

A Modern Tragic Hero in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*

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Abstract

Eugene O'Neill's (1888 – 1953) play *The Hairy Ape* (1922) tackles a very important issue related to Capitalism and Industrialism that affected the United States of America at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this play we find an alienated protagonist of the low class who is perceived as a modern tragic hero of the century. What becomes of the ordinary man when everything around him is related to classicism and segregation, and the lost feeling of belonging when poverty flourishes is what O'Neill portrays vividly in the play. He is able to evoke sympathy with his protagonist, and raise serious questions in his death. This paper analyzes the protagonist from the angle of a modern tragic hero. Historical and theoretical background will be dealt throughout in order to comprehend the notion of heroism in a twentieth century era.

Key Words: alienation, capitalism, drama, tragic hero

Introduction

In the beginning of the twentieth century, American theatres were inspired by European cultures. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) influenced major playwrights in America, such as Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) and Arthur Miller (1915-2005). Because of this influence, Realism became a major movement in various plays, in which imitating reality was important to modernize the stage, create a sense of realism on set designs, dialogues, and characters. However, to completely imitate real life on stage became quite difficult, thus allowing the opportunity for Naturalism to emerge from Realism to make drama more feasible on stage. The scientific era of the nineteenth century influenced Naturalism greatly, in which science reflected on how "powerful forces governed human lives, forces of which we might not be fully aware and over which we might have little control – the forces of heredity and environment" (Styan, 1981, p.6). Naturalistic plays were driven by realistic aesthetics, and at the same time providing a scientific point of view with political, historical, and economic forces.

Relevantly, theatre became the main focus of Dion Boucicault's (1820-1890), an Irish actor and playwright, who worked alongside John Augustin Daly (1838-1899), one of America's influential men. Together they ensured "the subjects and techniques of the native theatre were regularly fed and nurtured by its older cousins." (Styan, 1981, p.109) To further achieve Realism and Naturalism on stage, David Belasco's (1853–1931) dominated the theatre, achieving drastic changes that affected the whole art of drama and the theatre. According to Styan, 1981, Belasco adapts Boucicault views, and avoids rebellion against Naturalism and Realism. "Belasco began as a stage manager within New York's commercial theatre itself, and was responsible for its best offerings in décor and scenic and lighting effects" (Styan, 1981, p.109). Technical detail became his characteristic throughout all of his plays, as he adopted realism to excite his audience. One of his greatest achievements is that he "aimed at photographic accuracy" (Styan, 1981, p.109), in which he spent a lot of time in creating perfect scenes for various plays, like *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905) and *The Governor's Lady* (1912). This professional technicality has become the essence of American theatre.

Richard Boleslavsky (1889 – 1937), a member of the MAT (Moscow Art Theatre) from 1906, founded the first American Laboratory Theatre with Maria Ouspenskaya, who is also a former MAT member. In this theatre, they taught the Stanislavsky System of acting. "The Laboratory Theatre demanded new skills of concentration from its students, based upon Stanislavsky's method of developing an actor's 'affective memory', by which he could live an emotion over again." (Styan, 1981, p. 117)

It took the American Theatre decades to establish a realistic theatre that is distinguishable from the Russian theatre. Elia Kazan (1909–2003) was the first to explore social problems on stage. As a result, by the end of the 1920s, the scene in American theatre was set for new and "indigenous playwrighting, in which the new realism would inevitably dominate much of the achievement" (Styan, 1981, p.121). There are variations in the way realism was presented in America, like using satire and parables. Elmer Rice (1892–1967) used these kinds of styles, "if a streak of sentimentality vitiates his social and political drama, he created a rich variety of ethnic character studies, and had the ability to set these in a firm naturalistic frame." (Styan, 1981, p.123) When the Great Depression hit America during the 1930s, American drama leaned towards "social protest, even propaganda, and they also belonged to the realistic tradition"

(Styan, 1981, p.124), which at that point leaned more towards Naturalism. The works of Clifford Odets (1906-1963) and John Steinbeck (1902-1968) reflected "human misery and cosmic pessimism" (Murphy, 1987, p.148) as major elements in Naturalistic plays.

