

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S THE HAIRY APE

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Abstract: Eugene O'Neill dedicated a life-time of incessant creative activity to understand the root cause of man's disillusionment with life and his disenchantment with the cosmos. He searched for faith and human values in a world which does not seem to subscribe to any consistent value system. He tried to find out the meaning of human tragedy. In the apparent meaninglessness and absurdity of life, O'Neill's protagonists strive hard to seek their identity with other fellowmen. In his plays he tried to discover the causes that erected barriers between man and his self, between man and human society and between man and universe. Man encounters nothingness at every step and a malignant shadow of emptiness hovers over him as he sets out to discover the meaning of life. His plays provide a keen insight into this predicament of man. The present paper examines the identity crisis of Robert Smith 'Yank', the central protagonist of Eugene O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape*.

Key words: Identity crisis, Disillusionment, Predicament, Disenchantment etc.

Introduction

The thematic universe of *The Hairy Ape* is encompassed by a sarcastic critique of bourgeois value system, which so entraps its exploited victims in its coils, that they gradually begin to propagate its supposed virtues even though they are its miserable victims. The play unfolds its meaning through the consciousness of its central protagonist, Robert Smith 'Yank' as well as through the articulated thoughts of his companions like Paddy and Long. Yank, as his name suggests, is a typical representative of ethical substance of the American Dream, which derives its strength from aggressive individualism and romantic adventurism. Yank is not only the embodiment of the spirit of the American working class, which because of its illiteracy and subservience to the capitalistic class structure is not at all or at best insufficiently imbued with radical consciousness, but also of man's constant search for identity, which in the play assumes both sociological and psychological dimension.

First we see Yank, a stoker on a transatlantic liner, barely articulate and splendidly muscular, in the cramped cage-like crew's quarters that reduce the men to the stooping and moving about like apes in the stokehole in which they feed the monstrous furnaces. Despite the dehumanizing surroundings, Yank sees himself as a triumphant man and a source of energy that moves the world. Yank dominates the stokers by his exceptional strength and turbulent personality and boasts of the feeling that he 'belongs'. One of the most interesting passages in the first scene of *The Hairy Ape* is when O'Neill, speaking first through Yank and then through the ancient Irishman, Paddy, shows his instinctive cleavage to the older idea which impatient science was attempting to destroy: The Idea of going back to primal inner peace and perfection to seek redemption. Yank has been boasting that the men in the stokehole are better than 'the baggage' in the first cabin. He says, "Who makes dis old tub run? Ain't it us guys? Well, den, we belong, don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat's all" (142). But the old Irishman, Paddy who has been listening half drunkenly to this

boasting, this pride in being at the bottom, suddenly ‘cries out in a voice full of old sorrow.’ As the men stare at him, startled, he says:

We belong to this, you’re saying? We make the ship to go, you’re saying? Yerra then, that Almighty God have pity on us! Oh, to be back in the fine days of my youth, ochone! Oh, there was fine beautiful ships them days – clippers wid tall masts touching the sky – fine strong men in them – men that was sons of the sea as if ‘twas the mother that bore them. Oh, the clean skins of them, and the clear eyes, the straight backs and full chests of them!
(143)

Then Paddy goes on to describe the sight and sound and smell of the sea and ships. ‘It was then 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’ (144). But Yank will have none of the dream of the past. He replies:

Hell in de stoke-hole? Sure! It takes a man to work in hell. Hell, sure, dats my fav’rite climate. I eat it up! I git fat on it! It’s me makes it hot ! It’s me makes it roar! It’s me makes it move! Sure, on’y for me everything stops. It all goes dead, get me? ...I’m at de bottom, get me? Dere ain’t nothin’ foither. I’m de end! I’m de start! Slaves, hell! We run de whole works. All de rich guys dat tink dey’re somep’n, day ain’t nothin! Dey don’t belong. But us guys, we’re in de move, we’re at de bottom, de whole ting is us! (145-146)

