



THE AMERICAN PROLETARIAT AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE ROARING TWENTIES: THE DEPICTIONS OF E. O'NEILL IN *THE HAIRY APE*

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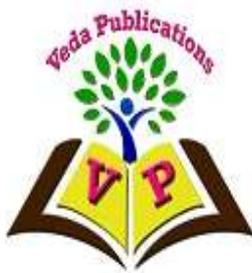
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ABSTRACT



Eugene O'Neill is one of the celebrated American dramatists who realistically dramatized the sufferings of the proletariat and/or the working class which he used to call the unfortunate or unhappy brothers. *The Hairy Ape* is regarded as one of O'Neill's most significant dramatic works in which he depicted the story of the modern man who lost his harmony with God, with his fellowmen and even with nature. Meanwhile "Roaring Twenties" is a term that refers to a period of economic prosperity and technological advancement in the United States in the 1920s, which included also remarkable changes in the culture, lifestyle and society. Accordingly, the paper sheds light on how O'Neill like many other social reformers utilized their literary narratives for the sake of resisting and challenging the social and cultural vices. Besides, this paper explores the ordeals which challenged the American proletariat in the American society in during the Roaring Twenties such as dehumanization, denial of belonging, alienation, identity crisis and religious decadence. There upon, the main contention of this paper is to depict how the American proletariat was suffering in a period in which they should be happy like the bourgeois due to the issues of inequality and injustice as depicted by O'Neill in the *The Hairy Ape*.

Keywords: Proletariat, Bourgeois, Roaring Twenties, Social Reformer

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INTRODUCTION

Roaring Twenties is a remarkable period in the Americans history which brought about favorable outcomes but not for all the Americans. In fact, in the 1920s the Americans witnessed unprecedented technological advances, industrial revolution and economic growth which contrarily increased the richness of the bourgeois as well as the poverty of the proletariat. The term bourgeois refers to the social group that owns the means of production during the roaring twenties and whose prerequisite concerns are to retain the property and preserve the capital, to ensure the perpetuation of their economic dominance in the society. At the same time the word proletariat is a social group which is known in the capitalist society as the working class whose role is to work in order to gain their own livelihood.

O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape*, depicted how the American society witnessed such division during the Roaring Twenties, which consequentially affected the peoples' culture and social relations. He explicitly depicted how the advancements and economic growth of the Roaring Twenties benefited the capitalist group and dehumanized the proletariat class. Yank who stands for the proletarians was alienated, dehumanized and denied any belonging in his own society. He was forced by his fellowmen to search belonging in the animals' world but he was rejected as he was denied by his own people. He continued searching for identity and belonging till he faced his tragic end. Yank also stands for the modern man who is disillusioned in his own microcosm due to his spiritual decadence and the loss of harmony with his fellowmen and nature. This paper explores how O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape* depicted the challenges which the proletariat faced in the American society during the Roaring Twenties.

O'NEILL AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

Like other meliorists O' Neill in most of his plays did criticize the social vices and promote virtue and create sympathy for the unfortunate people in his society. As a dramatist, his commitment was to the realistic dramatization of human situation. In his tragedies O'Neill used to census the "roots of sickness and social vices as he used to perceive it". Constantly, he used to explore the pressing issues and challenges that face the industrious group in the

American society. He used to refer to these people as "our brothers far down in the social scale". Unhesitatingly, he declared himself as the "interpreter/voice of the working class in the American society. Throughout his plays O'Neil decided to expose and explore the pain, suffering and injustices which they encounter in the society. His prerequisite hope is to inspire his audience and readers to "help their unhappy brothers" (Bloom, 159).

