

Existential Angst an outcome of the Modern life in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*.

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Abstract— This study surrounds the existential crisis that Yank and by extension, every man suffers due to industrialization and the fast-paced growth of society. Through Yank's descent from being the man who seems to be in control of his world to a man who is nothing but a hairy ape, O'Neill wants to portray the reality of modern life. The researcher intends to explore Yank's existential crisis due to the mechanization of society. Existential and Marxist lens are the primary lens' used in building the argument that Yank's ultimate death is a product of the dehumanization of the modern working class at the hands of the bourgeois. Yank is the mirror image of the modern man who has worked all his life but never found a place of belonging of his own. Yank's existential dilemma stems from not only having a place of belonging, nothing to call home but also a result of the exploitation he suffers in his labour due to the exploitative strategies of the bourgeois class that is ultimately contributing to his existential dilemma.



Keywords— Alienation, Authentic self, death as a place of belonging, Existential Crisis, Social self.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the mechanized world, man has become nothing but a machine, working to attain material objects, having no satisfaction in what he has worked for, but continuing to do so, leading to alienation. Alienation of the working class leads to an existential crisis. Yank is the mirror image of the modern man who has worked all his life but never found a place of belonging of his own. He has tricked himself into believing that he belongs to tangible objects – the ship, the steel, the fire, dehumanizing himself, all contributing to the repressed reality, ultimately, he does not belong. The evolution of the modern world began with industrialization, with rapid industrialization, the upper class has evolved over the labour of the working class, preventing their evolution, and alienating them in their labour (when there is no job satisfaction but the job prevails). Yank's alienation is a bit more complex and heart-wrenching. Yank associates himself completely with the ship and he believes that he "we belong" (O'Neill 10), which is true, that it's his and the entire working class' labour that the superstructure is

surviving and thriving on. However, he has no place of "belonging" and that is his alienation. He has repressed his dehumanization and tricked himself into believing that he moves the world, as if he is the apex creature in the hierarchy of society. The reality is the complete opposite of this, he is nothing but "a hairy ape" in the eyes of the bourgeois world, a primitive ancestor who is surviving due to his primal instincts- his strength to move the ship.

II. A MAN'S SEARCH FOR BELONGING.

According to Sartre, death removes and takes away meaning from one's life but in Yank's condition, death is the only place where he can belong because Yank's present situation is hell with no place of belonging. Yank's existential angst stems from the reality that death and the afterlife which Sartre in "Being and Nothingness" calls meaningless, as nothing can be experienced after death becomes absurd because O'Neill through his stage direction hints, "[He slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkey set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And,

perhaps, the Hairy Ape, at last, belongs.]” (O’Neill 34), that perhaps Yank belongs in death, this puts forth the notion that Yank and through him every man’s only consolation is that he would belong after death. Death could only become meaningless if there is some meaning to one’s life. Life could be meaningful if there is a place of belonging, a sense of belonging.

Sartre believed that ‘existence precedes essence’ giving importance to the Self over the associations the ‘self’ is known for. This idea boosts one’s self-perception, I exist and so “I” comes before my qualities or my work, this makes the individual important, and adds meaning to life. However, Yank does not belong because he has attached his identity to his essence, “I’m part of de engines!” (O’Neill 11) in his physical prowess, he has associated himself, and his essence with objects, dehumanizing his existence.

Yank does not have a home to return to. There are only two instances in the entire drama where Yank speaks of his family both someways showcase that as a young boy, he was exposed to the ugly side of the family, he says, “I runned away from mine when I was a kid” (O’Neill 9), “Home was lickings for me dat’s all” (O’Neill 9) or when he remembers his parents going to church to ask forgiveness for their sins and then later physically abusing him, “dey bot’ jumped on me for somep’n. Dat was where I loined to take punishment” (O’Neill 22).

These instances suggest that Yank is disillusioned with the institution of family.

Family never gave a sense of belonging to him, it was never a home to him. As a result, he experiences, he feels a sense of detachment from his fellow stokers who speak of returning home or returning to the love of their lives. Yank does not feel the need to love a woman as he suggests that ever since he ran away from home no one has liked him since then (O’Neill 9), this hints at the fact that Yank has somehow internalized the idea that he could never be liked.

