

## Material cupidity causing dissolution of life: A critical study of *Desire under the Elms*

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### Abstract

This article is a careful study of material gain as a functioning catalyst to set some interests in the mind of an individual whose life is based on the desires and gain of his/her life to a particular extent where an individual can find a social position and thus feels secure. It also focuses on the struggle through which an individual has to go to fulfill his/her desires. It shows some other aspects of an individual like revengefulness, loneliness, illusion, dishonesty, carelessness and also cruelty on the way of attaining his/her desires. It shows how hankering after belongings turns out to be disastrous to spoil an individual's life. Though we see individuals to be apparently successful in achieving their desires, ultimately it results in their continuous mental unhappiness for which we cannot consider it any success; instead it is a total futility of human life.

**Keywords:** functioning catalyst, total futility, material gain, revengefulness, futility of human life

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### Introduction

Human history shows thought of unethical material gain is a negative force that leads humans to cupidity and causes dissolution of life thereby. Social status, almost everywhere, depends upon material gain. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the farmhouse for which everyone has demand to a large extent, is the centre of attraction. Obsession with the material gain surpasses carnal desire here, and cupidity for mundane achievement diminishes emotional feelings of the characters that are, for that reason, frequently engaged in catastrophic feud. In male dominated society of the play, sometimes the male, for their avid attraction for earthly gain, consider the female as material, and use them as machines. The life, because of this selfishness, ultimately becomes insignificant and meaningless.

### Methodology

The present study is basically a text-based research. The paper, at first, brings into focus why Eugene O'Neill as an expressionist prefers analyzing the inner reality of human being which is largely attracted to material gain. In the second phase, it shows how Eugene O'Neill applies the dramatic techniques such as soliloquies, asides, interior monologues etc. to explore the radices of the psychological sway of humans for material cupidity. At last, the paper, through an analysis of the contexts leading the characters of the play to their respective attitudes towards life, rationalizes why we consider *Desire Under the Elms* as a play dealing with material cupidity. To do the research as primary sources the books—Eugene O'Neill by Clifford Leech and O'Neill's *Dramatic Vision* by N K Sharma—have helped us write the part, material cupidity causing dissolution of life. Moreover, *A Collection of Critical Essays* by John Gassner, and *American Playwrights on Drama* by Horst Frenz have assisted us to explore the features of materialism. As secondary sources we have taken information from few websites to infuse new thoughts and developments on

materialism into the research. This research brings out how Eugene O'Neill uses creative techniques to see through the minds of the characters engrossed, as such, with the desire for material gain. The paper, through a scholastic discussion, has unveiled that varied aspects of material cupidity causing dissolution of life are successfully reflected in *Desire Under the Elms*.

### Significance of the title

In *Desire Under the Elms* the word 'desire' appears with different aspects. For Ephraim, 'desire' is to live hundred years possessing the farmland in the company of his cows. Additionally, 'desire', for him, is to have mental support and sexual gratification from his lustful wife, Abbie. For Abbie and Eben, 'desire' refers to severe yearning to become the sole owner of the farm individually. 'Desire' also implies Eben's longing for avenging his mother's pathetic death caused by Ephraim's excessive pressure upon her to work relentlessly in the farmhouse. For Simeon and Peter it refers to the longing for possessing the farmland too. In the face of non-fulfillment of the 'desire', both of them want to change their ill fortune and therefore leave for California in search of gold. Moreover, 'desire' implies their inner craving for being free from the clutch of their cruel father.

### Attitudes to Material Gain

Eugene O'Neil considers land to be an important immovable wealth of an individual, and his *Desire Under the Elms* also elaborately states the attitudes of material gain centering a piece of land – in fact, a farmland. In the play, rush for acquiring land is the central subject matter that holds every element of the play together. The farmland was the radix of cupidity for all the characters in the play. Their desire for the land can be analyzed from points of view of 'authority-demand', 'legal demand', 'logical demand' and 'better half-demand'.



### **Authority-demand**

Ephraim Cabot having authority-demand for the farmland bears an extreme sense of possession of wealth and property. The farmland was initially considered to be worthless when Ephraim first bought it. He then made the farmland the center of everyone's attraction employing very hard labor which includes removing of the stones, planting of the stones to erect walls and raising of animals. He in humanly engaged other members of his family in working in the farmland to make it more profitable.

