

The Search for Belonging in Eugene O' Neill's Play 'The Hairy Ape'

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ABSTRACT

Man doesn't live by bread only. For the struggle of survival he needs many things. These means are not everything he needs but he thinks they are supportive. The modern man needs support from his fellow being and society. There is a sense of belonging when he finds people like him. This word 'like' is related to his class and community. American playwright O'Neill discusses this issue of a man's identity and sense of belongingness in the play 'The Hairy Ape'. This sense makes him as well as destroys him. Yank the protagonist is an illustration in this case. The dramatist has also raised the issue of class conflict and social protest.

Key words: Sense of identity, Class conflict, Social protest, belongingness, Yank.

Man doesn't live by bread only. For the struggle of survival he needs many things. These means are not everything he needs but he thinks they are supportive. The modern man needs support from his fellow being and society. There is a sense of belonging when he finds people like him. This word 'like' is related to his class and community. American playwright O'Neill discusses this issue of a man's identity and sense of belonging in the play 'The Hairy Ape'. This sense makes him as well as destroys him. Yank the protagonist is an illustration in this case. The dramatist has also raised the issue of class conflict and social protest.

The play 'The Hairy Ape' was published in 1922, O Neill's second creative dramatic phase i.e. during 1920 - 32. The belonging is a central theme in the play. If we look at his life it is not out of blue but the dramatist himself has experienced the same thing. As his parents continued to move from one place to the other he himself felt that he was

homeless. As a child this thing influenced his mind. When he grew up he saw failure of American life in terms of economic sense and religious things. The Americans were running behind materialistic life that brought frustration ultimately as only property or money cannot give peace and happiness. On the other hand faith in religion also didn't bring any solace. In such a situation man will look to have solace to his surrounding and in the society where he is rooted. This is all reflected in this play.

Because belonging gives a kind of security, a man tries to get social belonging that gives him a feeling of satisfaction. He feels protection, is encouraged and supported by his conviction. The sense of it is a great force to stand and deliver. If he fails to it he is discouraged and finds his existence fragile. He has to struggle a lot in its absence.

The main character of the play 'Hairy Ape' is Robert Smith, referred as Yank. There are many Yankee people in America. They are

common people. Our protagonist Yank is working as a stoker. He works on a transatlantic liner. His life is miserable. He work hard and his condition has not improved. But he is proud of his class. He thinks his belongs to the labour class and the class is the base of the rich class.. They think they are important and without them the rich won't have anything and will not get anything. He says, 'All de rich guys dat tink dey're somp'n, dey ain't nothin!' Dey don't belong. But us guys...'. 'Yank thinks he is steel or the fire. Because of him the ship moves. He says, 'I am steam and oil for de engines...And I'm what makes iron into steel! Steel , dat stands for de whole ting! And I'm steel-steel - steel!' dat stands for deThere is no any shame for his condition like most of the workers. He is half naked, and his look is similar to a 'Hairy Ape'. For this he remarks, 'We're better men dan dey are..'. The other labourers are also in the same class. So they all feel equality and are happy.

But sudden change comes over. A rich lady Miss Douglass is on the ship. She wishes to see the stokers. She wanted to show sympathy to them, but when she watched Yank she could not believe her eyes. It was a great shock. She found 'his gorilla 'face She referred him as a 'Filthy beast'. Later on Paddy remarks to him, 'Sure, 'twas as if she'd seen a great hairy ape escaped from the Zoo!'This is a general attitude to the labourers but Yank takes it personal. He feels insulted. He thinks, he belongs and she doesn't. He wishes to join the I.W.W. It is the Industrial Workers of the World but The voice in the play refers it as the *Industrious Wreckers* of the World. The members of this group have different views on the matters which Yank is unable to accept. He wishes to destroy the rich class. He wishes to, 'blow up