Yank also experiences disillusion towards religion, believes there is no heaven, and does not like the conversation about the Bible (O’Neill 9-10). This is a prevalent theme of modern life, disillusionment from religion, as religion no longer provides solace. His hatred could also stem from a lack of change in his circumstances, the absurdity of waiting for God to change his life, he might have been an ardent believer once but no change in his situations must have hardened him against religion. Religion is also an important aspect as it serves as a morality clock governing man’s life choices. O’Neil, creates a character who does not believe in the abstract

concept of God and, therefore attaches himself to the concrete ship.

Yank does not feel a sense of companionship with his peers. His peers appear to be divided into two factions one with those following the beliefs of communism like Long who calls fellow stokers “Comrades” (O’Neill 9) a common thing among the followers of communism. He assumes the position of the organic intellectual who points out the problem in the current system, “This is ‘ell. We lives in ‘ell, Comrades – and right enough we’ll die in it” (O’Neill 9). An intellectual ideology of ship being hell, hinting at the oppression they have suffered at the hands of the bourgeois alienating them from their jobs. The second faction comprises the people of the first generation like Paddy who come from a past wherein work and the individual each held their worth and man and nature co-existed harmoniously. “Twas them days men belonged to ships, not no. ‘Twas them days a ship was a part of the sea, and a man was part of a ship, and the sea joined all together and made it one” (O’Neill 11). This makes Yank an outsider as he belongs to neither of the factions. This highlights the extent to which Yank has been outcasted.

However, Yank does not belong to the ship, he so believes moves because of him. The ship is a symbol of capitalism, a symbol that Milred’s father represents – the capitalist society. The characters of Paddy and Long recognize that they are being exploited, they are nothing but a source of profit for the bourgeois, almost making them the ‘organic intellectual’ that Gramsci speaks of, however, they fail before the ideology of Yank for whom ship represents him, it is his only identity, a concrete one that he takes pride in. The ship is a symbol of his strength he believes without him the ship is nothing. He fails to recognize that in a mechanical society, his labour is replaceable, he is replaceable. Ironically O’Neill in *The Hairy Ape* calls Yank the “Rodin’s Thinker” (O’Neill 18) this adds to the humorous tragedy of modern life, that a man who fails to recognize his dehumanization and compares himself to an object assumes the position of the Thinker, who is referred as an intellectual.

The critic Robinson says, “Social Darwinism caused men to idealize man’s struggle against nature” (Robinson 105). To reiterate in Yank’s case masculinity is associated with struggling and survival and therefore there’s belongingness in it. Yank takes a lot of pride in his physical prowess and that is the reason why he belongs. He considers himself as one with iron, “de engines” (O’Neill 11), or when he says, “Steel was me and I owned de woild” (O’Neill 32). He feels emasculated when Mildred calls him a “filthy beast” (O’Neill 17).

This begins a domino effect where Yank realizes he does not belong to the ship, he has been exploited by the capitalist society into feeling proudful over his dehumanization something that Robinson says, "The working-class Primitive Masculine identity in which he gloried is revealed to him as a subject to manipulation by a higher, invisible authority against which it is futile to revolt" (Robinson 105). Douglas, Mildred's father represents the higher authority in this situation. An authority that represents the bourgeois and Mildred somehow becomes the catalyst in the recognition. However, as Robinson mentioned it is a futile fight against an authority that has long established and maintained the cultural hegemony over a prolonged period through the ideological apparatus they have ingrained in strong individuals like Yank, for Yank this apparatus suggests that he belongs because it is his strength that moves the world. To reinforce their ideologies, they keep the workers engaged in nothing but work, "Dis a man's job, get me? It belongs" (O'Neill 10).

