

The search For Identity in Eugene O'Neill's

The Hairy Ape

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Abstract:

Due to industrialization, modern man who was exploited and persecuted, became devoid of human feelings. He started to act just like animals with the capability of physical strength without intellectual thinking.

The research analyses the main character in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* who wants to regain his identity. The research also deals with O'Neill's employment of expressionistic techniques like symbols, distorted language, costumes and monologues to expose Yank's sufferings as he rejects enslavement in the age of machines that deprives him of his identity.

الخلاصة:

لقد تعرض الإنسان إلى الاستغلال والاضطهاد في العصر الحديث بسبب الثورة الصناعية فتجرد بذلك من المشاعر الإنسانية وبدء بالتصرف كالحيوان الذي يتمتع بالقوة البدنية فقط وليس له القدرة على التفكير. حلل البحث الشخصية الرئيسية في مسرحية القرد كثيف الشعر للكاتب يوجين أونيل والذي أراد استعادة هويته المفقودة. تناول البحث كذلك توظيف الكاتب أونيل للتقنيات التعبيرية كالرموز واللغة المحرفة والملابس والحوارات الداخلية للكشف عن معاناة يانك ورفضه للعبودية في عالم الآلة التي جردته من هويته.

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The Hairy Ape

Eugene O'Neill's was born in New York city in 1888. He was educated at Princeton and Harvard. He worked on a tramp steamer at sea and that taught him much about the ugly side of modern society. Such experience in life helped O'Neill to change the "old characters of melodrama into realistic characters." ¹ He was awarded four Pulitzer prizes for his play; *Beyond the Horizon* (1928), *Anna Christie* (1922), *Strange Interlude* (1928), and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). O'Neill was also awarded Nobel prize for literature in 1936.

The theme of each play that O'Neill has written "goes beyond the surface of life to study the force behind life." ²

O'Neill lost his sense of security due to his long tours with his father who was an actor. Thus, his plays are "in, a very real sense, a continuous record of his soul-searching." ³ O'Neill employed forces represented by fate and psychology of Freud in his plays to mirror the inner conflict of his characters' minds reflecting their instability.

However, O'Neill prob deep into the American society and he succeeded to change American melodrama from its being superficial pictures into more expressive and meaningful reflections of life.⁴ O'Neill employed expressionism in most of his plays. He distorted reality to prob into the soul of his protagonists and their real predicament. Thus, expressionism is an X-ray photograph, as J.W. Marriotte pointed out when he compared it to arealistic play which is "based upon superficial observation of detail_ a more photography: but expressionism has been likened to an X-ray photograph."⁵

In a note, expressionism is a movement that started in Germany early in the 20th century. It was initiated by a number of painters who avoided the representation of external reality and, instead, presented a highly personal vision of the world.⁶ According to this movement, expressionists will determine the form of the play, therefore reality will sometimes be distorted to present the inner psychological state of the protagonist's mind. The expressionists employ various form to convey their ideas such as symbols, disconnected language, masks choruses, lighting, costume, sound effects in addition to monologues. As A.C. Ward state that: " Expressionism ... is intensely personal to the author, who aims to create avision of life reflected through his own individual consciousness of it."⁷

Eugene O'Neill's real concern was the oppressed industrial working class and the effect of capitalists on worker. They enslaved the workers and deprived them from their self-esteem and free will. He criticized the capitalist system, and attacked the movement that should stand by the workers, fulfill their needs and solve their problem. However, Oscar G. Brockett stated that " industrialism and science have kept man's eyes on the ground and have reduced him to machine like creature".⁸

Industrialism dehumanized man, alienated him from society and oppressed his present, past and future. Man was highly effected by the social environment and the materialistic values that started to prevail leaving him an easy prey to the danger of his emptiness and insecurity resulting from loss of faith in himself and in religion. O'Neill perceived this tragedy inb *The Hairy Ape* which was expressionistic " both in technique and in its disgust at modern humanity. The lower classes in it are hairy apes, the upper classes more marionettes."⁹

Yank, the main character in *The Hairy Ape*, is a symbolic representation of man who is alienated from the modern world He believes that he "belongs" to the industrial world through his physical strength, yet he is, gradually, transformed into an ape-like creature. He and the fireman in the forecastle of the ship are described by O'Neill as " beasts cage";

The room is crowded with men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing- a confused inchoate uproar swelling into a sort of unity, a meaning – the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage.¹⁰

This stokehole is a symbol of a prison that keeps men disconnected from the outer world. These men only need their physical strength to keep the ship moving, thus; they become machines without the ability of intellectual thinking.

