



THEME OF ALIENATION AND LOSS OF IDENTITY IN EUGENE O'NEIL'S 'THE HAIRY APE'

Lingamurthy Mukkera

(Assistant professor, Dept. of English, Methodist College of Engineering & Technology, Hyderabad.500001)

Email: mlmurthy28@gmail.com

ABSTRACT



Life in the United States of America became more difficult and complicated at the beginning of the twentieth century because of the technological developments, schools of thoughts, literary movements and wars which influenced modern man's life. Modern literature and specifically modern drama paid attention to man's relation to himself and to his society. The playwrights tried their hand to reflect the bitterness and suffering of people at that time. Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is one of the prominent figures that anchored the basis of the American drama. He tried all the types and styles in writing his plays; he dealt with many important themes and issues of the American society. In fact his themes extended to more than the American people. O'Neill's plays portray the American life, race relations, class conflicts, sexuality, human aspirations, disappointment, alienation and psychoanalysis of American life. He is distinguished among American dramatists for the diversity of his characters throughout his dramatic career. O'Neill brought to the stage a richness of detail and psychological depth of portraying the various types of American characteristics that shape the American identity.

Keywords: *American Life, Race Relations, Sexuality, Human Aspirations, Alienation.*

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article

Copyright © 2017 VEDA Publications.

O'Neill continues his dramatization of the American identity in his works. In 1922 he presents his play *The Hairy Ape*. In this play he exposes an important problem that was common in the world in general and in the America society in particular. It discusses the alienation of the American individual in the modern technological age and the lost identity of those individuals. *The Hairy Ape* is a one character play which shows the reality and the bad conditions of the American society.

The play talks about the reality of the working class. Yank, Paddy, and Long are the central characters with Mildred, the representative of the upper class. Yank is the leader of the firemen on a steamship. Early in the play Yank is strong, powerful and confident of himself and his existence. He glorifies himself and his strength; he resembles himself with the machines that he serves. He thinks of himself as the leader and the prime mover of all machinery, he is the maker of the steel.

Yank's world is shattered and turned upside down by the appearance of a young, pretty woman in

the stokehole. Mildred Douglass is the daughter of the owner of the stokehole and all the steel that Yank produces. Mildred is curious "to discover how the other half lives", she wants to have a new experience. But when she sees Yank's face and clothes she is terrified and fainted with fear. She is appalled, frightened and cries out "the filthy beast". Mildred does not expect to see a man in this miserable situation. When she sees Yank; she is shocked by his clothes, face, and his hairy chest.

At this moment Yank realizes his real status in the society, he is shattered, confused and he has to reconsider his thoughts of himself. He is destroyed psychologically by this experience because it forced him to reevaluate himself and his existence in the world. O'Neil shows how Yank and his fellow men live, and how they spend their time working day and night without any appreciation from their social system in the first scene. The play dramatizes the American society taking the typical American people. O'Neill's vision of the American society is dramatized through the character of Yank and his fellowmen.



O'Neill's descriptions of Paddy at the beginning show Yank as an animal.

The Hairy Ape dramatizes the theme of alienation and loss of identity. O'Neill draws a character, Yank, a stoker who lives in the bellow deck in the stokehole of an ocean liner. Yank leaves his home when he was a child, becomes homeless, an outcast; he thinks that he has finally found his warm home which is the stokehole. In the play, Yank thinks that he has found his real place in the world and he can achieve something valuable for himself and for society. Having this feeling, Yank thinks that he belongs to the society and he is important and counted. O'Neill puts the stokers in the bellow deck and at the bottom of the social ladder and even so they are satisfied and convinced in their lives and positions because they think that they do something for society and society is grateful in return.

Yank thinks that he and his fellow men are more important and stronger than the others and they can achieve many things for their society, for this he thinks that he belongs and feels proud for his real and valuable identity. Long supports Yank's ideas that they are better guys and they belong, their real home is the stoker and they have no home other than this one.

At this scene Mildred utters three words enough to shatter the world of Yank and enough to shake his faith in himself. When she sees him, she is frightened, appalled and cries out "*take me away! Oh, the filthy beast!*"(Scene Three: 164).

Yank at this moment is shattered; he loses his confidence, dignity in front of his friends and his entire world is confused. O'Neill here uses Mildred as a symbol for her class, for the capitalists. She wants to be sincere, "she wants to help them", but in fact, she destroys them especially Yank. "The filthy beast" as Mildred calls Yank, loses his fake identity and his respect in front of his friends.

Yank realizes that he is no more than a filthy beast in the eyes of Mildred and her class. He knows his real value in society and what is his position in the ladder of evaluation. O'Neill intentionally brings Mildred to the stage though he knows that her role is limited and minimal. Mildred's importance in the play lays in her few words that are intended by O'Neill to awake Yank from his illusion. She was a catalyst to shake Yank from within, to make him realize his reality and his value in society. Mildred's appearance represents an awakening from the lethargy and the dormancy of Yank.

Yank at first has his world, he belongs to the stokehole as he says in the first scene, and he has his identity. But then this identity is dragged forcedly

from him because it is not for him, he is abandoned by society. Yank takes his identity from the mechanized world but this sense of belonging is a form of oppression imposed on him. When his world view is changed his power fails him, he can do nothing. The first thing that Yank wants to do after his insult is to "think". He begins to question himself; he tries to think who he is, "*Can't you see I'm tryin' to tink?*" .Then he begins to hate, he falls in hate as he puts it, "I've fallen in hate, get me?"(Scene:4,19).

