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The Hairy Ape As An Expressionist Play

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Abstract:

Expressionism is a term first used by painter Julian Auguste Harve in 1901, while trying to distinguish his paintings from Impressionism. Expressionist movement in art was initiated in Germany in early 20th century under the influence of Swedish Playwright Strindberg. It was at its height between 1910-1925, just before, during and after the World War-I. In America, Expressionism made a strong impact on the plays of Eugene O'Neill such as 'The Emperor Jones (1922), The Hairy Ape (1922) and The Great God Brown (1926). The Hairy ape is the first expressionist play in America. The Hairy Ape is an expressionist play by Eugene O'Neil about a brutish, unthinking laborer known as Yank as he searches for a sense of belonging in world controlled by the rich.

Keywords: Expressionism, Impressionism, brutish, unthinking, laborer, belonging.

Eugene O'Neill is an eminent playwright of the 20th century American drama. He is not only the creator of the serious American drama, but he ranks with the greatest European dramatists of the 20th century. O'Neill is a voluminous writer who has left behind him a large body of One-Act plays as well as large number of full length plays. Much of his work is considered as inferior which is not to survive for long. His longer plays are: Beyond the Horizon, Anna Christie, The Emperor Jones, Under the Elms, The Great God Brown, Lazarus Laughed, Strange Interlude, Mourning Becomes Electra, The Iceman, Long Day's Journey into Night and The Hairy Ape. In America, Expressionism made a strong impact on the plays of Eugene O'Neill such as 'The Emperor Jones (1922), The Hairy Ape (1922) and The Great God Brown (1926). The Hairy ape is the first expressionist play in America. He wrote 48 plays, among these plays 13 plays are called sea-plays and six plays are considered to be minor plays. In 1936, he received Nobel Prize for literature.

The Hairy Ape, written in eight short, abrupt scenes, is an expressionistic Tragi-comedy of modern industrial unrest. The protagonist of play is a mighty stoker called 'Yank' and we see him first, stripped to the waist, with the rest of his half-necked companions in their stoke hole. He can out course, out fight, out feel them all and he is proud of his job a stoker at the heart of the ship.

"Twenty-five knots an hour! That's me". (THA) ¹

We next see the ultra-sophisticated Mildred Douglas, the daughter of the owner of the liner, lolling on the deck and pining for the sensation of going down into the stock-hole to see how the other half lives. The play gives a realistic picture of contemporary American Society. It is a world where rich become richer and poor become poorer. On the one hand, there are the rich represented by Mildred Douglas and her aunt. On the other hand the poor are represented by Yank and the other stokers, who sweat and work hard, and who are exploited and insulted for their toil, trouble and tiredness. The curtain parts and out of the darkness gleam the rims of the boiler-doors. A bell clangs the door, swing open, a terrific red glare leaps out at the audience, and Yank and his mates heave in the coal. The bell clangs again, too soon, and Yank is cursing the engineer with terrific violence, when he turns to see the girl beside him. She almost faints at the sight of him cries out that he is a beast. Yank hurls his shovel after her with a horrid oath.

Another change that is noticeable in the stoke-hole to see Yank completely upset by the incident, brooding over the depths of social difference revealed to him, burning with hatred, rage and revenge. He is no longer, steel, coal, speed, because he is no longer sure of himself. To make sure of himself, he must go out on a mission of revenge. We see him next on Fifth Avenue. The passers by are strange unreal people. He makes no more impression on them than if they were fart of dreams; all that happens is that a police-man beats him up and arrests him. Then we see him in a prison cell on Islands. Out of the darkness come the snarls and oaths and horrid howls of other prisoners. One prisoner reads from the New York Times an attack on the Industrial Workers of the World as a menace of civilization. The Hairy Ape resolves to join the I.W.W. When we next observe him, he is trying to join the society and he may plant a dynamo beneath the steel magnet's home, but is thrown out as an agent provocateur.

Finally, in his puzzled despair, he reaches the gorilla's cage in the zoo. Ah, a brother, the real Hairy Ape! He lets the gorilla loose, to go with him on a pilgrimage of destruction. But the gorilla silently seizes him in a deadly embrace and tosses him into the cage, where he dies behind the bars. Commenting on the play Clifford Leech writes;

"The Hairy Ape is a comedy of Ancient and modern life."²

Expressionism is a term first used by painter Julian Auguste Harve in 1901, while trying to distinguish his paintings from Impressionism. Expressionist movement in art was initiated in Germany in early 20th century under the influence of Swedish Playwright Strindberg. It was at it's height between 1910-1925, just before, during and after the World War-I. Expressionism endeavored to express as intensely as possible. The author usually bitterly reacts to the world around him. Expressionistic writers are not optimistic

due to their bitter experience in their art and literature. Expressionism art often depersonalizes and dehumanizes its subject to convey the shock of unfortunately being alive in the cruel modern world. Instead of presenting the world as it is, an expressionist presents the world as it appears to his mind or to his literary character.

