

# Spiritual Chaos in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*

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## Abstract

The theme of spiritual Chaos affecting modern men runs through all the major plays of Eugene O' Neill. *The Hairy Ape* can be regarded as one of the foremost representative plays in this regard as it presents a powerful journey of a soul from a world of harmony to that of spiritual chaos. In *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill presents a world which is blind and purposeless, a world where God is dead and has been replaced by new gods like materialism, industrialism, capitalism, success and wealth. The death of the old faith in God has made man hollow and he is suffering from spiritual chaos.

**Keywords:** Spiritual chaos, hairy ape, rootlessness.

## Introduction

Spiritual chaos is a type of psychological disorder in which a human being is unable to belong anywhere. This is especially present in modern people as they have lost their modern harmony. Steven Hyman and al. says on mental disorders:

Mental disorders are diseases that affect cognition, emotion, and behavioral control and substantially interfere both with the ability of children to learn and with the ability of adults to function in their families, at work, and in the broader society. (605)

Eugene O' Neill's involvement with the theme of spiritual Chaos is actually reflected from his own personal life. The change in the complexion of western society during modern times had created confusion of values during his lifetime. Eugene O' Neill observed the modern man as an uprooted being from his own spiritual self and spiritual past as well. People during his contemporary times had lost faith in traditional religion due to advancement in science and technology. Replacement of old religion from new ones had created a vacuum in relation to their rootedness. He found the modern man suffering from inner emptiness and vacuum due to lack of any nourishing faith.

In *The Hairy Ape*, Yank's tragic alienation is the symbol of modern man in the present day industrialized and mechanized society which is devoid of spiritual values. People like Yank are living a life of spiritual chaos as a result of faithlessness during modern times. Sheaffer observes:

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 it is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to belong. (74)

## Research Methodology

Picking examples from primary and secondary sources, this article will try to show the onset of spiritual chaos in Yank. As a result of the onset of spiritual chaos in a person, the behavior of the person becomes eccentric or chaotic. Such a person is perceived to be a threat by the society and may be termed as suffering from neurosis. The researcher has tried to find some of the reasons for the onset of this spiritual chaos in a person during modern times in the article by using the research method of psychoanalysis.

## Analysis and Findings

Yank, the central character of *The Hairy Ape* is a stoker on a trans-Atlantic liner. Yank resembles "those pictures in which the appearance of the neanderthal man is gnashed at. All are hairy chested with long arms of tremendous power and low receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes" (207). Yank dominates his limited world of the stock hole. He towers over his fellow workers by the very force of his brute strength. He is "broader, fiercer, more truculent, more powerful, more sure of himself than the rest" (208). All other men respect Yank's superior strength and believe that he is the most highly developed individual. He is shown in perfect harmony with his fellow workers and surrounding on this ocean liner. He takes pride in his work as he belongs here. The passengers on the board are "just baggage. Who makes this old tab Run? Ain't not it us guys? Well done we belong and dey don't. Dat's all" (212). At this moment, He is passionate to have a sense of belonging with his work. there is no conflict in his soul. The only thing which makes his life endurable in the liner is the fact that he belongs, that he is a necessary part of the system. He has false perception that he is the authority behind the ship, behind the world itself. Yank identifies himself completely with his work, with the industrial

world. But this is his illusion which is not accepted in the industrialized mechanical society. In fact, he is a small, insignificant part of it, but he thinks otherwise:

I'm smoke and express trains and streamers and factory whistles; I'm de ting is gold dat makes money!  
And I'm what makes iron into steel, steel, dat stands for the whole ting! And I'm steel-steel-steel... de  
whole ting is us! (216).

Paddy and Long, the two-workers of Yank, understand the industrial world better and indirectly expose the hollowness of Yank's belief by contrast. They know that this world has no belongingness. They know that they are working in a world which is full of rootlessness and nobody belongs to it. There is class structure in modern society. The capitalist class does not consider the proletariat as human beings. For them, they are nothing more than 'hairy ape'. It the new capitalist system in America that has shattered the American dream of equality, fraternity and brotherhood. The capitalists and those who are in power are only exploiting the proletariats. Paddy accept this chaotic situation in his own words when he wants to care for nobody:

I care for nobody, no. not I,  
And nobody cares for me. (216)

The first real blow to Yank's blind obsessive belief comes in Scene three when Yank is thrown in collision with the capitalist world outside by injecting Mildred Douglas in the advancing action in the play. The introduction of Mildred Douglass brings spiritual Chaos of society in general and Yank in particular. Mildred is the representative of cruel civilization who plays an important role in breaking the dreams of Yank. Yank's dream of happiness is broken when Mildred goes to ship to see the life of the stokers and when she sees Yank, she gets unconscious in horror crying "Take Me Away, Oh, the filthy beast (226)!" Virginia Floyd writes:

Using the technical device of expressionism, O'Neill moves his hero, Yank, through a series of rapidly changing scenes in his quest to belong, to find his place in the universe yet; yet in his highly subjective treatment, the dramatist never neglects to present the effects of dislocation and loss of faith on the human psyche. (Floyd)

