



Cover Page



## ILLUSION AND REALITY IN EUGENE O' NEILL'S *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS*: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

**Dr. Sandeep Kumar Sharma**

Assistant Professor and Head

Department of English, D. M. College, Moga , Punjab

### Abstract

Eugene O' Neill occupies a commanding and distinctive place in the realm of American drama as numerous prestigious literary awards are credited to his genius. He is a marked realist who presented the true colours of society in his play. Already explored his masterpiece *Desire Under the Elms* by erudite scholars, the present paper is an attempt to analyse this play from the perspective of illusion and reality which is another fruitful way to explore this literary text. In this play, all the major characters live in the world of illusions and fanciful ideas as they are interested to cherish their illusions and they don't want to confront the reality of life. The playwright gives an important message to the human beings through the tragic end of the characters that awareness is very essential as we live in a concrete and real world and while living in this world, one cannot negate the harsh realities of life.

**Key Words:** Illusion, Reality, Farm, Cherish, Dreams

Eugene O' Neill had the rarest honour of pioneering the modern American drama and achieving world-wide recognition by winning four Pulitzer Prizes in 1920 for *Beyond the Horizon*, in 1921 for *Anna Christie*, in 1928 for *Strange Interlude* and in 1931 for *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Furthermore, this honour was followed by the coveted Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. More than any other dramatist, O'Neill introduced the dramatic realism pioneered by Anton Checkov, Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg into American drama, and was the first to use truly vernacular in his speeches. O'Neill can be counted among those rare playwrights who leave their footprints on the sands of time by virtue of their essentially humanistic vision, enshrined in intensely dramatic and life like creations. He is unarguably a conscientious writer who earned tremendous name and fame as a celebrated playwright by virtue of his meticulous social awareness and his plays are thus a marked example of illustrating the true colours of the society.

O' Neill plays involve characters who inhabit the fringes of society where they struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations but ultimately slide into disillusionment and despair. His career as a playwright consisted of three periods; his early realist plays utilize his own experiences, especially as a seaman. In the 1920s, he rejected realism in an effort to capture on the stage the forces behind human life. His expressionistic plays during this period were influenced by the ideas of philosophers like Nietzsche, Freud, Carl Jung and August Strindberg. It is worth mentioning that during his final period, O'Neill returned to realism. These later works which most critics consider his best depend on his life experiences for their story lines and themes. Through his experimental and emotionally probing dramas, he addressed the difficulties of human society with a deep psychological complexity. Jordan Y. Miller comments, "The stature of Eugene O' Neill casts a long shadow on the American theatre. Whether it stretches on contracts in the critical estimates of a particular period or critic, this much is certain; the height and breadth of the American Theatre is measured by it" (Miller 59).

O' Neill is not merely an American in experience and imagination. the frontiers of his genius touch the horizons of the world. Though his contribution to the World drama is significant yet his contribution to the American drama is colossal. Prior to his arrival on the theatrical scene, American drama was suffering from anemia and lack of intellectual substance but O' Neill gave it to the core and shook the Americans out of their drinker stupor. Joseph Wood Krutch rightly affirms, "By common consent, Eugene O' Neill is acknowledged to be the most distinguished of the group which created serious American drama" (Krutch 11). R. S. Singh further remarks that O' Neill chose to write about the soul stifling daily struggle and the real problems engulfing the American people as he "was not contented with the melodramatic tradition of America" (Singh 2). In this context, the observations of Olivia Coolidge are noteworthy, "O'



Cover Page



Neill universalized the problems of American people by relating them to the psychology of Freud and Jung. His writings are accounts of the collapse of the individual world where characters disintegrate under tremendous social and psychological pressures. He revolutionized the American theatre and mirrored the turmoil of the whole generation" (Coolidge 8). Jean Gould manifestly proclaims, "O' Neill saw the inner struggle of man laid before, as no American dramatist had ever dared to show it" (Gould 65). He himself experienced the trauma of raw life and dramatized it in his plays from a first hand knowledge and he chose stark and realistic depiction of life instead of romantic drama. In his plays delineation of romantic love is a tool to bring serious and profound anguish of human relationships. N. K. Sharma aptly emphasises, "Love is another source of disappointment, sufferings and deaths in the tragic world of O' Neill. Doubts and misgivings disturb love relationship and bring untold miseries and hardships in their wake" (Sharma 4)

It is an admitted fact that various critics have analysed the works of O' Neill from different perspectives, my focus in this research paper will remain on the analysis of illusion and reality which is the key to the very survival of the institutions of the society. The play deals with different factors like incompatibility in characters, altruism versus materialism, mercantile attitude etc. which determine illusion and reality as a whole. The inhibitions imposed by society, morality, race and religion prove disastrous. Man is a helpless victim of the social norms and his own complex mental make up and in this play the protagonists do struggle heroically against these hostile forces though they are defeated and crushed by these forces at the end and this is what happens in every great tragedy.