Yank at the beginning, rejects the idea that the capitalist class is the reason behind their predicament and alienation. He believes that he "belongs" and that he is the force that keeps the ship moving; " It's me makes it move ... I'm de end! I'm de start ... I'm steam and oil for de engines." (p.9) Yank is unconscious of the bestial and inhumane treatment to which the stoker are subjected. Yet the appearance of Mildred, the daughter of the owner of " Nazareth " steel, in the stokehole changes Yank. He realizes that his sense of belonging and brotherhood is just an illusion, a self-deception and his search for identity starts to obsess him.

Mildred is also a victim since she is imprisoned in her cultural identity. She considers herself the waste of her father's steel company, " I'm a waste product in the Bessemer process-like the millions." (p.11) She wants to be useful to others, as she addresses her aunt; "I would like to be some use in the world. Is it my fault I don't know how? I would like to be sincere, to touch life somewhere." (p.11)

Mildred intends to discover the life of the sailors in the stokehole, on the other half of ship. The visual and audible aspect used by O'Neill when presenting the fireman are described as chained gorillas:

**A line of men, stripped to the waist, is before the
furnace door. They bend over, looking neither to right
nor left...,handling their shovels as if they were part of
their bodies, with a strange awkward, swinging rhythm
...outlined in silhouette in the crouching inhuman
attitudes of chained gorillas.(p.14)**

These men lost their identity in a physical work that make theme inferior to human beings and start taking the shape of apes in body and gestures. Mildred is horrified to witness such a scene when Yank embodies the perfect picture of an ape in a rage;" he [Yank] brandishes his shovel murderously over his head in one hand, pounding on his chest, gorilla-like." (p.16) Yank's

'brutality' and horrible state lead Mildred to collapse and utter " Oh, the filthy beast!" (p.17) At this moment, an unbridgeable gap takes place between the upper and lower classes. Consequently, Yank starts to lose harmony with his surroundings;" Yank and Mildred confront each other only for a moment, but that one moment is enough to play havoc with the soul of Yank."¹¹

The old Irish man in the ship, Paddy, has a philosophy concerning the sailors in the past. Those sailors were free, empowered and valued

more than the sailors today. Paddy is conscious of class discrimination and he tries to explain to Yank

that Mildred's behavior is not personal and all the rich are alike in their attitudes toward the poor. Yet, Yank insist on taking the matter personally and vows to have revenge upon Mildred. To regain his destroyed myth of belonging, Yank decides to go out on 'a mission of revenge' to the Fifth Avenue.

To intensify class discrimination in the play, O'Neill describes the social environment of the Fifth Avenue as quite an unfit place for Yank: "A general atmosphere of clean, well-tidied, wide street; a flood of mellow, tempered sunshine; gentle genteel breezes." (p.22) This setting is contrasted with Yank who is described by O'Neill as holding the same appearance of the stokehole;

Yank is in his dirty dungarees. A fireman's cap with black peak is cocked defiantly on the side of his head. He has not shaved for days and around his ... eyes – the black smudge of coal dust still sticks like make-up. (p.23)

Such a contrast establishes a further conflict within Yank as he walks unseen by people in the Fifth Avenue street. To help his audience prob into Yank's mind, O'Neill tends to employ monologue as an expressionistic technique. Yank is now pulled apart from his natural surroundings and his inner conflict starts to increase.

Yank is imprisoned because he offends one of the rich people in the Fifth Avenue. The prison is given a description similar to that of the stokehole in the ship which is just like an animal cage, dimly lit and it is surrounded by heavy steel bars:

"one electric bulb from low ceiling of the narrow corridor sheds its light through the heavy steel bars of the cell at the extreme front" (p.27)

Yank feels happy while reading about The World American Labour Union in an "anarchist" paper in the prison.

