

Nature, Female Confinement and Patriarchal Mindset: An Ecofeminist Reading of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* in the Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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The present paper examines the affinities between female marginalization and the exploitation of mother nature by the patriarchal system from an ecofeminist approach. The male characters of O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* are obsessed with the desire of possessing the farm and winning the heart of Abbie Putnam. Both women and nature are objectified and perceived as commodities and objects of male desire. Starting from Gaard's criticism of the patriarchal system and its negative impact on women and nature, the present paper draws certain parallelism between the muffled female voices and the over-exploitation of 'mother nature' by patriarchal practices. The title of the play is significant as it entails female oscillation between freedom and social constraints. The elms may stand for female freedom in nature away from social suppression. Like the elms which are damaged by pollution and male practices women are affected by patriarchal hegemony. The play has a contemporary dimension because it is relevant to the contemporary context of Covid 19. Indeed, ecofeminists encouraged the protection of nature during quarantine. On the other hand, they condemned domestic violence exercised on women. This paper aims at showing the connection between women and nature and proving that both women and nature are easily affected in moments of crisis. To achieve this conclusion, the paper will be divided into three parts: while the first part will deal with a theoretical framework about ecofeminism, the second part will focus on ecofeminist traces in *Desire under the Elms*. The last discussion part will approach the play in the context of covid19 pandemic.

Ecofeminism, covid 19 pandemic, domestic violence, land, nature.

1. Introduction

Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* is often interpreted as a modern tragedy that reveals the desire for possession and modern man's ambition of achieving the

American dream of collecting lucre. The twentieth century American culture is a male dominated culture where women are denied the rights to possess a land. Abbie Putnam struggles to possess the Cabot's farm and to hide her passion regarding Eben. She kills her son to prove her authentic love and to get rid of marriage as a social contract. This paper shows that O'Neill's play is relevant to a contemporary context. Using a contemporary ecofeminist approach, the paper explores similarities between women vs nature and modern vs contemporary contexts. Women and nature are undermined in the play as they are perceived as objects of male desire. In the same way, women and nature are easily affected during the contemporary Covid-19 pandemic. The paper shows how the play helps us understand the position of women and nature in America during the COVID 19 pandemic and how the experience of women and the exploitation of nature during the pandemic help us grasp Abbie's profile in the modern play. The aim is to demonstrate the relevance of modern drama for opening new horizons and widening our scope about contemporary American culture.

2. Theoretical Framework

The ecofeminist theoretician Gaard focuses on the role of science in damaging the natural chain and the role of the patriarchal machine in the objectification of women and nature. The natural chain is affected because of using animals as objects of laboratory experiments. For instance, "Between 17 and 7 million animals are killed in US Laboratories every year. Under the guise of scientific inquiry, dogs, cats, monkeys, mice, rats, pigs and other animals are routinely suffocated, starved, shocked, blinded, beaten, frozen, electrocuted and eventually killed" (Gaard 1993, p. 65). The alarming number shows that animals are overexploited and they are treated as mere objects of tests. Gaard condemns science for animal extinction and the overexploitation of animals. In fact, "reducing animals to objects devoid of feelings, desires and interests is a common consequence of scientific mindset" (Gaard 1993, p. 66). The idea of animal exploitation will be explored in *Desire*¹ through animal imagery and female sympathy with animals. Apart from animals, Gaard focuses on the close relationship between women and nature. In this respect, the ecofeminist critic examines the dichotomy between nature and culture. "When nature is feminized and therefore sexualized in such construction, culture is masculinized" (Gaard 1993, p. 304). Gaard further explores the relationship between women and nature when she mentions the idea of rape and she reveals that men and women approach rape differently. "Men speak of 'rape the wilderness' when a man says that the land or the forest on the mountain has been raped, he is speaking of despolitation" (Gaard 1993, p. 131). Men talk about nature in an objective way without showing any sympathy or involvement. On the other hand, women talk about rape in a more subjective way. For women "rape is a

¹ *Desire Under the Elms* will henceforth be referred to as *Desire*.

different metaphor or entirely. ... With the same sympathy for nature as we feel for our sisters who are victimized by male violence, that is, a pain in our own bodies, a sense that nothing can be kept sacred, a despair, a loss of self” (Gaard 1993, p. 131). Both women and nature are victimized by male violence. It is clear that there is an intersection between feminist and ecologist views about the common thread between women and nature. The victimization of both women and nature is reminiscent of the Covid-19 pandemic when women and nature were negatively affected.

