LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 10 : 7 July 2010

ISSN 1930-2940

Eugene O' Neill's *The Hairy Ape* – An American Expressionistic Play

Jayaraman Uma, M.A., M. Phil., PGDTE

A Definition of *expressionism*

A definition of *expressionism* is called for here at the outset. The following quote reflects the approach taken in this paper: Expressionism is "an art movement early in the 20th century; the artist's subjective expression of inner experiences was emphasized; an inner feeling was expressed through a distorted rendition of reality." wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn.

Eugene O' Neill's Life and Its Impact on His Plays

Eugene O' Neill's attitude towards science is thought-provoking. He felt science had cut Man away from his religious faith. The machine era has brought wealth to America. Americans' need for material comforts have been well provided for. But, at the same time, industrialization has destroyed his work satisfaction. His sense of security and belonging has been shaken. Lacking some sustaining faith, he feels lonely. This fundamental problem is aggravated in the case of an American immigrant. His sense of alienation becomes pronounced. O'Neill himself, having descended from an Irish immigrant family, felt this acutely.

This loss of Faith even when we have assumed Science to be our new God is something that playwrights around the world need to portray in their plays according to several critics. For example, Krutch writes: "It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work now-a-days must have this subject behind all the little subjects of his

plays or novels, or he is scribbling around the surface of things." (J. W. Krutch, *The American Drama Since 1918*, page 92.)

An Expressionistic Play

O'Neill's artistic achievement is revealed in his expressionistic play, *The Hairy Ape*. The play was written in 1921 and was produced in 1922 for the first time. Immigration from Europe was still on, and industrial unrest amidst great expansion was easily noticed. In some sense, America was yet to achieve its super-eminence in economic activities. Talk of socialism was not yet a taboo.

This play deals with the theme of social alienation and search for identity or belonging. Yank, the hero of *The Hairy Ape* is a representative of modern workers, who felt socially alienated and have been continuously in search of their own identity. As a result of industrialization man has lost his sense of harmony with nature. Hence he is condemning the whole of machine civilization because it has affected his psychological wellbeing. It has robbed him of his pride in his work.

Modern Man

In his "Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study", S.K. Winther describes the plight of modern man in the following manner.

> "Man's work is a necessary part of his personality; it is an extension of his ego; it makes him feel he is a necessary part of the life of the world in which he lives. Modern industry tends to destroy this psychological counterpart of work…. and it leaves the worker a nervous, irritable and a dissatisfied misfit. Yank was such a worker, and at the same time conscious of the thing he had lost. He didn't want a job simply because it would be a means to earning a living; he wanted a job in which he could live." (S. K. Winther, *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study*. page 27)

The immediate occasion that led to the writing of Yank's story was the unexpected suicide of O'Neill's stokehole chum Driscoll.

It is, however, a well known fact that *The Hairy Ape* is based not only on Driscoll, but on the playwright as well. Biographers like Louis Sheaffer attest to this fact. Eugene O'Neill was a man forever haunted by feelings of not belonging. Unlike his father, he was acutely conscious of his "Irish identity" and the resultant problems in an "alien country". Moreover his mother's drug addiction and his actor father's rootless way of life did not brighten things for him. In *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* – a highly autobiographical play – he tells his essential story in a few words.

> It was a great mistake my being born a man, I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish. As it is I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death! (Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright*, page 25)

The Story

When the play opens, Yank has already identified himself with "steel" which symbolizes motion and speed and thus symbolizes life for Yank.

He declares:

> I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles ….. And I'm what makes iron into steel; steel dat stands for the whole thing! And I'm steel-steel-steel! I'm de muscles in steel, de punch behind it!" (*The Hairy Ape: A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life in Eight Scenes*. The Modern Library of the World's Best Books, New York, page 98.)

His repetitive and emphatic assertion "I'm steel-steel-steel" has a note of exultation in it. He feels he is essential for the movement of the ship. This gives him a sense of being needed, of "belonging".

On the other hand, Paddy, the Irish stoker yearns for the past, for the grand old days of the sailing ships:

> "T was them days a ship was part of the sea and a man was part of a ship, and the sea joined all together and made it one". (*The Hairy Ape*, page 99.)