With Realism and Naturalism, the idea of a world where individuals find it hard to connect with one another emerges in modern drama, giving birth to a new kind of character who is known as the modern tragic hero. Aristotle (384-322 BC) was the first to record the concept of a tragic hero. In his book entitled *Poetic*, he explains how a classical tragic hero should be. First, a hero must go through tragic events that are "an imitation...of an action of life" (as cited in Butcher, 1902, p.27). Action then generates character and thought. Aristotle's tragic hero should be "a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is not brought about by vice of depravity, but by some error or frailty" (Butcher, 1902, p.45). Not only does the hero share common traits with a common man, but also is part of a noble or prosperous family.

However, in modern times, the framework of a tragic hero is bound to change. According to Arthur Miller's "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1965), Miller redefines a tragic hero from a modern perspective. Miller (1965) believes that Aristotle's tragic hero should not be one of noble birth or from a prosperous family. He believes "that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were" (Miller, 1965, p.148). To see a common person fall into the depths of a mental and emotional dilemma as he or she faces tragic events, the impact would be much stronger on the audience than that of one of noble birth. Most importantly is that a modern tragic hero should struggle in finding his "rightful" (Miller, 1965, p.148) place in society.

Aristotle (as cited in Butcher, 1902) believed that a classical tragic hero should have a fatal flaw in order to achieve a great downfall or the hamartia. Yet Miller sees the tragic flaw as a flaw related to indignity. When a modern tragic hero struggles to secure dignity in his or her society, a struggle is inevitable which generates feelings of awe and tragedy in the audience. Moreover, the main cause of the modern tragic hero's fall is his or her incapability to accept the status quo, and thus falls into the depths of despair.

Aside to Miller's definition of a modern tragic hero, Marvin Carlson, 1993, defines the modern tragic hero in his book *Theories of the Theatre* as an isolated person who is cut off from the world (p.367), yet he interacts with the community with his unique individuality of "limited awareness" (Carlson, 1993, 367), and is not seen as an "abstract self" (Carlson, 1993, 367). His personality seeks "consciousness both of self and the world. Unlike the Greek Tragic Hero, who takes refuge "in silence and the self, he commits himself to the world in language and action, striving at last to unite himself with the absolute Other" (Carlson, 1993, 367).

This paper connects Eugene O'Neill's main character in *The Hairy Ape* to a lost, disconnected tragic hero. Throughout the play, a qualitative approach is imperative in order to come to such a conclusion.

Modern Tragic Hero

Eugene O'Neill was greatly affected by Realism in drama, and as an acknowledged leading playwright of the twentieth century, he took charge of the Greenwich Theatre between the years 1923 to 1927. O'Neill "was also a director of the Provincetown Players and a founder

of the Theatre Guild, which produced most of his plays.” (Grey, 2012, p.427) Yet, his interest in the various aspects of life made him focus on his writing. He was inspired by difficult and controversial topics, as he tests the limitation of man kind in very sensitive situations. Being the son of a popular “matinee idol and the father of American Drama” (Grey, 2012, 427), James O'Neill, his father, made him expand the ideology of realism, expressionism, and lyricism to the American stage. Influenced by his father, who was also an actor and a playwright, he was able to transform the theatre into drama of its truest sense. It is also striking how many of O'Neill's characters resemble the people he knew in his life, the “content of O'Neill's drama is intricately tied to his own past...O'Neill could not escape – neither in his own psychic development nor his playwriting – from the conflicted relationships he had with all the members of his own family” (Bloom, 2007, p.1). This shows that the complicated relationships O'Neill faced with his family is reflected in his characters, for he drew them with a sense of mourning and tragedy.

His taste for tragedy impressed critics, leading him to win four Pulitzer prizes in drama for several of his plays, and later on the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936 (Bloom, 2007, p.8). Yet his personal torments from the scarring effects of his familial relationships – his mother's drug addiction, father's constant absence, and brother's death due to alcohol – haunted him, making him write plays from a disturbed personal perspective.

According to O'Neill's life and influential kind of drama, his play *The Hairy Ape* (1922) is one of his most controversial plays. It was first produced by the Provincetown Players, and was a huge hit after its first performance. O'Neill's statement on *The Hairy Ape* was that the play “should by no means be naturalist.” (Grey, 2012, p. 427) implies that the play is entirely realistic in its characters and plot.