3. The Intersection between Ecofeminism and Covid-19 Pandemic

There is an intersection between ecofeminism and Covid-19 Pandemic because women and nature were targeted. According to Covid 19 observers, “the pandemic hit us all. It forced the recognition that global warming and the deregulation of our climate is a root cause of the sharp increase in the number of natural disasters including storms, droughts, flooding, fires and zoonotic spillover” (Khoury 2023). Indeed, the pandemic brought about environmental issues like pollution. It complicated the misbalance of ecosystems and led to disasters. Disease led to air pollution and it negatively affected the green environment. Water scarcity is one of the issues developed during the pandemic and it led to the destruction of the environment. “With the covid 19, there is now an added burden: community centers, which offer drinking and bathing water to those who do not have running water, have been shut down” (Heidi Hunter 2020). It is clear that Covid 19 led to pollution and poverty. “The fissures of inequality, racism, environmental destruction and suffering are deepening and widening with the virus” (qtd. in Hunter 2020). Gender inequality was remarkable during the pandemic when a high rate of women were raped and exposed to domestic violence. Home was no longer defined as a safe place, but it turned into a sphere of violence. The Earth Day was not fully celebrated during the pandemic because it was considered as a day of suffering. “On this 50th anniversary of Earth Day, as the covid 19 spreads, and kills, the elderly, the poor and non-white folks suffer the greatest harm” (Hunter 2020). The use of the superlative form ‘greatest’ reveals the heavy impact of the pandemic on minority groups. It is clear that the pandemic had repercussions as it led to the destruction of nature and the violation of women. Women and nature are affected in moments of crisis. The victimization of women and nature by the patriarchal machine is the main rationale for using ecofeminism to study O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms*. Ecofeminism examines “how the interconnected and intersecting sites of oppression and domination that include patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism are intimately linked to the destruction and pillage of the environment” (Khoury 2023).

4. The Desire for Possession

The affinities between women and nature are made obvious from the very beginning of the play. Indeed, the play opens with a minute description of nature and the house of the Cabots. The opening stage directions introduce the setting: “Exterior of the Farmhouse. It is sunset of a day at the beginning of summer in the year 1850. There is no wind and everything is still. The sky above the roof is suffused with deep colors, the green of the elm’s glows, but the house is in shadow, seeming pale and washed out by contrast”. (Act 1.3). The bright colors reflect the beauty of nature during the agrarian revolution and before the penetration of the machine in the American garden. The image of the green elms mirrors the image of the fertile land before human exploitation. On the other hand, the house of the Cabots is defined in naturalistic terms as a pale house which is tainted by family issues, gender disparity and the absence of the mother. Women are not given equal chances in the house of the Cabots. Indeed, the possession of the land is considered as a male activity and women are not allowed to own anything. Male characters are introduced as explorers and exploiters of the land. The sartorial appearance, the facial expressions and the olfactory sense are deployed to show the Cabots’ lust for possessing the land: “Their clothes, their faces, hands, bare arms and throats are earth-stained. They smell of earth. They stand together for a moment in front of the house and, as if with the one impulse, stare dumbly up at the sky, leaning on their hoes. (act 1,3). The earth has an important dimension in the lives of the Cabots as it stands for the absent mother. Mother nature is the source of serenity and tranquility. It appeases the tension of the Cabots when they feel frustrated and disappointed with the American dream of collecting lucre. In this respect, Minnie is perceived by the Cabots as an object of desire. “She’s liket’night, she’s soft ‘n’ wa’m, her eyes kin wink like astar, her mouth’s wa’m, her arms’re wa’m, she smellslike a wa’m plowed field, she’s purty” (Act 1, 14). Warmth is the common point between Minnie and the fields. Like the fields which are the source of liberty from social chains, women are the epitome of maternal warmth. The idea of warmth and the consciousness about the role of ecology in maintaining the natural chain is recognized during the Coid-19 pandemic when social distancing, confinement and lockdown contributed to the liberation of nature from environmental perils. “In this respect, some American citizens developed a new awareness about the important role of nature in creating balance. One citizen declares: “The spring, while I social distance, I will plant seeds, after, when it is safe to go out, I will work to build a just world through community” (Hunter 2020). Planting seeds brings new hope and deepens male awareness about the necessity of protecting nature and defining it as a source of warmth.

