YANK'S SEARCH FOR HIS SENSE OF BELONGING IN "THE HAIRY APE"

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In the twentieth century, technological development facilitates man's life, but it also makes man rootless. His position in the universe is no longer secure and he begins to sense the disintegration of human values—moral, religious and spiritual. This sense of loss is what Eugene O'Neill feels to be the primary characteristic of his age. In "The Hairy Ape" O'Neill attempts to deal with the relationship between modern man and his universe, a universe in which man struggles to search for his sense of belonging among forces that are unknown to him. As O'Neill himself puts it,

> The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt "to belong."[1]

In this play O'Neill focuses his attention on the social outcast, Yank, whose rootless, bitter, and hopeless struggle against a hostile society symbolizes the struggle of mankind in an indifferent universe.

Thematically speaking, "The Hairy Ape" studies man's attempt to locate his position in the universe, to find to whom and to what he can belong. In this play, Yank, a brutish but heroic stoker, leaves his place in the bowels of a ship to seek a spiritual home. But his struggle only makes him discover that he can never belong—he can never find a spiritual home in the universe. He struggles and agonizes; he searches but he is lost; and at the end of the play what he gets is only to die in despair in the cage of the gorilla.

In this play O'Neill uses a lot of animal images to help presenting the central theme, that is, man's search for his sense of belonging. The description of the firemen's forecastle in the first scene suggests an image of caged animals. It gives us the impression of a constricted cage, reminding us that these firemen, or ultimately men in general, are caged in by some aspect of life or some aspect of their own nature. O'Neill describes the forecastle as "crowded with men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing— . . . the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage."[2] From this stage direction we can see that even the sounds of the men suggest animal sounds rather than those of human beings. In their forecastle, the firemen are imprisoned by white steel and the heavy construction of the ship and ultimately by life itself. Since the ceiling crushes down upon their heads, they cannot stand upright. They have to stoop in order to walk. This kind of circumstance suggests further alliance with the ape or animal world as "[t]he men themselves. . . resemble those pictures in which the appearance of Neanderthal Man is guessed at" (p. 1053). Moreover, these men are "hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power" (p. 1053). This concept of great physical power is important because, later in the play, "Yank will feel his sense of belonging only in a society which is built on brutal force"[3] and which is actually not

his spiritual home at all.

As the play opens we see Yank controlling the firemen on the ship with animalistic power and the confidence that comes out of his sense of importance in the stokehole and in the whole industrial world. Therefore, we can say that Yank is the central character of this play. All the other characters are "scarcely more than wraiths that flit into and out of the consciousness of Yank."[4] They are used as foils to make us see clearly the character of Yank. But from the very first scene, we are made aware that not only Yank but also those around him have lost their roots, namely, their sense of belonging. Long's dissatisfaction with his position on the ship betrays his loss of belonging. Though he works in the stokehole, he does not think that he belongs to it. It is not his root, but he does not know to what he really belongs, either.

> This is 'ell [the stokehole]. We lives in 'ell, Comrades—and right enough we'll die in it . . . . And who's ter blame, I arsks yer? . . . All men is borne free and ekal. That's in the bleeding' Bible, maties. But what d'they care for the Bible—them lazy, bloated swine what travels first cabin? . . . They dragged us down 'til we're on'y wage slaves in the bowels of a bloody ship, sweatin', bunin' up, eatin' coal dust! Hit's them's ter blame – the damned Capitalist clarss! (p. 1056)

Long is class-conscious and represents the socialist view. He sees the conflict between labor and capital, and wants to bring reformation to society through revolution; however, his socialist view is far too impersonal and remote to appeal to a simple fellow like Yank because Yank cannot understand the dichotomy that the two classes pose and has no class-consciousness. Therefore, Yank resents Long's complaints by shouting:

> Aw g'wan! I've listened to lots of guys like you, see. Yuh're all wrong. Wanter know what I t'ink? Yuh ain't no good for no one . . . . Yuh're yellow, dat's what . . . . What's dem slobs in de foist cabin got to do wit us? We're better men dan dey are, ain't we? . . . Well den, we belong, don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat's all. (p. 1057-58)

Yank knows only that he is more important than the people on the deck because he makes the ship move. His only concern is his important role in this industrialized society and he regards himself as an integral part of its progress.

