

The Hairy Ape: A Tragic Dilemma of Belonging

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Abstract

Eugene O'Neill was the product of that American society which was beset with class consciousness and growing materialism. Many of his plays focus on the difficulty of life, relation and identity in modern America. This paper aims to delve deep into the question of identity in Eugene O'Neill's Play *The Hairy Ape* which is often considered as a modern tragedy, though it is subtitled as *A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life in Eight Scenes*. The thrust of the paper lies in its effort to find out to what extent the tragic framework and also the subtitle of the play helps in intensifying the deep sense or dilemma of identity in the play.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*, tragedy, dilemma, identity.

Eugene O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape*, published in 1922, is concerned with some of the central problems of American society in the first half of the Twentieth Century. O'Neill's acute observation of the American society in the post-war, post-depression era finds a poignant, but a somewhat stylized expression in the play. In the process of enunciation of the problems that concerns O'Neill and his generation, the playwright improvises on the convention of the form and structure of tragedy. And however debatable O'Neill's improvised notion of tragedy may be, his plays raise certain issues quite successfully. O'Neill's contribution, therefore, is two-fold: on the one hand he emphasizes the need to improvise traditional structure and, on the other hand, he is capable of holding mirror up to the American society.

Tragedy, as a rule, concerns itself with lofty ideas, involving characters drawn from high stratum of life, and arising issues that are noble as well as serious. The 'terror' and 'pity' that tragic characters evoke in the mind of audience are projected in such a way as to transform the audience from their familiar, ordinary level to a level from which they are able to grasp the universal order. The flaws in the protagonist in a tragedy, therefore, involve huge consequences, bringing destruction and misery to the world in the play, and this allows the audience to grasp the tragic waste in a death of the ideal hero. The transformation of the audience in power of

realization from a commonsensical order to the universal or comic is one of the ultimate objectives of tragedy. When O'Neill started writing, he was working in milieu in which the presence of the hero of a royal stature was impossible. Monarchy, personal heroism and nobility had long given away to a land of ordinary characters, situations and problems in the democratic America. The generation of O'Neill was faced with the problem of either accepting tragedy as the form of literature at the cost of divorcing their effort from the realities of their time or improvising the form or structure of tragedy in order to evoke new structure of meaning. Therefore, it was imperative for the playwrights of the Twentieth Century to treat ordinary, middle or lower-class citizen and to still retain the basic tragic structure. So, tragedy to the 20th Century playwrights came to mean a dramatic form which involves tragic waste in the death of protagonist. Yank, the protagonist of *The Hairy Ape* is drawn from the lower-class life but his infallible pride in his sense of physicality and his fidelity to believe make him a kind of tragic hero.

O'Neill completely abandons the traditional five Acts structure of tragedy and adopts an eight Scenes structure. The play is chiefly concerned with Yank's exploits throughout the play. Yank's shipmates Long and Paddy are so presented that the development of the theme at the surface level is carried out through their characters. Yank believes in hard physical work, and that is what really determines the quality of life for him. Those who work hard with a sense of conviction of physicality actually run the world and those who sit in the first-class cabin are dismissed contemptuously by him. Yank's firm conviction of physicality is shattered once he confronts Mildred, a lady who belongs to world that Yank is not aware of. Yank is humiliated and for the first time in his life is conscious of a sense of uncertainty. Once lack of belief sets in him, he becomes restless and starts searching meaning of his existence. His world view is completely shattered when he steps out of the ship and sets foot in the New York soil. The humiliation of Yank further continues. His celebration of physicality is contemptuously treated by the urban society and finally in a symbolical moment, in desperation, Yank identifies himself with a Gorilla in a zoo. Unable to find his identity in the human world, Yank tries to befriend an animal, and, ironically, even in that attempt he is thwarted. The gorilla crushes Yank's bone and kills him. What is heroic about Yank's journey in search of meaning is that he never really abandons his set of beliefs and ultimately faces his death because of his fidelity to it.

