
The Hairy Ape as a Critique of American Capitalism

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Literature has been called a mirror to the society. Wherever there are human beings, there is literature. Literature is the record of events in the human history. It is people's experiences and impressions of the life. Literature can be in any form such as letters, diaries, novel, plays, poems, pamphlets and essays etc.

American literature began with the first colonies of Virginia and New England. The colonist from these countries brought with them the literary wealth of their countries. A number of American writers were English migrants who began writing in 16th century. Though American literature is a large and important part of English literature, but still too little of it is known on the European side of Atlantic. During the last 30 years of the 18th century, Americans began writing about their government. The one contemporary figure, who contributed a lot to the cause of Americanism was Benjamin Franklin (1706-90). He embodied the "American idea" and practiced a simple life.

The mid of 19th century saw the beginning of the great American literature. American Renaissance emerged during the period 1850-55. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) was the prominent writer and the New England was the centre of American literature. Emerson, a lecturer, an essayist, a clergyman, preached that man is a relic of God. He said "Trust Thyself" in *Self Reliance*. He asserted on the very basic reality of life. He said that it made no difference where one lives or what one's work is. He lived in Concord and wrote stirring prose that inspired the nation. Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), who was Emerson's neighbor, was much inspired by him and lived by his precepts. Thoreau's *Walden* is an experiment in living an independent life. Mahatma Gandhi was motivated by his essay "Civil Disobedience" which worked as a miracle.

The 20th century American literature is quite different from the early American literature because the modern literature is technically more sophisticated and more complex. It is simple in language, realistic and individualistic in approach and varied in content. The same is the case with modern American drama which takes a very realistic approach. American playwrights such as Elmer Rice (1892-1967), Sidney Kingsley (b.1906) show life as it is lived. While expressionistic techniques in writing were used George Kaufman (1889-1961) Mare Connell (1890-1980). *Our Team* by Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) was experimental. Whereas T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Maxwell Anderson's (1888-1959) *Winterset* are poetic dramas.

Eugene O' Neill (1888-1953) was one of the leading American playwright and was quite experimental in his writings. His *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922) are unique-one character plays. He won the Noble Prize in 1936. Much of the substance of his finest writings came from the tragic life that he led. He wrote a variety of themes - costume dramas, biblical fables, multiplay mammoths, nightmarish expressionistic works, bitter strindbergian views of marriage and free adaptation of classical tragedy. He almost exhausted the stage's non-verbal resources while writing all this - nearly 30 long plays and a dozen short ones through the use of pantomime, dance, unusual scenic devices, mask, music and novel sound effects. Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was born in 1888, in New York

City. James O' Neill, his father was a noted 19th century actor while Ella, his mother was shy and devout Roman Catholic. When he grew up, O' Neill turned rebellious and rejected all established authority and yet always at war with himself like his hero. O' Neill was an emotional haemophiliac and his addiction to drugs sharpened his own sense of guilt. Under the tutelage of his brother, "O' Neill early took to drink, patronized brothels and as a disciple of Nietzsche, sought to establish a position beyond good and evil." After a number of odd jobs, in 1916, his one-act play *Bound East for Cardiff* was produced on Cape Cod by the province town Players.

O' Neill married three times during his life time and all his marriages were a big failure. During the last years of his life he became estranged from his children. O' Neill died in a hotel in 1953 after crying out, " Born in goddam hotel and dying in a hotel room!"

O' Neill is a major American playwright and his prominent plays include *The Iceman Cometh*, *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1921), *Desire under the Elms* (1924), *The Great God Brown* (1925), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1929-31), *A touch of the Poet* (1935-40), *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1941-43). He tried to write plays for confession and for salvation and his subjective nature was the reason for his checkered career.

Louis Sheaffer holds that O' Neill had little direct or immediate influence on other playwrights despite his pre-eminent position, both because of the autobiographical nature of his writing and his constant experimentation. The chief emphasis of his writing was "to help lead the American theatre, stale and long overdue for change into the 20th century."

Eugene O' Neill, in his numerous plays, depicts the decline of the moral, ethical values in the modern times. He talks about the evils of the capitalism. His play *The Hairy Ape* (1921), is a severe attack on moral devastation. It was first produced at the Princetown Playhouse, New York City. O' Neill writes about the social issues, especially in this play about the attacks upon racism which were rampant at that time. In brief, the play portrays the evils of the capitalistic system.

The Hairy Ape opens with the portrayal of the fore-castle of a ship, that is about to voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. We witness an atmosphere of claustrophobia due to the crowded atmosphere of the firemen and stokers, many of whom are drunk. The dramatist tells the reader that the effect sought after is that of a cramped space in the bowels of a ship. All the stokers are " hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small fierce, resentful eyes." The adventures of the stokers is rhapsodized as seen below:

Voices Gif me trink dere, you!