In fact, *The Hairy Ape* is one of the best among his works in which he appears as a social reformer and critic, because he exposed the negative side of the state and the capitalist society and how they both made a group of people within the society as pariah. Consequently, O' Neill reflected how the Roaring Twenties with its economic and industrial development propelled the exploitation and dehumanization of the proletarians for the benefit of the capitalist group in the American society. Minutely, O'Neil demonstrated how the mechanized America benefited one group (bourgeoisie) and dehumanized and distempered another group (proletariat) within the same society. In addition, O' Neil reflects how the government and the religion became supportive tools for eternalizing the injustice in the society. On the one hand O' Neil explained how the church and Sunday observance were devoid from their real meaning and reality as the church became a place for discussing the deals and bargains. On the other hand O' Neil shows how the government represented by the police became a devise for protecting the capitalist people from the disturbance of the poor working people (Bloom, 195).

In *The Hairy Ape* O' Neil reflected three various attitudes towards the mechanized American, first by Yank who accepted the industrial society, second by Paddy who wished to have the life before the advent of the industry of the Roaring Twenties and third by Long who described the economic system as rotten and unfair. In his works, we notice the enigmatic condition of human existence as he perceived was caused by the death of the old god [s] and the failure of industry, science, technology and materialism. O'Neill focuses on the causes that have inflicted man with universal uneasiness and his failure to belong or to find roots anywhere in the



hostile world. O'Neill further views that man is totally alienated not only from himself, but also from the society, nature and god. Overall, O'Neil in most of his works used to focus realistically on the issues that challenge the proletariat such as economic injustice, unequal distribution of wealth, corruption, postiche religiosity, alienation, dehumanization and isolation of the man in his own world.

THE ROARING TWENTIES

The "Roaring Twenties"- is also known as a period of rapid change in lifestyles and accompanied with great changes in economy, industry and the technology. It is also known as the era of exciting change as it increased the personal freedom and the ways of entertainment. America became the richest country in the earth. Technological inventions and the industrial activities played a vital role in enriching the American economy and nation. 'The trends of the 1920s that seemed to define the era— Prohibition, bootleggers and bathtub gin, the Harlem Renaissance, the Lost Generation, the Jazz Age, flaming youth, flappers, and the Florida land boom— represented different aspects of profound shifts in values away from the staid and stern morality of the 19th century" (Carlisle, IX).

During that era, there was a big difference between European and American psychology. Europe has suffered from the World War I (1914 - 1918). The question of life for European society always ends up with the sense of absurdity of human condition as the result of war. Individual does not exist; man is alienated from his fellow man as he tries to establish his own personal identity. This is the reality of human existence because war has torn apart their sense of humanity thus they are not human.

While America, has experienced a great change in many aspects of life due to the technological advancement, industrial inventions, economic growth and the political change. The economic growth during this period was more than doubled between 1920 and 1929. This led American into "consumer society". They changed their life style and became so excited with the new things including music like jazz, artificial beauty, even slang language. Despite of these developments, in fact, many American were uncomfortable with the new "Mass

culture". It brings a new conflict in the American psychology, that is, the sense of loss of identity.

The 1920s brought dramatic changes in American experience. Before the World War I, American identity 'remained culturally and psychologically rooted in the nineteenth century, but in the 1920s America seemed to break its wistful attachments to the recent past and usher in a more modern era' (Zeitz, 2017). The 1920s was a period of extreme contradictions, prosperity with despair, cultural and technological advancements with social vices and complete disillusionment. People become confused between modernization and tradition, some were optimistic and many were trapped into nostalgia of the past memories. O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* addresses the issue that the Americans faced during that period with more emphasis on the ordeals of belonging and identity. In the 1920s we find many roarings, like the roaring of mass culture, roaring of economy and roaring of technology.

Roaring of mass culture refers to the increase of cultural diversity in the American society due to opening the doors of migration for immigrants from all over the world. Such procedure and step allowed for millions of immigrants from different countries with different languages, cultures and colors to inter the United States and work for their livelihood as they were propelled by what is called the American Dream. Besides, talking about the Roaring of technology refers to the invention of new technological gadgets and devices like electric washing machines for clothes, electric vacuum cleaners, electric and gas stoves replacing wood-burning ranges, with hot-water heaters and hot and cold running water in kitchens and bathrooms. In this period also we notice the invention of television, phonograph and later radio which popularized music and jazz for all the nations. Moreover, Roaring economy refers to the growth of the American economy which increased after World War I, in about 24 percent due to the mass production (because of the industrial revolution) and mass consumption (because of the increase of population due to the migration). More tellingly, the United States in the 1920s produced nearly half of the world output which consequently increased the people average income as it rose from \$6,460 to \$8,016 per person.