There is both splendour and terror in Yank’s pride in being at the bottom, in his scorn for past days that were cleaner and better and freer. Paddy embodies the voice of O’Neill calling for redemption from a fallen state, whereas Yank is the O’Neill blazing with pride in belonging to the low past, and seeking to glorify the lowest state into the highest pride in going back to the ape. He identifies himself with smoke, steel and speed – the values of modern individual civilization. He lives in the delusion that he belongs. His philosophy is that men like him have mastered the world because they control machines and thus keep the world running. But this is the belonging of man to the machine, of worker to his master. He fails to realize that he can never belong to ship so long as he is merely a wage earning slave on it. But a feminine character destroyed this masculine complacency. Mildred Douglas, the grand-daughter of a steel pudder who became a steel master, is one of the first class passengers. In her weary and disillusioned way, she wants to know how the ‘other half’ lives. She has dabbled somewhat in social service, and has an abstract sympathy for the poor and an understanding of the snobbery of her own kind. She visits the stokehole of the ship and comes upon Yank at a moment when he is railing against the tyranny of the ship’s officers who are driving the men to feed the blazing furnaces. She is filled with horror and terror at the sight of him and at the sound of his rage. She cries to the engineers, “Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast!” (157) – and faints.

This is the blow that upsets Yank’s complacent pride and makes him ‘try to tink’. For the first time, Yank sees himself as the hairy ape, the lowest form of life aspiring to something higher to which he can never ‘belong’. His pride in being at the bottom, in being ‘the works’ of the thing of steel, has been shattered by a woman. Mildred’s contempt for the beastly appearance was an opportunity for Yank to see himself through her eyes. Two things happened together; he saw in herself a contrast to himself and at the same time he saw scorn in her eyes. This scorn confirmed his feeling that he was nobody. This experience of seeing himself for what he really was shook his faith in his superiority and his belongingness. He was told that he did not run the ship, it was owned by someone else and that he himself was an ordinary person dependent on that capitalistic class. Once Mildred comes as nemesis of his pride to remind him of his flesh that has become metal, he becomes a restless soul. It is after Mildred’s appearance that Yank becomes conscious of himself in relation to that which is outside him. Yank is robbed of the sense of ‘belonging’, which

he possessed in his animal like state. Now he is confronted with the question of his identity and he is made to think and ponder over it.

According to John Gassner, “O’Neill’s major theme was man’s disorientation, man’s bedevilment from within and from without” (133). O’Neill’s protagonist is not compelled to make choice between alternate actions in order to accomplish another action; he must make a choice between the alternate images of self, in order to discover the real self, which he often fails to do. Certainly he performs the acts—if nothing else, he antagonizes other characters that are engaged in their own search for self. But his conflict with others is only a by-product of the protagonist’s own conflict with himself. He must solve that, must find his integrated self, before he can engage in purposeful action. O’Neill’s protagonists faced with identity crises search for something to belong. Divided between two worlds, they cannot identify themselves with either. As a result they are rootless and alienated. This search for identity is connected with the struggle against alienation as Dr. John Schindler’s observation is pertinent in this regard: “The search for identity, the need for recognition, the need for creative expression, the need for self-esteem, the need for self-manifestation are indicating one and the same thing” (Leech 231).

In order to gain his lost harmony in this world Yank sets out on a journey from his bonded state. He thinks that he must seek revenge and in his effort, he would probably find his ‘identity’, the real self in place of the empirical self that he has discarded after finding Mildred scorning it. Everything he believes in is shattered. A sense of loss, anxiety and dislocation overshadows Yank’s world. Yank tries desperately to belong to the destructive element. In order to take revenge, less on the feminine dispossessor than on his own disenchanted self, his anger drives him to New York, to show Fifth Avenue society who belongs and who doesn’t. He reaches in front of a church, hoping to find the object of his love and hate. But the people he sees do not see him. They are marked automatons. When he calls them names, they do not hear. When he throws himself against them in his rage, it is he who recoils, not they. They merely answer ‘with mechanical affected politeness’ and say ‘I beg your pardon.’ Yank is arrested and thrown into jail. In jail Yank hears for the first time of the I.W.W.—hears from a politician’s speech in the newspapers that they believe in blowing up the world with dynamite. When he gets out of jail and tries to join a local of the I.W.W., he again finds that he does not ‘belong’. The I.W.W., hearing his violent intentions, thinks him as an agent provocateur and throws him out bodily. The last shred of his contact with the world has been broken. He belongs, nowhere.

