

# The Hairy Ape as a Modern Tragedy

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**Abstract-** O'Neill is one of the greatest American dramatists. He is a prominent dramatist of modern age. His parents were ardent Catholics. O' Neill was established as the leading American dramatist. He was awarded Pulitzer prizes for *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie*. Despite some critical effort to debunk him Eugene O'Neill remains American's outstanding playwright, the only one to win international fame and recognition, and the Nobel Prize. All O'Neill plays are great tragedies but they are not tragedies of the conventional sort in the Aristotelian tradition. They are modern tragedies which strike at the very root of the sickness of to-day. The methods of the German Expressionists have also been effectively used by O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape*. The realistic techniques have not have been entirely abandoned but they been used to serve non-realistic purposes.

**Index Terms-** Expressionist, Harrowing, Disillusionment, Frustration, Proletarian, Incident, Impulses.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Hairy Ape* is a play of great significance. Its theme which is handled with perfect artistic mastery is quite close to the core of modern life. Most of O'Neill's plays are tragedies. The *Hairy Ape* is also a great tragedy. But it is not conventional tragedy in the Aristotelian tradition, but a modern tragedy. Its subject matter and theme is the same, but its form is different. It is a great tragedy with a difference. The tragedy of Yank is so harrowing, first because he is superior and noble, efficient and capable even though he does not occupy any exalted position. His death is the waste of so much that is noble, good and useful. Secondly, the tragedy is so effective because it is the tragedy of everyman; what happens to Yank is happening to countless millions in the modern age. 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. However, we will have to acknowledge that in the

last scene of the play this involvement of the audience with Yank is lacking.

Most of us do fail to see ourselves as hairy apes shaking hands with our biological ancestor and so cannot sympathise with Yank as he is crushed by the gorilla. The end strikes one rather as theatrical and melodramatic than truly tragic. No doubt as Homer E. Woodbridge points out "The *Hairy Ape*' is a powerful tragedy, but towards the end symbolism gets out of control of the dramatist and reality and emotional appeal fade away".

The giant stoker Yank is happy and confident in his existence, is proud of his strength, and longs for nothing beyond what he possesses. But in a second his self-respect is shattered beyond what he possesses. But in a second his self-respect is shattered when he talks with an elegant young lady of the capitalist class. His beings to make comparisons, to fume, to seek revenge. It is characteristic that the final bankruptcy of his self-esteem occurs in the office of the workers' party, among proletarians already seasoned in politics, which naturally take this foolish, childish revenge-seeker for a spy and throw him out. He is a child of nature and exactly for that reason he feels the tragedy of the proletarian's exile from all the charms of nature. It is this hairy ape who kills him." The rejected of man, who ends in an animal's cage, is a daring and terrible symbol. Yet this symbol is completely alive, thanks to the splendid power with which the eight scenes are constructed. This task O'Neil has here performed with a mastery which definitely fixes his rank as playwright." All the multitude of other dramatists who in all languages have sought to put the worker and his existence on the stage has failed to rise above speech-making and picture painting.

Symbolism may be defined as the use of any part of a play – character, incident, setting, language, etc.-to suggest an idea or ideas not conveyed by the surface story. In this way, the use of symbolism enables a

dramatist to enclose vast concept within little space. It enables him to suggest the deeper reality and the profounder significance of his theme. It imparts depth and richness of texture to his plays. Even in his earliest plays O'Neill had used symbolism. However, it is in *The Hairy Ape* and other subsequent plays that symbolism has been used with great effect and mastery. Symbolism runs throughout the play from the beginning to the end. Yank, the central character in the play, is a complex symbol, as he symbolizes not one, but a number of ideas. First, Yank is a stoker and he symbolises their most perfect individuality. He is superior to them in muscle and strength, and he is more adjusted to his work than they are. He is the ideal stoker, an ideal to which all stokers should try to approximate. Secondly, he symbolises the proletariat the have-not, working in most difficult and oppressive conditions producing the wealth on which the rich flourish and live in luxury. Thirdly, he symbolises the animal-nature of man, the instinct and impulses, which man has inherited from his biological ancestor, the hairy ape. He is hairy chested and has immense physical strength. Fourthly, he stands for the primitive in perfect harmony with nature, with his work and with his environment. Fifthly, he symbolizes, Everyman, his attitudes and impulses, and what happens-to him is happening to man everywhere in the modern machine age.

