

Desire Under the Elms Summary

Writer: Eugene O'Neill | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Part One: Scenes 1-4

The Setting and the Cabot Farmhouse

The play begins in New England (a region in the United States) in the year 1850. The setting is a lonely farmhouse of the Cabot family. Two big elm trees bend over the roof. They seem to “protect” the house but also “press down” on it. It is as if the elm trees are heavy with sadness. This gives the place a dark and trapped feeling. Everything in the play happens in or around this house.

It is early summer of 1850. Eben Cabot, the youngest son, comes out of the house. He rings a bell for dinner. His two older half-brothers, Simeon and Peter, come back from the fields after a hard day's work. They are tired but cheerful. They talk about Simeon's dead wife. They also talk about their plan to go to California for the Gold Rush. They are tired of their father's farm. They dream of finding gold and freedom. Simeon and Peter hope that their father, Ephraim Cabot, will die soon. Because if he dies, they might get the farm. From the window, Eben hears them and angrily says he prays his father is dead too.

Eben's Anger and the Brothers' Conflict

During dinner, the brothers talk. Eben says he hates his father. He believes their father oppressed his mother and made her work hard until she died. Eben says her mother was a very kind and gentle woman. Eben feels the farm rightfully belongs to him because it was his mother's land. He feels his mother's spirit still lives there. The brothers argue that they also worked on the land, so it belongs to them too.

Eben announces he is going to the town. His brothers laugh. They say he must be going to see a woman named Minnie. They tell him their father also went to her once. Eben becomes furious, but they just laugh more. He walks away angrily.

Eben's News and the Deal

Early the next morning, Eben returns from town. He tells his brothers shocking news. Their father has married again! This means the new wife will share the farm and maybe inherit it.

Simeon and Peter feel hopeless and talk again about going to California. Eben then offers them money if they sign over their share of the farm to him. He says he will give them gold so they can travel. They ask where he got the money. Eben lies that he took it by force from Minnie, the woman in town. Eben actually stole the money from their father. Simeon and Peter agree to the deal.

The Father Returns with Abbie

Later that day, Simeon and Peter drink and talk lazily while Eben works outside. Then Eben suddenly shouts that he sees his father coming. Simeon and Peter quickly pack their things because they do not want to meet their father. Eben brings out a small bag of gold coins hidden under the floor. He gives each brother their share after they sign their share of the farm. The brothers feel free.

As they leave, they see their father, Ephraim Cabot, arriving with his new wife, Abbie Putnam. Abbie is much younger than Cabot (Ephraim Cabot). Simeon and Peter meet them at the gate and spit on the ground in disgust. Then they walk off and sing about California. They are happy to escape their cruel father and the farm forever. Cabot shouts curses after them. Abbie feels happy that they are gone.

Abbie and Eben Meet

Later, Abbie goes into the kitchen and meets Eben. She smiles and says she wants to be friends. But Eben is cold and angry. He sees her as an intruder stealing his mother's home.

Abbie tries to explain her situation. She says that she was an orphan and a widow. She worked for others. Now, she is finally happy to have a house of her own. Eben feels pity and attraction. But he also hates her. He calls her a bad woman and says the farm is his mother's and now his. Abbie laughs and says, "We'll see." They threaten each other. Both want to own the farm. Abbie then suddenly speaks softly again. She says they should be friends. Eben feels attracted to her beauty, but then he bursts out that he hates her and runs outside.

Outside, Eben sees his father and stares at him with hate. Cabot yells at him for not working, and they argue. Finally, they both walk off toward the barn.

Part Two: Scenes 1-4

Abbie and Eben's Quarrel

It is now two months later, in the late summer. The farm looks more peaceful from the outside, but inside, tension is rising. Ephraim Cabot, the old farmer, is still harsh and proud. Abbie, his

new wife, wants love and security. Eben, his youngest son, burns with anger, jealousy, and a secret attraction toward Abbie. The elm trees still hang over the house, as if watching the dark desire that grows beneath them.