*Desire Under the Elms* (1923) was first staged at the Greenwich Village Theatre on November 11, 1924 which is an intense personal tragedy of all the major characters of the play. The play is a tremendous advance over O' Neill's previously full length works for surpassing the power of either. *Beyond the Horizon* or *Anna Christie*, to both of which it is linked by its naturalistic style. It combines all the elements most typical of O' Neill at his creative best: the crude, elemental passions of people who harbour the seeds of their own destruction, the brilliant psychological insight into the love hate relationship of father and son, son and mother, husband and wife, brother and brother, the cosmic loneliness of man; the hardness of God and the final acceptance of an inescapable and inscrutable fate. Before exploring the play from the standpoint of illusion and reality, it will be appropriate to overview what various critics argue about *Desire Under the Elms*. Travis Bogard proclaims the play to be "the first important tragedy to be written in America" (Bogard 200). D. K. Lal opines that the drama "embodies the conflict between the Puritanical values and the Freudian attitude of sex" (Lal 52). On the other hand, B. S. Goyal claims it to be "a play of great beauty and sheer elemental vigour" (Goyal 118). Timu Tiusanen observes, "Thematically *Desire Under the Elms* goes on with the pagan, Nietzschean affirmation of life" (Tiusanen 160). Charles Pickering proclaims that the play "served to point up man's alienation and domination by irrational passions" (Pickering 141). John Gassner recognises *Desire Under the Elms* as "O' Neill's finest and the most consistently wrought play" (Gassner 96)

*Desire Under the Elms* is set on a farm in New England. In this play, O' Neill states that human beings do not want to face the reality of life because they always live in the web of illusions. In case, they depend on illusions, they are bound to be destroyed. It is a raw reality of life that illusions cannot give permanent solace and compassion. Either they conquer somebody or be conquered by somebody, wither they humiliate others or they are humiliated by others. So man has to accept the person as he or she is. The playwright affirms that humans always live in the web of dreams and illusions but ultimately they have to face the naked reality of this life. But there is another reality that human beings also need illusions because they all love illusions and depend on them. *Desire Under the Elms* is full of illusions because nobody can change human nature. It is the problem of human beings who think that they can have a better world or they can attain something unachievable. Even in the old age, they commit the same mistake. Time and again they understand that these illusions are destructive but even then they close their eyes as they dare not confront reality. Thus human beings have to face and accept this world with all its naked and blunt realities.

Man thinks that he is contented and time and again he cries because he depends on others nonetheless he is alone. He cherishes illusions and then also realises the world of false images but he keeps on liking illusions. So human beings always keep on depending on illusions and as such they go on creating illusions. Basically man thinks that he can make