Irony may be defined as the use of words to express something other than, and especially, Then opposite of the literal meaning. It is an incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result. There are different kinds of ironies: irony of situation, irony of fate and verbal irony. O'Neill is the master of irony; he himself calls his drama "ironic tragedy". The Emperor Jones uses all the three kinds of ironies. And so does *The Hairy Ape*.

Yank's isolation is disturbed because of the crippling tyranny of organization. The capitalists and the proletariats, the incendiaries and the pacifists, the state and the society, the jail and zoo merge themselves into a symbolic spectrum of impersonal revenge thwarting man's search for belongingness. The arrangement of these juxtapositions is ironical in itself. As a consequence, Yank assumes a motiveless malignity against everybody including himself. Yank's trying to find peace and solace from the excruciating metabolism- of metal and flesh in the

mechanized world, goes back to the animals; but, trapped as his flesh is in steel again; he becomes the prisoner of his own humanity. Those who call him the ape or they apes; what an irony it is that the whole world despite all its progress is still an animal world!

Even in the title of the play there is implicit irony. This sense of irony in the term of 'ape' goes on hunting the whole play. In the sub-title of the play. "A comedy of Ancient and Modern Man", there is irony again. It is a comedy in the sense that God's in his heaven, and everything is wrong with the world, Satan is laughing at God's in his heaven, and everything is wrong with the world, Satan is laughing at God's creation. The audiences expect the play to be a comedy but it turns to be a ghastly tragedy. In the play the ancient and the modern meet and embrace, and in the final scene irony becomes explicit when the real ape embarrassing the human ape not only emphasizes the basic identity of man and animal but also the essential animal-like qualities of a modern man.

In characterization also there is a touch of irony; Mildred regards stokers as wild beasts, and Yank as a hairy ape. Long regards all the rich men going to the church as beasts. Long calls Mildred 'a blooded cow'; Yank calls her a cat. Thus all the character in one sense or the other is beasts.

At one place in the play, Yank is asked by the policeman to go to hell. He in fact goes to hell. Is it not an instance of irony. Yank, hairy ape, tries to behave like a human being, for thinking is a human quality; he tries to think. He says: "I'm trying to t' ink" and his subsequent posture of Robin's 'The Thinker' have an ironical effect. Despite all his thinking and gift of intellect and reasoning, he belongs to nowhere; though the whole world is his yet he belongs to no place, he is neither man nor animal. Then what is he? What an irony, the greatest irony in the play is, therefore, in the theme of the play. There is irony in the setting and atmosphere of the play. For Paddy the life of the Stoker moving about in the ship was no substitute for normal family life, but for Yank this mobile ship on the wide expanse of water was more than a home since it gave him a chance to feel that he was running it, that he alone was responsible for the onward movements of the ship, that he belonged to it. But in the end we me to know that Yank's thought was a mistake. So irony

in the play is pervasive, progressive throughout the play.

There is irony in the metaphoric ape, in the statements of Yank, in the statement of Mildred. Long and other characters, in the heart of the rich people, in the bell of the church, in the whole world. All human beings are double dealers - more cunning and cruel than the animals. "Then by itself The Hairy Ape is a play of sheer terror or life covered with a mask of mocking pride. But like all other O'Neill's plays it cannot be taken alone. It catches the raw horror of mood and gives vent to that horror with a brutality almost unparalleled in dramatic literature.

The Hairy Ape was not to be the end. It was to be only a symbol of the dark despair that sometimes sweeps over the soul to disappear later in a triumph of sheer will. The greatest weakness in the play is its unimpressive ending. Another defect is the fusion of various elements such as dialogue, scenery, intellect, emotion and spirit. This fusion is somewhat depressing and enervating. Symbolism of the drama is also full with an error of the judgement. It gets out of the control in the closing scenes of the play.

#### REFERENCE

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