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Theme of alienation and belongingness: A study of Eugene O'Neill's '*The Hairy Ape*'

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Abstract

In Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, the theme of alienation and belonging is prominent. Yank, the protagonist, experiences profound alienation as he grapples with his place in society. His search for belonging leads him through different social classes, highlighting its dehumanizing effects of industrialization, and the struggle for identity in a rapidly changing world. The play explores how one's sense of self can be shattered by societal forces, emphasizing the harsh consequences of alienation, and the yearning for meaningful connections. Eugene O'Neill, in his play *The Hairy Ape* explores the sense of dehumanization and alienation in the personality of the protagonist of the play. The use of stark contrasts, vivid symbolism, and exaggerated emotions reflects the playwright's commentary on societal issues. In his plays he shows that society as soulless and mechanical. The purpose of the present study is to explore the sense of belongingness and alienation deep rooted in the play and the psychological implications of society on the life of the protagonist.

Keywords: Alienation, belongingness, identity, society, psychological

Introduction

Eugene O'Neill is one of the foremost and greatest playwrights of American literature, to whom goes the credit of securing recognition for English drama. Unlike Arthur Miller, O'Neill is not a social critic or a political agitator. He is concerned with larger issues of human life like man's predicament in the modern world. *The Hairy Ape*, which was written in 1921 and performed in 1924, deals with the plight of an ordinary individual in modern urban industrial civilization. The sensitive writers of that era were concerned with the dehumanizing effects of mechanical and industrial society on the emotional psyche of ordinary human beings.

The theme of alienation or a man's quest for belonging forms the core of the writings of that age. Man has lost harmony with nature and is unable to establish harmony with his fellow man also. His work has grown soul-less and mechanical. He feels lonely and isolated like an insignificant part of a machine. This play is a modern tragedy in which the playwright has given us a peep into the mind of tormented soul. Later on O'Neill wrote in an introduction to the play " ...the search, for an explanation of why Driscoll, proud of his animal superiority, and incomplete harmony, with his limited conception of the universe, should kill himself, provided the germ idea for *The Hairy Ape*. The play gives us realistic picture of contemporary American society. It is a highly commercialized world, artificial and torn by class tensions. It is the world in which the rich become richer and lead an artificial mechanical life of comfort and luxury, however, brings them little happiness. Alienation and isolation is the common lot of man in the modern industrialized and urbanized society, but O'Neill's Expressionism is based on reality. *The Hairy Ape* deals with man's struggle with himself and his effort to find for himself the place to which he belongs. The play is a tragedy of a man who is out of place or land. The wealthy people and the capitalists regard the workers as beasts. But the fact brought out by the play is that they themselves are beasts. Thus, the play is an attack on capitalism. The action of the play symbolically revolves round 'Belongingness' and 'Lostness'.

"... this story of natural man in a machine world remains one of the best-known of all American dramas from this period" (cited in Sah, 2019: p. 14) [1].

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Yank, the central character in the play, is a complex symbol as he symbolizes not one but several ideas. First Yank is a stoker, and he symbolizes their most perfect individuality. "Though, Yank's employment as a stoker included long, tough days of manual work in confined room as well as intense heat (Nezhad & Ahmadian, 2012) ^[5]." It's significant to recognize Yank's physical appearances which were giving by the playwright, when he later met with Mildred a rich lady on the ship's deck, her external appearances were the polar contrasting of Yank's masculine and gruff description (Azizmohammadi, 2022) ^[6]." He is superior to all in muscle and strength, and he is more adjusted to his work than others. He is the most perfect individual. He identifies himself with the steam and smoke and steel:

"I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles; And I'm what makes iron into steel; Steel dat stands for the whole thing ; And I'm steel, -steel-steel ; I'm de muscles in steel, de punch behind it ; "

Secondly, he symbolizes the proletariat working in most difficult and oppressive conditions, producing the wealth on which the rich flourish and live in luxury. Thirdly, he symbolizes the animal nature of man, the instinct and impulse, which man has inherited from his biological ancestor, the hairy ape, he has hairy chest 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 is every man and what happens to him is happening to men everywhere in the modern machine age.

In Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, the protagonist, Yank, experiences a profound sense of alienation as he grapples with his place in an industrialized society. His search for belonging is hindered by his physical appearance and social status, leading to a poignant exploration of the dehumanizing effects of modernity. The play delves into themes of isolation and the struggle for identity, highlighting the harsh realities of a world where individuals like Yank can feel disconnected. Belongingness is one of the major themes of 'The Hairy Ape'. It deals with alienation and search for identity. In the beginning of the play. We find that yank is quite confident and proud of his superior strength. His fellow stokers respect his superior physical capacity and obey him. Yank is satisfied with his position. He feels that he belongs, but his fellow stokers don't belong. But Yank's sense of belongingness is soon shattered as he is confronted with Mildred Douglas. Douglas looks at him as if he were a hairy Ape. He calls him a filthy beast. -Now Yank becomes aware of the fact that he does not belong. Like Yank many others suffer from the same problem in the Fifth Avenue. But O'Neill has given it finely in his dialogue and stage- direction.

This is the end of the third scene; the remaining five scenes show Yank, robbed by the sense of belonging who has a near animal in the stoke hole, he securely had. Now he feels cut off from his fellow workers as he broods over the wrong done to him. he is enraged by the sight of the well-dressed in different Sunday walkers on fifth Avenue, the locality where the rich live; he finds himself in prison where he learns of the organization called I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the world) and rages against the rich; it is rejected by the IWW. When he naïvely offers his services to blow up the factory belonging to Mildred Douglas's father; he goes to the zoo, tries to make friends with the gorilla and he's

crushed to death when he lets it out of its cage. The gorilla, "...shuffles off menacingly into the darkness that left-a symbolical warning for a negligent Society."