Ephraim has strong fondness for the farmland and it is evident in his expression - "They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. .... I'll go t' the barn an' rest a spell." (O'Neill 1094). There is, no doubt, a very intimate correspondence between Ephraim and the farmland. He considers the farmland to be more valuable than his own life which is not to be shared with others. To Ephraim, the land is heaven, and he describes it by stating - "The sky. Feels like a wa'm field up thar." (O'Neill 1082). Even Ephraim thinks the barn animals understand him better than any human in the house because of the animals have intimate relationship with the land.

As it is Ephraim who bought the land first and employed vigorous labour, he became authoritative of it, and wants to be its sole owner. He not only uses authoritative tone for the land but he bears a keen feeling for the land in his deeper mind also. He never wants the farmland to be owned by anyone else as he has always considered the land to be his sole right.

### **Legal Demand**

Eben has the sense of legal demand and sole ownership for the land as it was built at the money of his mother. He also thinks that his mother employed deadly labor in the farmland for which she had to die. He always sees his dead mother's soul roaming around the house which prompts Eben more to grab the farmland. Eben cherishes one kind of vengeance on his father whom he thinks to be responsible for his mother's death, therefore, wants to grab the land from his father is to give some solace over his dead mother's soul.

He believes, "She still comes back--stands by the stove thar in the evenin'--she can't find it natural sleepin' an' restin' in peace. She can't git used t' bein' free--even in her grave."

When the play begins we see Eben describing Minnie, his girlfriend, using the beauty of the land saying, "her mouth's wa'm, her arms're wa'm, she smells like a wa'm plowed field, she's purty..." (O'Neill 1071).

### **Logical Demand**

Peter and Simeon have logical demand for they are sons of Ephraim and have been working hard to develop the farm. The excitement communicates itself to Simeon and Peter when they recall the everlasting misery of their lives on the farm, raising one stone on top of another to build "stone walls fur him to fence us in!"

Peter is the second son of Ephraim Cabot, brother of Simeon Cabot, and half-brother of Eben Cabot. He has worked resentfully on his father's farm all his life and has an aspiration for the farmland. For him, the stone walls they have been building on the farm supposed to imprison them, and he is happy to take from Eben his thirty pieces of gold which he wants to use to try his fortune and find freedom in California. Though he is a trifle more practical and less sensitive than Simeon he feels some hesitation during leaving

the farm as he employed bone breaking labour after the farm and thus cherished a little desire to own the land which he considers "number one prize stock" that he and his brother have raised. Though not so strong, his demand is logical. He says, "Here--it's stones atop o' the ground--stones atop o' stones--makin' stone walls--year atop o' year--him 'n' yew 'n' me 'n' then Eben--makin' stone walls fur him to fence us in!" Simeon is the eldest son of Ephraim Cabot, brother of Peter Cabot, and half-brother of Eben Cabot. Like Peter, Simeon has also worked resentfully on his father's farm all his life, and he does not want to leave it too. For him too, the farm's stone walls - as Peter feels - imprison them, and he is also happy to take his thirty pieces from Eben to free himself from the slavery created by his father and to seek his fortune in California. However, prior to that, he also made hard labor for the farm and thus cherished a little desire to own the land that he and his brother had raised. So, his demand is also logical. He says, "We've wuked. Give our strength. Give our years. Plowed 'em under in the ground--(he stamps rebelliously)--rottin'--makin' soil for his crops! (a pause) Waal--the farm pays good for hereabouts."

### **Better half-Demand**

Abbie Putnam is the wife of Ephraim Cabot and beloved of Ephraim's son, Eben Cabot. She has a better half demand for the land of Ephraim Cabot. Thirty-five-year-old Abbie Putnam the third wife of seventy-six-year-old Ephraim. She is a buxom, good-looking woman whose face is marred with an obstinate chin and a "gross sensuality." She has married Ephraim just to gain possession of a home and the farm. She had a hard life until Ephraim came along and had been searching for security. Yet she has no love for him, only a desire to find a place which will belong to her, and in fact, she has a physical aversion to her husband. We can see her excitement for material gain as soon as she enters the house first. She says,

Hum! It's purty--purty! I can't b'lieveit's'r'ally mine.