The Hairy Ape portrays the rupture of a man's identity, who is from the working class, is sent into exile and then to his death when the play ends at the zoo. Yank, the protagonist of the play works at a ship below deck, feeding the ship's engine with coal. He has a muscular physique and a loud voice that distinguishes him from the rest of the crew. His confidence in his strength and ability as a stoker is untouched until Mildred, a rich young heiress, visits the stokehold to see what life is like on the other side of the ship. Yank is then greatly offended by Mildred's horror of him, who called him a “hairy ape.” This name-calling crushes his self-esteem, arousing the urge to go “see a gorilla at the zoo, the only creature with whom he can now feel kinship;” (Grey, 2012, 427) when he sets the gorilla free to destroy the capitalistic world he abhors the most, the gorilla turns against him and crushes instead. Yank's feelings of insecurity appears when his dignity is stripped away from him. This event only brings about the beginning of his downfall. According to Miller, 1965, and Carlson, 1993, Yank does fulfill the criteria of a modern tragic hero. His attempt as a low-class person who is fighting back the injustices of capitalism is encountered in the play with death and loss. To O'Neill, death and loss is reality, because the powerful system will always feed on the powerless person no matter how hard a strong individual fights back.

The death of the modern tragic hero is necessary to point out the consequences of segregation. Bloom, 2007, indicates that the play is a form of expressionism in addition to realism, for its expressionistic set design and staging techniques. Moreover, Bloom argues that the “episodic structure, dehumanized characters, [and] a dreamlike quality...place...[the play]

firmly in the expressionistic mode.” (Bloom, 2007, p. 65) Expressionism appeared in art as a sort of awakening from industrialization. Its goal is to awaken “the psyche of modern men. In an attempt to unmask the inner psyche of individuals, it exerted to present the whole world.” (Kaja, 2009, 63) The British critic Raymond Williams (1921-1988) (as cited in Kaja, 2009) explains how expressionism is an important issue when it comes to the consciousness of the mind; he states ““What life is like when the external pretenses are dropped”” (as cited in Kaja, 2009, p.63). This implies how dramatic the world would be if everyone acted the way they actually wanted, and not what is expected from them by society. Simply the way O'Neill characterizes Yank, a brute from the underworld, who does not know how to pretend to be someone unlike his own self:

Listen to me! Sure I'm part of de engines! Why de hell not! Dey move, don't dey? Dey're speed, ain't dey! Dey smash trou, don't dey? Twenty-five knots a hour! Dat's goin' some! Dat's new stuff! Dat belongs...I'm young! I'm in de pink! I move wit it! It, get me! I mean de ting dat's de guts of all is. It ploughs trou all de tripe he's been sayin'. It blows dat up! It knocks dat dead! It slams dat offen de face de oith! It, get me! De engines and de coal and de smoke and all de rest of it! (O'Neill, 1998, 1, p.128)

Obviously, *The Hairy Ape* tackles social problems in the quest for truth in recognizing what a human being actually is. Yank's feelings of loneliness and loss is but a mere fraction of the damage done to a low-class citizen.

With the dramatic use of realism and expressionism in *The Hairy Ape*, the theme of alienation evolves from the conflict between the classes, setting a tragic plot ready to unfold. Mildred symbolizes the upper class, an aristocrat in the form of a capitalist, whereas Yank falls into the working class whose sense of belonging is shaken when he meets Mildred in the Stokehold. The issue of belonging begins with Paddy, an old stoker, who reminisces the past on how sailors used to have more freedom and strength. Yank finds it easy to defend himself by striking odds with the old man and telling him how life as a stoker is not meant for a man of old age. The engines of a ship only work for those who are young and strong. However, Long tries to convince Yank that capitalism has everything to do with their current situation, in which the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. The word “belong” (O'Neill, 1998, 5, p.145) recurs a number of times throughout the play, and is specifically used by Yank to emphasize the place he belongs to:

“All dis gives me pain. It don't belong. Say, aint dere a back room around dis dump? Let's go shoot a ball. All dis is too clean and quiet and dolled-up, get me! It gives me a pain” (O'Neill, 1998, 5, p.145).