5. Ecofeminism and animals

In *Desire*, socially secluded characters like old Cabot find solace in spending time with cows. He reveals to the audience: “I rested. I slept good—down with the cows. They

know how t' sleep. They'reteachin' me" (Act 2, 56). Epharim seems to be yearning for maternal warmth as the cow stands for maternal warmth. "Cow is the maternal animal par excellence...We talk of the kind mother that is particularly excellent with small children as cow-like" (Hannah 2006). Maternal warmth can be studied through the relationship between Abbie and the Cabots. Eben associates cows with his dead mother and he considers milky cows as the fetish for maternal warmth. He rages against Abbie for desiring to win the place of his mother and to own the land: 'EBEN--(with *queer excitement*) It's Maw's farmagen! It's my farm! Them's my cows! I'll milk my durn fingers off fur cows o' mine'! (Act 1, 20). The recurrent use of the possessive pronoun "my" reflects male desire for owning the land and Eben's desire to recapture maternal love. The image of the milk reinforces the lust for possession. Indeed, "Cow's milk is linked to moonlight it is as abundant as the innumerable stars in the milky way, and nurtures the earth in the form of rain" (Werness 2006). Like nature which is nurtured by milk, Eben is nurtured by maternal care. He shares with his father the longing for maternal warmth. "Ephraim Cabot, the man of stone, rigid in his puritanism, representing everything that denies the natural, the Dionysian, in human behavior, needs the warmth of the cows" (Berlin 1993, p. 76). The cow is thus another example about the affinities between nature and women. From an ecofeminist standpoint, "animalizing women has served as a justification for the domination of women, animals and the earth" (Gaard 1993, p. 5). The idea of animalizing women can be further examined through the image of the snake. Eben describes Abbie as a snake and he addresses: "Her--here--sleepin'with him--stealin' my Maw's farm! I'd as soon pet askunk 'r kiss a snake!" (Act 1, 18). Abbie is associated with the snake for her attempts at possessing the farm through Epharim. Like the snake which is characterized by devouring other animals, Abbie is poisoning the ear of old Cabot and ensuring him to have a son inspite of old age. "Abbie the newcomer of the family seems to slither like a snake in her famous description of sexual desire in which the hissing S sounds recall Satan in the Garden of Eden" (Vogliano 1999, p. 50). Abbie is clearly placed at the margin of society: she has a secondary position because she is associated with evil and satanic deeds.

Abbie, as a helpless woman in a patriarchal community cannot own the land and she is insisting on having a son to be the heir of the family. The fact of denying female access to ownership is not accepted by some ecofeminists who reject the denigration of women and the exploitation of animals. They reject male hunters' practices and their consideration of "Women and animals as different and lesser beings, beings whose suffering and death are justifiable sacrifices" (Gaard 1993, p. 69). Like modern American female characters and animals that are endangered by environmental hazards, Covid-19 women and animals were easily influenced by the pandemic. In reality, "covid 19 probably began in 'animal wet markets' in China. The virus is most likely the result of humans and animals living in dense conditions" (Hunter 2000). The dense conditions in the play are observed through Simon and Peter's decision to leave the farm and to fulfill their dream of collecting lucre in California. They are escaping the tense relationship with the father and