However, not all the Americans benefited similarly from the boons of the Roaring Twenties. Besides, it impacted greatly the peoples' culture and social relations as O'Neill depicted in *The Hairy Ape* (Aba Sha'ar and Rofiah, 369).

THE PRESSING ISSUES THAT CHALLENGED THE AMERICAN PROLETARIAT DURING THE ROARING TWENTIES

The proletariat is a group in the American society which contributed remarkably in the economic development, technological advancement and industrial revolution which the Americans witnessed in the 1920s and thereafter. However, those proletarians were exploited, dehumanized and ultimately given unequal share and rights. These and other negative repercussions will be discussed further as in the following:

➤ **DEHUMANIZATION**

In the point of fact, O'Neill depicted accurately in his play *The Hairy Ape* the issues of modern industrialization and materialism in the American society and how they brought about the repercussions of alienation, dehumanization and disillusionment for the Americans in the American society. O'Neill focused since the beginning of the play about the inhumane treatment of the proletarians in the way of achieving industrial and technological advancement and for the sake of bourgeoisies who have become richer and at the expense of the proletarians who consequently became poorer. Their efforts were indispensable factor in gyring the wheels of development and progress though they were not acknowledged or given equal share.

The utilization of expressionist and humanist approaches depicted the play as "comedy of ancient and modern times" (Baker-White, 208). Since the beginning of the play Yank the protagonist and co-workers were depicted as animals in the cage. O'Neill described the stokehole as cage of animals and the workers as animals shouting and speaking incoherent sentences by stating:

The room is crowded with men shouting, cursing, laughing, singing a confused incoherent uproar swelling into a sort of unity, a meaning-the bewildered furious, baffled defiance of

a beast in a cage ... some wear singlet but the majority are stripped to the waist (3).

Thereafter, O'Neill depicted even the way they were inhumanly caged in the bowels of the ship, expressing, "they are "imprisoned by the white steel. The lines of the bunks, the uprights supporting them cross each other like the steel framework of a cage. The ceiling crushed down upon the men's head, they cannot stand upright" (3). Explicitly, O'Neill exposes the way and type of treatment which the laborers used to experience at the hand of the capitalists who ultimately denied not only their share for their labor but also their humanity and belonging to their own world. They constantly used to be considered as different even in their physical structure as "Neanderthal". They were described by contrasting them to the while capitalist people who physically perceive the proletarians as "All are hairy-chested with long arms of tremendous power and low receding brows above the small resentful eyes" (4). Contrarily, O'Neill described the other people the bourgeoisies represented in the play by Douglas and his Family. Mildred his daughter appears different from the animals caged in the bowels of the ship as O'Neill described her as "a girl of twenty, slender, delicate, with a pale pretty face" (15). She is arrogantly aware that she is living in different world and the proletarians are living in another world as she relies to her aunt "please don't mock my attempt to discover how the other half lives. ... I would like to help them" (17). But her attempts to be what was not caused the calamity for herself and those who were living in the other world. O'Neill expressionism granted an outlet for describing the inhumane condition of the proletarians who were subjected in the lower part of the ship for the benefit of those who are living comfortably on the upper part of the ship as he described them "the men who are outlined in silhouette in the crouching, inhumane attitudes of chained gorillas" (22). Mildred in in her way to discover the other world and as she want to help them and become sincere but this comes against the nature of her and her family or class. Therefore, the moment she reached and found how those people are working for the benefit of her family and class she conformed consciously and



unconsciously to the believe and attitudes of stratum, calling Yank the most robust among all as "GORILLA". She asked for pulling her away from the world of the animals as it is nasty and the people are not human beings "Take me a way! Oh the filthy beast"(25). She did not realize the fact that it is her family and stratum that make the human beings animals and their world becomes different from the capitalist world without getting consequently any acknowledgement or share for their efforts.

