

Existential Crisis of Yank in the Play the Hairy Ape by Eugene O'Neill

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Abstract:

The Hairy Ape (1922) is one of the well-known plays by Eugene O'Neill. The play is subtitled as *A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life*. It is a tragedy in eight scenes, of a coal stoker, Robert Smith also known as Yank. The play is said to be an expressionist play which deals with the themes like, industrialization, the clash between upper class and worker class, alienation and existential crisis. This paper deals with the state of the protagonist in the troubled world of industrialization. The character feels alienated in his own world and faces existential crisis where he tries to search the truth of his existence but confronts only anxiety, disappointment and alienation. The paper focuses on Sartrean Principles of Existentialism which places the character as the centre of the universe and presents the dictum, 'existence preceded essence'. Yank's tragedy is the result of his failures to find belongingness in the society where the world has divided men into two parts, the rich and the poor. As per the norms of Sartre's philosophy, Yank struggles to find the aim of his life as he takes freedom to choose and sense of responsibility with him to find the truth of his existence.

Keywords: Alienation, Anxiety, Essence, Existentialism, Tragedy.

"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."

-Jean-Paul Sartre

Man first exists, decides and creates his future on his own. This is one of the basic concepts of the philosophy of existentialism. Before analysing the very basis of existentialism, first question that comes in one's mind is that what is philosophy. Philosophy is basically a branch of knowledge which aims at studying general and fundamental questions concerning topics like, existence, reason, mind, knowledge and many more aspects of the universe. Therefore, to find the answers related to the very existence of man, many thinkers analysed the existing knowledge, questioned, observed henceforth the philosophy of existentialism came into existence.

The philosophy of existentialism came as an intellectual movement that occurred in the mid-twentieth century France. It is said that the World Wars, the Nazi death camps and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, fueled the emergence of this movement. The very circumstances of death, bloodshed, despair and anxiety around the world forced the entire generation to confront the miserable human condition, anxiety, death, freedom, and meaninglessness.

Although the existentialism movement became prominent in the mid-twentieth century but the conceptual groundwork of the movement was laid much earlier in the nineteenth century and those famous thinkers were, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche. Other notable thinkers who contributed in this

philosophy were, twentieth century German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and many more.

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French writer and philosopher. His philosophical viewpoint was influenced by several thinkers and most prominently the Second World War. According to Sartre, man is the centre or the subject in this irrational universe where he is committed to be free as he can or has to make decisions in his life but this decision making is the most challenging part as this may lead to meaninglessness, alienation, anxiety, hopelessness and sometimes death too. Therefore, man is what he makes of himself. In other words, the philosophy of existentialism is about individual existence, freedom, responsibility and choice.

Sartre gave his lecture in Paris on Monday, October 29, 1945, entitled “Existentialism is a Humanism”. This lecture made his philosophical concept of existentialism more apparent. The basic dictum of his philosophy is, ‘existence precedes essence’, which means man first exists and he is free and he decides and with responsibility finds the essence or the meaning of his life. Other than this dictum, there are some principles that his philosophy talks about and they are, freedom, choice, responsibility, anguish, despair, being-in-itself, bad faith, authenticity, alienation etc.

As the literature is the replica of the society and Sartre finds drama genre to be the best tool to represent the issues of the society. Sartre’s philosophy has influenced many writers around the world. Eugene O’Neill, an Irish-American dramatist whose plays are known for realism and character representing the modern man, his plays reflect the traces of Sartrean principles of existentialism. He was writing in the beginning of the twentieth century till mid twentieth century. His works prominently involve themes of death, mourning as a result of the sadness. His famous works are, *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Anna Christie* (1922), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Ah! Wilderness* (1933), and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (1956).

The philosophy of existentialism places the human being in its centre, focuses upon individual freedom and gives him freedom to choose and to take decisions for his life. Sartrean philosophy provides several principles comprising, ‘existence precedes essence, death as an inevitable, man’s freedom with authenticity and his responsibility etc. The common topics like death, the difficulty of maintaining meaningful relationships, the absurdity of life, and alienation, are majorly focused upon by Sartre in his philosophy of existentialism and can be traced in *Hairy Ape* as well.

The Hairy Ape is an expressionist play, which attacks the American materialism through the character of Yank, a coal stoker on the ship. *The Hairy Ape* was written in 1921 and produced by the Provincetown players at the Playwright theatre New York City on March 9, 1922. The subtitle of this play is ‘a comedy of ancient and modern life in eight scenes’. This play had also been adapted for film production and Alfred Santell had directed the film *The Hairy Ape* in 1944.

