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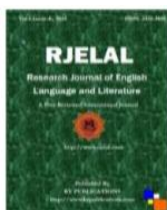


The Search for Self: Belongingness and Existential Crisis in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*

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ABSTRACT

Eugene O'Neill's drama depicts humankind in continual struggle and enduring suffering. His protagonists yearn for a sense of belonging, yet their aim remains elusive and comfort is scarce. The heart of his tragedies lies in the very nature of human existence which is marked by persistent self-awareness and internal conflict. It is fundamentally a tale of an individual's isolation and their intense, unfulfilled longing for a place to call home. A lack of understanding of oneself leads inevitably to misfortune as reflected in literary characters of his plays. This paper examines the existential quest for belongingness in Eugene O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape*. O'Neill depicts a tragic framework around Yank, a working-class protagonist, who is alienated both socially and spiritually. The analysis focuses on how the search for identity and the failure of self-recognition manifests as existential dilemma, shaping both the character's inner psyche and his outward actions. Drawing on critical perspectives, the study illustrates O'Neill's unique synthesis of realism and expressionism, highlighting the play's relevance as an American existential tragedy.

Keywords: Belongingness, Existentialism, Alienation, Capitalism, Identity

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Introduction

O'Neill's characters consistently seek to know their real identity and his protagonists strive to find their rightful place within the larger framework of existence. In *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill successfully combines elements of realism and expressionism to portray humanity's futile quest for meaning in the modern age. The play stands as the first American existential tragedy as it explores the theme of self-alienation and the unsuccessful attempt to find belongingness in a world that is overwhelmingly harsh, cold, and dominated by the impersonal forces of materialism. The idealized vision of America is tainted by the corrupting influences of capitalism. The myth of democracy is sabotaged by systemic inequality, exploitation, and spiritual depletion. The

paper attempts to examine the theme of belongingness in *The Hairy Ape* and to explore O'Neill's dramaturgic strategies such as realism and expressionism in dramatizing the struggle and psychological trauma of modern man. It attempts to explore the impact of industrial capitalism on personal and collective identity.

O'Neill's own admission to critic Joseph Wood Krutch, "I am interested only in the relation between man and God"¹ (Krutch11) signals his larger philosophical vision in drama. He is interested in the individual's relentless search for identity and belonging within a fragmented, indifferent universe. Doris V. Falk, in her pivotal work *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*, underscores the peril of self-ignorance that pervades classical literature from

Orestes to Hamlet. This lack of self-knowledge finds resonance in the existential turmoil of Yank. For Falk, the "failure to know oneself"² (Falk 28) is both life's and drama's core tragedy, culminating in self-destruction.

Discussion

At the centre of the play is Yank Robert Smith, a stoker on a transatlantic liner. Yank is a strong and commanding figure who firmly believes that he belongs to the transatlantic liner where he works. His role as a stoker makes him powerful and dominant within the stokehole. He perceives himself as their leader and the most evolved individual among them. To the other stokers, he represents the very force and energy that drives the ship. Proud of his skill and strength in his trade, Yank asserts that the ship's operation, and the safety of its passengers, depends entirely on his energy. He confidently claims that he belongs to the ship. He contrasts himself with the capitalist class, whom he believes have no strength to match his. Yank is content in his environment; he is unaffected by concerns of religion, fate, or society and shows no regard for beauty, as these are irrelevant to his way of life. He lives in the present moment without attachment to the past. He considers himself, a man whose presence moves the world. His entire sense of identity and existential belonging is rooted in this belief. He equates himself with the unyielding strength of steel. He feels that his raw, primal power transforms raw materials into steel.