O'Neill also depicts that Mildred who is a daughter of a millionaire and having all the facilities of the world is also suffering from spiritual chaos. She talks about her spiritual chaos in Scene Two:

I would like to help them. I will like to be of some use in the world. Is it my fault? I don't know how? I would like to be sincere and touch life somewhere.... Or rather, I inherit the acquired trait of the byproduct, wealth, but none of the energy, none of the strength of the steel that made it. I am not sired by gold and damned by it, as they say at the race track- damned in more ways than one. (219)

Mildred's visit to the liner shows the outward manifestation of the repulsion the affluent classes feel for the proletariat. Yank feels "himself insulted in the very heart of his pride" (226) because of the comments used by Mildred for him and his co-workers. Yank asks his co-workers what Mildred said about him before getting unconscious? "Is dat she called me -a Hairy Ape (230)?" Yank asks, "Why de hell should I scare her? Ain't she the same as me? Hairy Ape, huh (231)?" In this modern society, workers like Yank gets alienated as soon as they come to know about this inequality. Yank himself comes to express this alienation during his discussion with Long:

Long. (hysterically) We're free and equal in the sight of God.

Yank. (with abysmal contempt) Hell! God! (229)

Margaret Loftus observes:

It is Yank's demoralization confrontation with the bored, bread out young society women, Mildred that destroys him psychologically, leading him to question both himself and Society. (62-63)

This demoralizing incident resulted in the onset of spiritual chaos in Yank. In some cases, such frustrated and disillusioned people take revenge either from the person who insulted them or from higher society which ignores them. This revenge takes the form of physical revenge in some cases as is visible through the irrational actions of Yank. As Yank could not get the opportunity to take revenge from Mildred by spitting on her face so he takes revenge by hurting people of her class at the Fifth Avenue. Yank tries to show people at fifth avenue that actually he is the person who belongs not the lifeless capitalists.

"Steel, dat's me! Youse guys live on it. And tink yuh're somep'n. But I'm in it, see! I'm the hoistin engine dats make it go up! I'm it-de inside and bottom of it". (238)

Yank's outburst is seen with indifference and coldness by men and women in Fifth Avenue. They ignore him. For them, he does not exist as an individual. His importance for them is no more than that of a product kept in a window of a shop. Nobody feels any kind of humanity towards him. Nobody even dares to ask him about his problem so that he may be counselled in order to bring harmony in his existence. Virginia Floyd observes,

Typically Somber O'Neill thesis prevails in the bleak word of *The Hairy Ape*: that man has lost his place and his belief in himself and in God or anything external to himself that life without faith can only end in despair and death, and that men must try to retain his humanity to give order and meaning to existence. (Floyd)

Because of the inequality which he was able to see at Fifth Avenue, the process of spiritual chaos became more intense in him and resulting in deep desire in him to belong somewhere, to have spiritual peace. He starts his quest to belong somewhere. The modern gods were not able to give him his spiritual moorings. There develops a thirst in him to belong somewhere. Once again in order to satisfy his thirst, he visits I.W.W office and offers to blow off the factories, steamers and the Steel Trust and all other capitalist systems that make life of the proletariat difficult. But even there he is not accepted, he is physically thrown out of the office with the insulting remark "You're brainless ape" (250). Yank now realizes that he does not belong anywhere and spiritual chaos becomes a reality for him. All his efforts to find his spiritual moorings have gone waste. He goes into depression and starts feeling himself as an ape. He visits a zoo in order to know whether he belongs to animals or not. It is here that his sense of disappointment is complete. This scene demonstrates the total and final breakdown of Yank. Here also, he realizes that he does not belong. He cries out in despair:

Even him didn't belong...Christ where do I get off at? Where do I fit in? (254)

Yank becomes so neurotic that in a state of complete despair he enters into the cage of the Gorilla. Gorilla crushing his ribs. In a letter published in New York Herald Tribune on November 16, 1924, Eugene O'Neill Said:

The Hairy Ape was... a symbol of man who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not been acquired in a spiritual way. Thus not being able to find it on earth or in heaven, he's in the middle trying to make peace. (Falk 34)

Once man used to have "harmony with nature" (Cargil 110). When he has made material progress, he has not been able to regain that old harmony which he used to have. He is so busy that he is having no time to think for himself and contemplate.

## Conclusion

O'Neill portrays in *The Hairy Ape* a blind and purposeless world where God is dead and there is no spiritual peace. Modern gods have not been able to temporarily replace the true and traditional God but also have not been able to bring spiritual peace for its believers. Earlier people used to have faith in traditional God or their family. For modern people, there is neither family nor God to belong somewhere. So, people are alienated and rootless. Modern life and especially industrialization have been responsible for creating the distance between the person and natural world/members of the family. Workers' unions are made for the proletariat to develop a sense of brotherhood and belongingness. These very unions have become the hot bed of politicians working for the benefits of leaders and capitalists. As a result of this, workers suffer from depression and neurosis as there is nobody in true sense to help them. They are there to be used and thrown. Once Yank is thrown, he is living a life of complete disharmony and depression leading to spiritual chaos in him and bringing his accidental death due to neurosis.

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