Yank still clings to the ideas of belonging just because he is in his world, the world of coal and smoke, he is still in the stokehole, he has not moved yet to the upper world. Yank does not know that Mildred is a symbol of her class, later he discovers that if he wants to fix someone then he should fix the whole class. His revenge is not upon Mildred individually but upon her class entirely, the capitalist system. As Long tells him, he should avenge the whole class not only Mildred.

Yank's feeling at this situation of frustration and alienation is symbolic of the feeling of the industrial worker in that contemporary machine age. Yank's personality begins to disintegrate and he feels that he is a prisoner in a cage of steel which he himself produces.

In Scene Four Yank starts his journey looking for his identity in the Fifth Avenue, it's the first time for him to see people since months or years. O'Neill describes Yank and Long in the street.

This shows Yank's reality, how he speaks, how he wears and how he behaves with other people. He tries to attack men and women, he just wants to fight anybody but their reactions shock him severely because no one seems to see or hear him. He begins to speak about his glories and his work in the stokehole; "*Sure! I'm steel and steam and smoke and de rest of it! It moves –speed....!*"(Scene Five : 179).

Yank tries to attack people in his way but they seem even not seeing him and unaware of his existence, they ignore him and just passed him, they seem neither to see nor to hear him. This negative reaction of those people annoys Yank so much so he jumps into fury and begins to insult them.

Yank is taken to the prison for misbehavior and there O'Neill draws an ironic picture of the American character. Yank is the maker of the steel and it's him "who makes it move, roar"....etc. in the prison he realized that for the second time that for the second time the society has rejected him, first by Mildred and then by the people. He still wants to avenge himself from that harsh ungrateful society. He tries to find someone who can understand him in



this society. In prison Yank learns about the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Yank, after getting out of the prison, joins IWW in an attempt to avenge himself upon Mildred by blowing up the steel company of her father. However, Yank's suggestion is too violent even for the IWW, they think that he is a spy; they just give him another name, a brainless ape, and throw him on the street. In Yank's conversation with the secretary of the IWW the difference of languages appears. The language of Yank is abrupt, fragmentary and full of mistakes and errors. This language is intended by O'Neill to reveal Yank's identity and reality.

O'Neill dramatizes the American society and the American character in that society in a way that shows him lost and belonging are nothing. The American society and the social system do not care for their citizens, they are indifferent to their lives, as did the policeman to Yank. The American individual has no room inside his house; he is dismissed because it's not his house anymore. Their only fault is that they were born, so this is the charge as Yank says, and the sentence for this fault is hell. Hell is the only shelter that is offered by society. But O'Neill's characters never give up to their shortcomings, Yank is convinced that he does not fit in this world, so he moves to another world in an attempt to find out his lost identity.

When Yank realizes that his search to belong to somewhere has been futile, and he has been rejected by all segments of society, the wealthy represented by Mildred, the imprisoned in the prison and the representatives of the masses, the IWW, he is confused and bewildered, where should he go and what should he do in this cruel society?. He realizes that he has no place in this mechanized society and this world is not for him. He remembers Mildred's words and applies her theory and goes to the zoo. Yank, in the final scene passes through a desperate phases. He with his desperate identities of filthy beast and hairy ape decides to go to the zoo.

In the zoo, he approaches the gorilla. There he sees the real hairy ape and he realizes the ugliness that Mildred has seen in him. He starts talking to the gorilla, he envies it because, he says, gorilla can think of the past and should not have to question its being. He envies the gorilla because it has a place and he does not; the gorilla belongs and he does not as he says.

O'Neill speaks through Yank about the American individual, he has no pleasant past that he can think of nor does he expect any promising future. He has only this harsh, cruel and desperate life to live in the middle of this mechanized society that seeks to

dehumanize and deform the American man and to leave him behind. The mechanical civilization seeks to rob all the human qualities from man. It has replaced man by machines, man has no place in this world, he does not function in this society and he is out of service. O'Neill suggests that man becomes equal to animals yet sometimes even the animal is better than man, says Yank to his "brother"

O'Neill's dramatization of the American character is revealed in this scene. Society is not the only one that rejects Yank, but even the animals do. The gorilla, Yank's brother, also rejects him. The American individuals according to O'Neill, have no place neither with the humans nor with the animals.

This is the question of the modern American man, he does not fit in society, he cannot live with animals even, so what is the answer of Yank's question? O'Neill suggests death to this question; he says death is the only solution to this situation because man cannot live in this industrial monstrous world. But O'Neill adds an ambiguous note to the last direction of the play he says:

"And perhaps the hairy ape belongs" (Scene Eight: 198).

In *The Hairy Ape* O'Neill condemns the new faith in technology. He says that technology has alienated man from past and future. Yank is alienated by technology. Yank can only question himself saying *"where do I fit in?"*

It is clear that Eugene O'Neill is a great critic of the modern American society. In *the Hairy Ape* he presents a very negative view of the states, of the mechanical world, and mechanical America. Where the worker is treated as a hairy ape and where the capitalist class is terribly dehumanized for it has lost its connection with life. America for O'Neill is a device for dehumanizing its citizens, and for preventing change. O'Neill through the character of Yank presents his reaction to the modern age in America because Yank is every human being. The only answer that O'Neill can find for every human being is death.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Albert, Edward, History of English Literature, 1979. OUP
- [2]. O'Neil, Eugene, 2004, *'The Hairy Ape'*, Surjeet Publication, Delhi.
- [3]. Stern. Milton. R. and Gross Seymour.L, *American Literature Survey*, 1978, The Viking Press.
- [4]. Tilak, R. *History of American Literature*. 2009. Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly.
- [5]. www.bookrags.com study guide-hairy ape web on 21 oct
- [6]. www.gunterberg.com web on 21 oct.
- [7]. www.lucidOcafé.com web on 21 oct.