Abbie is sitting on the porch when Eben comes out. He is wearing his best suit. She teases him by asking if she is going to see Minnie. Her face shows jealousy and anger. She begins to flirt with him. She speaks softly and tries to charm him. But Eben acts proud. He says again that he will get the farm away from his father and her. He claims he will make sure his mother's spirit wins. Then he goes to the road. Abbie becomes very angry. For the first time, she realizes she truly wants Eben—not just the farm.

At this moment, Ephraim Cabot comes from the barn. He sees Abbie upset and asks if she and Eben are fighting again. She lies and says no. Cabot says Eben is soft and lazy, unlike him. Abbie says he is just like his father. Cabot proudly says no one can be like him—he is strong, hard, and chosen by God to work the land.

Abbie's Plan

Cabot sits with Abbie and speaks about getting old. He says he feels lonely. He wonders if maybe he should forgive Eben and live peacefully with him. Abbie becomes jealous and angry. She does not want Cabot to give anything to Eben.

Cabot looks at her face and praises her beauty. He kisses her hand, but she looks away. She disgusts him. Then she softly asks who will get the farm when Cabot dies. Cabot says maybe no one. He says the land is his life, and he does not want anyone else to enjoy it.

Cabot thinks for a while and says the farm should go to someone with his own blood—his own child. Abbie immediately sees a chance. She suggests that they could have a son together. Cabot's eyes shine with excitement. He hugs her and promises that if she gives him a son, she can have everything she wants. But inside, Abbie already has another plan. She does not really love Cabot. She decides to have a child—but with Eben, not with Cabot. That way, she will have both love and the right to the farm.

The Lonely Night

That evening, Cabot and Abbie sit on their bed in their nightclothes. Abbie looks distant. Cabot talks endlessly about his life and his faith in religion. In the room next to them, Eben sits on his bed. He is restless and sleepless.

Cabot starts talking about how people once laughed at him because the farm was full of stones and infertile soil. He worked hard. He turned it into a good farm. He believes God made him

suffer to make him strong. He says he went West once, to a place with soft land, but God told him to come back here. He believes God wants him to live a hard life and stay on this rocky land.

While Cabot talks about God, Abbie is not listening. She is thinking of Eben. She hears Eben walking in his room. She cannot take her eyes off the wall between them. When Cabot notices that she is not paying attention, he becomes angry. Cabot says it is cold in the house, then decides to sleep in the barn. He leaves the room.

Abbie waits for a while, then quietly opens her door and goes into Eben's room.

The Forbidden Love

Abbie runs to Eben and kisses him passionately. He kisses her back, but then pushes her away. He says he hates her and calls her a liar. She says she can make him happy and that he must love her, too.

They argue about Minnie. Abbie becomes jealous and furious. Then she laughs. She says she can see in his eyes that he really desires her. Eben's face changes; his anger melts into desire. Abbie smiles slowly and says she is going downstairs to the parlor—the room where Eben's mother had died. Eben looks frightened and begs her not to go there. Abbie says she will wait for him there.

The Meeting in the Parlor

A few minutes later, Abbie is sitting in the dark parlor. Eben enters. The room is silent. Abbie whispers that she feels "something" here. Eben says it is his mother's spirit. They talk about Eben's mother. Eben says his mother hated Cabot. He says she was kind. Abbie embraces him—first like a mother, then like a lover.

Eben feels torn between love and guilt. He says Abbie stole his mother's home. Abbie whispers that she loves him. Suddenly, Eben smiles—a strange, wild smile. He says maybe their love can be his mother's revenge on Cabot. They kiss passionately. The parlor becomes a symbol of forbidden love.

A New Morning

At dawn, the next morning, Eben and Abbie speak to each other playfully and lovingly. Abbie asks if he loves her, and he says yes, he does. They both feel peaceful. Eben says his mother can rest now, because her spirit has found peace through their love. Abbie smiles. She believes that now she can have both love and the farm.

