

# A review of eugene o'neill's "the hairy ape" essay sample

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## **A Review of Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape" Essay Sample**

A play which is divorced from man's struggle with an unfriendly and an unmoral universe loses the most abiding appeal that art can have for man. Eugene O'Neill's tremendous success as a dramatist depends to a great extent upon the fact that he has had something to say about the modern social order that has been worth saying. His technique and his form have been admirable vehicles for an interpretation of the conflict which arises out of the circumstances of the world in which we live. Social criticism supplies a rich background in O'Neill's plays. However, it is in *The Hairy Ape* (1922) that the modern social order is directly, and in some cases, bitterly criticized.

Clear in its symbolism, *The Hairy Ape* relates in a series of short scenes the story of a man who loses his old harmony with nature. Here, O'Neill presents a problem that has broader implications than the immediate success or failure of the major character, Yank, a stoker on a transatlantic liner. He becomes aware that he does not belong. Yank has always gloried in his work and in his brute strength until he is startled and infuriated when Mildred Douglas, spoiled daughter of a millionaire, visits the stokehold. Driven to thought and unable to rationalize his place in the scheme of things, Yank is obsessed by the idea that he does not belong.

Yank awoke to the fact that he counted for nothing as an individual. Yank finds out that the world has been gradually but quite rapidly revolutionized by machinery, a revolution that has not carried him with it. If he could have reasoned it out clearly, he would have known that as soon as a machine

known as an automatic stoker could be invented, he would be thrown overboard. He would have known that the progress of invention is for the benefit of those who exploit the workers and not for the good of society as a whole. He finds that a new world which disregards human rights and aspirations has left him stranded. The one thing which made his life endurable was that he felt that he belonged, that he was a necessary, vital and human part of a social order.

And this is not Yank's problem alone, but the problem of the whole social system. There are literally millions of men and women who are blood relations of Yank in his modern industrial world. Like Yank they have grown up in the faith that they belonged, that they were a necessary and respected part of a social order, but they have lived to find out that they are nothing of the kind. As they walk up and down the world looking for work only to be turned away with a brutal word; as they stand in thousands of bread lines to receive food not much better than slop that charity flings them; as they shiver from cold, and see their loved ones die from want, consoled only by the fact that they, too, will soon be dead, they come to the realization that they do not belong.

Like Yank, these men and women see an abundance of food, clothing and shelter lavishly wasted on every hand, but nothing is offered them. They taste only the food that has been allowed to rot, because of a system which does not or cannot change its ideals. They stand on the sidewalks of the world, desolate, abandoned, even hated and despised for being something they did not ask to be. They are forced to listen to the empty talk which

flows like a garbagechoked river from the vacuous minds of the protected ones.

Nothing could reflect more clearly than does this scene the utter bankruptcy of the modern system to deal with the problem that confronts Yank and millions of others. The system has evolved beyond control and each day the gap between Yank and his needs grows wider.

In *The Hairy Ape* O'Neill reveals himself in sympathy with literature dealing with social problems. The difference with other work of arts having this nature, however, is that the dramatist is not dealing with the condemnation of a particular political order. O'Neill's problem is the deeper one of the psychological implications of the machine age. His predecessors might have shown how Yank lost his job and finally through starvation was led to crime to support himself and family, or some similar theme. But it should be remembered that Yank's problem was not loss of work. He could have had all the work he wanted.

In addition, O'Neill does not appeal to the emotions by having Yank lose a sweetheart, mother, or children. Yank is alone as far as any family connections are concerned. It is not work that Yank is seeking; rather, what he wants is to know that he belongs. Yank wants to find out what it is that has happened to the world which separates him from the realization that what he is doing is a necessary and a fitting part of the life of the world.

In pursuing the answer to this problem, Yank receives blows and insults. He is clapped into jail for starting a riot on Fifth Avenue. No insult is greater than

that which is expressed in the usual speech of the senator who attributes to the workers all the sins of which he and his class are guilty. A fellow prisoner makes a plain and direct criticism of the social order by reading the senator's puerile defense of a system that offers imprisonment or starvation as its only answer to social injustice. This demagogic speech shows the extent to which O'Neill introduces a direct approach to the social problem:

There is a menace existing in this country today which threatens the vitals of our fair Republic...I refer to that devil's brew of rascals, jailbirds, murderers and cutthroats who libel all honest workingmen by calling themselves the Industrial Workers of the World; but in the light of their nefarious plots, I call them the Industrial Wreckers of the World...They would tear down society, put the lowest scum in the seats of the mighty, turn Almighty God's revealed plan for the world topsy-turvy, and make of our sweet and lovely civilization a shambles, a desolation where man, God's masterpiece, would soon degenerate back to the ape! (65-67)

The speech alludes to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), or the Wobblies. The years 1905 through 1917 were the heyday of the IWW, the period in which the organization showed considerable power as an industrial labor movement in the United States (Dugan 109). This period also provide the setting for many of O'Neill's plays. One can pay close attention to the role of the IWW in *The Hairy Ape*, which can be argued as the only such careful consideration of the Wobblies in O'Neill scholarship (Alexander 349).