Social conditions in capitalism have rendered him into an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being. Now he realizes the final truth, that the source of trouble is neither in society, nor in Mildred, but in himself. As Doris V. Folk says: Since Mildred has stripped away the ideal which dignified the body and the slow mind within it, the body has become the only symbol of self, and constitutes a prison. From this point onward, Yank devotes himself to an attempt to escape which only makes him more aware of the strength of the barrier, and the more hopeless it is for him to attempt to tear it down. (127)

Since he can belong neither to his steel image nor to the world society, his last resort is to withdraw behind the barrier and surrender only to self-image with which people and now he also thinks he can become integrated. So, he continues to go on towards the zoo, with a confused notion that he might belong there. The last scene of the play is one of O’Neill’s most memorable strokes of fantasy, when the bewildered Yank finds himself face to face with a gorilla in the Zoo. Yank talks aloud to the gorilla, which seems to understand him. He says:

I s'pose yuh wanter know what I'm doin' here, huh? he asks, I been warmin' a bench down to de Battery – ever since last night. Sure. I seen de sun come up. Dat was pretty, too – all red and pink and green. I was lookin' at de skyscrapers – steel – and all de ships comin' in, sailin' out, all over de oith – and dey was steel, too. De sun was warm, dey wasn't no clouds, and dere was a breeze blowin'. Sure, it was great stuff. I got it aw right – what Paddy said about dat bein' de right dope – on'y I could't get in it, see? I couldn't belong in dat. It was over my head. And I kept tinkin – and den I beat it up, here to see what youse was like. (187)

This whole passage becomes a terrifying picture of a soul that has slipped its anchor to the world. Yank even feels that the ape is happier than him—a deep and rich recognition that man, even if he would, cannot find himself by going back to the beast. He asserts: It's dis way, what I'm drivin' at', Yank tells the Gorilla, 'Youse can sit and dope dream in de past, green woods, de jungle and de rest of it. Den yuh belong and dey don't. Den yuh kin laugh at 'em, see? Yuh're de champ of de woild. But me – I ain't got no past to tink in, nor nothin' dat's comin', on'y what's now – and dat don't belong....(187-188) Here we have in the crude language of Yank, the most profound problem of the disjointed and divided soul, rebelling not only at the burden of creating but at the very possession of intellect itself, at the very distinction between man and beast, at the burden of thought itself and the tragedy of being born a man. Man searching for peace in mere animal instinct and finding that even then he cannot throw off his manhood. Then, in a sudden access of furious exaltation, he breaks open the gorilla's cage to set him free – but then mocks at him with a last touch of proud superiority. The gorilla wraps his arms around Yank and crushes him to death. In his last feeble moment of life, Yank crawls into the gorilla's cage to die. "And perhaps," concludes O'Neill, "the Hairy Ape at last belongs" (189).

Richard Dana Skinner relates the theme of the play to the mental and emotional cloud of late nineteenth century science, and the spiritual chaos it produced. Dwelling at length on the spiritual interpretation of *The Hairy Ape*, Skinner observes: No one has understood better than Eugene O'Neill that the soul at war with itself belongs nowhere in this world of realities. The soul that denies or seeks to escape from its own creative power sinks in misery below the beast.... In *The Hairy Ape* we have a restatement of the theme in the rough and inarticulate regions of the soul, ending in death through the embrace of the beast. (103)

Taken by itself, *The Hairy Ape* is a play of sheer terror of life covered with a mask of mocking pride. But even in its worst moments, it never wholly loses sight of things outside. There is always the vision of the Irishman, Paddy, and Yank's strange understanding that, in spite of everything, he is not a beast and his racial consciousness cannot go back to the unthinking quiet of the jungle. When he does, even mockingly seek comradeship with the beast, it brings death.

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