

# Highlight of the Tragic Theme of "*The Hairy Ape*" by Expressionist Techniques

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## ABSTRACT

**"*The Hairy Ape*" is Eugene O'Neill's masterpiece of expressionism and one of his representative works of experimental tragedy in his second dramatic career. This article explores the tragic fate of modern people who are homeless and rootless by analyzing various expressionist techniques used in the play, such as visual effects, symbolic techniques, inner monologues, masks, etc., thus highlighting the tragic theme of "*The Hairy Ape*".**

**Keywords:** expressionism, visual effects, symbolism, interior monologue

## I. INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill was an American dramatist in the early 20th century and was hailed as "American Shakespeare". Eugene O'Neill is the founder of American national drama. The critics once pointed out: "Before O'Neill, there was only theater in the United States; after O'Neill, there was drama in the United States." He was the creator of modern American drama and wrote more than 50 plays in his life. He transformed the shallow American popular drama of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and made American drama embark on the path of serious and tragic creation. Mr. Arthur Miller, a contemporary American dramatist, gave O'Neill a very high rating, saying: "In fact, he read the books, he was familiar with Chinese philosophy and German philosophy, and began to seriously study ancient Greece. He is an outstanding writer."<sup>1</sup> Ancient Greek tragedy has great influence on Eugene O'Neill's dramas.[4]<sup>P128</sup> "*The Hairy Ape*" is Eugene O'Neill's masterpiece of expressionism, which explores the theme that ordinary laborers in modern Western society cannot find their home and fall into a spiritual wasteland.

## II. THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF EXPRESSIONISM

The term expressionism first appeared in the 1901 exhibition in Paris, France, and was the general title of a group of oil paintings by French painter Julian Elvi. After 1914, "expressionism" became a recognized

literary and artistic genre and was widely used. This artistic trend first appeared in Germany. Great German artists such as Dürer, Gruenewald, Bach and others used expressionist techniques in their works to reveal the inner essence of things and explore the needs of the hearts of the characters. It has a direct and far-reaching impact on various fields of modern literature and art, but its highest achievement is reflected in the field of drama. The rise of expressionism is the first major impact and breakthrough on the realism drama model. By distorting reality, the character's inner world is externalized, that is, visualized, and nakedly displayed on the stage to reflect the social reality in a zigzag manner, seeking the true meaning of life. [3]<sup>P167</sup> In the theater world, expressionism is a rebellion against realism and naturalism. Its main feature is the use of abstraction, transformation, masks, symbols, monologues, absurdity and other techniques to reveal the essence of things and display eternal truth. Ed Schmidt declared in the "Expressionism in Creation" called the Manifesto of Expressionism: "It must reflect the image of the world purely and accurately, and this image only exists in ourselves." [1]<sup>P153</sup> O'Neill used various forms of drama to externalize the character's mind and expose the true nature of life.

## III. THE APPLICATION OF EXPRESSIONISM IN "*THE HAIRY APE*"

The theme of "*The Hairy Ape*" has obvious social significance, that is, it directly or indirectly reveals real social problems, and discusses the fate and social value of contemporary people. The protagonist Yank finally failed to find his own destination. This tragic theme is mainly revealed through the following expressionist techniques:

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Miller: "Strong Desire for Greatness", "New York Times" Book Review, November 6, 1988.

### A. Visual effects

The expressionist approach focuses on digging into the inner world of the character, and the visual effect is to make the inner world of the character "visualization", so as to make mind be felt. In *"The Hairy Ape"*, this technique is mainly through the background design of the stage, leaving people with a specific visual effect to externalize the character's psychology.

The drama *"The Hairy Ape"* is advanced layer by layer around the protagonist's psychological development process. From the initial optimism to the hesitation to the pain to the final despair, the exposure of these psychological activities can be found on the stage. Yank is a furnace worker on the ship. The first part of the drama is the real scene, but it has a symbolic meaning. The front deck is like a cage, and the hearth is like a human prison. Because of his rough appearance, he was nicknamed "Hairy Ape", but this did not affect his recognition of himself. He worked hard on the front deck, full of vitality. A dominating power radiated from his body, as if the world could not function without him. This positive and optimistic image left a deep impression.