Yank moves from one defeat to another striving vainly to find some answer to his problem. He thought that he could find among IWWs an answer.

However, they threw him into the street, just as the Communists of today would deny him a place. The Communists would not accept Yank, because Yank is an individualist not a party man. What he wants is to be a creative worker, proud of what he as an individual has created.

Yank's speech after he has been thrown from the IWW headquarters explicitly summarizes the whole situation. It suggests that wages, distribution, shorter hours and all the rest of it is no solution. Yank reviews the whole situation and ends by admitting that his greatest crime was that of being born:

YANK (Bitterly) So dem boids don't fink I belong, neider....Dat's me now-I don't tick, see?-I'm a busted Ingersoll, dat's what. Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me. Aw, Hell! I can't see-it's all dark, get me? It's all wrong! Say, youse up dere, Man in de Moon, yuh look so wise, gimme de answer, huh? Slip me de inside dope, de information right from de stable-where do I get off at, huh?

POLICEMAN. What you been doin'?

YANK. Enough to gimme life for! I was born, see? Sure, dat's de charge. Write it in de blotter. I was born, get me!

POLICEMAN. God pity your old woman! But I've no time for kidding. You're soused. I'd run you in but it's too long a walk to the station. Come on now, get up, or I'll fan your ears with this club. Beat it now!

YANK. Say, where do I go from here?

POLICEMAN. Go to hell. (78-77)

It is suggested that, as the machine created wealth, it destroyed the joy of living, the only thing that wealth is good for. O'Neill has presented the paradox of modern civilization with great insight into its fundamental tragedy. Like Yank, many people ask "where do we go from here", and the answer is "Hell."

While O'Neill denied any direct influence from the expressionism of German writers, *The Hairy Ape* was immediately termed expressionistic because of its attempt to portray inner reality in nonrealistic terms by the use of abstraction, symbolism, and distortion. It was an excellent medium for satire and social comment and at the same time offered an excellent opportunity for imaginative stage designs and production (Gagey 49). Expressionism was employed more effectively by other American dramatists and more completely by O'Neill himself in *The Great God Brown* and later plays.

Towards the end of the drama, Yank attempts to shake hands with a gorilla at the zoo but is crushed to death by the animal. This is O'Neill's symbolism for his inability to get back to a lower order of existence. The play, obviously, is concerned not so much with Yank as with Man and his struggle to find

himself, and to bring out the symbolism O'Neill has departed from naturalism, as in the famous Fifth Avenue scene where the passers-by are represented as mere walking automatons. Reality is still present and recognizable, however, especially in the salty speech of the stokehold, and the play might very well be called another example of imaginative realism (Gagey 50).

O'Neill exploited the implicit social commentary of the city's contrasting man-made structures, underlining the thematic focus on the poor with set descriptions that in production exploited verticality and emphasized a subterranean world as normative, situating stage set and audience seating in a relationship that maximized the audience's potential inclusion in and identification with the society depicted in the subsurface scenes (Flynn 5).

The society depicted in the play is supported by the set design. O'Neill exploited the implicit social commentary of the city's contrasting man-made structures, underlining the thematic focus on the poor with set descriptions that in production exploited verticality and emphasized a subterranean world as normative, situating stage set and audience seating in a relationship that maximized the audience's potential inclusion in and identification with the society depicted in the subsurface scenes (Flynn 5).

Overall, the world revealed in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* is tragic because it is without intelligent social organization. Greed, selfishness, ignorance, brutality, and hatred are the dominant forces in this world. The multitude of men and women who pass by in the imagination as one tries to vision the



sum total of life that O'Neill has presented in this play is a sorry lot. The importance of O'Neill as a social critic is that he points out the disease of our acquisitive society. He does not merely stress the fact that workers are exploited to create wealth for the few, but shows how in modern machine-made world they are deprived of the sense of harmony and well-being that comes from doing something that seems important and necessary. Man's work is a necessary part of his personality; it is an extension of his ego; it makes him feel that he is a necessary part of the life of the world in which he lives. Yank was such a worker, and at the same time, conscious of the thing he had lost. He did not want a job simply because it would be a means to earning a living; rather, he wanted a job in which he could live.

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