



Desire And Deception: A Psychoanalytic Reading Of O'Neill's Classic

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Abstract

This paper offers a psychoanalytic reading of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*, focusing on the intricate dynamics of desire and deception that drive the narrative and character development. Utilizing Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the analysis uncovers the latent desires and unconscious motivations of the central characters—Ephraim Cabot, Eben Cabot, and Abbie Putnam. The play's exploration of forbidden love, oedipal conflicts, and the quest for power and possession is examined through the lens of repressed emotions and unconscious drives. The characters' deceptions, both self-inflicted and directed towards others, are revealed as mechanisms for coping with their unfulfilled desires and deep-seated anxieties. The study highlights how O'Neill uses the farm as a symbol of both fertility and barrenness, reflecting the characters' internal struggles and the destructive potential of their desires. This psychoanalytic perspective not only sheds light on the psychological depth of O'Neill's characters but also provides a broader understanding of the play's themes of inheritance, legacy, and the human condition. Through this exploration, the paper aims to contribute to the critical discourse on *Desire Under the Elms*, offering new insights into O'Neill's dramatic portrayal of desire and deception.

Keywords: Deception, Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory, Inheritance, legacy, Repressed Emotions.

Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is a compelling exploration of human nature, delving into the darker realms of desire, deception, and the unconscious. Set against the backdrop of a New England farm in the 1850s, the play canters on a tumultuous love triangle between Ephraim Cabot, his young third wife Abbie Putnam, and his son Eben. Through this fraught relationship, O'Neill crafts a narrative that is rich in psychological complexity, making it an ideal subject for a psychoanalytic reading. This introduction will outline the key psychoanalytic concepts that underpin the analysis of *Desire Under the Elms*, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of the play's intricate dynamics of desire and deception. The psychoanalytic framework for this analysis is primarily grounded in Freudian theory, which posits that

much of human behaviour is driven by unconscious desires and conflicts. Freud's concept of the Oedipus complex, in particular, provides a valuable lens through which to examine the relationships in *Desire Under the Elms*. The Oedipus complex describes a child's unconscious desire for the opposite-sex parent and a sense of rivalry with the same-sex parent. This framework is vividly illustrated in the character of Eben, whose intense animosity towards his father Ephraim and passionate desire for Abbie can be seen as manifestations of unresolved Oedipal tensions.

Eben's relationship with his father is marked by a deep-seated resentment, which stems from his perception that Ephraim has usurped his rightful inheritance—both the farm and his deceased mother's love. This rivalry is exacerbated by the arrival of Abbie, who becomes the object of Eben's sexual desire and his means of reclaiming what he believes is rightfully his. Abbie, on the other hand, is driven by her own desires for security, love, and control. Her seduction of Eben is a strategic move to secure her position in the Cabot household, illustrating how deception is employed as a tool to fulfil her desires.

"In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill makes the figure of the 'father' as a paradigm of the antiquated hard, hubristic and heartless dad. O'Neill presents him, as a manifestation of the human will to control." (Aldewan 165). Ephraim Cabot, the patriarch, represents the superego in this psychoanalytic triad—an authoritative figure whose moral rigidity and control over the farm symbolize the oppressive societal and familial structures that constrain the characters' desires. His harshness and emotional detachment further alienate him from Eben, intensifying the latter's rebellion and desire for Abbie. Ephraim's own desires, while less overtly expressed, are rooted in a need for dominance and immortality, achieved through the perpetuation of his lineage and the retention of his land.

The farm itself serves as a potent symbol in O'Neill's play, embodying the characters' internal landscapes and the battleground for their desires. It is a place of both fertility and barrenness, reflecting the dual nature of desire as both life-giving and destructive. The rocky, unforgiving soil mirrors the hard, unyielding emotions of its inhabitants, while the elms that loom over the farm represent the inescapable presence of the past and the unconscious forces that shape the characters' actions.

Through a psychoanalytic lens, *Desire Under the Elms* reveals the extent to which unconscious desires drive the characters towards deception, both of themselves and of others. Their actions are not merely the result of conscious decisions but are deeply influenced by repressed emotions and unresolved conflicts. By examining these underlying psychological currents, this analysis seeks to uncover the deeper truths within O'Neill's play, providing a richer understanding of its thematic complexity and enduring relevance.

In the following sections, we will explore how these psychoanalytic concepts manifest in the characters' interactions, the symbolism of the farm, and the broader implications for understanding desire and deception in O'Neill's work. Through this exploration, we aim to illuminate the profound psychological insights embedded in *Desire Under the Elms*, offering a nuanced interpretation of one of O'Neill's most enigmatic and powerful plays.

