



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2022; 8(12): 162-164
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 08-09-2022
Accepted: 12-10-2022

Dr. Rajeshwar Prasad
Professor and Head,
Department of English,
Sarvodaya Post-Graduate
College, Ghosi, Mau, Uttar
Pradesh, India

Expressionism in O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape*

Dr. Rajeshwar Prasad

Abstract

This study presents expressionism, the quest for identity, and the human predicament in the machine age. It shows that man does not live by bread alone. He also needs spiritual health and well-being. The tragedy of Yank is the tragedy of millions of people in the world. *The Hairy Ape* presents a profoundly pessimistic social philosophy that rejects the current status of society. One sees no answer for man in a better society. There is no hope of any changes in society.

Keywords: Expressionism, the quest for identity, rejection of social taboos or status quo, O'Neil and his *The Hairy Ape*, A sense of stability, security, and belongingness is necessary for happiness and tranquillity for man as he is a gregarious animal

Introduction

Eugene O'Neil has made a great contribution to American theatre and English drama. He used to write things of contemporary interest. He gave American drama its requisite genius and authority, dynamism, and force when the American theatre was in desperate need of reform and there were notable playwrights there before O'Neil. Despite all this, the drama had got enmeshed in a stereotyped pattern demanded by the commercial theatres. O'Neil incorporated both realism and expressionism. Expressionist effects were first made noticeably a part of his drama in his play *The Emperor Jones*. Later, O'Neil moved to bolder and more varied experiments in drama. O'Neil used naturalistic detail with symbolist mood, suggestiveness, and symbol. His plays are true of epic dimensions, and through these, he brought to the American theatre spaciousness.

Expressionism was imported from Europe to America, and this movement in English drama was in vogue in Germany before the emergence of Eugene O'Neil. This movement shows the artist's dissatisfaction with naturalism or realism which expressed only the surface reality. The expressionist wants to present and project through outer symbols' inner reality. Expressionism in English drama is just like the stream of consciousness in modern English fiction. The expressionist portrays the situation and working of the mind of his characters and wants to present their anger, sadness, sorrow, sacrifice, faith, etc. characters are also symbolic. We find the themes of inner reality, man's mind and consciousness, and his soul and conscience.

D Heiney & LH Downs have viewed in their study. They say:

"In practice, the most striking characteristic of expressionistic literature, whether in the drama or the novel, is its weird, fantastic, or unreal atmosphere; the action seems to move forward in a nightmare. Everything is distorted or oversimplified; the elements of conflict are presented in their bare essence rather than encumbered with detail. The stage settings of expressionism often carry out this tendency: they are stark, fantastic, and anti-naturalistic, consisting of oddly inclined planes and surfaces. In style as well as expressionism abandons the conventions of previous literature; the dialogue is often spoken in a sort of telegram-style, staccato and devoid of unnecessary speech parts." (Continental European Literature, Volume 1 by D Heiney & LH Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc, New York, page nos. 145-146)

Johan August Strindberg was the father of the expressionistic drama born in Stockholm, Sweden on 22 January 1849. He has presented some directives regarding expressionism. According to him, the expressionist imitates the disconnected – and for an expressionist time and place do not exist – characters split, double multiply, vanish, blur, solidity, and clarify – and finally consciousness reigns above all. Characters are dreamers and the play is woven out of dreams.

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Rajeshwar Prasad
Professor and Head,
Department of English,
Sarvodaya Post-Graduate
College, Ghosi, Mau, Uttar
Pradesh, India

There are no scruples, no laws, and no congruities. There are neither judgments nor exhortations. But we see merely narrations. This type of drama is philosophical and takes place in the mind of the characters of the plays. Dramas are not realistic but para-realistic. It is obvious that the expressionist drama expresses the characters' consciousness in dealing with meta-reality.

A sense of stability, security, and belongingness is necessary for happiness and tranquillity for man as he is a gregarious animal. Man must have his moorings somewhere, in some home in love and affection of parents and other relatives to live happily. It is obvious that when the sense of belongingness and harmony is lost, man suffers from a feeling of insecurity and loss of confidence. Thus, he feels orphaned, defrauded, and at bay. This is also a fact that there was little stability of background in O'Neil's own life. This is the main reason that alienation or loss of identity is the basic theme in most of his plays. His characters constantly search for identity, for belongingness, and disintegrate and decay.

Obviously, alienation and the search for identity is the basic theme of *The Hairy Ape*. The readers find that Yank is quite confident and proud of his superior strength as revealed in the play. Yank exercises great authority over his fellow stokers, who pay respect to his superior physical capacity and obey him, and are afraid of him. Yank is seen as fully satisfied and he feels that he belongs but they do not belong. He harbours no destructive romantic illusions and does not seek any escape into a romantic past of Paddy's dream. He is in perfect harmony with his work and proud of the fact that he can eat smoke and coal and makes the ship run at 24 knots an hour. All these feelings overwhelm him.

The world in which one lives is a unique place where ideas and feelings are shattered soon. The same happened to Yank. His sense of security and belongingness is soon shattered like all other people in the world. He is confronted by Mildred Douglas who looks at him as if he were a 'hairy ape'. She calls him a filthy beast. This event and the reaction of Mildred Douglas open his eyes and he knows that he does not belong. He becomes aware of the fact that he does not belong. He finds out that while he has been performing his duty the world has been gradually but quite rapidly revolutionised by machinery, the revolution that has not carried him with it. He knows that a new world that disregards human rights and aspirations has left him stranded. In the past, he felt that he belonged - he was a necessary, vital, and human part of a special order. This was the reason why his life was endurable. But when he overcomes these feelings, he finds himself lost and defrauded.