The play gives us a realistic picture of contemporary American society. It is a highly commercialized world decadent and artificial and torn by class tensions. It is the world in which the rich become richer. And lead an artificial, mechanical life of comfort and luxury which, however, brings them little happiness or tranquility. On the one hand, there are the rich represented by Mildred Douglas. And her aunt and on the other hand, there are the poor laborers. Yank and the other stokers who sweat and work hard and who are exploited and insulted by their pairs:

"This extremely symbolic descriptive story displayed the dilemma and agon of the lower-class people in 1920s American society. It expressed their inevitable pain and oppression when an individual tried to find himself in highly segregated community to face a world by which he does not belong to (Posner, 2018) ^[2]."

O'Neill in the present play presents the question of belongingness. In *The Hairy Ape* the playwright shows that man is stripped of the accidental circumstances, and is confronted with basic choices, the situations of his existence. In the present play, O'Neill presents a problem that has broad implications than the immediate success or failure of Yank. He becomes aware of the fact that he does not belong. After losing this sense of belongingness, Yank feels himself eliminated and he tries to find his roots in a society which is full of and is surrounded by a state of anxiety or dread, pride, despair, or faith. Thus, here O'Neill emphasizes the psychological implications of the modern social order. A subject here is the ancient one and that is the man and his struggle with his own fate. Belongingness and alienation are the major themes of the play which can be better understood in the light of the following points:

1. Yank's initial sense of belongingness.
2. Confrontation with Mildred
3. Yank in Fifth Avenue
4. Psychological impact of machine age
5. Rejection by I.W.W.
6. Rejection by the hairy ape.

In fact, the theme of belongingness is made very clear in the very opening scene. Here we see that Yank lives on the illusion of superiority. The play opens with Yank enjoying mastery over his environment in the stoke-hole of a trans-Atlantic liner. While the companions of Yank are drinking and speaking all sorts of things, he is sitting in the foreground, and he is broader, fiercer and more reluctant than others. They all fear him and give respect for his superior strength. He is treated as a boss by his co-workers, and this makes Yank satisfied with his position and colleagues. He explains to the other stokers that he belongs while they don't. He thinks that he alone is responsible for the movement of the ship. Thus, we see that unconsciously he is dreaming that he 'belongs'.

Yank's sense of security, his sense of belongingness is soon shattered as he is confronted with Mildred Douglas. The girl who wanted to study the life of poor, shudders to see the very first page of their life and putting her both hands before her pale face to shut the ugly sight of Yank utters a low, choking cry, "Take me away! Oh! the filthy beast!" This one and half sentence seals the fate of Yank who used to boast of his belongingness to the stoke hole and the ship. He

is chucked away from the ground of imagination to the ground of reality; he finds that while he has been doing his work, the world has been gradually but quite rapidly revolutionized by machinery. Yank is just like a homeless wanderer and wants to rehabilitate himself. He says, "All de rich guys dattinkdey're somp'n, dey ain't nothin'! Dey don't belong. But us guys.' All this is a step forward in the direction of the belongingness theme."

Like Yank, in Fifth Avenue, countless others, on the sidewalks of the world, desolate, abundant and hated. Here Yank and Long pay with their blood for all the costly stuff that they see in the shops there. Yet they do not belong to that place. They are proletarian and this modern mechanized system is beyond his control and each day the gap between Yank and his needs grew wider. More and more the Yanks of the world realize that they don't belong. In search of belongingness Yank becomes a tragic figure. Earlier he was working in the hell working in a stoke hole where fire and darkness prevails.

"O'Neill presents Yank's oppression by demonstrating his feelings of loss and loneliness which any lower class individual might be experienced in 1920s American society (Murphy, 2018) [3]."

Throughout the play, he broods the words 'hairy ape' used for him. Desire for revenge burns hot on his heart. His confident sense of belongingness is gone. He realizes that the ship belongs to Mildred, and he is simply a slave working to maintain her in luxury. He is no longer in harmony with his work; now he does not share or clean himself like other stokers and comes to look like the hairy ape. Search for identity becomes an obsession with Yank, and it finally leads him to the zoo where he stands face to face with a gorilla in its cage and begs for its companionship. Yank finds a strike between himself and the gorilla. He admits that gorilla is luckier than him. Unlike the gorilla, he is caged forever and has no chance to escape from this life of humiliation and confinement.

The Hairy Ape thus centers on Yank's loss of faith and identity in the world in which he lives. Yank, in his search for himself, discovers that he is alone, isolated and the world is impossible to live in. One can recall the fellow American Robert Frost's words 'the earth is the right place to live and love' (Birches) and can ask himself/herself whether it is hope for it now. Though Yank wants to come back to his position as everyman, he sees no hope. The playwright does not appeal to the emotions by having Yank lose a beloved. Yank is alone as far as any family relationships are concerned. It is not job that Yank is seeking. What he wants is to know that he belongs. There lies his happiness. He is a symbol of the deep protest that rises like a wave. At last, in his search for self and belongingness, Yank meets a tragic end for which mechanical, industrialized and emotionless society is equally responsible.

Conclusion

Thus, in conclusion it can be said that *The Hairy Ape* is the quest for belongingness in modern times and man's failure to find any suitable place in the world. Yank suffers from an immense loneliness, which despite his best efforts, he fails to overcome. The play is a powerful indictment of the modern civilization in which man has lost his sense of belonging which used to be his chief asset in the past. Yank is the predominant symbol of modern man's quest for identity - a quest which intensifies his sufferings and leaves

him all more confused and disenchanted. Man can belong, but not without sacrificing his life. For O'Neill, man remains a searcher, having no clear-cut destination. He moves from pillar to post in search of belonging, but he fails to find roots anywhere.

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