



Victoria University  
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# FINAL ASSESSMENT

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## 2. Write an essay on the use of symbolism in *Desire Under the Elms* by Eugene O'Neil?

### Answer:

Symbolism is a powerful literary device that authors often employ to convey deeper meanings and evoke emotional responses from their readers. In Eugene O'Neill's play "Desire Under the Elms," symbolism plays a significant role in enhancing the themes of desire, conflict, and the relentless pursuit of personal fulfillment. Set against the backdrop of a New England farm, the play explores the forbidden desires, power struggles, and the consequences of acting upon one's innermost cravings. Through the strategic use of symbols such as the elms, the stone wall, and the child, O'Neill crafts a compelling narrative that explores the complexities of human desires and the consequences they bring. In this essay, we will examine the various symbols in "Desire Under the Elms" and analyze their significance in portraying the characters' struggles and the consequences they face.

The elms in the play serve as a prominent symbol that represents both the characters' desires and the burden of their pasts. The elms, which once provided shade and refuge, now stand as reminders of lost innocence and the erosion of familial bonds. The elms, which were once a source of shade and refuge, now stand as reminders of lost innocence and the erosion of familial bonds. They symbolize the characters' longing for connection and their deep-rooted desires. They act as a metaphor for the Eben Cabot's yearning for a connection to his deceased mother, who is symbolically associated with the elms. The elms, with their strong roots that penetrate the earth, reflect Eben's deep-rooted desire to reclaim his mother's love and secure his rightful inheritance. The elms symbolize the search for identity and the need for a familial connection that Eben desperately seeks throughout the play.

Eben's obsession with the elms becomes evident in Act I when he declares, "Them elms! My mother was one of 'em. I'm goin' to own 'em if I have to fight God Almighty!". The elms represent Eben's longing for a sense of belonging and identity, which he believes he can attain by possessing the family farm and the elms that surround it. The elms symbolize Eben's pursuit of personal fulfillment and his relentless determination to break free from the burden of his past.

In "Desire Under the Elms," the characters grapple with intense internal conflicts, primarily driven by their repressed desires and conflicting emotions. The central character, Eben Cabot, experiences a profound internal struggle as he battles his longing for love, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. Eben's conflict arises from his complex relationship with his deceased mother, whom he idolizes and yearns to be connected to emotionally. His desire for his mother's love becomes entangled with his attraction to Abbie, his father's young and beautiful new wife.

Eben's internal conflict is further intensified by his sense of betrayal towards his father, Ephraim Cabot. As Eben begins a clandestine affair with Abbie, he grapples with feelings of guilt, torn between his loyalty to his father and his passionate desires. Eben's internal conflict reflects the duality of human nature, showcasing the inherent struggle between one's desires and societal norms.

Furthermore, the elms also embody the struggle between tradition and modernity. As the play progresses, the encroaching influence of industrialization and progress threatens the elms, mirroring the encroachment of outside forces on the Cabot family. The symbol of the elms serves to underline the conflict between the old ways and the changing world, highlighting the characters' futile attempts to hold onto a fading past.

The stone wall in "Desire Under the Elms" is another potent symbol that represents both emotional and physical barriers. It stands as a metaphorical barrier between characters, illustrating the walls they build around themselves to protect their desires and secrets. The wall symbolizes the isolation and emotional distance that exists within the family. For instance, Ephraim Cabot, Eben's father, uses the wall to keep his family confined and to protect his property, displaying his possessive nature and unwillingness to share his wealth and affection.

Moreover, the stone wall represents the constraints imposed by societal norms and conventions. It becomes a symbol of confinement and limitation, reflecting the characters' struggle to break free from societal expectations and pursue their desires. Just as the wall surrounds and confines the characters, societal expectations restrict their ability to express their true desires and find fulfillment.

The societal expectations and norms of the time period in "Desire Under the Elms" add an additional layer of conflict to the characters' lives. Set in a patriarchal society, the play explores the tension between societal expectations and individual desires, particularly in relation to sexuality. The characters find themselves trapped within rigid gender roles and social conventions that stifle their freedom and expression.

Ephraim Cabot, as the patriarch, represents the oppressive forces of societal expectations. He embodies the traditional values of the time, viewing women as possessions and land as a symbol of power and control. Ephraim's rigid adherence to societal norms fuels the conflict within the play, creating a clash between his authority and the characters' desires for personal fulfillment.

Abbie, as a young woman trapped in a loveless marriage, experiences her own internal conflict. Society dictates that she should remain faithful to her husband and maintain her role as a dutiful wife. However, her desires for love, passion, and a sense of purpose lead her to engage in a forbidden relationship with Eben. Abbie's conflict arises from her struggle to reconcile her societal obligations with her yearning for personal happiness.

The stone wall also serves as a symbol of the characters' trapped emotions. It becomes a physical manifestation of their repressed desires and their inability to escape the consequences of their actions. As the characters grapple with their desires, the stone wall acts as a constant reminder of the emotional barriers they have erected, preventing them from finding true happiness and satisfaction.

The conflicts in "Desire Under the Elms" extend beyond individual desires and sexuality to encompass the familial relationships within the Cabot family. The complex dynamics between the family members contribute to the overall tension and conflict in the play.

