



Eugene O’Neill: A Transcendent Figure in the Annals of American Literature

With Reference to: Expressionism in *The Hairy Ape*

Radhika verma

Abstract

The present study explores the works of Eugene O'Neill, an iconic figure in American literature whose contributions significantly shaped modern American theatre by integrating realism and expressionism. O'Neill's work is notable for its profound psychological depth, where he intricately examines human struggles, social alienation, and existential conflicts. His experimental style, blending intense emotional inquiry with innovative dramatic techniques, brought a transformative energy to the American stage. Expressionism, as a literary and dramatic technique, is central to O'Neill's work, particularly in his play *The Hairy Ape*. This technique allows for a deeper exploration of themes explored by the author in a piece of literature. By examining *The Hairy Ape* through an expressionistic lens, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of O'Neill's influence on both American drama and the evolution of expressionism as a technique in literary and theatrical arts.

Keywords: American Literature, Drama, Theatre, Eugene O’Neill, Expressionism, Realism, Industrialization, Belongingness, Identity, Alienation.

Introduction

From the founding of Jamestown in 1607, American literature has embodied the resilient spirit and tenacity of early settlers, characterized by courage, industriousness, and an unwavering optimism in the face of adversity. The struggles for survival—marked by harsh living conditions, persistent conflict, disease, and starvation—were poignantly chronicled by figures such as John Smith, William Bradford, and John Winthrop. Confronted with the myriad dangers of colonization, these early Americans ventured forth with a steadfast ambition to pioneer and define a new frontier. In contrast, drama emerged as a nascent art form in 18th-century America, a time when the nation was increasingly yearning for freedom and independence. American playwrights, including Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, captured the essence of life with remarkable honesty, reflecting its stark realities. Although theatrical productions had been woven into the fabric of American life since the 18th century, it was not until the period between 1910 and the late 1920s that drama began to establish itself as a significant branch of contemporary literature, transcending its previous

role as mere popular entertainment. This era witnessed a maturation of the genre, as innovative American theatre sought to challenge and redefine the landscape of theatrical production, often standing in stark contrast to the conventional offerings on Broadway.

Eugene O'Neill

Eugene O'Neill, born in late 19th-century America during a time of profound national transformation, was a pioneering figure in American theatre. He was the first playwright to regard the stage as a serious literary medium. In recognition of his significant contributions to the field, O'Neill became the only American dramatist to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936, underscoring the lasting impact of his work on the landscape of American drama. To write about O'Neill is to delve deep into the birth of American drama. He was held as the 'American Shakespeare' and the pioneer of American National drama.

O'Neill, born as the third son to his parents experienced a complete absence of stability throughout his upbringing. He accompanied his father on extensive acting tours that further heightened his instability. His aspiration for a happy and fulfilling life was gradually crushed from early on. Both his parents passed away prematurely. He attempts suicide before being institutionalized. Over his 65 years, he witnessed his brother's death, severed ties with his daughter and one son, endured suicide, battled terminal illness, and went through three marriages. By then his dream of fulfilling life was long extinguished providing him with a harsh realisation of the American Dream's demise, though too late to rescue his own hopes.

He resided during an era fraught with turmoil, where sustenance for mankind was scarce and even resembling 'a heap of shattered images.' He reflected upon the connection between humanity and the divine, yet the ancient deity had perished. By 'God' he referred to all the internal and external forces that govern the human psyche. The absence of stabilizing core resulted in the loss of innocence in his life. His comprehension of the depth and agony of discard surpassed that of anyone else.

O'Neill embarked on the journey of writing plays. He sought to elevate theatre beyond mere amusement, aiming to create works that would resonate deeply and offer introspection rather than just provide a temporary escape for audiences. His close associate Edmund Jones, encapsulated the significance of theatre for O'Neill with the following words:

To me, theatre is a light that blind people are made to see for the first time. The theatre is a dream that the audience comes to behold. The theatre is revelation.

