

O'Neil's the hairy ape and insane society

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Abstract

Man, from time immemorial is in search of a sane society. He is struggling to fashion out a beautiful society but he always behaves, thinks and acts in an insane manner. Man is sum total of his social system. He needs society for survival. Society gives man the sense of meanings of life. It provides support to man for survival. Man's identity in this universe is a question which needs a satisfactory answer because he is always surrounded by people like him. This word "like" has a relation to class and community. In "The Hairy Ape" O'Neil discusses the issues of man's identity and also how an insane society results in alienation of a person, not only from himself but also from all other people. If sane society makes a man, an insane mars him. Yank is an elaborated illustration in this case. Socio-economic conflicts and social protest are the points raised by the dramatist. This paper illustrates how, apparently a sane society was actually insane at core.

Keywords: identity, yank, social conflicts, sense of survival, insane society

1. Introduction

1.1 Discussion Analysis

Through socio-economic conditions, O'Neill portrayed the culture of the insane society of the 1920s in America. Capitalism was a disease which was a blemish on that society. Social conflict of a capitalist economy is the central conflict in the play. Yank (working class) and Mildred (capitalist class) are not only representatives of class struggle but also how the society was ill in structure and approach. Man does not live alone. He needs many things to survive. People and society are a source of support and belonging through which he can create a good society. The issue of creating a sane society out of insane one can makes a man or destroys him. The then the society proved to be insane for Yank, this is the central image presented in "The Hairy Ape". O'Neill observed that American society was failing in terms of religion and economic sense. Materialistic life became the order of the day. It resulted in frustration, anxiety, depression and alienation. Money could not bring peace, prosperity and happiness for them. He created structures like religion, socialism, capitalism to create a beautiful culture. Faith in religion also failed to restore man. In such a condition man looks to the society in which he lives, in order to get solace and comfort. This is all reflected in this play. Society gives man a sense of security. But a socially, economically and religiously punctured society gives neither feelings of protection nor satisfaction.

Ship stands for home, for society and everything which is soothing and comfort giving. Society is amalgamation of Haves and Have-nots. The play revolves around the Have-nots. Yank stands for poor people and Min Douglass represents upper class. The hard work done by the poor class is described in the play. Yank walks as a stoken. In spite of working hard, his condition of life never improves. He is proud of his class. This is the real cause of insane society. Yank and his class consider themselves the beauty of the

lower class of society for they are source of comfort for upper class but due to unequal distribution of wealth and source, the society is not running on smooth road. A rich lady wishes to see the hard workers. Apparently she wants to show sympathy with them but actually the condition is other way round. On seeing Yank, she referred him as a filthy beast. Who is really filthy? It was the upper class which was filthy in soul and spirit: they have neither sympathy nor understanding. They are so-called religious people but they do not help the poor and they remain backward. A society which is not based upon justice can only be termed as a failure society. The problem with have-nots was that they do not do collective efforts to come out of their worst conditions. If anyone wants to come out, he will have to struggle alone as was in the case of Yank. There is no change in lives of Have-nots. The dramatist aims at delineating the degrading society because no revolutionary changes were visible there. It also elaborates social protest.

It is true that in any society, upper classes are always prosperous and flourishing. The real dilemma is the down condition of low class people. Ideal society comprises of equality among all strata of people. The then American Society was not ideal in this respect. A society allows the down people to protest against the system. They want change in society. Yank is not only representative of disrupted American Society but also a voice of bringing change in the insane society. Yank criticizes capital clan: rich people use poor people like machines. Upper class society creates depressive conditions for them—this is what is called Insane Society. The greatness of labor class, shown by O'Neil, is their struggle against Capital class to change the conditions—this is what is called a sane society for after struggle all will be equal economically and socially.

A good society is one which gives identity to its people. Yank's identity crisis is a critique on the insane American Society. The moment Yank is called filthy beast, his search

for his identity starts. Nothing in his surrounding owns him. He goes to Fifth Avenue and feels everything indifferent. Even the jail and the cage of the Hairy Ape do not accept him. He feels he belongs to no place; the result is anxiety and frustration for Yank. He is troche bearer of bringing change in capitalistic stone hearted American society. People of his class are not, perhaps conscious of their ill conditions but Yank, is being aware, makes efforts to change status quo of society. Ultimately Yank is the winner. In his fall, there is his rise. He is even different than all common people for he rebels against insane society and tries to come out of disintegrated social dilemma. In that society man's identity was at stake. There man was uprooted and as a result alienated socially, economically and personally. He is a revolution in himself so he is a sane in an insane society. This paper is an attempt to reveal the ingredients of the American derated society through as is explored in "The Hairy Ape" by Eugene O'Neil.

The Hairy Ape is symbolic representation of man who is not in harmony with society. Socio-economically failed society fails to sustain him and his identity. Americans failed to promote an interacting society based on human worth and dignity. It was the problem of the society in which, in spite of whole process of civilization, man was alienated from his own being although he was having the virtues of creating structures like sane society, religion, socialism, capitalism and God. The subject in this play is man's struggle with his surroundings to create a beautiful society. Man also struggles with his fate. In ancient times, struggle used to be with gods but at present, man fights with himself. Actually this is the problem of man's identity which is impossible without a rational society. Yank is the central figure in the play. He "represents to them a self-expression, the very last word in what they are, that most highly developed individual" (The Hairy Ape, 174). He is a self-confident, expressive and representative stoker while others lack representative qualities. O'Neil was keen in delineating the realistic strength of the situation and Yank as near to nature as possible.

The Hairy Ape centers around Yank's loss of faith and identity in the society in which he lives. He discovers himself to be alone, isolated, frustrated and alienated. The society is impossible to live. Yank's words in the last scene are proof of the fact that American society is yet to be defined. "Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in? And what the hell! --- I ain't on oath and I ain't in Heaven, get me?..... I'm in de middle tryen' to reparate 'em, taken' all de worst punches from bot' of em" (The Hairy Ape, Scene VIII). One can recall Robert Frost's words, "the earth is the right place to live and love" (Birches) and can ask whether it is acceptable or not: Yank's deep pursuit of a sane society which renders him his human values starts when he sees Mildred. Etta Worthington opines: "In the course of the play Yank goes from the cocky leader of the mighty firemen to a heap of human being, crushed physically and morally. The fateful encounter with Mildred puts his world on edge. He is a man beside himself when her look of horror and revulsion emblazons itself on his psyche. His worldview is shattered as he realizes he is not the king of anything. And he sets out roaming like a wounded beast.

2. Conclusion

Human problem presented in play is man's handling of his predicament in the society. It is story of modern man who has become victim of insane society. Great civilization of science and technology is the creation of today's man, but still he is not in alliance with the society and as a result is alienated and. "The Hairy Ape" is a modern story to present what is insane society and insane humanity: The greatest factor behind the failure of American society is its capitalistic economic system which is predicament of modern man in 20th century. The problem is same one of how to change an insane society into a sane one.

3. References

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