Cover Page



this world a better place to live in but again it is a misconception and deception. Furthermore, human beings are never interested to learn from their past and thus go on relishing their fancies and delusions. O' Neill has given this message in a very graphic and illustrious manner in *Desire Under the Elms* though these illusions and false notions are disrupted again and again even then humans hanker after illusions. So human beings have to comprehend that no God will help them at the critical time and no society will save them; therefore, they have to come out from the web of illusions and day dreaming.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, there is another illusion that man can give a special meaning to life. Man thinks that he can conquer this world but the reality is entirely different and this is the message given by the playwright in this play that adopt any mode, illusions are bound to be shattered because they can never be realised. So human beings deceive themselves and they do not want to accept this reality that they are simple humans and they can never change human nature. If a person thinks that he is very powerful but in reality power depends on the recognition or acceptance by others. The problem is that human beings are basically scared to face the reality whereas they should understand that illusions are to be destroyed or the world may destroy the illusions. In this play, O' Neill has thus tried to enlighten the readers that man thinks that he will learn with the passage of time but the reality is he never learns in his life time. Sometimes man feels that now he will face the reality of this life all alone but again it is his illusion because after some time he again starts depending on others. So human beings should humbly accept that they are sinners because they feel guilty in most of their works because they are simple humans with so many drawbacks and shortcomings in their nature. Basically, the playwright wants to teach the readers that human while living in this materialistic world, human beings always desire something and desire is a sin and O' Neill has illustrated and explained this fact in a very realistic and convincing manner in this play.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, all the major characters live in the world of illusions and they do not want to confront reality. Every character in the play desires one thing or the other. As the play opens, we are introduced to the three sons of Epharaim Cabot, the owner of the Cabot farm and farmhouse. The two elder sons Simeon and Peter are fed up with their life on the stony farm. In reality, the sons do not love their father because they have an impression that their father has extracted nothing but work from them and has made them like bonded slaves on his farm. They feel as if they were chained to the farm and trapped, only hard labour has been extracted from them and they want to liberate themselves from the inhuman conditions in which they are kept by their father. Thus due to the dictatorial and despotic attitude of their father towards them, Simeon and Peter want to escape from these wretched and miserable conditions and their wish is exposed in the first scene when the two brothers are talking to each other about migrating to California. When Peter says it will be very hard for him to give up everything which he has earned here by his sweat and at this point Simeon says, "Mebbe ... he'll die soon ... Mebbe ... for all we know ... he's dead now" (205). So in reality, they want to get rid of their father as they have no love, affection and fellow feelings towards their father and for this very reason, they want to migrate to California, the land of gold and their dreams.

The playwright says that it is very difficult to face the tern reality of life. It is late in the night when Eben returns home cursing and chuckling bitterly, he wakes up his step brothers who are in the bed at that time and tells them that he has some important news for them. The news is that their father, old Cabot has married again and this time he has married a young woman of thirty five, who is said, is quite beautiful. The news of Cabot's marriage comes as a terrible blow to the two elder brothers. They feel that all the property and the farm will now go the newly wedded bride and it is the high time to move to California, the land of their dreams where they can find some gold but it is again the illusion of the two brothers. Now the existential question is, money is needed for the journey. Eben suggests that they should sell their share sell their share of the farm to him and in return he would give them three hundred pounds to each of them which they could use as fare for their journey to their dream land. The two brothers are tempted by this offer because they are determined to realise their dream to earn money at California, so the two brothers cherish their illusions and consequently, they pack their luggage, sign the necessary documents, and are glad to have the money which they would need for their journey to America. When old Cabot comes home with Abbiw Putnam, his two elder sons, in a kind of mockery taunt him



Cover Page



and leave for California. The dialogues are charged with insult, injury and disrespect when Simeon says, "We 're free as injuns! Lucky we do not skulp ye! ....An' rape yer new woman" (223).