Actually Long is just a theoretical social protestant without any real action. That's why later on Fifth Avenue when a direct confrontation with the capitalist class is about to happen, he slinks off. He can advocate justice only in high-sounding words; but when the actual tests come, he retires to the background. This indicates the unsavory quality in him: he shall not be saved from his loss of belonging and he shall never regain his root in this industrialized society.

Paddy's doleful nostalgia of the good old days also reveals his loss of belonging in this industrialized society. When Yank boasts to the other stokers, "Well den, we belong, don't we? We belong and dey [the capitalist class] don't. Dat's all." (p. 1057) Paddy refutes his overconfidence by saying, "We belong to this, you're saying? We make the ship to go, you're saying? Yerra then, that Almighty God have pity on us!" (p. 1057) Then he sighs for the old life on the sea in which man played an

important role and could feel his worth as a human being. He describes man's harmony with nature and the strong sense of belonging that man used to have on the old sailing ships:

> Oh, to be back in the fine days of my youth, ochone! Oh, there was fine beautiful ships them days—clippers wid tall masts touching the sky—fine strong men in them—men that was sons of the sea as if 'twas the mother that bore them. (p. 1057)

In other words, the past was a time to which Paddy felt he really belonged; however, now amid the coal smoke and the caged conditions, he has lost completely his sense of belonging. Nevertheless, Yank does not pay any attention to Paddy's doleful remarks; instead, he ridicules Paddy as followed:

> I belong and he don't. He is dead but I'm livin' . . . . Sure, I'm part of de engines! . . . all dat crazy tripe about suns and winds, fresh air and de rest of it——Aw hell, dat's all a dope of dream! . . . He's old and don't belong no more . . . . I'm de end! I'm de start! I start somep'n and de woild moves! . . . And I'm what makes iron into steel! Steel, dat stands for de whole ting! And I'm steel—steel—steel! (p. 1059)

Here we can see that Yank is the complete opposite to Paddy. Yank insists that he now belongs to the engine and the stokehole which make the ship and, thus, the whole world move. He emphasizes that the present relies upon power, force, and brute strength. The modern ship, having its basis on coal and steel, needs a new type of man who can cope with this new force, and Yank sees himself as this ideal type. Being the cause of power, he feels that he has a stronger sense of belonging than Paddy does because the modern world is based on power, strength, and force. In this sense we can say that Yank has a strong sense of belonging in this highly industrialized society of coal and steel. He regards himself as the one who makes iron into steel; however, ironically at the end it is steel that destroys his sense of belonging and brings him catastrophe. He considers himself an integral part of progress and accepts his position as being of great importance, but his overconfident view is actually pure illusion. The emphasis on steel gains further significance as we learn later that Mildred's wealth comes from steel and that she causes the destruction of Yank by calling him "the filthy beast" (p. 1067). When the faith in the importance of his position is shattered, the disintegration of Yank begins. Thus Yank, who now looks upon steel as his ally, will later reverse himself and want to destroy all of it when he comes to realize his real position in this industrialized society of steel.

Mildred is as lost as Yank will ultimately be at the end of the play. She is lost and bored. The whiteness of her dress suggests the anemia of her character and her lack of vitality. She is so empty that she must seek outside thrills in order to escape the essential nature of her self. She admits that she should stay in her world of artificiality.

> When a leopard complains of its spots, it must sound rather grotesque . . . . Purr, little leopard. Purr, scratch, tear, kill, gorge yourself and be happy—only stay in the jungle where your spots are camouflage. In a cage they make your conspicuous. (p. 1062).

The jungle is the world where each person fits. Mildred's jungle is the artificial world where she can say honest and detestable things to her aunt in an affected and bored manner. But because she wants to seek a new thrill, she insists on visiting the stokehole. As a result, when she steps into the world of Yank, she stands out as the spots of a leopard do in a cage. Therefore, we may say that each animal must remain in its domain. Similarly, when Yank tries to emerge from his world, he is defeated by forces which he does not understand. Thus, the sense of belonging which each character in this play possesses is only in terms of the world in which that character functions.[5]

We now have two opposing worlds—the world of the strong, brutal Yank and the world of the anemic and bored Mildred. The confrontation between the two is sure to bring conflict and danger. As Scene III begins, Yank is in his rightful place and he hates any interference from the outside world. His sense of belonging to the stokehole makes him get extremely angry when the engineers blow their whistles. Evidently Yank is fighting against any outside interference.