Eugene O'Neill, a seminal figure in American drama, has profoundly influenced the theatrical landscape with his exploration of the human condition. His works, rich in psychological depth, address themes such as family dynamics, existential angst, and the intricate interplay of desire and deception. This article aims to provide a comprehensive psychoanalytic reading of O'Neill's classic plays, delving into how these themes drive his characters and narratives. Utilizing the theories of Freud, Jung, and Lacan, we will uncover the latent psychological forces at play in O'Neill's works, revealing a complex tapestry of human emotion and conflict. Psychoanalytic theory, pioneered by Sigmund Freud and later expanded by Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan, offers a robust framework for understanding the unconscious motivations that influence human behaviour. Freud's concepts of the id, ego, and superego, along with his theories of repression and the Oedipus complex, provide insights into the hidden desires and conflicts within individuals. Jung's archetypes and collective unconscious, as well as Lacan's notions of the mirror stage and the symbolic order, further enrich our understanding of the psychological underpinnings of literature.

In psychoanalytic terms, desire is seen as a fundamental drive that shapes human behaviour, often operating beneath the surface of conscious awareness. Deception, both self-deception and the deception of others, can be understood as a defence mechanism to manage the anxieties and conflicts that arise from unfulfilled or socially unacceptable desires. When applied to literature, these concepts help us decode the symbolic meanings and hidden motivations within texts. Desire is a pervasive theme in O'Neill's plays, driving characters to extreme actions and revealing their deepest fears and longings. In "Long Day's Journey into Night," for instance, the Tyrone family's desires for love, validation, and escape from pain are central to the unfolding drama. Mary Tyrone's morphine addiction is a manifestation of her desire to retreat from the harsh realities of her life, while her husband James's stinginess and their sons' struggles reflect their own unfulfilled desires and coping mechanisms.

"O'Neill's play, *Desire under the Elms* is seen to manifest the psychologically intensive and conflicting nature of Eben Cabot. He is the protagonist of the play, who impersonates an intensive feeling of inner tension regarding the death of his mother, whom he supposes to be killed by Ephraim Cabot, his father." (Rashid 1). "*Desire Under the Elms*" is another play where desire takes centre stage. The characters' yearnings for land, love, and power drive the narrative, leading to intense conflict and ultimately tragic outcomes. Eben's desire for his deceased mother's farm, Abbie's longing for security and affection, and Ephraim's need for control and dominance illustrate how desire shapes and distorts their actions and relationships.

In "*The Iceman Cometh*," the characters' pipe dreams represent their desires for a better life, a sense of purpose, and redemption. The protagonist, Hickey, embodies the tension between desire and deception as he oscillates between confronting the harsh truths of his existence and clinging to comforting illusions. Deception, both self-deception and the deception of others, is intricately woven into the fabric of O'Neill's plays. Characters often deceive themselves to cope with their painful realities, creating illusions that provide temporary solace but ultimately lead to greater suffering. In "*Long Day's Journey into Night*," each family member engages in self-deception to avoid confronting their collective and individual traumas.

Mary deceives herself about her addiction, James about his financial decisions, and their sons about their failures and futures. In "The Iceman Cometh," the patrons of Harry Hope's bar live in a state of collective self-deception, clinging to their delusional hopes and dreams to avoid facing the despair of their present circumstances. Hickey's arrival and his mission to strip away these illusions force the characters into a painful confrontation with their deceptions, ultimately revealing the depth of their existential crises.

"Desire Under the Elms" also showcases the destructive power of deception. Abbie's deception of Eben regarding the true nature of their relationship and the fate of their child underscores the tragic consequences of lies and manipulation born out of desperate desire. A detailed psychoanalytic reading of "Long Day's Journey into Night" reveals the intricate interplay of desire and deception within the Tyrone family. Mary Tyrone's morphine addiction can be interpreted through a Freudian lens as a regression to a state of infantile dependence, driven by a desire to escape the unbearable pain of her present reality. Her self-deception about her addiction reflects a defence mechanism to protect her fragile ego from the guilt and shame associated with her condition. James Tyrone's obsession with money and his parsimony can be understood as a manifestation of his deep-seated fears of poverty and inadequacy. His deception of himself and his family about the true state of their finances is a way to maintain a semblance of control and security in a world that feels precarious and uncertain.