The stockers view themselves primarily as a collective group. This strong group identity reinforces Yank's own sense of belonging. In stark contrast stands Mildred Douglas, a pale and fragile young woman whose father is the president of the Steel Trust. Unlike Yank, who identifies with the working class, Mildred belongs firmly to the capitalist elite. Her main interest lies in toying in social work. She is the daughter of the Steel Trust president, a powerful man who also chairs the board overseeing the ocean liner where Yank, Paddy, and Long are employed. Mildred realizes she lacks the strength and vitality that steel embody; she feels like merely a manufactured product of her wealthy background. Curious about life beyond her privileged world, Mildred wishes to understand how the less fortunate live. She wants to know about the working class and the deprived. To satisfy this curiosity, she

accompanies an engineer and goes down to the stokehole. Determined to step outside her comfort zone, she ventures down into the stokehole despite her fear and apprehension.

Mildred descends into the stokehole and watches Yank appear in all his might, silhouetted against the glowing furnace as he sweats and shovels coal into the fire. Overwhelmed, Mildred is at a loss for words and visibly shaken. Gazing at Yank in horror, she is unable to fully grasp the grandeur of his monstrous strength. She disgustedly refers to him as a "filthy beast"³ (Eliot 214). Yank, slow to understand the situation, is profoundly affected by her exclamation. Her words crush the foundation of his identity and the belief that he belongs to the ship. This encounter represents a clash between two entirely different worlds. Yank feels deeply insulted in the heart of his work station. Having identified himself with his physical power, the comparison to an animal becomes humiliating. The confidence Yank once held collapses under the weight of Mildred's scornful remark. Later, he confides to his friends, "I was scared, get me?"⁴ (Eliot 214). Up until this moment, Yank had lived without much thought on his selfhood but now, forced by this experience, he begins to reconsider his place in the world.

Yank has a powerful urge for revenge, which drives him to venture to Fifth Avenue to confront first the woman who insulted him, and then the society she symbolizes. However, he finds himself face-to-face with a world to whom he was non-existent. This rejection deepens his identity crisis. In a moment of rage, Yank assaults a passerby by knocking a lamp post down, only to be arrested and thrown into jail. It is here, in confinement, that Yank confronts the harsh truth of his existence. The strength he once attributed to himself, symbolized by steel, is revealed to be an illusion. Steel, which he believed connected him to the industrial world, now feels like a prison. He realizes that the power he thought was his belongs to others, not himself. Where steel once symbolized engines, ships, and buildings, it now appears as cages, cells, locks, bolts, and bars. The memory of Mildred's words haunts him and his subconscious gradually accepts the painful reality that he is a 'Hairy Ape'. In this sorrowful existential dilemma, his search for identity leads him to the conclusion that, like himself, all the prisoners are mere apes.

His search for belongingness takes him to the IWW office, but the IWW rejects him. This rejection makes him realize that the real source of his conflict lies not merely in the society but within himself. Yank discovers that he cannot fully belong either to the world of steel or to the larger social order. His final resort is to cling to the only identity he feels he can accept—the image of the ape. He cannot return to the human world, nor can he embrace a truly animal existence. As a result, he is forced to seek communion with the animal world itself. He finds himself pushed outside society entirely, until he finally ends up seeking connection in the zoo. Each stage of his journey takes him farther away from the world of the elite and closer towards a lower realm where he hopes to find some sense of belonging. O'Neill presents this descent as a powerful dramatic expression of existential failure. Yank arrives at an impasse where he can move neither forward nor backward. His spiritual regression thus becomes the inevitable fallout of his existential crisis.

Yank suffers deeply from not feeling accepted within a community, leading to a profound loss of belongingness. This psychological state reflects a lack of meaningful ties to any social group or relationship. Belonging is a fundamental human need that goes far beyond casual acquaintance; it provides security, support, and a sense of significance. In contrast to those who find affiliation with groups or individuals, Yank is unable to establish such bonds. His isolation embodies the language of existentialism, rooted in alienation, loneliness, and the absence of purpose. Existential thought, particularly as expressed by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Sartre, describes angst—the anxiety born of human freedom, responsibility, and detachment from social connection. For Yank, this absence of belonging makes life appear empty and meaningless, intensifying his solitude and disorientation in the world. This results in confusion and uncertainty, both of which define the existential crisis that consumes Yank. He has no one to confide in, no supportive relationships, and no sense of shared humanity. While characters like Paddy retreat into the past and others cling to their own illusions and roles, Yank is left stranded in painful isolation.