Part Three: Scenes 1-4

The Baby and the Farm

It is now eight months later, in early spring. The farm looks peaceful again, but inside the house, tension has grown stronger. Abbie has had a baby. Ephraim Cabot believes the child is his, and he feels proud and young again. But in truth, the baby is Eben's son. This innocent child becomes the symbol of both love and guilt.

The scene begins in the kitchen. Abbie is singing softly upstairs to her baby. Eben is sitting alone, thinking. He loves Abbie and the child deeply, but he also feels shame and fear.

Suddenly, Cabot enters, happy and full of energy. He looks younger and stronger than before. He laughs and says the baby's birth has given him new life. He believes God has finally blessed him with a true son—someone to inherit his farm and continue his name. Eben watches him quietly, his eyes full of anger and pain. Cabot talks proudly about how the baby will grow up strong and hard, just like him. He says, "He'll be a real Cabot!"

Cabot's Celebration and Eben's Jealousy

Cabot tells Eben that he plans to throw a party for the farm workers to celebrate the birth. He says everyone will drink, dance, and bless the child. Abbie pretends to be happy, but she feels uneasy. She knows her secret cannot stay hidden forever.

After Cabot leaves to prepare, Eben angrily accuses Abbie of enjoying Cabot's pride. He believes she loves the old man again because he owns the land. Abbie cries and swears that she loves only Eben. Eben becomes cruel. He says maybe she used him just to have the farm and a child. Abbie tries to explain that she wanted the baby for him, to make their love complete. But Eben does not listen. He calls her a liar and runs out of the house.

Abbie feels heartbroken. She falls to the floor and sobs. She looks at the baby and whispers, "He's mine and Eben's." She kisses the baby again and again, but in her mind, a terrible idea begins to grow—a desperate plan to prove her love to Eben.

The Party in the Barn

In the evening, the farm workers and neighbors come to celebrate. There is laughter, singing, and drinking. Cabot, dressed proudly, feels like a king. He dances with the others. He boasts of his new son and his strength. But behind the joy, Abbie and Eben are both miserable. Eben sits alone in the dark. He refuses to join the fun. Abbie seems detached.

Cabot laughs loudly and tells Abbie that she has made him young again. He shouts, "I'll live forever!" Meanwhile, Abbie turns toward the stairs. Her face is pale. She whispers that she knows what she must do to show Eben her love. She slowly goes upstairs to the baby's room.

Abbie's Terrible Deed

The stage becomes quiet. The sound of laughter fades from the barn. After a while, Abbie comes down the stairs again. She walks slowly, carrying something wrapped in white cloth. She lays it on the parlor table and covers it. When Eben returns later that night, she runs to him and says she has "done it." Eben looks confused and asks what she means. She says she has proved her love—she has killed their baby so that nothing stands between them.

Eben stares at her in horror. He cannot believe it. She begs him to forgive her, but Eben's face turns pale. He calls her mad, a murderer. He rushes out and tells the neighbors what she has done. Abbie follows him, crying, begging for forgiveness. But he does not look back.

The Morning After

The next morning, the sun rises slowly over the farm. The elms stand silent, heavy with sorrow. Inside the house, Abbie sits quietly. Her hair is messy, and her face is white. She looks tired and peaceful, as if waiting for punishment. Eben comes in slowly. His face shows guilt and pain. He says he went to the sheriff (police) and told him the truth—that Abbie killed the baby. He also says that he is guilty too. Because he forced her into jealousy and despair. He says he wants to share her punishment.

Abbie's eyes fill with tears. She says she is no longer afraid to die, because he still loves her. Eben holds her tightly and says they will go to jail together—"together, always together." They kiss gently, the same way they did when their love first began.

The sheriff and his men arrive. Cabot enters from the barn. He looks at them silently. Eben says they are going away. Cabot says he will stay on the farm because it is all he has left. He turns his eyes toward the elms. The play ends in deep silence. The elms stand tall, like witnesses to everything that happened. Abbie and Eben's passionate love has destroyed everything—the child, their peace, and the family. Yet, at the same time, their love becomes something pure at the end, because they accept punishment together. Eugene O'Neill shows through this story that when love turns into possession and greed, it leads to tragedy.