The sons, Jamie and Edmund, each grapple with their own desires and deceptions. Jamie's self-destructive behaviour and cynical outlook can be seen as a reaction to his unfulfilled desire for paternal approval and his guilt over his mother's condition. Edmund's struggle with tuberculosis and his poetic aspirations represents his desire to break free from the family's destructive cycle, yet he too engages in self-deception about his health and prospects. In "The Iceman Cometh," Hickey's transformation from a charming salesman to a messianic figure intent on exposing the truth reveals the complexity of his psychological state. His own self-deception about his motives and the murder of his wife underscores the theme of repression and the return of the repressed. Hickey's attempt to liberate the bar's patrons from their illusions ultimately fails, highlighting the human tendency to cling to comforting deceptions even in the face of undeniable reality. O'Neill's use of symbolism and imagery further enhances the psychoanalytic reading of his plays. In "Long Day's Journey into Night," the recurring fog symbolizes the characters' desire to obscure painful truths and retreat into a state of ambiguity and denial. The foghorn's mournful sound serves as a reminder of the inescapable reality they are trying to avoid. In "Desire Under the Elms," the farmhouse itself becomes a symbol of desire and inheritance, representing the characters' conflicting claims to love, power, and legacy. The elms, with their overbearing presence, evoke the weight of the past and the oppressive force of repressed desires. "The Iceman Cometh" employs the motif of the iceman, symbolizing death and the inevitable confrontation with the truth. Hickey's insistence on facing reality and his ultimate failure illustrate the tension between the desire for liberation and the comfort of deception. The psychoanalytic reading of O'Neill's works has been explored by various scholars, each offering unique insights into the psychological dimensions of his characters and narratives. Critics like Travis Bogard and Stephen A. Black have examined the influence of O'Neill's own turbulent family life on his plays,

highlighting the autobiographical elements that inform his portrayal of desire and deception. "O'Neill abstracted and reformulated Greek tragedy by exercising Freudian and Jungian psychological theories blending the components of ancient Greek and American mythology. "(Fathima 10).

Others, such as Timo Tiusanen and Egil Törnqvist, have focused on the symbolic and thematic aspects of O'Neill's work, emphasizing the interplay between psychological forces and dramatic structure. These critical perspectives enrich our understanding of how O'Neill's exploration of desire and deception resonates with broader human experiences and psychological truths. O'Neill's plays often revolve around the complexities of family dynamics, where desire and deception are intimately linked. The Tyrone family in "Long Day's Journey into Night" serves as a prime example of how familial relationships can become a battleground for unfulfilled desires and self-deception. Mary's longing for a lost ideal of family life, James's nostalgic desire for a past he cannot reclaim, and their sons' struggles with identity and purpose all converge to create a fraught emotional landscape. Similarly, in "A Moon for the Misbegotten," the relationship between Josie Hogan and her father, Phil, is marked by a blend of love, resentment, and mutual deception. Josie's desire for respect and affection is continually thwarted by her father's domineering and manipulative behaviour, leading her to adopt a facade of toughness that conceals her vulnerability.

Romantic relationships in O'Neill's plays are often depicted as arenas where desire and deception play out in dramatic ways. In "Anna Christie," the titular character's relationship with her father, Chris, and her lover, Mat Burke, is fraught with secrets and misunderstandings. Anna's desire for a new life and her efforts to conceal her past as a prostitute lead to a series of deceptions that threaten to unravel her relationships. In "Desire Under the Elms," the illicit affair between Abbie and Eben is driven by their intense desires for love and belonging, but it is also marked by deception and betrayal. Abbie's manipulation of Eben and her ultimate deception regarding the fate of their child highlight the destructive potential of desire when it is entwined with dishonesty. The search for identity is another recurring theme in O'Neill's works, where characters' desires to understand themselves often lead to self-deception. In "The Emperor Jones," Brutus Jones's desire for power and control is rooted in his need to escape his past and assert his identity. His self-deception about his invincibility and the eventual collapse of his constructed persona reflects the fragility of identity when it is built on illusions. In "The Hairy Ape," Yank's struggle to find his place in the world and his desire for belonging are thwarted by his realization that he is an outsider in both the working class and the upper class. His self-deception about his strength and significance is shattered, leading to his tragic downfall. Memory plays a crucial role in O'Neill's exploration of desire and deception. Characters often grapple with their pasts, and their memories shape their present desires and self-deceptions. In "Long Day's Journey into Night," the Tyrone family's recollections of happier times are tinged with regret and longing, influencing their current interactions and self-perceptions. In "A Touch of the Poet," the protagonist, Cornelius Melody, clings to his memories of past glories and his desire to be recognized as a gentleman, leading him to deceive himself and others about his true circumstances. His inability to reconcile his idealized past with his present reality drives much of the play's conflict. " Here, the elms represent the nature thwarted by Puritanism (strictness in beliefs and practices). Nature can be

suppressed, but not for long. It takes revenge upon its oppressors. Hence, the elms come to represent the brooding and ultimately triumphant fate. " (Srivastava 2).