So it is the high time for the two brothers to exit as they want to run away because the new mother has come. They understand this reality that the farm belongs to the mother and they will not get anything. On the other hand, Eben has his own illusions as he thinks that the farm belongs to him. He is possessively attached to the farm and he is unable to compromise that the farm belongs to the mother. Eben says, "It's Maw's farm agen ! It's my farm ! Them's my cows ! I'll milk my durn fingers off fur cows O' mine !" (217). The powerful scene between the sons is followed by the equally powerful scene between Abbie and Eben. The two come across each other in the kitchen; they stand face to face and each is fascinated by the personality of the other. Her eyes take him in penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength as against her but the reality is that under this, her desire is dimly awakened by this youth and gook looks. It is pertinent to mention here that both Eben and Abbie in reality, are attracted to each other though they refuse to admit this even to themselves, and pretend to hate each other. But in the end, she tells Eben the reality that she married an old man like Cabot only for his property, and further that the home, the farm, the kitchen, all now belongs to her. The stage is now set for an incestuous affair. Abbie want to show him the power of woman but in reality she wants to show the power of sexuality to Eben. She desires the property, stability, home, companionship and security. The dramatist wants to say that all the human beings have lacks and they do not want to depend on themselves. Moreover, human beings are never contented and satisfied in life. Cabot has three sons but in reality he is all alone. So this is the raw reality of life that human beings are all together yet they are alone.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the characters do not want to face the reality because they are just interested in cherishing illusions. Cabot has his own illusions as he has a passionate longing for a son and heir: "A son in me - my blood - mine ought t' git mine. An' then it's still mine - even though I be six foot under. Do ye see" (234)? Abbie now realises that she would get the farm only if she has a son and so cunningly suggests, " May be the lord gives us a son" (234). The very possibility thrills old Cabot and he says if they had a son, he would not feel so lonely in his old age and it is again the illusion of Cabot. Thus Cabot is a typical character who wants to live in the world of dreams and illusions. Cabot and Abbie talk of the need of a son; Abbie desires a son for herself while old Cabot wants it for the farm. So these two characters remain in the world of illusions. Cabot and Abbie talk of the need of a son and with the sinful union of Abbie and Eben, a baby boy is born to Abbie, though he is considered the son of old Cabot. The father has given the party because the father has given birth to the son but in reality the son has given birth to a son. The playwright observes that according to the law of the father, nobody wants to accept his age. Cabot is the voice of patriarchy, voice of strength, voice of vigour and voice of illusions. So human beings remain narcissist all their life and that is why they long to be in the web of illusions. Cabot is proud that even at the age of seventy six, he can give birth to a son and thus he is the voice of masculine ideology.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, the dramatist opines that facing the raw reality of life is always bitter. Cabot tells Eben that now that he has a son born to him, therefore, he would never get the farm. He further tells Eben that he has promised Abbie to give anything she wants if only she would beget a son for him, and she had promised to do so. Now she had kept her promise, and she would have a farm, and Eben would inherit only the dust of the road. Eben is unable to face this reality and mad with grief and rage at being thus befooled and tricked by the cunning and treacherous Abbie. He says that he would never touch her again and he would go to California, earn gold there, and then return to claim the farm which lawfully belongs to him. So even in such a difficult situation, Eben remains in a web of illusions. Eben angrily tells Abbie, "I wish he never was born! I wish he'd die this minit ..." (257). She tries to reassure him that she would do anything to prove her love to him and she never meant to steal his farm. To prove her love for Eben, she kills the child by smothering him. Eben infuriated at the killing of his child, goes to the Sheriff and asks him to arrest Abbie for infanticide but on his way back home, he too realises the reality that he is equally responsible for the death of the child.

Conclusively, after a minute study of illusion and reality in *Desire Under the Elms*, it is significant to apprise the readers that the protagonists cherish their illusions and when they confront reality, they pay a very heavy price. The two





Cover Page



brothers want to earn money in California but it is their illusion. Eben wants the baby to be alive and he has decided to go to California and one day he will come back with a lot of money, is another fantasy. The reality of life is that human beings have to face their fate alone, they have to enjoy alone and suffer alone. Illusions are always shattered because nothing is permanent and everything is in a state of flux and evolution. Man can never possess anybody because possession means destruction. Basically human beings can never change human nature and that is why human beings live through illusions and they live in illusions. In this play, the playwright has given the message that awareness is very necessary for human beings. Man can never understand the ways of God. One moment Eben says that he will leave illusions but in the very next step, he is in the grip of illusions by deciding to go to California. Life is life and death is death, this is the stern reality. Human beings should understand and accept the flaws in their nature and therefore, awareness is very essential. In reality, humans can never come out from the web of dreams and illusions which is the root cause of their miseries, anguishes and misfortunes and this aspect is well illustrated and substantiated by Eugene O' Neill in *Desire Under the Elms*.

## Referecnes

1. Bogard, Travis. *Contours in Time: The Plays of Eugene O' Neill*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972
2. Coolridge, Olivia. *Eugene O' Neill*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.
3. Gould, Jean. *Modern American Playwrights*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969.
4. Goyal, B. S. *O' Neill and his Plays*. New Delhi: Aarti Book Centre, 1970.
5. Krutch, Joseph Wood. *Nine Plays by Eugene O' Neill*. New York: The Modern Library, 1959.
6. Lal, D. K. *Myth and Mythical Concepts in O' Neill's Plays*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1992.
7. Miller, Jordan Y. *American Dramatic Literature*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1961
8. O'Neill, Eugene. *Desire Under the Elms*. New Delhi: Grapevine, 2023. Print.
9. Pickering, Charles. *The Works of Eugene O' Neill*. Michigan: Xerox University Microfilms, 1978.
10. Sharma, N. K. *O' Neill's Dramatic Vision*. New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 1985.
11. Singh, R. S. *O' Neill: The Playwright*. New Delhi: Doaba House, 1971.
12. Tiusanen, Timo. *O' Neill's Scenic Images*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968.