From the outset, O'Neill focused on the psychological complexities of his characters, prioritizing their internal struggles over their external circumstances. He masterfully created metaphorical settings that illustrated the emotional states of his characters, allowing audiences to experience their inner turmoil. His personal circumstances served as the catalyst for conflict, and he wielded his imagination as a tool to unveil truth on the stage. O'Neill's creative energy stemmed from his yearning to elucidate life complexities.

Despite the tragedies in his life, Eugene O'Neill recognized the significance of theatre as a legitimate space for exploring profound ideas. His belief in the power of drama to engage with serious themes shaped his

influential contributions to American theatre. He molded his plays from a deeply personal viewpoint, exploring tragic family dynamics that spiraled into a life of instability culminating in a state of destructive illusion, alienation, and false consciousness. He was an unwavering experimenter, constantly exploring new techniques of expression. He initially started as a realist but quickly merged realism with symbolic and suggestive modes.

He crafted realistic narratives centered on individuals who endured challenging lives, reflecting his own experiences—an approach that was relatively rare at the time and garnered him significant praise. He authored 51 works in total and received numerous awards for his contributions, including the Nobel Prize in Literature. He intricately wove his narratives within the backdrop of his family's struggles and conflicts, drawing inspiration from his own experiences to add depth and authenticity to his story telling. His outlook on life was inherently characterised by tragedy, reflecting a deep understanding of human suffering, adversity and the intricate complexities of existence. He predominantly crafted tragedies reflecting his deeply tragic perception of life. He held the conviction that a truly meaningful life inherently bore the mask of tragedy. In his view, the nobility of existence resided solely within the realm of tragedy.

Eugene O'Neill wrestled with conflicting desires, one urging him towards solitude and privacy, while the other compelling him to articulate and defend his existence to the world. Writing plays required significant time and effort, and his rising fame made it increasingly difficult for him to find solitude. He needed an environment conducive to creativity and focus. To achieve this, he relocated to a newly designed home, specifically crafted to facilitate his work. This space was so effective that he was able to complete six of his most renowned plays within just seven years. Through his literary works, he both revealed and obscured facets of his identity, presenting a complex interplay between self-disclosure and concealment. In 1930, Sinclair Lewis defined Eugene O'Neill's place in American culture:

"[O'Neill] has done nothing much in the American drama save to transform it utterly in ten or twelve years from a false world of neat and competent trickery to a world of splendor, fear and greatness ... [he has] seen life as something not to be neatly arranged in a study, but as terrifying, magnificent and often quite horrible, a thing akin to a tornado, an earthquake or a devastating fire."

Eugene O'Neill was born into a period of profound transformation in American society. The nation was still reeling from the Civil War's devastation, which had left its people exhausted. At the same time, the American economy was embarking on a new path toward industrialization. Major industries were rapidly emerging, outpacing native competitors and accumulating significant wealth and power, in many ways embodying the ethos of the American Dream. The swift westward expansion and settlement across the continent fueled explosive economic growth, though it also led to low wages for industrial workers who labored in inhumane and hazardous conditions. This shifting landscape in American civilization catalyzed the emergence of new literary themes and forms. In fact, writers like Mark Twain and Henry James began to produce works that reflected these evolving social realities, marking a distinct shift in American literature.

William Dean Howells championed realism in literature, emphasizing the need for a truthful depiction of life in English, European, and American writing. This approach encouraged authors to explore how individuals form their identities within familiar landscapes, often shaped by forces beyond personal control. The two world wars marked an era of profound change, propelling the United States into a thoroughly modern nation. World War I left Americans skeptical of policies and governance, as socialist and communist ideologies gained traction. The Great Depression then deepened these social challenges, followed by World War II, which catapulted the U.S. to a position of significant industrial and political power. During this period, literature increasingly examined political and social conflicts, especially addressing class disparities and tensions arising from the Great Migration and the rapid expansion of industrialization in the wake of the wars.