de factory, de woiks,..to blow up de steel, knock all de steel...'. When the secretary comes to know about it he also refers Yank as a 'brainless Ape' and orders his boys to throw him out of the office. Yank realises that he does not belong to that class also, as he is thrown out on the street. Even the policeman asks him to go away. Everybody pushes him from his position. Ultimately he goes to a zoo. He identifies himself with the ape in the zoo. He tells the monkey that bothof them are same belonging to the same club - 'de Hairy Apes?' he adds that he belonged to them but 'Dey don't belong wit me.' He considers the monkey as lucky one because he is recognized as an animal and that's why he is put into the cage. But, the monkey also does not approve his belief. He attacks him. O Neill describes: (mockery of the animal) 'suddenly enrages the animal. With a spring he wraps his huge arms around Yank in a murderous hug. There is a cracking snap of crushed ribs - a gasping cry.' Yank's body slips on the floor. He is in a deep pain. He knows he would die. Yank realizes that he even does not belong to the monkey class. 'Even him didn't tink I belonged.' He asks the vital question, 'Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in?' They dramatist at the end states 'The Hairy Ape at last belongs' but in reality he belongs to that class of death.

In this way Yank meets death in search of his identity and belongingness in life. There is another matter also which is related to the plight of have notes. There are two classes. 1. 'The Haves' class which is rich. They have everything. That's why they are known as the Haves. 2. 'The Have -nots' is the other one. They are poor people. They have not enough food. That's why they are called the Have Nots.

The play describes the condition of the Have Nots. They are in quite contrast to the rich people. Miss Douglass belongs to the rich class and Yank is represents people of the poor. We find marked contrast in between them. The reality of hard work at the stoke hall is shown. Their work is hard and condition is miserable. Their life is meager. They are poor and die and pitiable condition. The rich people are steel hearted. They have no sympathy to them, no understanding. They are religion more but lack the attitude to help the poor so the Have not class remains backward. Even any one tries to come out from the poor condition has to struggle alone like Yank and in doing so many die but hardly they rise. There is hardly any change. So, there is complete contrast between the Haves and the Have not.

The dramatist also aims at describing social protest. During the period between the two world wars class distinction was clearly visible. The views of Karl Marks changed not only the Europe but also the America. The lower people began to protest and raised their voice. They wanted to bring change in their position. Yank is the voice of such people. The first scene of the play has this reflection. Yank criticizes the upper capital class. He says that they are better than those rich people. He adds 'we belong and they don't.' His outpouring reflects the anger of the crushed people. The rich people made them machine like. They have created depressive condition but they will become stronger and would continue to struggle. The building of the rich people is standing on the base of the labour people.

In the second scene the contrast between the two classes is shown. Mildret comes from the upper class. There is whiteness, cleanliness, comfort and everything good. On the other

side Yank and company faces horrible life. Their hard life is vividly described in the three scenes. The scene on the Fifty Avenue is again related to social inequality. The tension is more in the seventh scene. It is a reflection of their activities of social revolution. There is an organisation and we find discussion regarding it as well as their function but Yank is not happy the way they want to bring change in another being.

In search of his belonging Yank becomes a tragic figure. Earlier he was in the hell i.e working as a stokehole where fire and darkness prevail. His life is that of a wonderer. But there was pride in it. But the fall comes with Milderd's remark. Though it was meant general Yank takes it personal insult. The quest of identity begins from there. He tries to see his position. He goes to the Fifth Avenue but find that he does not belong there. Even the jail does not keep him. The I. W. W does not help him. The last thing is the cage of the hairy ape but that is also not meant for him. He is thrown from every place. His outburst makes it clear that he is angry and has deep frustration. He considered himself as steel but it is irony that steel does not stand, as it melts down.

The play has been referred as a comedy but it is the mask to hide the traffic elements. Even real comic scenes prepare the audience to go through the tragic experiences. The play is not comedy but it is a dark comedy. Yank's search makes him a comic figure. His efforts to take revenge upon Mildred shun his sense of thinking properly. But we should not forget that ultimately he is the winner. The people of his class have not even any idea of their class or their consciousness of belonging. Yank at least has thought of it. He didn't stop after it but struggles to rise. Even in his fall there's the rise. That is what our inner sense

can get. He has risen above all the common people as he tried to come out from the assigned social position.

Yank is representation of modern man. The contemporary world has become the root cause of snatching away man's identity. In the social surrounding man is uprooted and feels alienated. He is an island himself. He wants to be but the world does not allow him to be what he is. Conflicts and confrontations break him down. His life apparently still is actually full of whirlwind and storms in which he is trapped and ultimately disappears from the 'stage' like Yank.

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I always try to turn every disaster into an opportunity.

~ John D. Rockefeller