The tragedy of Yank is heroic first because he is, in his own way, superior, efficient and capable even though he does not occupy any exalted position. Secondly, Yank's tragedy is the tragedy of the universal man. Loss of a sense of harmony and creative joy results in disillusionment, frustration, and tragedy for the modern man as it does for Yank in the play. But the ending of the play becomes more theatrical and melodramatic than truly tragic. *The Hairy Ape* is a powerful tragedy but towards the end symbolism gets out of control of the playwright, and reality and emotional appeal somewhat fade away.

The Hairy Ape is a tragedy about a man who is in complete accord with his world and content in his understanding of love, who comes face to face with a lack of self identification in a world which is overwhelmingly alien, harsh and cold, tempered by the strength of street, curse of capitalism and impersonal mechanism of materialism. Alienation and search for identity are the basic themes in *The Hairy Ape*.

Out of the play emerges the dominant figure of the tragic protagonist who is a stocker in a trans-Atlantic liner, a man who feels he belongs as none to the others. To the other stockers, he is the leader, “their most highly developed individual”, the man who is the symbol of the power and energy behind the ship. This is Yank’s illusion, which originates in what the other thinks of him and is fostered by his brutal strength. While speaking of the capitalist class, he says,

... Dat’s what I’m sayin’. Everything else dat makes de woild move, somep’n makes it move. It can’t move without somep’n else, see? . . . I’m at de bottom . . . I’m de end! I’m de start! I start somep’n and de woild moves! It -- dat’s me! . . . I’m de ting in gold dat makes it money! And I’m what makes iron into steel! Steel, dat stands for de whole ting! And I’m steel – steel – steel! I’m de muscles in steel, de punch behind it! . . . All the rich guys dat tink dey’re somep’n, dey ain’t nothing! Dey don’t belong. (Sc. 1, 180)

We find Yank exultantly expounding his views. Nothing troubles him – no consideration of God or faith or home or society. He totally ignores beauty. These are things immaterial and have no place in his scheme of living. For Yank, the present is of utmost importance, for it is the present which satisfies his ego. Yank’s whole sense of belonging is based on this fact. His imagination makes him identify the impersonal strength of steel with the brutal, primitive strength which he possesses, for it is this strength which has the power to convert iron into steel. This helps to strengthen Yank’s sense of belonging and his idea of mastery. But the confident self image of Yank is soon destroyed by Mildred Douglas, whose father is the president of the Steel trust. Her look of horror when she sees yank, her exclamation, “Oh, the filthy beast!” (Sc.III, 188), as she observes him in all the splendor of his anger, stress, feelings in Yank which is never dripped up. She does not actually call him a ‘hairy ape’, but her sense of shock is aptly conveyed in Paddy’s words: “Sure ‘twas as if she’d seen a great hairy ape escapes from the zoo” (Sc.IV, 191). With that exclamation Mildred has destroyed the very foundation of his being. He, who was so proud of his strength, suffers an indignity at the hands of a woman. In his meeting of two different worlds, Yank has been humiliated in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride. All his efforts now move in a single direction and converse in an attempt to escape this self-image. There is a pathetic vehemence in the way he exclaims:

Hairy ape, huh? Sure! Dat’s de way she looked at me, aw right. Hairy ape! So dat’s me, . yuh skinny tart! Yuh whitfaced bum, yuh! I’ll show yuh who’s an ape! . . . sure! I tought

she was a ghost, see? She was all in white like de wrap around stiffs. You seen her. Kin yuh blame me? She didn't belong . . . I'll square wit her" (Sc.IV, 192).

The animal desire for revenge is very strong within him, and it is this desire, almost primitive in its brutality, which motivates him and provides him with an incentive for building up a new image of himself. His search for a new identity and a new sense of belonging will now turn into a kind of frenzy, with a desperation that can only end in self-annihilation.

Yank reaches Fifth Avenue in order to seek revenge on the class of people to which Mildred belongs. However, he confronts there a world which breathes materialism, artificiality and aimlessness. It is here that he realizes that the force which he thought was strength, i.e. steel, was no force at all. It was a prison for him. He had thought that he was steel, that he belongs as steel belongs to industrial world. However, he realizes that the power was not his own but of Mildred's father. He feels that he is a hairy ape in a cage of steel.