The play can be called an existential allegory, as existentialism asserts ‘I am nothing but my actual existence which exists in reality’. Yank who is the protagonist of the play does not possess any quality or merit by birth. In *Hairy Ape*, in the beginning Yank feels that he belongs to this world but he becomes disillusioned when Mildred comes in his life and calls him a beast, who does not belong to her society. From that very point Yank starts feeling a sense of hopelessness, that where does he belong on this earth. Yank longs for belongingness in the society. He is in an ardent search for identity but he fails to find the meaning of his existence. Ultimately he is killed by an ape in a cage.

Yank, the protagonist of the play and the coal stoker at the ship calls himself the ‘hairy ape’. According to him, he has an attitude of Rodin’s “the thinker”. He gets deeply hurt by the reaction of Miss

Mildred, the daughter of the owner of the ship and decides to take revenge from her. This aggression causes annoyance in Yank and in that hostility he goes to the zoo where he meets an ape and addresses him as his friend. For him the Ape becomes the symbol of his own oppression, and decides to release him so they two may release from this oppressive world: "wanter wind up like a sport 'stead of croaking" slow in dere?" "I'll take yuh for a walk down Fif Avenoo" Then he shakes hands with the Ape, but the Ape crushes his ribs and Yank falls down and realizes that now he is finished, "Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fint in?" And therefore at the end stage direction says that, "perhaps the Hairy Ape at last belongs"(Hairy Ape).

Yank's tragedy is the result of his failures to find belongingness in the society where the world has divided men into two parts, the rich and the poor. The character of Yank as per the norms of Sartrean philosophy, tries to find the aim of his life, as he takes freedom to choose and sense of responsibility with him to find the truth of his existence. According to Sartre, human existence, responsibility, and freedom are interconnected and man has the freedom to build his future. Yank feels a sense of responsibility towards his co-workers. He says:

YANK: Who makes dis old tub run? Ain't it us guys? Well den, we belong. Don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat's all. (4 loud chorus of approval. Yank goes on) As for dis bei' hell - aw, nuts! Yuh lost your noive, dat's what. Dis is a man's job, get me? It belongs. It runs dis tub. No stiffs apply. But yah're a stiff see? Yuh're yellow, dat's you (Hairy Ape 44)

The theme of belonging in this play reflects one of the norms of existentialism philosophy that, man is alone in this absurd world with the sense of hopelessness. In the New York Herald Tribune (Nov. 16, 1924) O'Neill says:

Hairy Ape was propaganda in a sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way. Thus, not being able to find it on earth nor heaven, he's in middle, trying to make peace, taking the worst punches from both of 'em This idea was expressed in Yank's speech. The public saw just the stoker, not the symbol, and the symbol makes the play either important or just another play Yank can't go forward, and so he tries to go back. This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to "belonging either. The gorilla kills him. The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and will always be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the Gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to belong. (Clark 84)

The question of belongingness to this world is apparent throughout the play. In the beginning of the play Yank is shown as a 'being for-itself', who lives in 'bad-faith'. As he gives importance to his social role of a coal stoker and thinks that he belongs to this world of ship where everyone listens and appreciates him. His ignorance and his failure to see his human reality as he in a 'being in-itself' first, he meets with a tragic end of his life. In the scene eight, he finds a sense of belongingness with an ape, who looks like him exactly. He talks to the ape, as if the ape is his friend:

YANK... Sure, I get yuh Yuh challenge de whole world, huh? Yuh got hat I was sayin' even if yuh muffed de words. (Then bitterness creeping in) And why wouldn't yuh get me? Ain't we both members of de same club-de Hairy Apes?....

On'y yuh're lucky, see? Yuh don't belong wit 'em and yuh know it. But me, I belong wit 'em-but I don't see? Dey don't belong wit me, dat's what, get me? Tinkin' is hard- (Hairy Ape 86)

His despair, that he does not belong anywhere except the cage, and his anguish to overcome the question of his existence bring him close to his death as it is presented in the last scene where he opens the door of the cage to meet the ape and he dies due to the murderous hug of the ape and again Yank fails to find his loss of sense of belongingness and the absence of any Godly figure marks the loss of faith and loss of hope in Yank.