➤ **THE DENIAL OF BELONGING**

Another challenge which the proletarians faced during the Roaring Twenties is the denial of belonging to the capitalist society and world despite it is their own. Brilliantly, O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape* brought people from the proletariat and the capitalist strata together in his imaginative world in order to explore the issue of identity, co-existence and belonging. Mildred represents the capitalist group while Yank stands for the proletarians and in the American society. Since the beginning of the play Yank was seen in a constant search for belonging. Initially, Yank tried to attribute his belonging to the ship as it is the thing in which he constantly see himself, stating, "Dey re just baggage. Who makes dis tube run? Ain't it us guys? Well den we belong don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat's all" (9). Here we find Yank's persistence of his belonging as the members of his stratum faced isolation and denial of membership to their own society after the roarings of the 1920s. But ultimately, he realized that belonging to the ship is something insignificant as it is owned by capitalist group and not his own group. Thereafter, he attributed his belonging to his physical power as it the steam and oil for the engine. Therefore he and his friends do belong and the capitalist on the upper part of the ship don't as he explicitly explains:

"I'm the bottom. Dere aint nothing foither. I'm de end! I'm de start! I start somep'n de woild moves! It-dats' me!
.... Im de ting in coal dat makes it boin,
im steam and oilf for de engine. i m de ting in noise dat makes yuh hear it"
(13).

But Paddy reminded Yank that they have been alienated in the bowels of the ship

and thereby this cannot be considered belonging. Consequently Yank persists that they belong no matter how but the capitalist people don't as he speaks "All de rich guys dat tink dey're sommep'n, dey ain't nothing! Dey don't belong. But us guys we're in de move, we're at de bottom, de whole ting is us!" (14). Contrarily, Mildred is the daughter of the tube owner, who desried to visit the people in the other world to help them. She was attempting to do what she was not brought up for. Thereby, when she reached and found the stockers are furiously sweating and their faces stained with coal she uttered what her class and family usually say 'you are animals like; not like us stating "take me away" from this world "oh the filthy beast" (25). Unfortunately, she devastated all Yank's attempts of belonging. He was injured in his dignity and humiliate in front of his comrades. He consequentially, left the world of steel and went searching for belonging in the materialistic world of the capitalists. He went to Fifth Avenue and tried to assert his belonging even in a wild manner. Unconsciously, he was trying to avenge Mildred's materialistic and inhumane world. He tried to talk to the churchgoers and the passersby but no one gave him any attention. As a result, he violently blocked the passage of a churchgoer and stopped another from getting in to the bus asking for attention and recognition of his belonging speaking "you don't belong, get me look at me why don't you dare, I belong dats me" (40). But he was detained as the government became a tool for supporting the bourgeois group. The steel which he was put behind in the prison stands symbolically for the prevention of reality to come out. The bulb which appeared in the stokehole was similarly appeared in the prison and it symbolically refers to the limitedness of exposition the proletarians' suffering and challenges in the society.

Further, Yank decided to belong to search for belonging in the capitalist organization by the name of W.W.I (Industrial Wreckers of the World) despite they are only murders, rappers, jailbirds, and criminals. But as he belong to the proletariat he was denied any



belonging, as the secretary to call him "a brainless hairy ape" (45). All these pushing situation which he encountered in the capitalists' society urged him to search for belonging in the animals' world. He realized that the gorilla is more affectionate than the human beings because it at least reacts to his presence. So Yank decided and went to the gorilla's house asking for belonging but the gorilla did not trust and accept the one who was distrusted by his own people in his own society. Yank opened the cage gate and progressed to hug the gorilla but it used its tremendous power to defend its self which resulted in crushing his ribs till he died uttering ultimately, "hey got me, aw right I thought. Even him didn't tink I belong" (60). Yank like many of his social group who attempted and died in the course of searching for identity and belonging.