His search for belonging brings him to the I.W.W., an organization which attacks social inequality and disparity of the time. Now his aim is to destroy all the steel works, but, even here he is not successful. At this juncture, he realizes that the main source of trouble is not in the society, nor in Mildred, but in himself, and accepts that he does not belong to steel.

Since he can belong neither to steel nor to society, he eventually resolves to withdraw and surrender to the image of the ape. And in his last speech with the ape, we see a Yank who has realized to some extent the significance of the spiritual world, but he cannot as yet belong to it. He lives in an inescapable image which is 'self but cannot even belong to himself because he does not know what 'self' is. He is a part of nature, subject to all her physical law and yet not a part because even though he has a home, he is homeless. He has vision as well as imagination, but this only makes him more aware of himself and of the limitation of his ego. He has no past, no future and he is jealous of the ape which in reality belongs to green woods, the jungle.

In his final attempt to belong to the world of the ape, he pries upon the cage and tries to shake hand with the ape: "Come on brother, shake De secret grip of our order". These are the last words that Yank, in his last endeavour to belong to some other world, utters. But even this appeal is rendered futile for the ape seizes him in a crushing hug and cracks his rib, leaving Yank with final conviction that he does not even belong to the animal world.

Thus, it has been seen that there is a close relation between the tragic framework of the play and the issues of belonging around which it develops. The play is a tragedy in all its manifestations; it is a tragedy of man and his dignity, and at large his identity. The last sentence of the play is highly relevant; "And perhaps the Hairy Ape, at last belongs". With a deep sense of responsibility Yank searches for an image of himself, but he cannot see beyond his conscious

self, and the barrier can be overcome only by death. To the existentialist, Yank is a great man, great because even though he lives in a meaningless world, he does not accept humanity passively. Yank strives to seek a meaning in life which organization or social court can provide. Interestingly, he is willing to do this despite the obvious reward of pain and suffering. He has chosen the path of the rational or sensitive man and treads that path with his despair and dismay. The plight of Yank is well expressed in the following lines:

The gorilla in the zoo looks better in its predicament than a man. It is champion of its world. It belongs, a belonging denied to man. The human world is 'hell' for it which never allows any sense of the self or identity. In a despairing sense of self condemnation, Yank seeks to belong to the gorilla and as if to cement this bond of belonging, he goes to embrace it. But the gorilla simply does not trust Man, a man who is not trusted in his own world. The gorilla crushes him to death in an act of self - defence, repeating the story of man in his world in the world of animals as well. When man cannot belong to man, how can he belong to the animals? (Rachana, 30).

Belonging appears to be highly problematic in the context of modern man, and so was in the context of the ancient man. Belonging is realized in association with one's environment- both natural and social. The primordial man was much happier as he lived a life of total harmony with nature. As civilization set in, man started distancing from nature, often engaging in her annihilation. The modern man or the civilized man has completely distanced himself from nature; he has also distanced himself from his fellow being thanks to his excessive materialistic concern. The ancient man sought civilization for happiness, but got tragic alienation from nature, in the same manner modernization alienated one man from another and has driven the mankind to that extreme where he is also alienated from himself. What could be more ridiculous than this? It is in this sense O'Neill has subtitled the play as *A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life in Eight Scenes*. Man does not belong to anything nor anything belongs to him; he is born without being asked to; he lives according to circumstances, not by his wishes; he dies without being asked to. In this process where does man stand? Nowhere, in no man's land. And this makes his life comic despite his tragic experience. It is this absurdity of belonging that Yank is faced with. He is made to think what he is, and this drives him from the world of man to the world of animal. This reverse journey is more painful than the journey of human civilization, as Yank realizes that he also does not belong to the world of animal. Yank is the being of no man's land; he neither belongs to man nor to animal, and this makes his tragedy comically metaphysical.

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