It wasn't until one day that a white lady named Mildred accidentally saw this "hair ape", and she was fainted, so that Yank began to doubt his identity and his belonging. He felt hesitant. In the eyes of others, was him really a hairy ape? In the fifth scene of *"The Hairy Ape"*, on Easter Day in New York, Yank wobbled on the Fifth Street Avenue where nobles gathered in New York City, retaliating against the nobles and trying to scare them. This is the externalization of the spirit of the protagonist's mind. From these behaviors and scene changes on the stage, the audience can feel the development process of the character's psychology.

Helpless, those gentlemen and wives turned a blind eye to him, and disregarded him, but his toughness could not help the indifference of these "weak" people to him, which made him feel even more painful. Finally, he admitted that he was really a hairy ape, and his companion was not a human, but a hairy ape. So he came to the zoo and tried to be with the gorillas in the cage. Unexpectedly, he didn't find a place there. Instead, he was scratched by the "companion" gorilla he recognized to death. The zoo embodies the society's distortion of the character's character and spiritual alienation, and the real cage is the external visible object of the protagonist's pessimism and despair.

O'Neill, like an excellent magician, transforms the characters' complex psychology, ideas, etc., into real and perceptible visual images, thereby truly expressing the inner world of the characters in the works.

### B. Symbolism

Symbolism is an important expressionist technique. It focuses on depicting personal phantoms and inner feelings on the subject matter, emphasizing the use of textured images and methods of suggestion, foiling, contrast, and association. In O'Neill's *"The Hairy Ape"*, a lot of symbolism is used. The characters, events, and stage backgrounds are all images and have corresponding symbolic meanings. Through these symbolic images, the protagonist's abstract and complex inner world is vividly conveyed to the audience.

The subtitle of *"The Hairy Ape"* script is "Eight Comedies About Ancient and Modern Life". It describes the tragic life of Yank as mail ship boiler worker, a symbolic drama created with expressionist techniques. In the play, the cruise ship symbolizes modern society, and the people on board represent people of different classes in society. The protagonist Yank means Americans, the representatives of all people. As a boiler worker, he symbolizes people in the steam age, full of strength and courage; as a "hairy ape" in people's hearts, he symbolizes the entire human race. O'Neill once said, "The hairy ape is a symbol of humanity. He has lost the harmony with and nature of the past, and he has not been able to gain peace of mind. In this way, he will not be able to go up and down, but will be suspended in midair ...". [6]<sup>P66</sup>

When Yank came to the zoo to talk to the hairy ape, he said that the hairy ape was locked in a cage made of steel, but he was an ape trapped outside the cage. The "cage" here is a symbol of human living environment. Although Yank is outside the real iron cage, he is imprisoned in the iron cage and has no freedom. The struggle of Yank trapped in an iron cage symbolizes the painful process in which human beings are imprisoned in a capitalist society, struggling to pursue, find themselves, and desire to get out of trouble.

In front of Miss Mildred, who was like a "white ghost", Yank felt his "nameless, unfathomable, naked, shameless animal nature". He was confused and angry, so he rampaged on the street and was locked go to jail. He went to the "World Federation of Industry" and only got a swear and beating. He realized that he was alienated and rejected by humans. He had no choice but to work with the hairy ape to seek a sense of belonging. So he came to the zoo to "confess" the gorilla, but he died in the gorilla's strong hug. This failure to "return to the ancestor" further highlights that Yang Ke is the victim and victim of the capitalist system, a symbol of "dislocation" of all modern people, and a symbol of the loss of self and the inability to find a home. [3]<sup>P67</sup> O'Neill himself pointed out the universal significance of

the protagonist Yank as early as 1922, saying: "Yank is indeed you, and myself. He represents everyone."<sup>2</sup>