leaving family issues apart. Simone dislikes staying in the farm and enjoying the beauty of mother nature. He discloses to his brother: "I been hearin' the hens cluckin' an' the roosters crowin' all the durn day. I been listenin' t' the cows lowin' an' everythin' else kickin' up till I can't stand it no more. It's springan' I'm feelin' damned," he says. "Damned like an old bare hickory tree fit on'y fur burnin'," (Act 1, 13). It is clear that some male characters do not appreciate mother nature and do not respect the natural chain. Both Peter and Simon share the same patriarchal mindset of repressing women and exploiting the farm. In this context, Simon informs his brother: "-Ye kin take this place an' burn it!...-- An' rape yer new woman! Whoop! (He and Peter stop their dance, holding their sides, rocking with wild laughter" (Act 1, 28). Both Abbie and the farm are associated with negative connotations: the Cabots want to burn the land and to rape the woman. These actions reflect the male vision of both women and nature as scapegoats of the patriarchal system. Simon and Peter share the same patriarchal view of women and nature and they share the same desire of leaving the land. The two brothers sing the "Oh, Susannah" song: "I jumped aboard the Liza ship, And traveled on the sea, And every time I thought of home, I wished it wasn't me! Oh! Californi-a, That's the land fur me!" (Act 1, 30). They are seeking for California because it is filled with mines of gold and it mirrors the desire for achieving the dream of material success. Gold is a symbol of escape and "this symbol of escape identifies the Cabots; as each man loses his hold on the farm is ready to escape to the West" (Itkin 1954, p. 47). The escape to the West is another example of the desire to exploit the land and to explore the fields of California: "An' we're startin' out fur the gold fields o' Californi-a!" (Act 1, 29). It is clear that both Peter and Simon serve the patriarchal hegemony of abusing female freedom and damaging the land.

Both modern and contemporary American societies are unjust to women and nature as female repression, environmental issues and gender inequality are still dominating the American society. This part sets out to compare the twentieth century situation of women and environment to the Covid-19 problems of minimizing women and using animals for laboratory experiments on new vaccines. Starting with women, the rate of domestic violence increased and many women were raped. "Globally, 243 million women and girls aged 15-49 have been subjected to sexual and physical violence" (qtd. in Sanders 2023, p. 1). This alarming number demonstrates that domestic violence against women became a dominant phenomenon during the Covid-19 pandemic. The phenomenon shows that women are easily affected in moments of crisis. During the pandemic some women went through surveillance. Indeed, "the instruction to stay at home, issued based on keeping people safe and protected from the virus poses dangers for victims living with perpetrators of domestic abuse. Victims are in the alarming situation of spending protracted periods with perpetrators in shared living spaces" (Kumar 2020, p. 139). Domestic violence proves that women's behavior is controlled by the patriarchal community. In the same way, Abbie goes through verbal violence and she is humiliated by her lover who does not believe in

her. “Eben (*brokenly*) Lies! Ye love him! He’ll steal the farm fur ye! (*brokenly*) But t’ain’t the farm so much--not no more--it’s yew foolin’ me--gittin’ me t’ loveye--lyin’ yew loved me--jest t’ git a son t’ steal!” (Act 3, 70)”. Eben has doubts about Abbie and he accuses her of being a thief who wants to own the land. He considers her as a liar who wants to steal the land and he does not trust her feelings. Verbal violence is an example of female social denigration. Abbie is not allowed to express her feelings of pure love in a society where female desire is seen as a taboo.

