

**The Elements of Existentialism in Eugene O'Neill's Play
*The Hairy Ape: A Study***

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Introduction

This paper deals with how Sartrean concept "Existence precedes essence" is reflected in the character of "Yank" from the play "The Hairy Ape" written by Eugene O' Neill.

"*Existence Precedes Essence*" is the central theme of Existentialism, which means that the actual life of the individual is defined as the "true essence" and through their own consciousness, values they determine the meaning of their life. The qualities and characters associate with individuals come to them after their birth in this world. And their roles, labels, definitions and how they are fit in the society are known as essence. This was the idea said by Sartre. Existentialism says "*I am nothing else but my conscious existence*". This paper focuses on how the idea of Existentialism is at work in the character Yank.

Application of Existentialism in *The Hairy Ape*

Yank, the protagonist of the play *The Hairy Ape* by birth, does not hold any qualities, it is the decisions that he has taken constitutes his own qualities. As a result at the beginning of the play he is introduced as human with animalistic quality, which is reflected through his behaviours. It is this behaviour based on his own attitude differentiates him from other stokers. It is this wild dominant quality introduced him as an individual even in the first scene itself, where he is described in the following manner.

Yank is seated in the foreground. He seems broader, fiercer, more truculent, more powerful, more sure of himself than the rest. They respect his superior strength – the grudging respect of fear (p-4)

Stokers are assembled in the stokehole, but none of them, except Yank, has been individualized. Only two of them Long and Paddy have been given names, but they too are simply the symbols of two different attitudes or points of view. Long is a radical dreaming of golden age of

social equality and social justice ushered in by the exercise of the right to vote and other constitutional means. Paddy, on the other hand dreams of golden age in the past, when man lived in harmony with nature and life was pleasure. The other stokers have not been given any names. They are merely a chorus of voice; they speak together and taken together they are expressive of simple animal like existence of the stokers. Thus as Yank sits thinking they advise him in unison; “Drink, don’t think”. It is Yank alone who has been given a distinct personality. This distinct personality is the basic quality for being an existentialist.

In scene two we are introduced to Mildred Douglas and her aunt, but like the other stokers, they, too, have not been individualized. They are simply the representatives of luxurious capitalist class. Mildred is brought here to confront with Yank to bring out Yank’s existential nature. It is for this reason only the author brings out crisis with her introduction in the drama. Mildred appears for a moment in the life of Yank like a feeling ghost, and equally mostly are the denizens of the Fifth Avenue, one people of the class to which Mildred belongs. They are mere automatons, mere lifeless shadows, moving about as if in a dream. They are mere abstraction described expressionistically to create an impression of the mechanical nature of modern life:

“The crowd from church enter from the right sauntering slowly and affectedly, their heads held stiffly up looking neither to right nor left, talking in toneless, simpering voices. The women are rouged, calcimined, dyed, overdressed to the high degree. The men are in tail coats, tall hats, canes, etc. A procession of gaudy marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of Frankensteins in their detached, mechanical unawareness”. (p-36)

As they move about, they speak in chorus, and entirely ignore the existence of Yank, and thus help to heighten Yank’s sense of his own insignificance and his feeling of insecurity. The feeling of insecurity is caused by his sense of individuality because Yank cannot identify himself with mass. His individualistic ideology is antagonistic to the mass ideology. Due to this, he is depicted as a lone individual in the play.

Similarly, the prisoners in the prison cells have not been individualized. They have not been given even names. They are merely voices providing Yank with the information regarding the I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World). The secretary of the I.W.W. and other people in the office are equally lacking in individuality. The secretary talks of the use of constitutional means only and rejects the use of dynamite and violence as suggested by Yank. He represents the proletariat, touched and corrupted by politics as contrasted with Yank who stands for a class of workers, still uninfluenced by politics. Yank’s sense of isolation is further aggravated, as he is thrown out of I.W.W. office. Every time and everywhere, the stubborn nature of Yank keeps himself aloof from others. It is through this individualistic nature, he builds up his own essence.

The foregoing analyses make it quite clear that Yank is the only living character in the play: the other characters simply constitute the background which inflates the personality of Yank. In the opening scene, Yank has been conceived realistically and the external details of his appearance, gestures, motions, etc., have been graphically and vividly given. But after his confrontation with Mildred Douglas the action is increasingly internalized. O' Neill's major figures generally suffer from some obsession which sends them to their doom, and Yank is no exception in this respect. He is obsessed with a feeling of insecurity and insignificance. This creates angst in his mind, which instigates him to take a revenge on Mildred and her people, for such revenge would restore his sense of self-respect and feeling of security. He is carried off his feet by the obsession and is no longer capable of rational, logical thought. He pushes against the crowd of people on the Fifth Avenue, tries to uproot a pole to give them a blow with it, and strikes his first in the face of a fat man. In this way he wants to demonstrate to them his own physical superiority over them, and that they are mere 'baggage' in comparison with him. The result is he soon finds himself in jail.

YANK: Bums! Tarts! Bitches! (He turns in a rage on the men, bumping viciously into them but not jarring them the least bit. Rather it is he who recoils after each collision. He keeps growling) Git off de oith! G' wan, yuh bum! Look where yuh're goin', can't yuh? Git outa here! Fight, why don't yuh? Put up yer mits! Don't be a dog! Fight or I'll knock yuh dead! (But, without seeming to see they all answer with mechanical affected politeness "I beg your pardom." Then at a cry from one of the women, they all scurry to the furrier's window. (P-40,41)

Yank's mind is obsessed with bitter experience which drives him agitated. In prison he sees himself as a hairy ape in a cage, which forces him to break cell and comes out. He has the strength of a gorilla, but is no longer capable of rational thought. He is put behind the bars. After his release, he goes straight to the zoo. Even in desperate mood he is guided by his own decision. It is this decision that makes him move to zoo. As he is an individual, he is unable to find any replica of his mind in society, so he goes to zoo, where the caged ape gives him temporary relief as he believes wrongly that the ape belongs to his world. Against his wish he is injured by ape which puts him in a very desperate and desolated condition. This kind of despair, an existentialist should undergo in their lifetime. Through this existential suffering Yank builds up his own character, which is highly individualistic in nature. This individuality determines his essence (attitude).

YANK: Yuh don't belong wit'em and yuh know it.
But me, I belong wit'em don't, see? Dey don't belong wit me, dat's what. Get me? Tinkin' is hard...(p-58).

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of the character Yank, in every respect, proves that Yank constructs his own character through his individualistic attitude. This individualistic attitude inspires him to

take a bold decision against those who are at cross swords with him. This can be proved in the case of Mildred Douglas and the secretary of I.W.W. The bold decision of Yank, highly individualistic in nature earns the abhorrence of others and puts him in isolation. This isolated condition makes him experience the existential suffering. This existential suffering, in turn, breathes a new essence into his existence. From this, it is evident that Yank, a human being, is born without any essence, but the very essence is supplied by his existential traits. Thus the Sartrean concept 'Existence Precedes Essence' is proved in the character of Yank.

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