..... Say dot again!

As J.M.I. Indra Mohan says, "Yank then expresses his sense of belonging when Paddy feels nostalgic about the past and says that the life of modern man is very much in contrast with that of the past when man was conjoined with his vacation." ¹ That is the reason the play has been subtitled as " A comedy of Ancient and Modern Life in Eight Scenes."

As the play moves on, after two days, we are given the view of the promenade desk. There we meet Mildred Douglas and her aunt- both of them representatives of American capitalism. They are a contrast to each other. Mildred is young rich and vainglorious. Whereas the aunt does not understand her motives that how she wants to help the "other half". She says. "Please do not mock at my attempts to discover how the other half lives."

After having a good discussion with her aunt, the two engineers arrive to take her for a visit to the forecandle. In that part of the ship, Yank is the leader, directing everyone what is to be done. Mildred looks at the furnace. It is the same as Inferno, fiery and very hot. Yank frightens her and as he turns back, she calls him "the filthy beast." Shortly she cries "take me away" and the engineers take her away.

Scene IV reveals Yank sitting, contemplating in the posture of August Rodin's "The Thinker". He cannot digest the insult which has been hurled upon him by Mildred and he thinks of taking the revenge. While the other stokers go and wash themselves, he does not feel like doing it. There comes a drastic change in the character. He becomes joke for them when he tells them that he is trying to think. They think that he has fallen in love with Mildred Douglas but he refuses it. Yank hates the American Government, American social practices and capitalism. Mildred stands for him as a symbol of American capitalist society.

In the Fifth scene, which is quite significant, we see Yank and Long are at the Fifth Avenue. They are watching, of course, with annoyance to the very core the capitalists and the affluent whom they detest vehemently. Yank has now lost his sanity, he behaves in a ludicrous manner in order to provoke and indulge into a trifle with the capitalists. But Long tries to persuade him for a peaceful life. There is an emotional turmoil within Yank, he loses temper frequently. He notices monkey for being put to sale in one of the shops and this disturbs him further. As he saw people coming towards him, he disturbs them. Firstly he disturbs a woman but she neglects him. Then he did the same thing with a gentleman and he misses his bus and ask Yank for the reason. A team of police arrests him and puts him in the prison. Critics observe, "The idea that man is an animal is presented throughout the play. He is presented as an animal to highlight the inhuman conditions in which he is placed. He is projected as an animal, caged by the world of machinery. He thus becomes a prisoner with respect to his vocation and his living. The proletariat lives in the machine world of steel and like steel it is hard, rigid and makes his life austere and unendurable."

In the sixth scene, O'Neill shows Yank in the Jail. Yank lands into trouble due to two reasons : his own inner conflict and pride and secondly due to his encounter with the external world. Mildred Douglas' comment upon him that he is a "filthy beast" keeps coming back to his mind and he turns mad. His madness works a frenzy of hysteria. He keeps on attacking people whom so ever he meets on his way. He then learns about the IWW and its method of operation. In order to take vengeance on the civilized world, he decides to join it. When he is released from the jail, he needs the secretary of IWW, an association for the welfare of the industrial workers. After fulfilling the necessary formalities, Yank is satisfied as it gives him the feeling of belongingness. This feeling has been missing in him after his sudden and angry meeting with Mildred Douglas. As he knew that his father is a rich capitalist, he thinks that the IWW will give him the chance to take up his revenge upon the duo of father and daughter. But then there is a lot of disillusionment; he finds a lot of differences with the Secretary because Yank is not the man of the modern world. The crises comes when Yank invites a bodily chastisement. He is taken for a spy. He is compared to Black Hand. Yank goes insane and loses his mind.

Towards the end of the play, the police enquires Yank and this aggravates his agitated mental condition. Because of the references of his resemblances to a gorilla, he speaks like an ape. He thinks that as a gorilla, he can revolt against the capitalists. Finally, he goes to the gorilla's cell and rises to speak to it and calls him brother. He says that he and gorilla should unite to rise against the capitalist and kill them. He even befriends it physically as if to kiss the gorilla but in return gets killed by him. The last speech by Yank is quite significant as

the play ends with the phrase –“ And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs.” The very idea that man is basically an ape and has evolved from an animal has been presented here. At the same time, man’s inborn or instinctual pride, stubbornness and animality mars his peaceful life as can be seen in the case of Yank. Aristotle considered that the pride of the tragic hero as a flaw and an error or frailty and it is this pride only that binds a man to self deception as is quite explicit in the case of Yank.

O Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* is a serious comedy but hilarious at times. It can also be called a single – character play because the focus of the dramatist always remain on Yank. It is known for his expressionistic technique and the play also deals with the psychological problems with social implications.

REFERENCES

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