In addition to women who are denied freedom and they are victimized by the patriarchal society; animals are exploited during the Covid 19 pandemic. According to Gaard, “because women and animals are judged unable to comprehend science and are thus relegated to the position of passive object, their suffering and deaths are tolerable in the name of profit and progress” (Gaard 1993, p. 69). Animals are sacrificed during the pandemic in the name of scientific progress. During the pandemic “a significant amount of animal tests being conducted on a range of species including mice, rats, hamsters, cats, guinea pigs, forests and monkeys” (Stevier 2020, p. 1). Animals are thus used as subjects of experiments and they are considered as tools for treating human disease. Using animals for sample tests negatively affects biodiversity and results in animal extinction. Scientific experiments impact the natural chain as animals are treated as scapegoats of the system. In the same vein of disrespecting animals and misunderstanding their role in maintaining natural balance, some characters are downtrodden in the play and they are considered as evil doers and passive creatures. When he is asked about his emotions regarding Abbie, Eben uses animal imagery: “Ay-eh--like a dumb ox” (Act 3, 70). Abbie is described as a beast because of her approval to be the mother of Old Cabot’s son. The image of the ox has a symbolic dimension as it stands for sacrifice. In fact, “white oxen were sacrificed to the Greek god Zeus” (Werness 2008, p. 308). In the same context, Abbie accepts to get married to Old Cabot at the sacrifice of her feelings. Cabot has a patriarchal view about the female body as a reproductive machine.

Like women who are affected by the patriarchal agenda and they are denied freedom, animals are affected by male practices like hunting and they are used as objects of scientific experiments. This exploitation has a negative impact on ecology. Indeed, “the trade in wild animals including hunting, butchering, transporting, handling and marketing for human consumption and other uses -creates a serious risk of zoonotic spillover” (Stevier 2020, p. 5). Animals are exploited in contemporary societies for the sake of human consumption and scientific development. The scientist does not hear the cries of animals, he does not see their flowing blood, he sees nothing, but his idea” (Gaard 1993, p. 257). Animals are scapegoats of scientific research and women are the victims of male suppression. Like animals that are degraded, Abbie is perceived by the old Cabot as a mere child bearer who has the function of bringing up a new heir of the family. Epharim uses a tone of pride while talking about the son: “--That hain’t me. A son is me--my blood--mine.

Mine ought t' git mine. An' then it's still mine--even though I be six foot under. D'ye see?" (Act 2, 43). The use of the possessive expression "mine" shows that old Cabot considers the son as a tool of owning the land. It is clear that Abbie has a secondary position in a modern American community where male supremacy reigns supreme. The image of Abbie as a child bearer recalls O'Neill's Nina Leeds who is treated as a guinea pig for scientific experiments. She went through a new experiment to have a child who is her 'raison d'être'. However, Nina feels embarrassed when she learns about the genetic disease of the Evans and the risk of having a mad son. She convulses to her mother: "But I'll be so lonely! I'll have lost my baby! Oh, Mother, how can I keep on living" (Act 3, 110). It is obvious that both Abbie and Nina are degraded in a patriarchal society where a woman is denied female desire and she is sherey defined as a child bearer and as a mother. Like women who are treated as objects of male desire, animals are treated like objects of scientific progress. Animal imagery proves that there are affinities between the exploitation of both women and animals by male behavior. "This zoological image is now a commonplace of modern world literature and is employed s a means of symbolizing the degrading absurdity of human existence" (Asli 1997, p. 85). A sense of absurdity prevails in the play and during the pandemic as a result of domestic violence, animal exploitation and male practices.

6. Ecofeminism and the Wilderness

Wilderness has an important role in maintaining natural and psychological balance. According to ecofeminists like Gaard, ecofeminism "presents environmental degradation as an abhorrent symptom of our alienation from the wild parts of ourselves" (Gaard 1993, p. 109). Self-alienation is noticed through Abbie's vacillation between longing for freedom and following the social norms which define a woman as an obedient wife and a tender mother. Her self-alienation is traced through informing Abbie about her pure feelings of love and her dedication to kill the son as an edifice for real love. She expressed her regret for killing the son, but she is elated with proving her authentic feelings regarding Eben. Abbie affirms:

I didn't want t' do it. I hated myself fur doin' it. I loved him. He was sopurty--dead spit 'n' image o' yew. But I loved yew more--an' yew was goin' away--far off whar I'd neversee ye agen, never kiss ye, never feel ye pressed aginme agen--an' ye said ye hated me fur havin' him—ye said ye hated him (Act 3,74).