In the hug of hairy ape, Yank's muscles was broken and he crumbled to the ground. Before he died, he said these words: "I have no past to remember, nor can I count on in the future. There is only one now, and that does not belong to me." "I'm finished." "Lord, where did I come from, and where should I go?" This despair is a symbol of the tragic fate of human beings who are at a loss and are extremely miserable and helpless. Yank's experience reflects human tragedy: in creative labor, people lose as much as they get, or even more. Human struggles out of ape nature, freeing himself from the animal world and hoping to become the master of the world; human struggles endlessly with nature and the limitations of human himself, transforming the world and transforming and perfecting himself In the era of sailing ships to the era of steam engines, but human has become more and more servants of the world he has created. In a new sense, he has returned to his starting point and become apes. The work is to express the author's deep thinking: where do people come from, where do people go. It reflects the spiritual wasteland of the United States and the entire world in the early twentieth century when people were isolated in spirit. In this indifferent and lonely world, people have no sense of belonging, there is no home to go back, no roots to find, and people have no home.

The use of these symbolic techniques has made the melancholy and tragic colors of the work "*The Hairy Ape*" fully revealed, giving a deep impression.

### C. Inner monologue

Interior monologue is the ancestor of the stream of consciousness. [2]<sup>p37</sup> It evolved from the monologue in the drama. It is a kind of discourse method of dialogue, monologue and narration of the original drama lines, that is, the voice lines in which the characters in the play express their emotions and wishes alone. Inner monologue is one of the main techniques of stream of consciousness writing. Analyzing it, this concept can be decomposed into three meanings: "inner heart", "independence", and "speech": "inner" heart is silent, continuous silent language or psychological awareness activities; "independent" is alone, silent psychological space; "speech" means confession, dependent on language. To sum up, "inner monologue" is silent language awareness. In the process of using the inner monologue, the author retreated behind the scenes, and everything was shown by the character's consciousness, which made the reader feel real and profound, as if entering the character's soul directly. Shakespeare, a famous British Renaissance dramatist, wrote four tragedies. One of them, "Hamlet", is famous for his

inner monologue of "The Melancholic Prince". "To be or not to be, that is the question." The prince's indecision was shown to the audience through his inner monologue without concealment. In the history of world drama, playwrights usually emphasize character portrayal rather than inner monologue. However, expressionist drama pays much attention to inner monologue as an important means to reveal the inner activities of the characters and tap the consciousness and subconsciousness of the characters.

In "*The Hairy Ape*", O'Neill makes extensive use of inner monologue. Through the protagonist Yank's self-talk each time, his inner conflicts, contradictions and the process of his mind gradually being distorted have been externalized. However, this thought process is usually unconscious, illogical, and sometimes even intermittent. This feature is consistent with the stream of consciousness method represented by Joyce in the later period.

In the last scene of "*The Hairy Ape*", Yank walked to the zoo at night to talk to the gorilla as if this animal was his only friend. He talked like a gorilla about the loss and hesitation in his heart, and the gorilla also seemed to react to him, but in fact this is Yank's inner monologue, because his listening object is an animal, not a person. His inner monologues are fickle, sometimes sober, sometimes confused, sometimes full of anger, and sometimes very painful. This not only rendered Yang Ke's difficulty in finding his own position in society and his own tragic situation, but also enhanced the tragic effect of the drama. Here are some excerpts from Yank's inner monologue:

Ain't we both members of de same club — de Hairy Apes? (They stare at each other — a pause — then YANK goes on slowly and bitterly.) So yuh're what she seen when she looked at me, de white-faced tart! I was you to her, get me? On'y outa de cage — broke out — free to moider her, see? Sure! Dat's what she tought. She wasn't wise dat I was in cage, too — worsen'n yours — sure — a damn sight — 'cause you got some chanct to bust loose — but me — (He grows confused. ) Aw, hell!