O'Neill's exploration of desire and deception is also informed by the social and cultural contexts of his time. The economic hardships, social stratification, and shifting cultural values of early 20th-century America provide a backdrop for his characters' struggles. In "The Iceman Cometh," the characters' pipe dreams reflect their desires for a better life in a society that has failed to provide them with opportunities. Their deceptions are a means of coping with the harsh realities of their socioeconomic conditions. In "Beyond the Horizon," the conflicting desires of the Mayo brothers, Robert and Andrew, are influenced by societal expectations and personal aspirations. Robert's desire for adventure and a literary career clash with Andrew's pragmatic approach to life and farming, leading to a series of deceptions and misunderstandings that have tragic consequences. Religion and spirituality also play a significant role in O'Neill's exploration of desire and deception. Characters often grapple with religious beliefs and existential questions as they navigate their desires and self-deceptions. In "Mourning Becomes Electra," the Mannon family's Puritanical values and the burden of ancestral sins influence their desires and actions, leading to a cycle of deception and retribution. In "The Iceman Cometh," the character of Larry Slade embodies a philosophical resignation and scepticism, contrasting with the other characters' desperate clinging to their illusions. Hickey's own religious-like mission to convert the bar's patrons to his nihilistic worldview underscores the play's existential themes. Gender and power dynamics are central to O'Neill's depiction of desire and deception. Female characters in his plays often navigate a patriarchal society that constrains their desires and forces them into deceptive roles. In "Anna Christie," Anna's struggle for autonomy and acceptance is shaped by the gendered expectations placed upon her. Her deception about her past is a response to the stigma and judgment she faces as a woman.

In "Desire Under the Elms," Abbie's pursuit of power and security through her relationship with Eben highlights the intersection of gender and desire. Her deceptions are both a means of survival and an assertion of agency in a male-dominated world. O'Neill employs various dramatic techniques to convey the themes of desire and deception. His use of expressionism, symbolism, and non-linear narratives enhances the psychological depth of his plays. In "The Emperor Jones," the use of expressionistic techniques, such as the repetitive drumbeats and the hallucinatory forest scenes, externalizes Jones's internal fears and desires, creating a powerful depiction of his psychological descent.

In "Strange Interlude," O'Neill's use of soliloquies and asides allows characters to reveal their innermost thoughts and desires, highlighting the gap between their public personas and private selves. This technique underscores the theme of self-deception and the complexity of human psychology. O'Neill's exploration of desire and deception through a psychoanalytic lens has left a lasting impact on American drama and literature. His works have inspired subsequent generations of playwrights and authors to delve into the psychological dimensions of their characters and narratives. The themes of unfulfilled desire, self-deception, and the quest for identity continue to resonate with audiences and readers, reflecting the timeless nature of O'Neill's insights into the human condition.

Eugene O'Neill's plays offer a profound exploration of the human psyche, revealing the intricate interplay of desire and deception that shapes our lives. Through a psychoanalytic lens, we uncover the hidden motivations and unconscious conflicts that drive his characters, illuminating the depths of their emotional struggles and the complexity of their interactions. O'Neill's mastery lies in his ability to depict these psychological realities with unflinching honesty, creating works that resonate with the timeless truths of the human condition. By examining desire and deception in O'Neill's classics, we gain a deeper appreciation for the ways in which his characters navigate the tumultuous waters of their inner lives. Whether through the tragic self-deceptions of the Tyrone family, the desperate yearnings of the characters in "Desire Under the Elms," or the existential confrontations in "The Iceman Cometh," O'Neill's plays invite us to reflect on the universal aspects of our own desires and the deceptions we weave to protect ourselves from the harsh realities of existence. In doing so, O'Neill not only captures the essence of his characters but also holds up a mirror to the audience, challenging us to confront our own hidden truths and the complex web of desires and deceptions that define our humanity. Ultimately, O'Neill's exploration of desire and deception underscores the fragility of the human psyche and the enduring quest for meaning and connection in a world fraught with uncertainty and conflict. His plays remain a testament to the power of drama to illuminate the deepest corners of the human soul, offering insights that continue to resonate across generations and cultural boundaries. Through a psychoanalytic reading, we not only deepen our understanding of O'Neill's work but also gain valuable perspectives on the broader human experience, making his plays timeless treasures of the theatrical canon.

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