But to Yank this is all just "crazy tripe" and he dismisses Paddy as out of date so that he doesn't "belong no more". To Long's assertions that the stokers are all condemned as slaves to the dungeons of hell because of the "damned capitalist class", Yank's answer is characteristic. He asserts: "It takes a man to work in hell" and as for being slaves, -

> "Slaves hell! We run de whole works. All de rich guys dat think dey're somep'n dey aint nothing! Dey don't belong. But us guys, we're in de move, we're at de bottom de whole ting in us." (*The Hairy Ape*, page 199)

Drastic Encounter

So, neither Paddy nor the folks on the deck "belong". Then suddenly Yank's illusion that he is "part of the engine, the moving force behind it" is shattered. This devastating experience comes to him in the form of Mildred. She is one of those who are "devoid of speed and motion" since she is the daughter of a business tycoon. Yet when she confronts Yank, she calls him "a filthy beast". Yank feels insulted and is very much upset. He tries in vain to take revenge on her. His antagonism arises not out of jealousy for her wealth. Nor is he class conscious like Long. His anger is because he is being refused the recognition due to him as a man. He has been robbed of his sense of belonging. His manhood has been spurned by Mildred. He has been called a "brute" for the same physical strength on which he prided himself.

The Conflict

Consequently, there is a conflict within him. Since his earlier illusion of "belonging" is shattered, he goes in search of his identity. His encounter with the lifeless "automatons" of Fifth Avenue proves to him that he cannot "belong" to the aristocratic class of Mildred. He shares not their mechanical and artificial way of life. His encounter with I.W.W. reveals to him the fact that neither can he "belong" to the worker class. He is an individualist and not a party man. His desire to blow up all the steel "in de world" results in his getting thrown out.

The Realization of Not Belonging Anywhere: "Even him didn't tink I belonged."

It is now that he realizes the fact that he "belongs" nowhere. He receives the knowledge that he is no more the driving force behind the engines. Steel is no more a power within him, but a prison around him. Steel makes the ship which represents power, but it also makes the cage in which Yank is imprisoned. He discovers that it is not he who is steel but Mildred's "old man" who makes half de steel in de world". This predicament he describes eloquently thus:

> I ain't got no past to tink on, nor nothing dat's comin on'y whats' now and dat don't belong … I ain't no earth and I aint in heaven, get me? I'm in de middle takin all de worst punches from bot' of 'em. (*The Hairy Ape*, page 258.)

Groping blindly in "de dark" he asks, "Where do I get off say, where do I go from here?" The policeman's cryptic "to Hell" appears to be the most fitting reply.

Ironically enough, Yank ends up at the zoo. Creeping close to the caged gorilla, he asks plaintively, "Ain't we bot' members of de same club, de Hairy Apes?" To his utter dismay he realizes that even the brotherhood of apes is denied him. It is not only the aristocratic and the working classes that repel him.

Even the "hairy apes" do not accept him. Dying in the murderous embrace of the gorilla, Yank realizes this horrible truth – "Even him didn't tink I belonged."

Yank is thus a representative of modern man, who has lost his sense of primordial harmony.

O'Neill on Yank's Condition

O'Neill himself has explained Yank's condition in a letter to "New York Herald Tribune" thus:

> "The Hairy Ape" was propaganda in the sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor in heaven he's in the middle trying to make peace, taking the "worst punches from bot' of 'em". Yank can't

> go forward and so he tries to go backward. This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to "belonging" either. (Doris V. Talk: Eugene *O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*, page 72.)

Notable Distortions of Normal Human Condition

The setting of the play dictated through the playwright's stage directions is a notable distortion of normal human condition. The forecastle scene is described as crowded with men "shouting, cursing, laughing, singing – the ceiling crushes down upon the men's heads". This below deck setting powerfully conveys the inhuman mechanistic nature of Yank's universe. Scenes one and four set in the firemen's forecastle and scene three set in the stokehole of the ship recall the underworld. O'Neill himself asserts in the opening scene's stage direction thus:

> The treatment of this scene or of any other scene in the play, should by no means be naturalistic. The effect sought after is a cramped space in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel. (*The Hairy Ape*, page 185.)

Another set of powerful distortions involves the degradation of the human race itself. O'Neill, introducing his characters in the opening scene, declares,

> They cannot stand upright. This accentuates the natural stooping posture which shoveling coal and the resultant overdevelopment of back and shoulder muscles have given them. The men themselves should resemble those pictures in which the appearance of the Neanderthal Man is guessed at. (*The Hairy Ape*, page 186.)