The insult on the ship made Yank unhappy and unhappy, and he began to think about his position. Yank identified himself as an ape, at least for the "damn" white lady. So Yank came to the zoo to "recognize relatives." He saw himself as an ape outside the cage, and his situation was worse than the gorilla in the cage. Because the gorilla in the cage still has the opportunity to be released and free, but he is like an insect that is fixed on the wall and can't move. Because there was an invisible hand in life, he was suffocated by the grip and it was difficult to escape. There is no love and being loved, no telling and listening. In this spiritual wasteland, he found the original form of

<sup>2</sup> Editor-in-chief of Toby Kerr: "Playwrights on Dramatic Creation" (New York: Hill and Wang Press, 1961), p. 236.

human being — hairy ape — "intimate". He called the world hell and classified the hairy apes as kindred.

I ain't on oath and I ain't in heaven, get me? I'm in de middle tryin' to separate 'em, takin' all de woist punches from bot' of 'em.. Maybe dat's what dey call hell, huh?

Yank believes that he is neither in the world nor in hell. He has been tortured between the two. And in the end he found a way out — death. On the occasion of his death, he left the last paragraph:

Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant a 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.)

"Comedy" itself gives the work a sense of irony. Yank finally found his own destination in hairy apes by death. This "return" to animal is an expression of the "return to ancestor" phenomenon. It also symbolizes the return of modern civilization in the Western society to the original state, which symbolizes the degradation and transformation of modern civilization in Western society. O'Neill said with deep feelings: "The root cause of all the malpractices today is that the old God is dead, and science and material civilization cannot provide a new God to satisfy people's remaining primitive religious instincts, making people feel alive and meaningful." This is also the general mentality of Westerners being disappointed in reality. So it is exaggerated to say that the 20th century is a century of mythological revival. The mythological model traces its roots, hoping to return to the primitive and ignorant world, which is consistent with Lao Tzu's "return to baby" and "return to pure"

#### D. Mask

The mask is one of the expressionist tactics that O'Neill often uses. He uses the mask to reveal the inner conflicts of the characters more deeply, to visualize and concrete the invisible thoughts, and to show the adaptive changes that people must make to survive. O'Neill has used masks many times, believing that "a person's external life is spent in the loneliness caused by other people's masks, and a person's inner life is spent in the loneliness contributed by his own mask". [3]<sup>P169</sup> The actual scene of the first part of the play, Yank poses Rodin's "Meditator" artistic image posture, much like a guard at the gate of "Hell". The iron cage in the final scene of the show is actually a symbol of human shackles, and it is the last hell of human beings. These masks smeared the unavoidable tragedy on the protagonist and the whole drama.

#### E. Other methods

In addition to the expressionist techniques of visual effects, symbolic techniques, inner monologues, and masks, O'Neill also used contrasting and ironic techniques in "*The Hairy Ape*", such as the comparison between the real hairy apes and Yank, as well as the satire that the siblings and companions that Yank sought were actually a gorilla.

### IV. DISCLOSURE OF SCRIPT THEME

The success of "*The Hairy Ape*" is the result of the author's organic integration of realism, expressionism and symbolism. This is a good show that stirs people's hearts and souls. It was O'Neill's desperation in his final life. "The fragments of memory carved with blood and tears" were "a play" that he "finally can write in the face of those deaths with memories". It transcends the introspection of the author's personal soul, and it forces the soul of each of our readers and viewers. From each character in the play, people see themselves, which is a portrayal of the soul of modern people. O'Neill has repeatedly stated: "Yank is you and me, he is every man." It can be seen that the destiny of Yank's destiny is not only his personal tragedy, but of universal significance. This is the theme of the tragic fate of modern people discussed in the work "*The Hairy Ape*".

### V. CONCLUSION

In the history of modern American theater, Eugene O'Neill's status cannot be replaced by anyone. His appearance has made the young American drama literature recognized by the world. "Humans live in an age without faith; human dreams cannot be realized except in their own illusions; all pursuits and explorations are not only in vain, but also worthless; life is pain and death is liberation." [5]<sup>P285</sup> As a tragedy, "*The Hairy Ape*" embodies the cruel situation of human existence. People are alienated, people are alienated from society, and people are alienated from themselves. The final outcome can only be a tragedy. This is the tragedy of modern people.

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