She gets overwhelmed that even standing at the gate her eyes gloat on the house without seeming to see the two stiff figures there. Gradually she grows possessive of the house. She seems to become superior conquering a great obstacle and wants to have a look instantly inside the house. She says, "A woman's got t' hev a hum! I'll go in an' look at my house. This be my farm--this be my hum--this be my kitchen!" Her demand for the house can be viewed from the basis of possessiveness for her being wife of Ephraim.

### **Possession of Women as Material Gain**

At all times in the history of human society, women have been often considered to be a kind of material. In Greek classical myth the Trojan war is held between the city of Troy and the Achaeans (Greeks) to take the possession of Helen. The war is one of the most important events in Greek mythology.

In the middle age this attitude towards women didn't change. Throughout the middle Ages, the place of women in society was often dictated by men's authority, and women were treated nothing but a belonging of men in many places. Even in the modern ages in many cases this attitude remains prevalent.

Eugene O'Neil has brought this age-old but unreasonable and inhuman concept of 'women as material possession' in his drama through different images of women. Eben's mother died when Eben was fifteen. Here in this play we get some



unpleasant facts disclosed by O'Neil regarding the image of Eben's dead mother who was a victim to the traditional thinking of Ephraim towards women to be considered just as a material belonging. We get to know the fact from the conversation of Simeon, Peter and Eben that Eben's mother died because Ephraim Cabot forced her to work - though she was unable - until she becomes physically crushed. In fact, after marriage, Ephraim Cabot considered Eben's mother as material not man. The image of Eben's mother, who died many years ago remaining deprived of her logical rights, love, care and honour, is the image of a victimized woman. It shows that old Cabot married her to use only as a material for his earthly gain.

There is another image of a woman as a material for pleasure - the image of Minnie, a prostitute. We come to know that she has played the role of a beloved of Ephraim, Simeon, Peter and many others at different times. And now she has been lying with Eben Cabot. All these men know the nature of this lady pretty well. That none of them gives her the recognition of wife means that they considered her mere material. Though O'Neill has not directly sketched the image of Minnie through the pattern of the unfolding dialogues, he has tried to present the image of Minnie as a material belonging.

Ephraim says without woman life is incomplete although he does not have real love for his wife; it means a woman can only complement his authority of property - nothing more. After the death of his wife, he started to feel a kind of emptiness and vulnerability as he had become so old. This emptiness worked in him not because he would love her, care for her and make her his soul mate but she would serve the purpose of a possession. If Ephraim considered his wife at least as a human being, she would not face such kind of inhuman death. All his life he viewed her just as a material, and her stay with him as his material gain. At the age of 75 he still feels the necessity of womanly care. So, he brings Abbie to the house who is much younger in age. Ephraim says, "Yewr'n? Mine! Our'n--mebbe! It was lonesome too long. I was growin' old in the spring. A hum's got t' hev a woman."

#### **Material Cupidity Surpassing Carnal Desire**

From Ephraim's point of view his marriage with Abbie has increased his possession of material as he sees life to be incomplete without woman. He thinks Abbie will help him get a son who will ultimately inherit the farmland because he does not want to let the farmland to be possessed by others. His carnal desire has become secondary to his major desire for keeping the farmland in his possession.

Abbie wants to give birth to a son facilitating her to possess the farmland not because she feels sexual attracted to Ephraim. For Abbie, marrying Ephraim, a man of 75, she has firstly secured her social position. Secondly, she has taken it as an opportunity of owning a farmland. Previously she led a hard life but her marriage with Ephraim gives her a strong shelter. Though she does not love Ephraim, she has a desire only to find a place which can belong to him. She says to Eben, "Waal--what if I did need a hum? What else'd I marry an old man like him fur?" After all she has a kind of physical dislike to her husband.