Immediately after Mildred enters the stokehole, she "starts, turns paler, her pose is crumbling, she shivers with fright in spite of the blazing heat" (p. 1066). This is symbolic of the conspicuousness she feels when she has entered a cage which she does not belong to. Yank is not aware of her entrance. He keeps on yelling and raging against the sound of the engineer's whistle:

> [. . . he blinks upward through the murk trying to find the owner of the whistle, he brandishes his shovel murderously over his head in one hand, pounding on his chest, gorilla-like, with the other, shouting.] Toin off dat whistle! Come down outa dere, yuh yellow, brass-buttoned, Belfast bum, yuh! Come down and I'll knowck yer brains out! (p. 1067)

Here Yank is like an animal enraged with someone invading his domain. His shouting is that of a brute animal that fights to preserve the world to which he belongs. Then he sees Mildred, "like a white apparition in the full light from the open furnace doors" (p. 1067). The ghostly presence of Mildred statles Yank. His mouth falls open and his eyes grow bewildered. Horrified at Yank's bellowing and his dirty body, she cries, "Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast! " (p. 1067) and faints. It is this chance—this crucial encounter that "opens Yank's eyes to his true position, to awareness that he does not belong as he has imagined that he did."[6] He comes to realize that the world, the world of industry, does not belong to him and his fellow firemen who make it move, but to the group of Mildred who sees him as a "filthy beast," a hairy ape.

It is only after the encounter in the stokehole that Yank really begins to think. In Scene IV O'Neill describes Yank as "a blackened, brooding figure. He is seated forward on a bench in the exact attitude of Rodin's 'The Thinker' " (pp. 1067-68). And now Yank begins to figure out to what he really belongs. Rodin's "The Thinker" holds an evolutionary significance in this play. It symbolizes the "brutish man attempting to puzzle out the truth of his existence and perhaps to better it, mind triumphing over brute force."[7] But thinking and thinking, Yank still cannot figure out the truth of his existence, not to mention bettering it. At last he tries to reestablish his sense of belonging by swearing to tear Mildred down.

> Hairy ape, huh? [With his old confident bravado.] I'll show her I'm better'n her, if she on'y knew it. I belong and she don't see! I move and she's dead! . . . I'll fix her! Let her come down again and I'll fling her in de furnace! (pp. 1071-72).

Yank still has not given up the idea that he belongs. If he can avenge himself on the girl, he will be saved. By the demonstration of his brute force, Yank is sure that he will regain his sense of belonging in the world. Thus he threatens to leave the stokehole immediately to "burst de face offen her" (p. 1072). If his personal vengeance against Mildred could be carried out, his indignation would perhaps cease or at least be mitigated; however, as he is about to leave, he is piled on by the other stokers and is held in the same way that a captured animal would be held. His desire for his personal vengeance and for the demonstration of his brute strength will lead him later to Fifth Avenue, symbolic of the core of Mildred's world.

Long takes Yank to Fifth Avenue to convince him that Mildred is only a representative of her class, to awaken his class consciousness so that he can see that it is her class that he must fight, not her alone. But Yank is only concerned with his own sense of belonging and his personal vengeance upon Mildred. When he sees a monkey fur in a store on Fifth Avenue, Yank gets extremely enraged. He clenches his fists and his face grows pale with indignation as if the skin in the window were a personal insult. He cries out angrily, "Trowin' it up in my face! Christ! I'll fix her! " (p. 1075) and his desire for vengeance upon Mildred grows more and more intense. But up to now he still has a strong sense of belonging to the industrialized society and regards himself as a moving force behind the whole steel industry. Among the crowd on Fifth Avenue he keeps on saying:

> Aw, g'wan, de lot of youse! Yuh give me de eye-ache. Yuh don't belong, get me! . . . I belong, dat's me'. [Pointing to a skyscraper across the street which is in process of construction -- with bravado.] See dat building goin' up dere? See de steel work? Steel, dat's me! Youse guys live on it and think yuh're somep'n. But I'm in it, see! I'm de hoistin' engine dat makes it go up! I'm it—de inside and bottom of it! Sure! I'm steel and steam and smoke and de rest of it! ... Yuh're on'y dolls I winds up to see 'm spin. (p. 1077)

And he begins to insult some of the crowd by bumping into them, but no one pays any attention to him. Rather it is he who recoils after each collision. Then one of the women cries out ecstatically, "Monkey fur! " (p. 1077) and all the crowd scurry to the furrier's window. At this moment Yank's anger reaches its climax; no longer can he restrain himself. Accidentally a gentleman at this very minute runs at full tilt into the straining Yank. Seeing a chance for fight, Yank gives vent to his resentment and anger by landing his fist full on the gentleman's face. The man screams. Many policemen rush in from all sides and Yank is taken to the prison.