➤ ALIENATION

O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape* depicted the modern man as a sociable being who yearns for home to belong, family, reward, friendship and sympathy from the people around him. But when the human being is challenged, prevented or failed to find these elements in his microcosm he began suffering from alienation. The proletarians represented in the play by the stockers who were working in the bowels of the ship. They were isolated and disconnected from the entire world even their families just to make the capitalist world continues running as Paddy explains "I care for nobody, no, not I, and nobody cares for me" (14).

Yank is the protagonist of the play was alienated and denied any sense of belonging in his own society which consequently brought about his death.

Initially, the modern man lost harmony with nature and God then became unable to establishing harmony with his fellowmen. In fact, the proletarians were urged to dedicate all their lives to the machine which made them feel sense of belonging to its engine but they realized ultimately that they are a mere insignificant part of all the system as they were denied belonging by the people who owned the machine as Yank

explains "Im de ting in coal dat makes it boin, im steam and oilf for de engine. i m de ting in noise dat makes yuh hear it" (13). So, detaching himself from home instigated the stockers to articulate belonging to the machine then to his physical power but all these attempts collided with the denial of the capitalist people to accept the proletarians as human beings like them-calling them filthy animals. Further, Yank got closer experience about the attitudes of the capitalists towards the proletarians when he went to (Fifth Avenue) an example of the capitalists' world. He experienced grave alienation as he was not given any attention by the churchgoers and the passersby telling them "you don't belong, get me look at me why don't you dare, I belong dats me" (40). He thereafter tried to assert his belonging violently but he was taken to steel cell. However, Yank constant search for identity proved the fact to him that he was alone in his own world and the steel which he constantly encountered contributed in his isolation.

Again Yank went to the WWI in order to search for belonging despite its members but he was also rejected and labeled as gorilla. Ultimately, he went to the gorilla in order to search for belonging, calling the gorilla "brother". But the gorilla denied his advancement and giving him any belonging, because the one who is rejected by his fellowmen will definitely rejected by the gorilla. Yank tried to hug the gorilla in order to strengthen his relations and belonging but it crushed his ribs by its mighty power till he died. O'Neill dramatized the disillusionment of the modern man as symbolized by Yank who has been alienated in his society by his people as all become unkind and busy by the materialistic gains. The modern man is almost like Yank who is possessing fake concepts of belonging to his countrymen, nation and society while in reality all these are mere delusions.

➤ IDENTITY CRISIS

O'Neill was moved to write about the Americans' loss of identity, hope and humanity after witnessing the destruction of World War I and the



disillusionment of the Roaring Twenties. Besides, materialism and industrial revolution created the concept of individualism and led to the self-evaluation and self-questioning which ultimately led to the leanness of social relations and the fall in the labyrinth of spiritual decadence. The economic and industrial advancements resulted in isolating the people from each other in the same society. O'Neill depicted how the proletarians represented here by the stockers were imprisoned in the stokehole like animals. There were alienated and disconnected from the entire world. They even asserted that they don't have families or connection "rootless", except their world of steel. Therefore, Yank primarily identified himself to the ship as he asked his comrades "Who makes dis old tube run? Ain't it us guys? Well den we belong don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat's all" (9). But they realized such belonging will not help them forever. Thereafter he asserted his identification with relation to his physical power by explaining "It's me makes it move ... I'm de end! I'm de start ... I'm steam and oil for de engines" (13). But his sense of identification to his physical power was shattered after the capitalist class denied not only belonging but also his humanity as Mildred the daughter of the tube owner labeled Yank as "filthy beast" (25).