Eben thinks that Abbie has come with Ephraim as his wife to take the possession of the farmland. From the very first scene of his meeting with Abbie, he feels a kind of abhorrence. This happens not because Abbie is ugly but because his long-

cherished desire to own the farmland may fade. Even when Abbie tries to infatuate him frequently he replies, "I'm fightin' him--fightin' yew--fightin' fur Maw's rights t' her hum! An' I'm onto ye. Ye hain't foolin' me a mite. Ye'reaimin' t'swaller up everythin' an' make it your'n. Waal, you'll find I'm a heap sight bigger hunk nor yew kin chew!" He interpreted this infatuation to be the trap to snatch away the farmland which he has been fighting for with his father, his two half-brothers Peter and Simeon and now it is with her. Nevertheless, it would be natural for a young boy like Eben to be sexually attracted to the body language of a buxom lady like Abbie. However, Eben does not respond to her call and tries to reserve himself until he becomes sure of his possession of the farmland being unaffected. Eben, in course of time, feels attracted to Abbie and becomes engaged with her; still because of his aspiration for property, he breaks off with Abbie. He is tensed not about losing his chastity but about missing the farmland.

#### **Material Cupidity Diminishes Humane Emotions**

One of the traits *Desire Under the Elms* has discovered is that the more cupidity does a person have for material gain, the less human emotions does he/she have. In this play, we see relationships are often broken when it is the question of material gain. No matter if it is the relationship of father and son, mother and son, husband and wife or brother and brother. They forget blood relation when the question of material possession appears.

As to the diminishing of humane emotion we, at first, consider Ephraim who leads his family consisting of five members. On his part, there is no humanly care and feeling for any member of his family even in case of illness, and no thankfulness for the contribution other members make to the family. It is, instead, seen only the material cupidity of Ephraim that makes the family members weary and rebellious. At the beginning of the play we are told that Ephraim is gone disappeared for two months. After the disappearance of a family member others usually think about how to find him/her out. However, here we see everyone silent about the matter. Even Simeon says, "Mebbe--he'll die soon. Mebbe--fur all we knows--he's dead now." It seems if Ephraim died it would be better for them. This situation arises only because Ephraim was obsessed with his material cupidity and destitute of humane emotions.

Ephraim made his second wife, mother of Eben, work inhumanly for his material cupidity. When the stress grew unbearable for her, she became severely ill and at last died. He engaged not only his wife but also his three sons overtime to develop the land. For this inhuman behavior the sons cherish hatred for their father and wish his death. Eben's comment testifies the hatred, "Honor thy father! I pray he's died." As far as material gain is concerned, no one can come in Ephraim's consideration, not even his own sons. It is because of his material cupidity he can decide to burn the farmland instead of seeing it to go to the hands of his sons. He says, "If I could, in my dyin' hour, I'd set it afire an' watch it burn--this house an' every ear o' corn an' every tree down t' the last blade o' hay! I'd sit an' know it was all a-dying with me an' no one else'd ever own what was mine, what I'd made out o' nothin' with my own sweat 'n' blood!" Actually, all his life Ephraim has been engrossed in material cupidity for which he has become so emotionless that he curses his sons and is jealous enough to see the farmland owned by someone else even by his own sons. It is Ephraim's own



acknowledgement that the farm has made him so hard. He says, "It made me bitter 'n wormwood."

Eben has also been emotionless because of his material cupidity. He does not have brotherly feeling for his half-brothers, Peter and Simeon who are also the legal heirs of the farm. Eben also wants them to leave the farmhouse. He, therefore, steals the coins saved by his father and gives them to Peter and Simenon condition that they will withdraw their demand over the land and go away. Perhaps, the matter of heirship has ended here, but who knows, this land would be an apple of catastrophic discord paving the way for a bloody quarrel among them! Moreover, when he finds Ephraim to bring Abbie as his wife, his anxiety for losing the land gets to a higher degree and his hatred to his father increases. In fact, Eben did not know how Abbie was as a woman, yet it is his material cupidity that forces him to be destitute of humane emotion and to hate Abbie.