It is in the prison that Yank's strong sense of belonging to the industrialized society of steel breaks into pieces. In his cell, Yank "couch[es] on the edge of his cot in the attitude of Rodin's 'The Thinker' " (p. 1078). "The Thinker" pose is again of vital importance. Once again Yank assumes "The Thinker" pose in order to think out his place in the universe, his place of belonging; but here for the first time in his life Yank realizes "that he is not steel, that he is, instead, locked in and trapped by steel."[8] Having been robbed of his humanity, his pride in his work, and reduced finally to the

status of a hairy ape, he reacts bittery against the very steel with which he had previously declared his kinship. He determines now to become fire and destroy with fire.

> Sure–her old man–president of de Steel Trust–makes half de steel in de world–steel–where I tought I belonged–drivein' trou–movin'–in dat–to make her–and cage me in for her to spit on! . . . He made dis–dis cage! Steel! . . . Cages, cells, locks, bolts, bars–dat's what it means!–holdin' me down wit him at de top! But I'll drive trou! Fire, dat melts it! I'll be fire–under de keep–fire dat never goes out. (pp. 1081-82)

Here it finally dawns on him that he cannot fight Mildred as a person. He knows now that he must take it out on the whole capitalist class; therefore, he resolves to join the I. W. W. (The Industrial Workers of the World), which has as its underlying purpose the overthrow of capitalism.

But even in the I. W. W., which claims to overthrow capitalism, Yank cannot find his sense of belonging. He at first thinks that the I. W. W. should be a secret and mysterious organization; but when he arrives at its office, he finds only an air of the common, the barren, and the unmysterious surrounding the interior of the room, which resembles some dingy settlement boys' club. Yank expects much more from the I. W. W. than he finds there. At least, he is seeking some place where he can find his sense of belonging. And he needs an organization which is built on force and strength so that he can blend with it and use his brute strength and force as a demonstration to belong. But contrary to his expectation, the final aim of the I. W. W. is to change the unequal conditions of society by legitimate action rather than force or violence. It is highly ironic that when Yank presents his objectives and enthusiasm to the I. W. W., because of his strange behavior and curious inquiry about information, he is thrown out as a spy from the Secret Service. In throwing him out, the secretary calls him "a brainless ape" (p. 1086). It is only at this moment that Yank discovers that he does not belong here, either. He comes to realize now that he is not able to belong to any group. "So dem boids don't think I belong, neider" (p. 1086). He then assumes again "The Thinker" pose in his final attempt to think out his sense of belonging. At the end of this scene Yank asks, "Where do I go from here? " (p. 1087) This question implies strongly Yank's despair, isolation, and loss. He now understands "that there is no place for him to go and that he is on the verge of complete destruction."[9]

Having passed from rebuff to rebuff, Yank at last finds himself in the city zoo. "Because human society has failed him utterly, Yank finally turns to communion with the animal world."[10] We must notice here that in the cage the gorilla is seen in the same attitude of "The Thinker" that Yank has so often assumed. This attitude makes a great analogy between the two. When he sees the gorilla swelling out its chest and pounding on it with its fist, Yank has a strong sense of admiration for the brute force and strength of the animal because these force and strength are the same qualities Yank has always been pround of in himself. But though Yank tries to indentify himself with the gorilla, his position is worse than that of the gorilla. Yank is imprisoned in a worse cage because his cage is not physical, but spiritual. The gorilla is better off because it should not belong with people; but Yank should, yet people reject him. The gorilla can dream of the past; however, Yank sees himself without a past or future, only in a present to which he can never belong. "I ain't got no past to tink in, nor

nothing' dat's comin', on'y what's now—and dat don't belong" (p. 1088). He cannot go forward, nor can he go backward. So "I [Yank] ain't on oith and I ain't in heaven . . . . I'm in de middle trying' to separate 'em, takin' all de woist punches from bot' of 'em" (p. 1068). Yank considers the gorilla lucky because it belongs: "Youse can sit and dope dream in de past, green woods, de jungle and de rest of it. Den yuh belong . . . " (p. 1088). In the green woods and the jungle the gorilla belongs where human beings do not. Here in human society, Yank should belong, yet he does not. Thus, there is no place for Yank.