Yank's reaction to this recognition leads to anger, a primary emotion that Yank responds to in any given situation. Yank directs his anger from Mildred to what Mildred represents; the capitalist class. Here on, Yank begins his fight to belong in the society that considers him nothing but a brainless ape (O'Neill 32). He begins his plan of action by searching for the source of his emasculation and existential crisis; that is Mildred and by extension the capitalist society. However, Yank's approach towards the technologically advanced society is rather primitive, based on his physical strength. Yank fails both in the endeavour to reconcile with his past identity of steel and the vengeance he harbours towards the capitalist world. He is faced with the reality that he does not belong even on "Fifth Avenue Street", a bourgeois hub, because not only do they "avoid the spot where he stands in the middle of the sidewalk" (O'Neill 24) but they also maintained the farce of etiquettes, "I beg your pardon" (O'Neill 24) to maintain the discourse and express their superiority, thus justifying their status. They ignore his sheer existence with the recognition that he comes from a working-class background, which is very evident from his clothes. This further adds to his alienation and exposes him to the harsh reality of his oppression further adding to the existential angst. By exerting his physical dominance, he wanted to assert his masculinity and by extension, his belongingness but the treatment he receives at Fifth Avenue Street adds to his awareness that he does not belong among the bourgeois.

He does not belong even in the Blackwell Island jail. Blackwell Island represents the coercive technique of the capitalist society to maintain hegemony. It is a

rehabilitation center, "a coop" (O'Neill 25) as fellow inmates state. A place for domesticating the individual who fails to adhere to the rules of the bourgeois or those who threaten their dominance. Most of the individuals here have already been domesticated, but Yank becomes an oddball, almost an outcast in this coop because he believes, perhaps he belongs to the zoo, "Dis is de Zoo" (O'Neill 25). The zoo would represent wilderness, thus hinting at his wild actions which the society is failing to regulate through coercion. Although they succeed in achieving control over him through their ideology, which further alienates him, and when the realization set in, he became out of control, almost harmful to their existence.

He does not even belong among I.W.W, that is, Industrial Workers of the World. This association is working against the oppressive capitalist class, and therefore, the right place for an alienated individual like Yank to associate with, but this association is made up by 'the traditional intellectual. Although they believe they are detached from the capitalist class their actions are definitely governed by them and they are very much a part of this group. This group fails to provide Yank with a sense of belonging as he wants to attain justice immediately. The I.W.W works towards educating the working class about their oppression, educating them about the philosophy of communism. They use peaceful means to agitate against the bourgeois class, but Yank is driven by the only force that governs his intellect; his survival instincts of kill or be killed, thus failing to belong with the I.W.W. His existential dilemma becomes evident after being failed by every human association or the ship – all concrete and tangible concepts, or the abstract concept of God, he recognizes the problem is that "I was born, see? Dat's de charge" (O'Neill 33), questioning his existence.

Yank realizes that he does not belong with his labour, on the contrary, he has been manipulated to work although there is no job satisfaction, he has been oppressed, and his labour has disillusioned his existence, which leads to the search for his lost identity. This journey should have begun when a child is in his childhood or adolescence, the question with whom do I belong? Yank does not belong to his contemporary society because this society now relies heavily on machines whereas Yank heavily relies on his strength. Yank does not belong among the divided factions of his peers because there is a recognition of oppression among them, with some resorting to the reminiscence of a time when man was free, others resorting to the ideology of communism and Yank belongs to none. Yank's existential angst represents every man's reality- the search for the authentic self in the wake of the alienation suffered at the hands of the social self makes him a universal figure. Yank's final encounter with the ape is his way of trying to

search for his existence in the ancient past of his ancestor; the Ape. From the very beginning of the play, Yank's physical features are described in close association with an ape, "pounding on his chest, gorilla-like" (O'Neill 17), or the comparison to a Neanderthal Man (O'Neill 6) makes him want to search for his authentic self in the past. However, he understands that he has never truly lived or experienced the past, therefore, he cannot belong there, he says, "Sure, it was great stuff. I got it aw right – what Paddy said about bein' de right dope—on'y I couldn't get IN it, see? I couldn't belong in dat" (O'Neill 33).