Since then Yank left the world of steel and began searching for belonging in the capitalist world. He went the Fifth Avenue but he encountered indifference and disregard from all the people either passersby or churchgoers. Consequently he decided to assert his identity even violently as he blocked the way of a man and attacked another when he was trying to get in the bus stating "you don't belong, get me look at me, why don't you dare? I belong, dat's me" (40). He even though went to search for identification in the WWI organization which contains criminals, jailbirds, and murderers though he was denied any belonging and called "brainless ape" (54). Ultimately, he left the world of his fellowmen who all denied giving him any space and opted to quest for identity in the world of animals. But the gorilla is having unfavorable experience with human beings. Thereafter, Yank advanced to hug the gorilla but it defended itself in its own wild way as it crushed his ribs in its massive power. He died in the course of

searching for identity and belonging uttering helplessly before his last breath "Christ, where do I get off? AT? Where do I fit in" (60). To sum up, the modern man disconnected himself spiritually then began searching helplessly for belonging and identity in the world of man but he failed as the modern man himself is completely disillusioned and disoriented. Consequently, he went searching for belonging in the animals' world but the animals rejected to trust the one who was distrusted by his own people, and defend it microcosm in its own wild way, that brought the end of the tragedy (Hadi, 2009, Rachana, 2014).

RELIGIOUS DECADENCE

One of the grave harms of Roaring Twenties is the religious decadence. The church became a devise for maintaining and supporting the status of the capitalist group at the expense of the proletariat. Religiosity and the observance of Sunday became exclusive for the capitalist people only though they were postiche. In addition, Roaring Twenties caused irremediable harm for the spiritual side of the capitalists as well as the proletarians. O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape* shows that the capitalists are the only churchgoers while the proletarians do not attend the church regularly as he made Yank to Confess "Choich, huh? I useter go to choice onct-sure- when I was a kid. Me old man and women dey made me. Dey never went demselves, dough" (35). Long and Yank are sitting in "fif' Avenoo" in front of a church contemplating, then Long explains why the capitalists come to the church by saying "in church, blarst 'em ! Arskin Jesus to give em more money" (35). It changed the church from a place for worship into a place for either dozing off or discussing the commercial and materialistic gains and deals. Thereby, they come out of the church without any idea about what the sermon was all about as one of the goers asked: Dear Doctor Caiphas ... what was the sermon about? I dozed off.

The reply, About the radicals, my dear-and the false doctorines that are being preached. We must organize a hundred percent bazaar and let everyone contribute one one-hundredth percent of their income tax (39).

Pertinently, Fredrick Wilkins points out "Having rejected his former place as a "son of God,



he emerged as bastard child of materialism and industrialism and all other 'isms' that symbolizes his godless and his inability to provide substitutes" (1980). Despite, in the 1920s and particularly after the World War I the American exhibited a kind of religious indifference, both capitalists and proletarians due to the frustration of war and the hustle of the technological and industrial leaps which their society experienced. In *The Hairy Ape* we find the workers are unable to raise any class consciousness and spiritual revival due to their indulgence in the materialistic gains (Diggins, XXIII). Consequently, this led to the disintegration of the religious, moral and spiritual values in the society. O'Neill criticized the Americans for their spiritual dissolution and social dislocation.

The modern man was disillusioned by the modern materialistic life, disregarding keeping connection with God, only in the moment of crisis or before the moment of his life as Yank did. In his last utterance he complained to Christ about the issue of his belonging stating "Christ, where do I get off? AT? Where do I fit in"? (60).

CONCLUSION

In fact the Roaring Twenties brought great development in the American society and lifestyle, but not for all. Consequently, it affected negatively the culture and social relations among the people within the same society. In this paper O'Neill was depicted as one of the well-known literary figures who dedicated his narratives to expose and criticize realistically the ills that pervade in his own society. In *The Hairy Ape* he censured the issued that challenged the proletariat represented by the stockers like dehumanization, alienation, denial of belonging, identity crisis and religious decadence. Throughout his play he desired to inspire the audience about his advice that they should look for their unfortunate brothers. At the same time he depicted how the Roaring Twenties affected the lives of both the bourgeoisies and the proletarians as they equally lost their real identity and became restless in the own worlds. O'Neill shows clearly how the modern man has lost the harmony with God, nature and his fellowmen and thereby has become alien in his own society and the entire world till he died.

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