Abbie gives reins to female desire and she transgresses the rules of the patriarchal culture. She submits to the social order of becoming an obedient wife, but she subverts the

system from within. The successive use of the verb to love conveys Abbie's ability to express her feelings in an explicit way. The heroine gives priority to nature over culture as she refuses to be taken as "an ideal" wife and mother and she prefers the liberation of the body from social engagements. The liberation of the female body is recognized through Abbie's fervent desire to attract Eben. "Abbie stands for a second staring at him, her eyes burning with desire. Then with a little cry she runs over and throws her arms about his neck, she pulls his head back and covers his mouth with kisses. (Act 2, 48). The uses of images related to senses reflect the sensuality of Abbie and her refusal of the gender roles attributed to women. Female desire is further reinforced through the image of nature. Abbie enjoys female desire under the elms and sun beams. Nature is as an escape for improving the well-being of female psyche and reaching euphoria. Abbie talks about nature in a passionate way:

Hain't the sun strong an' hot? Ye kin feel it burnin' into the earth--Nature--makin' thin's grow--bigger'n' bigger--burnin' inside ye--makin' ye want t' grow--into somethin' else--till ye're jined with it--an' it's your'n--but it owns ye, too--an' makes ye grow bigger--like a tree--like them elums--(She laughs again softly, holding his eyes. He takes a step toward her, compelled against his will.)
Nature'llbeat ye, Eben. Ye might's well own up t' it fust's last (Act 2, 36).

The image of the sun may suggest the heat of real love and the role of nature as a source of female freedom from social fetters. Abbie believes that real love can grow under the elms and she seduces Eben in the wilderness. The elm is another important symbol, which suggests the harmony between Abbie and nature. "Whatever happens in the play happens under the elms--physically under them, as the stage directions insist and symbolically under them, as they represent nature and mother" (Berlin 1993, p. 74).

Female desire under the elms is a celebration of female freedom in nature. "Desire under the Elms [is] a celebration of the divinity of nature" (Voglino 1999, p. 49). Like O'Neill who highlights the role of nature in the revival of female psyche, Covid-19 pandemic showed the role of nature in alleviating female depression. Both ecofeminists and O'Neill deliver the same view about nature as a safe den far away from patriarchal practices. In the same vein, Covid-19 ecologists agree that "protecting nature is not just important for pandemic prevention; it is also critical for financial recovery from COVID-19. We must "build back better" from the present crisis protecting nature and making nature-positive investments that will ensure sustainable economic recovery and secure people's livelihoods." (Stevier 2023, p. 3). Protecting nature has a fundamental role in achieving

sustainable development and creating a green environment has a positive effect of inner-worth. During the pandemic, real and virtual visits to the forests proved to be beneficial. “Essential oils released by plants in the forest environment contribute to improved well-being” (Baranowska et al 2023, p. 99). The idea of plants recalls Abbie’s successful experience of achieving female pleasure under the elms. The affinities between women and nature are made conspicuous through the image of the rose. Cabot describes Abbie using the lexical register of nature: ‘Yew air my Rose o’ Sharon! Behold, yew air fair; yer eyes air doves; yer lips air like scarlet; yer two breasts air like two fawns; yernavel be like a round goblet; yer belly be like a heapo’ wheat.’ (Act 2, 40)”. There is a profuse use of symbolism which accentuates the affinities between the female body and the natural landscape. For instance, “roses, fiery and vibrant, symbolize enthusiasm, desire, and excitement” (Khatri 2025, p. 27). Roses may stand for female desire and longing for liberating the body from social constraints. Besides, the image of the wheat stands for regeneration: “wheat heads were a symbol of the fertile and life - giving nature of plants’ (Becker 2000, p. 327). Like nature which is supposed to be fertile and a source of recovery, Abbie is expected to be a child bearer and a source of fertility. She seeks to own the land by bring birth to the youngest Cabot.