Yank makes his final effort to belong by freeing the gorilla from the cage and makes an attempt to join him in brotherhood. He says to the gorilla, "Me 'n' you, huh?—bot' members of this club! . . . I'll take yuh for a walk down Fif' Avenoo. We'll knock 'em offen de oith and croak wit de band playin' " (p. 1089). But even this final effort fails, too. The gorilla, instead of shaking hands with him, rejects him by crushing his ribs and throws him into the cage. Yank gets bewildered: "Even him didn't tink I belonged. [Then, with sudden passionate despair.] Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in? " (p. 1089). It is only when he is dying that Yank realizes that the place to which he belongs is no other place, but the cage.

Yank is not merely the protagonist of this particular play, he is also symbolically the modern "Everyman." He is "a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature."[11] With the technological development of society, the individual is lost. A sense of not-belonging pervades every man of feeling and emotion. In the seventh scene Yank is asked by the secretary of I. W. W. what his name is. He thinks a while and gives it as "Robert Smith" (p. 1083). Actually it could be a name made up by him because he may have really forgotten his own name. This re-emphasizes the "Everyman" quality of the play because under such circumstances he may give any names such as John Henson, Herbert Kennedy, David Rogers, etc. At the end of the play Yank is crushed by the gorilla and finds that his place of belonging is in the cage. Similarly, modern man is helpless and trapped, and finds his sense of belonging only by being trapped in a cage—the spiritual cage.

In "The Hairy Ape" Eugene O'Neill shapes his protagonist and incidents in such a pathetic way that they arouse terror and pity in us as we witness the bizarre and overwhelming suffering of Yank. Through this suffering Yank finally arrives at knowledge about himself. We pity him still more because we realize, as Yank himself does, that "the knowledge thus gained through suffering cannot overcome a lifetime of progressive and brutal numbing."[12] The self-knowledge brings him not liberation, but destruction. We usually believe that "the light of understanding liberates, but in this case light annihilates Robert 'Yank' Simith."[13]

Many critics have contended that the suitable subjects for tragedy have been changing since the days of Aristotle. For example, Erich Auerbach points out in his *Mimesis*:

> In modern literature the technique of imitation can evolve a serious, problematic, and tragic conception of any character regardless of type and social standing, of any occurrence regardless of whether it be legendary, broadly political, or narrowly domestic; and in most cases it actually does so.[14]

If we regard Erich's saying as an acceptable explanation of modern tragedy, then "The Hairy Ape" is undoubtedly a great and profound tragedy. This play does not exalt us nor the character; however, it does release the terrible suffering of Yank, and in turn we feel relieved from the terror of his situation and suffering. Yank is low on the social and intellectual scale, but he has great physical strength and emotional vitality which cause him to struggle to find his sense of belonging. In spite of his lowness and crudity, Yank still wins much of our pity. Despite the fact that he has been compared to a hairy ape, he remains very human to the end in his tragic search for his spiritual home in the universe. Although at the end he still cannot find his real sense of belonging, yet through his struggle against the tremendous odds of his situation he takes on a kind of worth that makes him in many respects better than the other characters in the play.

NOTES

1. Consult John Gassner, *Eugene O'Neill* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 20.
2. Eagene O'Neill, "The Hairy Ape," in *The American Tradition of Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Sculley Bradley and others (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, Inc., 1975), p. 1053. To avoid innumerable notes, hereafter phrases or sentences within quotation marks yet without note numbers after them mean that they are quoted from the play "The Hairy Ape" in *The American Tradition of Literature*. The numbers of the pages on which the quotations appear will be put in parentheses after them.
3. Peter Clark and James L. Roberts, *"The Emperor Jones" and "The Hairy Ape"* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Cliff's Notes Incoporated, 1966), p. 30.
4. Chester Clayton Long, "The Hairy Ape," in his *The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (The Netherlands: Mouton & Co., 1968), p. 81.
5. See Clark, p. 35.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
7. Travis Bogard, *Counteur in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 246.
8. Clark, p. 45.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
10. David Rogers, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Commentary* (New York: Monarch Press, 1965), p. 26.
11. Refer to Clark, p. 55.
12. Long, 91.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* , trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), p. 31.