With multiple settings, the dilemma of Yank is indicative. Apparently, Yank does have some similar qualities to an ape, with his rough character and strong body. His “ape-like” qualities...[enables him] to shovel coal at breakneck speed; because of Yank, the engines of the steamship...possess an incessant rhythm.” (Krasner, 2005, p.146) As the plot progresses, we see a lonelier Yank, who keeps on searching for a place to belong. “Tink!” (O'Neill. 4. p.141) is the word Yank uses always to think about who he really is and where he belongs to. His identity

undergoes a serious change as he thinks of how Mildred squealed in horror by his very presence: "Say, is dat what she called me – a hairy ape?" (O'Neill, 4. p.141) At the beginning, Yan is perfectly fine with who he really is, an uneducated coal stoker, who lives with the mess of the coal for a long time. He is at harmony with himself and accepts the strength he has, a strength that is similar animalistic behavior. Yet when he encounters Mildred, who symbolizes the upper class, he begins to lose that sense of harmony, and tries to seek meaning to his presence. Hence, trying to find his rightful place in society transforms him into a modern tragic hero.

O'Neill's portrayal of a hero in modern times is to be an ordinary person, a commoner, who constantly struggles to fit in society. Miller, 1965, believes that for a modern tragic hero to appear, he or she should come from a low class society. Stature, according Miller, is necessary to induce tragedy, and for a tragic character to become a hero in modern times, he or she has to break free from the "bounds imposed upon them, usually by society" (as cited in Adams, 1991, p.9).

By looking closely at the character of Yank, one finds that he is stuck; he cannot proceed with this quest of finding a new him, and so he tries to find a way back to the way things were. Yank at first tries to grab the attention of the upper class, that perceive him as an invisible creature. He screams, yells, and even tries to hit the gentlemen who walk by him to grab their attention, but all remain indifferent. They only see what they want to see; the "Monkey fur!" they so desperately adore. Even after Yank hits a gentleman who was running after the bus, the gentleman did not show any sign of pain or anger towards him, and only focused on the fact that he has missed the bus:

Gentleman – I beg your pardon. (*then irritably*) You have made me lose my bus. (*He claps his hands and begins to scream*) Officer! Officer! (*Many police whistles shrill out on the instant and a whole platoon of policemen rush in on Yank from all sides. He tries to fight but is clubbed to the pavement and fallen upon. The changing gong of the patrol wagon approaches with a clamoring din*) (O'Neill, 1988, 5, p.245).

This indifference caused Yank to search further for a place to belong. With the upper class unwilling to accept him, and the lower class's reality is bitter and unfair, he ends up going to the world of contained animals, the zoo. When Yank shakes the hand of the gorilla, the act symbolizes his search for a sense of belonging. "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 gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to 'belong'" (Diggins, 2007, p.77).

The last soliloquy by Yank endears a heartbreaking throb and a final call to the audience to be aware of the issue of a lost identity; a struggle man will always want to solve throughout his or her lifetime:

He got me, aw right. I'm trou, Even him didn't tink I belonged...Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in? Aw, what de hell! No squakin', see! No quittin', get me! Croak wit your boots on! ... In da cage, huh? ...Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only –

(his voice weakening) – one and original – Hairy Ape from de wilds of –
(He slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkeys set up a
chattering, whimpering wail. And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last
belongs) (O'Neill, 1988, 8, p.163).

The final blow Yank receives from the ape is symbolic, as it shows the great injustices done to the common person, the poor, and the different. It is only in death does one finally realize that Yank was actually a somebody, who had once a voice of his own. His heroic act can only be seen in his death, and his flaw is his sense of indignity, transforming his feeling of nothingness into a sense of purpose and responsibility. Thus, the tragic ending truly makes Yank a modern tragic hero.

Conclusion

Yank's loss of who he really is and what he means to the world fits the description of a modern tragic hero perfectly. It is in his falling that one realizes the conundrum of a capitalist world and class segregation. Yank strives to make a connection with the other in order to be accepted in society, but never prevails. In the end, he dies alone, still searching to belong somewhere. The sympathy he arouses in the audience transcends him to a symbolic figure who has endured the pain of ignorance, and has chosen to sacrifice his pitiful presence to become a modern tragic hero.

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