When he feels about the behaviour of Mildred Douglas, he thinks to throw her. He knows 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. The problem of Yank is not his own, but rather that of an entire society. Like Yank in the modern world, there are millions of men and women in the world who are blood relations. They have also grown up in the faith that they belonged - they were necessary and respected parts of the social order. But the fact is that they were nothing - they were defrauded and lost.

Yank: Dynamite! Blow it offen de with - steel all de cages - all de factories, steamers, buildings, jails - de Steel Trust and all dat makes it go.

There are millions of people in the world who are on the sidewalks. They are abandoned, desolate, and 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 garbage-choked river from the vacuous minds of the protected ones. Yank is one among them. He listened one bright Sunday morning on Fifth Avenue. In the meantime, the fat ones came past him talking about the church service. The following lines present all this:

Dear Doctor Caiaphas! He is so sincere!
 What was the sermon? I dozed off.
 About the radicals, my dear-and the false
 Doctrines that are being preached.
 We must organize a hundred per cent American bazaar.
 And let everyone contribute one-hundredth percent of
 their income tax.
 What an idea!
 What an original idea!
 We can devote the proceeds to rehabilitating the veil of
 the temple.
 But what that has been done so many times.
 (Scene V, *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neil, Eugene)

This shows the real picture of the utter bankruptcy of the modern system to deal with the problem that confronts Yank in *The Hairy Ape*. The same is the situation for millions of other people in the world. The fact is that the system has evolved beyond control and more and every day, the gap between Yank and his needs grows wider. More and more realise that they do not belong and they face the same that has been faced by Yank in *The Hairy Ape*.

O'Neil reveals himself in sympathy with this search for identity. He has examined in full the psychological implications of the machine age. Yank has lost his job, and finally, he leads through starvation. He became unable to support his family. The playwright does not only want to show the work of Yank, rather he wants to show that he does not belong. Yank is indeed seeking it. He wants to know that he 'belongs'. He wants to know what has happened to the world which separates him from the realization - what he is doing is a necessary and fitting part of the life of the world. The fact is that there are millions of people who want to know what Yank wants to know in *The Hairy Ape*.

The real danger we see to modern civilization is the stupidity and timidity of the ruling classes. This is the real drama revealed in this play. Yank is not one - he is not an individual but rather millions of people. He is indeed a symbol of the deep protest that rises like a wave against the whole structure of modern civilization. Yank is a man crying out against a system that has not protested against low wages and unemployment. The play condemns the whole structure of machine civilization. This is the reason that it gives the play universality and enlists the sympathy and understanding of the audience.

Yank moves from one defeat to another, striving vainly to find some answer to his problem. He heard to the I.W.W. and thought to find among them an answer. They threw him into the street, just as the communists do not accept him as he is an individualist. He is not a party man. When he is thrown from the office of I.W.W., he delivers a speech that is an explicit summary of the entire situation which presents the facts - the same facts that millions of people in the

world have to face. How explicitly the playwright presents the picture in the following lines:

A Policeman: (who has come up the street in time to hear this last - with grim humour) 'You'll get off the station, you boob if you don't get up out of that and keep movin.'

Yank: (looking up at him - with a hard bitter laugh) Sure! Lock me up! Put me in a cage! Dat's de only answers yuh know. G'wan, lock me up!

Policeman: What you been don't?

Yank: Enough to gimme life for! I was born, get me! 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.

Obviously, as revealed in *The Hairy Ape*, Yank is rejected by society. He does not belong to the world of man. He cannot exist in isolation. He must have a place that is in the world of brutes. Yank must move down and seek companionship with the brute creation. Perhaps he belongs there. The search for his identity becomes an obsession with him and ultimately it takes him to the zoo, where he stands face to face with a gorilla in its cage. He talks to it as thinks that they both belong to the same group. But the end of Yank is very tragic, and the gorilla crushes him to death. Thus, Yank's quest for identity ends with his death. O'Neil presents a living picture of Yank's entrance into the zoo and his death.

Yank: (with a hard, bitter laugh) welcome to your city, huh? Hail, hail, de gang's all here! (At the sound of his voice the chattering dies away into an attentive silence. Yank walks up to the gorilla's cage and, leaning over the railing, stares in at its occupant, who stares back at him, silent and motionless.

Thus, *The Hairy Ape* is a play of sheer terror or life covered with a mask of mocking pride in a world where millions of people feel that they do not belong. They struggle lifelong for belongingness and identity and they die. The society in which they live never gives them a place to belong or to have a separate identity. The search for Yank's identity becomes an obsession with him and ultimately it takes him to the zoo, where he stands face to face with a gorilla in its cage.

References

1. Continental European Literature, Volume 1 by D Heiney & LH Downs, Barron's Educational Series, Inc, New York.
2. Modern American Playwrights by Jean Gould.
3. *The Hairy Ape* by Eugen O'Neil.
4. A History of English Literature, Vol.2, WR Goodman, Doaba House, New Delhi.