M.H.Abram remarks that:

The central feature of Expressionism is a radical revolt against realism. Instead of representing the world as it objectively, the author undertakes to express inner experience by representing the world as it appears to his state of mind. Often the work implies that mental condition is representative of anxiety-ridden modern man in an industrial and technological society which is drifting toward chaos. (AGOLT) ³

It is a radical revolt against the artistic and literary tradition of realism. The Expressionistic playwright undertakes to express a personal vision of human life and human society. Drama was a prominent and widely influential form of expressionistic writing. Expressionism, the name itself suggests that the writer does not use more action on the stage but he uses minimum dialogues, and minimum characters to express his inner bent of mind. The action is less important but he believes in the expression in the expression of the characters. It is a dramatic technique which enables a playwright to depict the inner psyche or inner reality of a character. Basically, it is a very difficult task to portray someone's inner mind but through deft use of expressionism one can perform the task very meticulously. Instead of dramatic sequence of events, expressionists concentrate on portraying the inner mind and how it works. The prominent playwrights of Expressionism are George Kaiser (*Gas, from Mourn to Midnight*), Ernest Toller (*Mass, Man*) and in his earlier production of Bertolt Brecht, Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice.

Among all the expressionistic playwrights, Eugene O'Neill is regarded to be the most outstanding playwright. He himself remarked:

Expressionism tries to minimize everything on the stage that stands between the author and the audience. It strives to get the author talking directly to the audience.....The real contribution of the expressionist has been in the dynamic qualities of his plays. They express something in modern life better than did the old plays.⁴

Most of his plays are based on this technique; it is easier to understand the audience. Some of his noteworthy plays are, *Beyond the Horizon*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* etc. Out of them, *The Hairy Ape* is a play where we can observe almost all the features of expressionism. The central figure in the play is Yank, representing all the human beings

in the modern age. In Expressionistic play, much emphasis has been given on the central figure and minor characters seem to be secondary. Before Yank who is protagonist, Paddy, long, the secretary of I.W.W. is nothing but nameless entities. Yank, the central figure goes to the secretary of the I.W.W. and the other people in its office are equally lacking in individuality. The situation enables the dramatist to focus on the obsession of Yank and what goes in his inner mind. This is nothing but the autobiographical element of the playwright. This play is highly subjective.

There is no development of relationship in the characters. They are only placed side by side, Yank and Mildred met only for a moment but it is enough to havoc with the soul of Yank. All these characters are present for a few moments but they stamp their impression on the audience. The use of dramatic contrivances like exaggerated gestures disturbing colours, sounds and movement was a significant component of the dramatic technique for shaking the audience. The dialogues are frequently repeated not only to emphasize the lack of sophistication but also drive it home to the audience. The expressionistic play is more realistic than the realistic plays because the action rapidly goes on the stage. The topsy-turvy condition of civilization is suggested by the distorted stage setting.

The playwright lays focus on the suffering and anguished soul of the central character through 'interior monologue'. Fredrick I. Carpenter observes:

His biography is exceptionally important to the Understanding of his work; it is exceptionally rustic. Many of his plays are autobiographical. Beyond biography his life as a whole as seemed to develop to dramatic stages of kind of 'continuing quest'.⁵

Yanks brooding on Mildred's word ' a filthy beast' continues in his mind throughout the play, which creates a feeling of indignation and gives rise to grudge against the sophisticated society. The inner brooding in his mind is the part of the psychological state of mind. It is not the inner reality of the Yank but the disintegration of all modern human beings.

There is a strong condemnation of the capitalism in the expressionistic play. Yank is the representative of the masses and Mildred Douglas is the representative of the classes. Here we can find that how the masses were exploited by the classes. The eighth scene of the play is very crucial because it is the study of Yank's thought process. John Gassner rightly says:

His major theme was man's disorientation man's bedevilment from within and without.⁶

Yank suffers from inner emptiness, isolation and a feeling of insecurity. In his play, *The Hairy Ape*, the protagonist of the play, Yank who is in search of his own identity says;

Oh! God where do I belong?⁷

Yank feels uprooted and alienated from the society and tries to take revenge on that rejected society. But then he does not able to take revenge on the society. His thought are not connected with rationality or reasoning. After his disappointment from the whole materialistic world passing from Zoo, he finds a gorilla and and think that even animal can realize his grudge against the society. On the contrary, Gorilla crushes him to death and monkey's in the other cages applause for the victory of the animal. It is one of the significant suggestive uses of expressionistic technique. In this context J.M.Marriatt posits;

A realistic play, is based upon superficial observation of detail- a mere photography: but expressionism has been linked to an x-ray photograph.⁸

We can easily find the fusion of Naturalism, Symbolism and Expressionism in the plays of O'Neill. He fused naturalistic detail with symbolist mood, suggestiveness and symbol. Strindberg admired Eugene O'Neill's 'expressionist' dramatic style of distortion of action, speech and scene of the play.

Eugene O'Neill used the speedy technique of the German Playwright. The action follows a continuously forward movement. Each scene is well-defined. Eugene O'Neill once asserted that he has used the expressionistic technique in the play, but the character of Yank remains that of a man and every on recognizes him as such. The play ends with a note of affirmation at the death of Yank.

Thus, the expressionists did not want to represent mankind grappling with outside forces rather they thought to dramatise man's struggle with himself. Edward Albert remarks,

Expressionistic drama was not concerned with society but with man.⁹

The disintegration of Yank's personality in *The Hairy Ape* is a symbol of the disintegration of American industrialized and mechanized society. It is a bitter satire on the society. Winter says;

It is a play which describes the disintegration of contemporary society. It is a part of the 'Decline of the West'.¹⁰

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