Critical interpretations repeatedly address the play's expressionistic use of language and setting. The repetition of 'belong' in Yank's dialogues and the

clipped, broken phrases symbolise his agitation and alienation. The grotesque imagery of imprisoned gorillas and caged men allude to the psycho-spiritual deadlock facing the modern individual. The ambiguous ending, "And perhaps the Hairy Ape at last belongs,"⁵ (Eliot 260) implies that true belonging is unattainable. Yank, emerges as a tragic figure whose yearning for identity and social recognition leads to psychological torment and ultimate self-destruction.

In examining the play's central question, where does Yank belong, the study reveals how existential crisis operates through social ostracism, spiritual dislocation, and the troubling interface between man and machine. The analysis foregrounds Yank's evolution: from self-assured leader in the stokehole, relying on brute strength and group solidarity, to a broken individual exposed to scorn and isolation by the capitalist world. A strong theme of dehumanization and spiritual desolation, emphasizing a loss of individuality, creativity, and connection to nature and community runs in the play. Yank's existence is demeaning, stripped of dignity and creativity, signifying a life drained of vitality and personal expression. There is the absence of nature's regenerative, enlivening, and preserving essence. This leads to spiritual depravity without natural or nurturing influences. The creative instincts and sexuality are misplaced in dehumanizing industrialized society. There is no communal relief and no religion which provides a spiritual nourishment that helps individuals adapt and thrive.

O'Neill moves beyond simple social protest to expose the metaphysical core of alienation. The existential dilemma emerges: Yank is unable to return to his community and forge new bonds so he retreats into the animal world as his sole option for belonging. However, this final gesture is itself ironically futile, for the ape's deadly embrace confirms his outsider status not just in human society but in the natural world too. The search for meaning thus ends in tragedy, underscoring the absurdity of existence and the impossibility of true belonging.

Yank's psychic disintegration dramatizes O'Neill's conviction that "the answer to their need is not found in any mystic force outside themselves,"⁶ (Parks 98) but within the "vast and foggy realms of their own unconscious"⁷ (Parks 98). Hubert Zapf highlights the dialectical reversal in the play—where

steel, initially an image of strength and belonging, becomes a symbol of entrapment and existential prison (Zapf 38). Doris Falk's commentary extends this symbolism to broader philosophical and anthropological planes, seeing Yank as an emblem of "Everyman's search for existential belonging"⁸ (Parks 98). C.W.E. Bigsby's interpretation of the ship as microcosm focuses on its purposelessness and the artificial pleasures of the wealthy, while the labourers are spiritually and physically bent by their mechanized roles⁹(Bigsby 48).

Through these features, the play raises powerful ethical and philosophical queries: Can man achieve authentic self-knowledge in an alien world? Is social integration possible for those cast out by class, fate, or destiny? Is there transcendence beyond suffering and exclusion, or is death the sole resolution to existential anxiety? The tragic ending, coupled with the ambiguous final line, leaves these questions suspended, implicating both individual destiny and collective historical circumstance.

Conclusion

O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* powerfully interrogates the problem of belongingness, situating the quest for identity at the heart of existential tragedy. Through the character of Yank, the play dramatizes the failure of self-recognition, the agony of alienation, and the futility of integration in capitalist modern society. The tension between psychological desire and social reality is rendered philosophically. The study demonstrates that belongingness, for O'Neill, is not merely a sociological concept but a metaphysical struggle—one that unfolds through pain, isolation, and existential questioning. Yank's fate illustrates the broader human predicament: estranged from both society and self, condemned to search for meaning in a world resistant to order and harmony. In this, *The Hairy Ape* remains a vital text for understanding the existential anxieties of modern man.

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