In scene three he goes one step further describing them, "outlined in silhouette in the crouching, inhuman attitudes of chained gorillas."

The final action of the play where Yank attempts to identify himself with the gorilla at the zoo is yet another horrible distortion. The very evolution of man is distorted here. Yank exclaims

> Sure you're de best off! You can't tink. Can yuh? Yuh can't talk neider … But you, yuhre at de bottom. You belong! Sure! Yuhre de on'y one in de world dat does, yuh lucky stiff! And dat's why dey gother put yuh in a cage. See? (*The Hairy Ape*, page 258.)

The reaction of the stokers to the Engineer's whistle is identical. When the bell sounds, all the men jump up mechanically. They "file through the door" silently very much "like a prisoner's lock up."

Becoming an Ape in Several Stages

Yank, incidentally, is the mask-name for Robert Smith. He is called Yank suggesting the fact that he stands for Yankee.

A more significant aspect of the mask is his nickname that gives the title to the play. He is "the hairy ape". The stage direction in scene three describes him "pounding on his chest gorilla-like." In the next scene, in Paddy's fancy he becomes "a queerer kind of baboon than ever you'd find in darkest Africy." By scene six, when he is put in prison for disturbing the traffic on the Fifth Avenue, he begins to think himself an ape. In scene seven, the I.W.W. secretary contemptuously calls him "a brainless ape". Finally he identifies himself as "hairy ape" in his desperate bid "to belong". And he dies in the process.

> The crowd from the church enter from the right sauntering slowly and affectedly, ther' heads held stiffly up, looking neither right nor left, talking in toneless simpering voices … A procession of marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of Frankenstein in their detached, mechanical unawareness. (*The Hairy Ape*, page 231.)

The Mechanical and Artificial Life of the Rich

The mechanical and artificial life of the rich is presented. These people care a fig for the poor and suffering. They are not even aware of the physical presence of Yank, let alone his tormented inner self. Even when Yank bumps against them and hits them, the victims remain strangely unaffected. They move on with polite gestures and "I beg your pardon." It is he who "recoils after each collision". This type of action shows how incapable those people are in understanding the plight of Yank.

Yank's confrontation with Mildred triggers off his journey to the Fifth Avenue and I.W.W. But these successive encounters prove to him that he belongs neither to the capitalist nor the working class. He discovers that the source of his trouble is not outside but it is in himself.

> Dis fing's in your inside, but it ain't in your belly … It's way down at de bottom. Yuh can't grab it, and yuh can't stop it … I don't tick, see? (*The Hairy Ape,* page 258).

Ultimate Relief in the Brotherhood of the Gorilla

It is this ultimate recognition that goads him to seek the brotherhood of the gorilla. The backward journey of Yank from a modern civilized man to that of a primitive ape thus becomes almost complete. But finally he realizes, he doesn't "belong" even to this ape.

Apart from the symbolic aspect of the character, O'Neill also makes use of particular symbols like "steel" and "monkey-fur." The monkey-fur is displayed in the steel glass showcase. The play is centred around the irony of self recognition in this symbol. It symbolizes Yank's regression from the powerhouse to the animal house.

O'Neill's language becomes explosive, clipped and abounding in repetitions. Certain expressions like "I belong", "I'll fix her", "Im de end" and "Dat's me" are often

repeated. These clipped and truncated phrases effectively bring to the reader "a sense of the storm and stress".

Thus, Eugene O'Neill can rightly be regarded as one of the masters of American Literature who made the technique of expressionism popular.

References

Doris V. Falk, *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*. New Brunswick : Rutgers Univer.sity Press, 1958.

J. W. Krutch, *The American Drama Since 1918*. New York: Random House, 1939.

Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape: A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life in Eight Scenes*. The Modern Library of the World's Best Books, New York.

Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright*. London : J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1968.

S. K. Winther, *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study*. New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1937.

wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn. Definition of the term *expressionism*.

Jayaraman Uma, M.A., M.Phil., PGDTE
Sri Sarada College for Women
Salem 636 016
Tamilnadu
jsunderram@gmail.com
uma@prasadv.org