

## ANALYSIS

*The Hairy Ape* (1922)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

"O'Neill believed he had an important idea to propound in *The Hairy Ape*, and the idea was charged with his very personal sense of man's alienation in the modern world. In this play he experimented with dramatic style and form not for the sake of theatrical virtuosity, at which no man was to prove more adept, but for the sake of self-expression. 'Self-expression' is, of course, a big word, but it is not too big for a playwright who always tried to find theatrical projection for his inner tensions and spiritual quests. O'Neill was even willing to exhibit these in the inchoate or half-crystallized form in which they appeared to him, thus exposing himself to the charges of excessive emotionalism and callow thinking. Such criticism was inevitable, once he began to do more and more of his groping in public.

In *The Hairy Ape*, fortunately, O'Neill's metaphysics has the advantage of a loamy substratum of reality. The person of the heroic stoker, Yank, is ultimately transformed into the abstraction Man as the play moves on. But before Yank is thus abstracted by O'Neill, the two-fisted stoker possesses a lyric vitality. He is half man, half symbol... O'Neill, as he explained to the press, regarded the play as '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.... Yank can't go forward, and so he tried 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 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 the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt to 'belong.' How far *The Hairy Ape* actually sustains this interpretation and benefits from it can prove a subject for lively debate.

O'Neill himself insisted on the value of his interpretation, writing in the *New York Tribune*, 'The public saw just the stoker, not the symbol, and the symbol makes the play either important or just another play.' He was quite correct, although his explanation does not necessarily indicate the only level on which the play can be followed. The theme is 'not belonging.' Yank is not just the abstraction Man, but the abstraction Worker or Proletariat. Yank discovers that he doesn't 'belong,' and this is his situation whether he is conceived as Man in the world of Nature or as Worker in the world of modern industrial society. Even the early, seemingly ultra-realistic scenes in the hold of the ship, scenes which were strikingly new in 1922 to a public only recently weaned from the genteel tradition, are poetically evocative; they are an example of realism theatrically displayed to create an emotional and symbolic effect.

Because O'Neill used realistic material and vigorous colloquial dialogue in *The Hairy Ape*, it is one of his most satisfactory early experimental plays. For all its allegorical implication, it has a rich texture virtually throughout; even the distorted, Expressionistic part beginning with Scene V, on Fifth Avenue, is anything but abstrusely presented. This may explain the play's power and the fascination it holds for persons who are not prepared to say that they understand or accept the author's argument. Poetically, however, they do of course understand—and probably also accept. That is, they experience the play as a metaphor of modern experience—of alienation in the universe and in society. It is not as a system of ideas that we can approach *The Hairy Ape* but as a felt distress for which O'Neill's ideas form nothing more than a sort of algebraic notation. O'Neill's mood here is saturnine and uncompromisingly pessimistic. It is a mood that rarely left him when he contemplated the world at large and man's chances in it.

Writing about *The Hairy Ape* in 1947, George Jean Nathan remembered its 'theme of despairing humanity gazing blinded at the stars.' It is, indeed, the large measure of frustration that playgoers were most apt to recall. But they were able to remember it, fortunately, in the context of driving drama and in an atmosphere of angry, broken light. The play radiated a febrile magnificence that made many an intellectually sounder play seem inconsequential. When, in later years, O'Neill's boiler-room explosions

began to take longer, they also tended to become tamer, and O'Neill was to lose, at times, one of his most attractive early qualities—his unreconciled fierceness in negation.”

John Gassner

*A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller*  
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 817-18

“*The Hairy Ape* opens as Yank, a powerful and illiterate stoker on an ocean liner, is boasting and ranting to his shipmates in the forecabin. Yank, all muscle and little mind, is a personification of brute energy, of the vigorous animal element in human nature. Although his mates complain of their back-breaking and ill-paid work in the stokehold, Yank exults in it and sets a dizzy pace for the others. He knows that ‘he makes it go’; not only the ship, but the whole civilized world is driven by energy supplied by him and his fellows. He scorns religion, home, bourgeois standards, everything but his satisfaction in his brute labor.

In the second act, however, a doubt is planted in his mind through an encounter with a passenger on the ship, Miss Mildred Douglas. Mildred, whose capitalist father owns the ship along with most of the steel business of the world, is bored with her sheltered and artificial existence; she has tried to find escape in social work, but this has proved synthetic and unrewarding. Aboard the ship she feels a desire to see how ‘the other half’—the stokers in the fireroom—live. Through her father’s prestige she persuades an officer to take her below. Yank, in the midst of one of his exultant and profane tirades, is startled to see her appear suddenly before him. For her part Mildred is terrified by the glimpse of real life she has seen; it is too powerful for her. She gasps in horror and cries to be taken away. The encounter has a profound effect on Yank. He tries to recapture his former exultation in his strength, but he cannot forget that another human being has seen him as a horrible and disgusting beast. Ashore in New York, he sets out to determine just what his place in the universe is.

He is obsessed with a desire to find some class, some group, to which he can ‘belong.’ Snubbed by Fifth Avenue church-goers, he then rejects in turn the insidious Marxist temptations of his Communist shipmate Long; he can feel no class hatred for the rich whose existence seems to him to lie in another universe. He tries to join the I.W.W., but is thrown out as a suspected provocateur when he proposes to blow up the capitalistic world with dynamite; again he does not ‘belong.’ In the final scene he visits the zoo and liberates a gorilla, which he hopes will accept him as a companion since humanity has rejected him. But the gorilla crushes him and runs away; Yank, dying, creeps into the empty cage, symbolically accepting the status of a caged and frustrated animal which he has actually been from the beginning.

Specifically a personification of brute energy, Yank is in a broader sense a symbol of mankind itself. Inexorably tied to his animal origin, man still aspires toward a higher existence; his basic search is for a realm to which he can ‘belong.’ Yank, failing to find this home in the higher regions, attempts to descend into the animal world. The unthinking brutes, however, destroy him as an interloper. Man is forever condemned to live an existence midway between the animal and the divine.”

Donald Heiney

*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 344-45

“Evolution is the idea behind both *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* and...while in the latter we see a man vainly trying to evolve, in the former we see him looking back at the stage he has evolved from. I would add that the Darwinian philosophy is less important than the psychological implication, which is the same in both cases: namely, regression. To be sure, Yank does not regress. It is O’Neill who regresses; and we with him. People who talk lightly of O’Neill the able seaman forget that his visits to stokeholes and waterfront dives were the slumming of an ex-Princeton undergraduate and son of a Broadway celebrity....

*The Hairy Ape* has many of the merits of *The Emperor Jones* and the first act of *Anna Christie* but also marks the appearance on the scene of Eugene O’Neill the Intellectual. You only need to read it once through to gather that an explanation is expected of you. You only need to read it a second time to discover that the explanation has been supplied by the author in his dialogue. You only need to read it a third time to

realize that this is precisely what is wrong with the dialogue. Perhaps for a brilliant reader three readings would not be needed, but for most, surely, the phonetic spelling will conceal for a while the far less uncouth mentality of the author. One cannot help thinking that the uncouth accents are only a device to cover intellectuality. Yank would not have talked about 'belonging.' The conception comes from the intelligentsia who have talked of nothing else for the past hundred years."

Eric Bentley  
*Major Writers of America II*  
(Harcourt 1962) 561-62

Michael Hollister (2015)