During the Covid19 pandemic nature proved to be a source of recovery “improved immunity to infections, and reduced risk of cardiovascular diseases and concerns. Being in the forest reduces the levels of cortisol, dopamine and noradrenaline” (Baranowska et al 2023, p. 97). Mother nature played a fundamental role during the pandemic as it led to improved psychology, it improved the immunity system and it attenuated stress. In the same context, nature is considered as an implacable force by Abbie as it lifts her spirits up and it allows her to express her feelings away from social strains. Eben mocks Abbie as she believes in the importance of nature. He reveals: “Ye can’t beat Nature, didn’t ye say? (He laughs and again starts to walk away)” (Act 2, 73). Laughing out loud is meant to debase Abbie and to remind her about her position. Eben seems to minimize the role of nature in endowing the human being with inner worth. Unlike the male view about nature, the female view is that nature is the locus for female freedom. Abbie goes through a dichotomy of culture and nature division: she oscillates between sensuality and cultural constraints. She succeeds at achieving female desire, but she is socially punished and placed at the margin of society. Indeed, “protagonists daily struggle is geared towards fulfilling their desires, but the real world disappoints them” (Bahroun 2023, p. 11). Abbie is one of the characters who are torn between what they desire and what the society expects them to be.

7. My Body My Choice: Infanticide

Abbie breaks social norms when she kills her son and she gives priority to love over motherhood. She is ready to take risks and to inform her husband about the fact of killing the son. Abbie reveals to Eben: “ I’ll gitsquar’ with the old skunk--an’ yew! I’ll tell him

thetruth 'bout the son he's so proud o'! Then I'll leave yehere t' pizen each other--with Maw comin' out o' hergrave at nights--an' I'll go t' the gold fields o' Californi-a whar Sim an' Peter be! (Act 3, 69). Her challenging tone shows that she is a powerful woman who flouts the maxims of patriarchy. The challenging behavior is reminiscent of the contemporary protest of 'my body my choice' ". My body, my choice. Pro-choice advocates believe that the rights to choose an abortion empowers women and other people with uterus to have control over their bodies and destinies" (Benson 2019, p. 42). The movement consists of allowing abortion and giving women the right to control their bodies. "Women waving protest signs that read 'my body, my choice'. Social media feeds are filled with claims that women's reproductive rights are being taken away. Celebrity influencers share their abortion experiences with fans and tout them as being the best thing they ever did for their carers" (Cates 2024, p. 4). The feminist protest is based on giving women the right to choose abortion and to refuse the social role of being a mother. In the play, the situation of Abbie is slightly different as she gives birth to a child, but she commits infanticide as a sign of refusing the social burden of being a mother. She chooses her emotions over the instinct of motherhood. She screams loudly: "*(lifting her head as if defying God)* I don'trepent that sin! I hain't askin' God t' fergive that!" (Act 3, 80). It is clear that Abbie defies social norms and she believes that she has the right to refuse the obligation of being a mother. On the other hand, her lover chooses his son over his feelings and he accuses Abbie as being 'sinful'. He reproaches her: "Don't ye tech me! Ye'repizen! How could ye--t' murder a pore little critter--Ye must've swapped yer soul t' hell! (Act 3, 74). The use of the modal 'must' shows that Eben is influenced by the social rules which perceive the act of killing as being 'sinful'. He decides to report infanticide to the sheriff: "I'll take vengeance now! I'll git the Sheriff! I'll tell himeverythin'! Then I'll sing "I'm off to Californi-a!" an'go--gold--Golden Gate--gold sun--fields o' gold in the West! (Act 3,75). The Sheriff stands for male authority as he is assigned the role of taking revenge and punishing sinful people. Eben and his father are rivals, but they agree over the idea of punishment. Cabot's sound of fury is made clear through his decision to contact the Sheriff. He addresses Abbie using harsh words: "I'll live to a hundred! I'll live t' seeye hung! I'll deliver ye up t' the jedgment o' God an'the law! I'll git the Sheriff now" (Act 3, 78). Both male characters resort to the sheriff and consider infanticide s a crime which should be punished.