Still, he discovers that this union will present to him a false deceptive security since it seeks to have the right in a legal and peaceful way. As for Yank, he desires to have revenge by using dynamite to blow the steel factory of Mildred's father. He soon realizes the bitter fact that he is alone and steel does not give him power, rather, it is a cage wherein he is locked. His free-will is just an illusion and he is unable to determine his own destiny. He wonder; "where do I go from here?" (p.37)

O'Neill asserts Yank's alienation. Since he is a hairy ape, so naturally he belongs to the monkey house in the zoo. He hopes to find "a creature with whom he is in harmony, that there, at least, he will 'belong'." ¹²

Through Yank's monologue, we understand that he remains encaged within the person of his soul. He feels worse than the ape in the cage. He

does not belong to his surrounding, he has no memories to comfort him and the future is not promising. He addresses the gorilla in the cage as he says:

**It's dis way, what I'm drivin' at. Youse can
sit and dope dream in de past, green woods de
jungle and de rest of it. Den yue belong and dey
don't But me ... I ain't got no past to tink in,
nor nothing dat's coming, only what's now ... and
dat don't belong.(p.38)**

Thus, in his attempt to befriend the animal group, Yank frees the gorilla from its cage. Yet dies as the gorilla "wraps his huge arms around Yank in a murderous hug,"(p.39) Leaving his body, afterwards slips on the floor. This last scene is a terrifying and universal picture of man's agonized soul since, as Dr. Tilak puts it; "Yank's sense of alienation and his quest for identity results in spiritual disintegration and death. His suffering is symbolic of the suffering of many an alienated soul in the contemporary world."¹³

In conclusion, the need to "belong" in Yank's world has lost its significance and vitality. It is an age of steel and materialism, not an age of free man who can be in harmony with his natural surrounding. Industrialism deprives the working class their spiritual values and humanity. Thus, the play is "a satire on the vacuous world of the rich, and the soulless existence of the poor. But the prime value is not the need to revolt but to 'belong'."¹⁴ Yank dies without knowing his real identity. He is not a part of steel and machinery, but actually, he is their salve.

Notes:

- 1-Peter B. High, *An Outline of American Literature*(New York: Longman Group Limited, 1986),p225.
- 2-Ibid.
- 3-John Gassnered., *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Prentice-Hall, Inc. nd),p. 143.
- 4-David Krasner ed., *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama*(USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.,2005),p.156.
- 5-Dr. Raghukul Tilack, *Eugene O'Neill - Desire Under the Elms* 7th ed.(New Delhi: Rama Brothers India PVT. Ltd.,2006),p.37.
- 6- J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*(Great Britain: Hazell Watson & Winey Limited, 1979), p. 253.
- 7- Dr. S.P. SenGupta and Dr. S.C. Mundra, *Trends and Movement in English Literature* (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1997),p.117.
8. Oscar G. Brockett, *The Theatre: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964),p.298.
9. Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth - Century Drama* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Publishers Ltd., 1962), p.111.
10. Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*, <http://www.Fullbooks.com/The-Hairy-Ape.htm>. Retrieved July 4, 2009. p. 2 of 40. All subsequent quotations are from this edition and will be enclosed in the text within parentheses.

11. Dr Raghukul Tilak, *Eugene O'Neill – Desire Under the Elms*, p.39.
12. John Gassner ed., *O'Neill A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.150.
13. Dr. Raghukul Tilak, *Eugene O'Neill The Hairy Ape*, 17th ed. (New Delhi: Rama Brothers India PVT, Ltd., 2007). p.122.
14. C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama 1900 – 1940* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.61.

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6. High, Peter B. *An Outline of American Literature* (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1986.
7. Krasner, David ed., *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (USA : Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005.
8. O'Neill, Eugene. *The Hairy Ape*. <http://www.Fullbooks.com/The-Hairy-Ape.htm>. Retrieved July 4 , 2009.
9. SenGupta, Dr. S.P and Dr. S.C. Mundra. *Trends and Movement in English Literature* (Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1997.
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11. Tilak, Dr Raghukul. *Eugene O'Neill - The Hairy Ape* 7th ed. New Delhi : Rama Brothers India PVT. Ltd., 2007.

