

The crisis of self-identity in the selected works of Eugene O' Neill

Virender Kumar Gill

Assistant Professor of English, S.D. PG College Panipat, Haryana, India

Abstract

Eugene O Neill's famous works are the presentation of capitalism and industrialism in United State of America. O Neill's protagonists try to find their self-identity in the society. The sympathy with the characters are also exhibited in the plays. Understanding of human psychology and expressionistic technique will be discussed in most of his plays.

Keywords: American literature, alienation, suppression, sympathy

1. Introduction

Born in New York City, Eugene O' Neill, the foremost American Dramatist of The twentieth century is one of the most dominant all time figures in international drama. Though theater inspired him from a very young age it was after working various jobs that he finally began his association with the cape cold theatrical group, the province town players. He possessed a deep understanding of human psychology and used expressionistic technique to analyse the working of human mind in his plays. His works brought him many laurels including for Pulitzer prizes for Literature and he received the nobel prize in 1936. O' Neill's intensely tragic vision of life coupled with his fair for experimenting with the theatre resulted in some of the most remarkable and powerful works of drama which include. "Beyond The Horizon", "The Hairy Ape", "The Emperor Jones" "The iceman Cometh", "Desire Under The Elms". "Mourning Becomes Electra" and "Long Day's Journey Into Night". "Bound East for Cardiff", "The Long Voyage Home" "The Moon of The Caribbees" and "Before Break Fast" are some of the finest one act plays that O' Neill wrote during the early days of his career as a dramatist.

2. Details and Description

"The Hairy Ape" is an expressionistic tragic comedy of modern industrial unrest wherein the playwright shows a Negro's psychic struggle and conflict for achieving recognition in the contemporary society Through the character of Yank, the stoker the dramatist drives from the point that the American society has become a cultures and spiritual wasteland where man, the master creation of god has been reduced to the status of an Ape of the bygone days. Yank struggles hard to establish his place in the society but gets crushed in this attempt. The theme of the play is social alienation and search for identity. O' Neill himself explained, "The Hairy Ape was a propaganda play in sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost harmony with nature, which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in spiritual way". William Shakespeare, a great dramatist of sixteenth century proclaims, "What a piece of work is a man and what man has made of man". Here the whole action of the play moves forward rapidly through eight short scenes. The central figure of the play is Yank, a stoker on the transatlantic liner barely articulate, splendidly muscular, dominant in the stokehole. He is proud of his strength and

asserts that it is his energy on which the ship and the passengers ultimately depend. He exercises great authority over his fellow stokers who respect his physical capacity. They obey him and are afraid of him. Yank is satisfied with his status. He is broader, fierce and more powerful than the other stokers. He has great capacity for works and can labour for hours without getting fatigued. He says

"And I am what make iron into steel! steel,
 Dot stands for the whole ting! And I am
 Steel- Steel- Steel! I am muscles in
 Steel, de punch behind it!"

But when Mildred Douglas confronts him and calls him a "filthy beast", his dream is shattered His friend, a fellow stoker, Paddy, tells him that she meant that he is "a hairy ape" stung by the remark, he says:

"Hairy ape, huh? Sure! Dat's de way she
 Looked at me an right Hairy ape!
 so dat's me huh?"

He turns livid with anger and imagines as if she is still present before him, He blurts out:

"You skinny tart! You white faced slut,
 Yuh! I'll show yoh who's a ape"

He is so indignant that he feels that Mildred is also a beast. He gets worked up and creates a scene. He is arrested for drunkenness while in prison he comes to know that the members of the association called industrial workers of the world (IWW) want to blow up the great steel works owned by Mildred's father. Yank offers his services for the same but when he goes to their office he is driven out.

He wanders aimlessly and goes to the New York Zoo and talks to the big gorilla. He feels that the gorilla has listened to his philosophy attentively. He thinks that the gorilla is convinced about his views so he released the animal and holds out his hand towards him. The beast gets enraged by the mocking tone of the man springs at him and holds him in a murdering hug. Yank's ribs get broken and he cries out: "Even him didn't think I

belonged” He slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkeys gather around him and begin to chatter and whimper.

“Before Breakfast” written by Eugene O’Neill depicts the mutual tension and restrained relationship between Mrs. Rowland and her poet husband Mr. Alfred Rowland. They belong to totally different social and cultural backgrounds and are frustrated with each other. They lead a poor life because Mr. Alfred Rowland does not do any work. Mrs. Rowland has to do a job of sewing clothes in the neighbors. That is why her attitude towards her husband is not good. Mr. Alfred is lanky and has shabby appearance. The lady thinks that nobody will give him a job. Mrs. Rowland utters.

“How awful you look this morning! For heaven’s sake, shave!
You are disgusting! You look like a tramp.
No wonder no one will give you a job.

So the protagonist attempts to find his self-identity in the house. As the play opens it is late morning and Mr. Alfred is sleeping. Mrs. Rowland calls his name and asks him to get up early in the morning. She takes down Alfred’s coat and searches its pockets. She finds a love letter to him by his girlfriend Helen. After reading this letter she considers her either an artist or a poet like her husband. This incident makes her angry and despairs. In the end of the play the lady hears a sound of something dripping on the floor from Alfred’s room. She is frightened to see the dead body of her husband. In order to find his self-identity, the protagonist gets despair, disappointment and frustration. Ultimately he commits suicide.

3. Conclusion

Thus we see that the “Hairy Ape” symbolizes the disintegration of American society. The collapse of Yank stands for the collapse of American Values. Yank represents the spiritual loneliness and the alienation of the contemporary American people. Doris Alexander feels that Yank is every man and his problem is the problem of every man. John Gassaner rightly says that modern man, like Yank, stands alone and isolated in an dark and pessimistic world where industrial life has prospered but spiritual life has declined.

4. References

1. Eugene O’Neill A: Critical Spectrum by Vindod Kumar Maheshwari, National Publishing House, New Delhi 2005
2. Critical companion & Essence O’Neill by Kurl Eisen Published by Penn state University Press
3. Critical companion to Eugene O’Neill by Robert M Dowlin Published New York
4. The Hairy Ape (Kindly Edition)
5. Centre Stage edited by Sunita Siroha, Sukhwinder Singh Rehal, Dinesh Kumar, Orient Black swan Private Lmt. 2016
6. The Hairy Ape complete summary and critical commentary Raja Sharma