To speak of Abbie, she has got married with Ephraim, an aged man only because of her material cupidity. We never see Abbie behaving honestly and faithfully with her husband. Immediately after her arrival in the house she questions whether the house will belong to her or not. We never find her expressing emotion of a wife to her husband; even she wishes to be mother of a son not because of motherly emotion but because of having authority over the farmhouse by virtue of the right of the son.

#### **Material Cupidity, the Radix of Catastrophic Feud**

Treason, intolerance and dishonesty, the generations of material cupidity, have caused catastrophic feud leading to collapse of a family. When the question of the farmland comes to the front, no one cares the minimum for others, no one keeps minimum trust on others and no one holds minimum tolerance for others. A race to win the farmland has been seen in the beginning of the play and at the end of the play no one of the family wins the race. And the family finally ruins and breaks into pieces. Ill competition for material gain is responsible for this undoing.

Almost every one of the family is associated with the catastrophic feud. Ephraim cares no one's willingness of his family but engages everyone at work for his own interest. Eben is the most dominating part the race in which his brothers Peter and Simeon are defeated with the cunning motivation and support of Eben who tries to ensconce him bidding them farewell forever. On the other hand, we find Abbie, at first, conspiring against Eben to drive him out of the house and to make him forsake the right of the property thereby. In fact, a kind of cold war is found for the farmland between Eben and Abbie throughout the play. Eben has never recognized Abbie as his half-mother lest he should lose the right of the farmland. Although Eben indulges himself in love affair with Abbie, it is not because he has, as such, fallen in love with her but because he hits upon a plan to take revenge on Ephraim whom he holds responsible for his mother's death. Peter and Simeon felt reluctant to work positively because they did not find their own material gain.

Complexity gets to the peak after a son is born to Abbie, and Ephraim announces that this son will be the inheritor of the property. Eben, at this announcement incriminates Abbie that she, to deprive him of the right of the farmland, intentionally has made the plan with Ephraim. This allegation paves the way for catastrophic feud leading to the killing of newly born baby. Pathetically, the combat for material gain ends up in

dissolution of life.

#### **Deception in Conjugal Life for Material Cupidity**

O'Neil has, through *Desire Under the Elms*, tried to determine the significance of human life and show how it is ruined. By virtue of the presentation of negative characters and chaotic situation created by their typical activities in this drama, he has successfully pointed at the fact it is the attainment of bliss which is the significance of life. If the bliss of a life is, therefore, ruined, the life will be insignificant. It is proved to be true that where there is material cupidity, there is chaos. As all the characters are engrossed in material cupidity, they are restless – they are living insignificant life destitute of bliss. Even, for material cupidity, the conjugal life becomes meaningless because there is no peace; instead deception is there. We find Abbie showing off her love to Ephraim appreciating his physical appearance and wishing to have a son in a cajoling smile -

"Ye're a strong man yet, hain't ye?" Tain't no ways impossible, be it? We know that. Why d'ye stare so? Hain't ye never thought o' that afore? I been thinkin' o' it all along. Ay-eh-an' I been prayin' it'd happen, too."

But it proves to be deceptive just after she claims the farmland to be left in will for her.

"Would ye will the farm t' me then--t' me an' it?"

Moreover, because of material cupidity, Ephraim loses the respect of his children of whom two leave home forever and the other stays with him with an intention to snatch away the farmhouse from him. Ephraim finally understands Abbie's deception and decides to go to California being disappointed from every side. In the context of the text, all the characters are unhappy and living insignificant life even the new born baby is victimized, and this situation is the result of material cupidity.

#### **Conclusion**

Everybody wants to be happy in life for which there is no alternative to money which plays pivotal role in earthly life. Yet perfect happiness is something to be ensured by going beyond material attraction for excessive attraction for materialistic achievement can generate cupidity which certainly leads to dissolution of a life. *Desire Under the Elms* suggests us not to become extremely obsessed with material gain, instead it suggests us to be kind, responsible and caring for the people living around us. Because of obsession with the earthly satiety, one may, as Abbie grew, grow cruel, and cruelty never goes unpunished. It is true that without material life is impossible; for the sake of life a man cannot help using material but he should have mental control over the attraction of material. If it is otherwise, that is if the attraction for material takes the rein of the life of a man gaining control over him, he is sure to have dissolution of his life.

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