It is in the eighth scene, where Yank acknowledges himself as the hairy ape succumbing to the pressure of society as a result of the failure of domestication and the failure of Yank to find the authenticity of his existence. There is the recognition that he does not belong with the ape but also the acceptance of the identity of a hairy ape. Yank, then is a modern ape, as he has physically evolved from the ancestor, in that sense he is a 'man', but he has failed to evolve existentially, however, it is hinted by O'Neill that although the ape is a degenerate in the modern world as he has failed to evolve but, existentially he is in sync with his authentic self, as seen through his interaction with the ape. He says to the ape, "Yuh're lucky, see? Yuh don't belong with 'em and yuh know it. But me, I belong wit 'em – but I don't" (O'Neill 33).

This inability to identify with the past or the present makes life hell, "I ain't on oath and I ain't even 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" (O'Neill 34). He neither belongs to the present earth nor the past heaven and therefore his existence has become hell. The hell Yank speaks of is not a literal hell or the hell mentioned in the religious texts, rather this is a metaphorical hell created by man himself. This is an existential hell, created in the mind preventing the individual from appreciating the experiences of life when Yank says, "Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me" (O'Neill 32). This existential hell is a product of Yank's alienation from the steel he so believed was him. The recognition of this reality torments Yank, up until he did not know the steel, he believed was him, the blindness of it gave him a make-believe triumph over the world. The epiphany of oppression struck his very ownership and diminished him to nothing but a degenerate, clinging to his physical prowess (essence), while he has no identity to call his (loss of existence). As a result, he tries to cling to the identity of an ape to find some comfort in connection to the past, "God's masterpiece, would soon degenerate back to the ape" (O'Neill 28).

Yank's existential inferno could be best explored through the lines of Guido from Dante's *Inferno*,

/If I thought that my reply would be to one/
who would ever return to the world, /
this flame would stir no more; and yet, since
none — /
if what I hear is true — ever returned /
alive from this abyss, then without fear /
of facing infamy, I answer you. (Dante 61-66).

III. CONCLUSION

These lines explain Yank's existential crisis, this existential inferno prevents Yank from returning to normalcy because no one has been able to return once they have entered hell. It's an abyss that consumes the life out of an individual. It isolates him from the past that he has heard of and never experienced but it isolates him from his present as well, that is why, when Yank frees the ape in the eighth scene he wants to reconcile with the ancestor as a way to pull himself out of the inferno that is feeding on his physical existence but fails because no one has been able to escape it. The inferno isolates him from his present because his evolution has been stunted somewhere in the middle of the past and the present making him unable to connect with his present reality. He is a creature who relies both on his past survival instinct (a residual product inherited from the ancestor); his physical prowess and the present association with the steel (his essence), but he has no form of human connection important for identity formation, thus making it impossible to escape this hell.

The only escape then available for Yank, although Sartre might disagree is death. The inferno created by the deprivation of existence or any meaning to that existence has made Yank disillusioned with the world. O'Neill's last comment in the play suggests "[He slips in a heap on the floor and dies. The monkey set up a chattering, whimpering wail. And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape, at last, belongs.]" (O'Neill 34), that there is some meaning in his death. There is some profound sense of belonging in his death, the answer to where he belongs; Yank belongs in his death. The same understanding that Camus wants the reader to believe in Sisyphus' eternal punishment of rolling the boulder, there is some satisfaction that he attains although his life is absurd, there is hope in that punishment.

Similarly, although there is no experience in death there is some consolation that he has found a place of belonging in death. His death is the end of his existential crisis but it is an outcome of the mechanization of the world, where those

who own the means of production exploit the labour of the workers, and maintain the hegemony through their manipulative ideologies, alienating the worker, thus taking all meaning out of their life. They become a 'living machine' programmed to perform the task over and over without any incentives making fruitful life experiences appear mundane and monotonous, stripping the individual's authentic self, adding to their alienation, and transforming their life into an inferno with no place of rest. The shattering of Yank's illusion of belonging to the world sets in motion his futile fight against a well-established and enrooted authority to his ultimate descension into hell. Thereby portraying Yank's existential angst as an outcome of the modern capitalist world.

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