The act of killing can be examined metaphorically as a symbol for social disobedience and Abbie's subversion of patriarchal stricture. She dares killing her son and expressing her feelings in an explicit way: "love ye, Eben! I love ye! (*Shestops at the door weakly, swaying, about to fall.*) I don't care what ye do--if ye'll on'y love me agen! (*She falls limply to the floor in a faint*)" (Act 3, 75). Abbie debunks social norms when she expresses her female desire and she refuses to be an object of male desire. She reverses the traditional roles assigned to women when she places Eben as the object and not as a subject.

The recurrent use of the pronoun “I” proves that Abbie becomes the subject and she refuses the objectification of the female body. She remains powerful even after revenge and when the sheriff decides to execute her. She wants to share the punishment with Eben and to have the same doom. Eben “looks into her eyes and forces a trembling smile.) If I’m sharin’ with ye, I won’t feel lonesome, leastways (Act 3, 81). The play has an idealistic end since the two lovers are sharing the bitter moments together and they are judged equally. Both male and female partners are punished for the illegal relationship and for infanticide. O’Neill delivers a message about social judgment and he shows that men should not be released and they should also be punished for adultery. In the farewell scene, the lovers celebrate the beauty of the sun. They go out the door in rear, the men following, and come from the house, walking hand in hand to the gate. Eben stops there and points to the sunrise sky.) Sun’s a-rizin’. Purty, hain’t it? (Act 3, 83). The rhetorical question highlights the role of nature as being a source of human redemption and as the source of peace. This idea is a reminder of the Covid-19 context when forests used to be a source for psychological well-being. Abbie and Eben are punished at the end, but they succeed at getting rid of social constraints. They are redeemed in nature and they achieve social decolonization. “Decolonizing means subscribing to the ecological view that creates new relationships between human and non-human beings as well as new economic systems that undo othering and thus transcend differences based on race, gender or nation state” (Holemans 2020, p. 81). Both Abbie and Eben are treated equally and they are sharing the same end. Pure love proves to be powerful as it unites lovers even when they are sentenced to death.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, an ecofeminist reading of O’Neill’s *Desire under the Elms* shows that both women and nature are sources of male desire. Both Abbie and the field are sources of male lust for possession. The close relationship between women and nature is reminiscent of the Covid -19 pandemic when forests used to be a source of therapy. Like the Cabots’ farm which is affected by the ravages of capitalism, Abbie is resisting male gaze and the objectification of the female body. Abbie’s resistance reaches its apex when she kills the son as a testimony of real love. This act is reminiscent of ‘my body my choice’ contemporary feminist motto. Abbie refuses female confinement and she gives priority to love over motherhood. She is punished by the Sheriff, but she succeeds at reaching freedom and enjoying the beauty of nature. There is an intersection between ecofeminism and modern drama since modern drama succeeds at staging the role of women and nature in achieving social equilibrium. O’Neill delivers a message about treating women as equal creatures who contribute to the creation of a civil society and he criticizes the objectification of the female body. Reading female marginalization in the context of Covid 19 pandemic leads to the conclusion that there are affinities between modern and

contemporary women. Both are vulnerable and they are treated as objects of male desire. While Abbie is the object of the Cabots' desire, some contemporary women were raped during the pandemic. *Desire under the Elms* gives voice to some women by highlighting female desire and showing the role of pure love in the redemption of male and female characters. . An ecofeminist reading of the play in the light of Covid-19 pandemic shows that both women and nature are vulnerable and they are easily affected in moments of crisis. The modern play has thus a contemporary touch because female vulnerability, the virus of masculinity and the patriarchal mindset are still challenged by contemporary feminist scholars. O'Neill shares with ecofeminists the same call for creating a better future and "realising that future in which care is not just something that is talked about but also widely practiced" (Holemans 2020, p. 91). Women and nature should be taken care of in order to achieve social balance and to maintain a well-balanced natural chain. This paper positions O'Neill as a playwright whose plays transcend time boundaries. His modern play intersects with contemporary concerns about nature and women. By dealing with themes that go beyond the modern American context, O'Neill's work crosses historical boundaries.

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