Ephraim Cabot, the patriarch, represents the traditional values and authority within the family. His possessiveness and strict adherence to traditional norms create a hostile environment for his sons. The conflict between Ephraim and Eben arises from their contrasting desires and their struggle for control and power. Ephraim's obsession with his property, symbolized by the stone wall, represents his dominance and his refusal to share his wealth or emotional affection.

Conflict also arises between Eben and his half-brothers, Simeon and Peter. They embody the resentment and competition that emerge within a family, particularly when inheritance and personal desires are at stake. The conflict between the brothers intensifies when Abbie enters the picture, further fueling the tension and jealousy among them.

The clash between generations, desires, and expectations within the Cabot family creates a volatile atmosphere that escalates the conflicts and heightens the dramatic tension throughout the play.

Sexuality plays a crucial role in driving the conflicts within "Desire Under the Elms." It is portrayed as a powerful and primal force that influences the characters' actions and decisions, often leading to tragic consequences. The forbidden desires and sexual tensions between Eben and Abbie serve as catalysts for the conflicts that unfold throughout the play.

Eben's desire for his mother's love becomes intertwined with his attraction to Abbie. His longing for emotional connection manifests in a sexual desire, blurring the boundaries between filial love and romantic passion. Abbie, on the other hand, seeks love and fulfillment through her affair with Eben, breaking free from the societal constraints placed upon her as a woman.

The play also explores the destructive nature of sexual desires. The sexual relationship between Eben and Abbie ultimately leads to a chain of tragic events, including Ephraim's death and the subsequent guilt and remorse experienced by the characters. O'Neill portrays sexuality as a force that, when repressed or expressed in forbidden ways, can result in turmoil, anguish, and the destruction of familial bonds.

The presence of the child in "Desire Under the Elms" carries profound symbolic significance, representing hope, purity, and the possibility of redemption. The child, born out of Eben and Abbie's illicit affair, serves as a symbol of their forbidden desire and the consequences of their actions. It embodies the potential for new beginnings and serves as a catalyst for transformation and redemption.

The child, who is named "Eben" after his father, represents the merging of the past and the present, highlighting the inextricable link between actions and consequences. The child's birth forces Eben and Abbie to confront their transgressions and face the repercussions of their forbidden love. It becomes a symbol of the cyclical nature of desire and its consequences, as the sins committed by the previous generation are passed on to the next.

Additionally, the child also represents the burden of the past and the cycle of pain and longing that the characters inherit. Its existence serves as a reminder of the sins committed by the previous generation, highlighting the inescapable nature of destiny and the weight

of ancestral baggage. The child's presence not only exposes the characters' hidden desires but also serves as a catalyst for their self-reflection and eventual redemption.

Another significant symbol in "Desire Under the Elms" is the rope, which represents both the ties that bind the characters and the means of escape. The rope symbolizes the intense desire for freedom and liberation from the constraints of their circumstances. It embodies the characters' longing to break free from their oppressive lives and pursue their individual desires.

However, the rope also serves as a reminder of the futility of their attempts to escape their predetermined destinies. While the characters may dream of liberation, they ultimately remain trapped by the chains of their past and the consequences of their actions. The rope symbolizes the entanglements of fate and the inability to sever the ties that bind them to their ancestral burdens.

Gold is a recurring symbol in "Desire Under the Elms" that represents wealth, power, and the corrupting influence of materialism. Ephraim Cabot's relentless pursuit of gold reflects his insatiable desire for wealth and control. It symbolizes his ruthless nature and his willingness to sacrifice personal connections and integrity in the pursuit of material gains.

Moreover, gold also serves as a symbol of temptation and the allure of worldly pleasures. The characters' desire for gold becomes a metaphor for their longing for a better life, but ultimately leads them down a path of destruction and moral decay. The symbol of gold highlights the consequences of unchecked desires and the hollowness of material wealth without emotional fulfillment.

In "Desire Under the Elms," Eugene O'Neill expertly employs symbolism to delve into the depths of human desires, conflicts, and the search for fulfillment. The elms, the stone wall, the child, the rope, and the gold serve as powerful symbols that enhance the play's emotional impact and challenge the audience to reflect on the complexities of human nature. Through these symbols, O'Neill explores themes of longing, the clash between tradition and progress, and the consequences of unchecked desires.

The elms symbolize the characters' yearning for connection and their struggle to reconcile their desires with the changing world. The stone wall represents the emotional and societal barriers that confine and limit the characters. The child embodies the possibility of redemption and the burden of the past. The rope symbolizes the desire for liberation and the entanglements of fate. And the gold symbolizes the pursuit of material wealth and its corrupting influence.

Eugene O'Neill's masterful use of symbolism in "Desire Under the Elms" elevates the play beyond a mere depiction of familial conflicts and desire, transforming it into a poignant exploration of the human condition. The symbols intertwine and resonate with one another, revealing the complexities of human desires and the consequences they bring. Through the symbolism in "Desire Under the Elms," O'Neill invites the audience to contemplate the intricacies of the human psyche and the profound impact of past actions on present circumstances.