The protagonist of this play appears as the victim of an extreme frustration that may be personal or caused by the external factors and this frustration further leads to tragic end. It also focuses on ‘the poignancy of the human struggle to discover the meaning of life’. Themes like, existential question, class-conflict, disappointment and violence can be identified in this play. This play presents a comprehensive picture of a mechanized world, where modern man faces the psychological, spiritual and social problems.

As Sartrean philosophy is essentially a philosophy which centres upon man, his freedom, and his choice and O’Neill’s *Hairy Ape* also deals the problems of modern man’s life like, alienation, loss of hope and, search for truth. Yank’s journey revolves around the search of essence and search for existence. He thinks that he has the fixed essence in this world as he has the conception that without him this ship can’t sail on the water.

Hairy Ape focuses upon two major concerns, “human existence in a burgeoning industrial society and existence itself”. It is asserted that, existentialism deals with human’s existence. This philosophy answers the questions like, what is it to exist? What are the problems of existence? How does one define his or her moral existence in an infinite, eternal universe? Sartre existentialism can be used to answer the question in the play, *Hairy Ape* as Yank is depicted as a modern existential being who is ‘troubled, thwarted, and embattled by consciousness, and uncertain about his existence’.

Yank like an existential being searches the truth of his existence and he confronts anxiety. He feels alone and devoid of any support. Yank’s existential question, ‘where d I fit in?’ is a running motive for O’Neill’s characters. O’Neill presents the play in two sections, protagonist on the ship and in the city. Yank on the ship is the man who lives with self ‘being-for-itself’. He is coal stoker, who is playing his role but unaware of his ‘bad-faith’ that, he is first a human being whose existence is more important than his role as a coal stoker. This play presents two different views of Yank: “the man of steel aboard ship and the man of anxiety in the city”. In his anxiety he starts interrogating the Self, that where does he actually belong. In the second part of the play in the city, he eventually reaches the point where he starts discovering the futility and absurd condition of his quest. It was not only the quest for identity, in fact it becomes the quest for ‘self’. His deep despair and the anguish depict the dilemma which the twentieth –century man faces. This dilemma is the result of shattering of faith in the machine and the world of materialism.

Yank, the hairy ape is a symbol, which symbolizes the primitive man, who has a quest for identity and his place in the society. Yank also stands as a symbol of everyman as through his character the dramatist shows the basic alienation of a man. The alienation of self, which is social as well as spiritual. As in the essay, “Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*: a symbolic representation of modern man’s predicament” of the book, *Eugene O’Neill: A Critical Spectrum*, the critic Nagendra Kumar quotes O’Neill’s opinion:

Yank is really yourself, and myself. He is every human being But, apparently, very few people seem to get this. They have written, picking out one thing or another in the play "how true it is. But no one has said 'I am Yank Yank is my own self Yet that was what I meant him to be. His struggle to. "belong, to find the thread that will make him part of the fabric of life as we are all struggling to do just that.

One idea I had in writing the play was to show that the missing thread, literally, the one that binds our understanding of one another (cited in Bhagwat S. Goyal, 1975:181). (Maheshwari 118)

His death signifies the death of compassion and O'Neill employs Yank as a tool to satirize the contemporary American civilized society. With the techniques as sound effect and monologues, O'Neill presents the existential plight of Yank in the play.

The Sartrean concept of freedom is echoed in this play too, as Sartre says that, "man is committed to be free". Yank and his other co-workers celebrate their freedom as one of the characters. Therefore, Yank's tragic end shows the condition of the modern man, who suffers from conflicts; psychological, spiritual as well as social. Although O'Neill's focus is upon the conflict between two stratum of the society and Yank's search for identity, yet this concept of identity is not as important as the search of one's Self. The loss of one's Self is more dangerous than the loss of identity. The last line of the stage direction announces the victory of Yank's journey to find truth as Long says in the scene one:

...this is 'ell. We lives in 'ell, Comrades-and righ enough we'll die in it. (Raging) And who's ter blame, I arks yer? We ain't we wasn't born this rotten way. All men is born free and ekal.... (Hairy Ape 44). Yank "slips in a heap o the floor and die. The monkeys set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs" (Hairy Ape 88).

Therefore, Yank's death was the ultimate aim and essence of his existence in this absurd world.

Thus, it is to be concluded that through the character of Yank, O'Neill presents a tale of a modern existential being who starts his search of belonging in this world, and ultimately his anxiety, despair and the loss of faith in God cause the end of his existence on this earth. According to existentialism man has to create meaning of his life by his own. Yank tries to redefine his existence. But in that search he fails to escape from his doubts and confusions, thus resulting in another tragedy.

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