Expressionism

A literary movement analogous to Expressionism in the visual arts emerged under the philosophical influences of Dionysian ideas, Hellenic traditions, and Nietzschean thought. This form of Expressionism found fertile ground in theatre, where numerous playwrights experimented with its principles, exploring subjective reality, emotional intensity, and existential themes. This technique allows dramatists to depict an inner reality, revealing the soul or psyche of their characters. Emphasis shifts from external events to inner experience, with action moving fluidly across space and time to mirror the character's thought processes. The narrative dives deeper into the subconscious, internalizing action, and prioritizing the inner workings of the character's soul over external events.

In ideological terms, expressionism in theatre initially emerged as a form of protest drama, reacting against pre-war authoritarian structures within family and community, the rigid social order, and the industrialization and mechanization of society. It became a forceful depiction of youth's struggle against the constraints of age and a demand for freedom over authority. However, in its core techniques, expressionism has remained a powerful, enduring influence in the evolution of modern drama, connecting figures such as Strindberg, O'Neill, Brecht, and O'Casey in a lineage of innovation and vitality. Although Eugene O'Neill is widely recognized for his contributions to realistic drama, he was also the first American playwright to introduce expressionist elements into his work. Drawing from the core design principles of expressionist theatre, O'Neill utilized sets and props to craft symbolic and impactful sound and lighting effects. His techniques included the use of memory sequences, dreamscapes, and fluid shifts in time to evoke an inner reality, exploring the psychological depths of his characters in a style that transcended conventional realism. Giving his own views on expressionism O'Neill once remarked,

As I understand it, expressionism tries to minimise everything on the stage that stands between the author and the audience. It strives to get the author talking directly to the audience..... The real contribution of the expressionist has been in the dynamic qualities of his plays. They express something in modern life better than did the old plays.

The Hairy Ape, a play by O'Neill published in 1922, structured in eight brief, intense scenes, is an expressionistic tragicomedy that examines the tensions of modern industrial society. The play narrates the

story of Yank, a brutish, unreflective labourer, who faces a crisis of identity that propels him into a state of both mental and physical decline. As the protagonist, Yank's once robust self-assurance is irreparably disrupted by his encounter with Mildred, a character who embodies the upper class's disdain for the working class. This encounter marks the beginning of his alienation and eventual descent into outcast status. O'Neill elucidated his views, stating that *The Hairy Ape* was propaganda in the 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.

In the stage directions for the first scene, O'Neill explicitly indicates that the settings are designed to be entirely expressionistic. This intention highlights the use of non-realistic, symbolic elements to convey deeper emotional or psychological truths, a hallmark of expressionist theatre. It is unequivocal that the design of the first scene, the firemen's stokehole, is intended to evoke the imagery of a cage. O'Neill states,

The room is crowded with men, shouting, cursing, laughing, singing- a confused inchoate uproar swelling into a sort of unity, a meaning- the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage. Nearly all the men are drunk. Many bottles are passed from hand to hand. All are dressed in dungaree trousers and heavy ugly shoes. Some wear vests, but the majority are stripped to the waist.

The treatment of this scene, or any other scene in the play, should by no means be naturalistic. The effect sought after is a cramped space in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel. The lines of bunks, the uprights supporting them, cross each other like the steel framework of a cage.

Yank's portrayal in *The Hairy Ape* represents a critical moment in his existential journey, marked by a sharp confrontation with his self-identity and social status. Initially, Yank exhibits a profound sense of belonging to the industrial world, viewing himself as an integral part of the machinery in the stokehole. His confidence in his physical power and his identity as a laborer are embodied through his actions: shouting, cursing, and pounding his chest, resembling a primal, almost animalistic force. This aligns with the broader theme of dehumanization in expressionist drama, where characters often grapple with the loss of individual identity in a mechanized, oppressive society. The encounter with Mildred Douglas is pivotal in triggering Yank's existential crisis. Mildred, a sociology student from a higher social class, represents a worldview that sees Yank as inferior. Her fainting and her labelling of him as a "filthy beast" symbolize the intense alienation he feels when confronted with someone who perceives him as an object of revulsion, rather than an equal. This moment marks the onset of Yank's awareness of his social position, which shatters his previously held belief in his strength and sense of belonging within the industrial system. This encounter with Mildred functions as a catalyst for Yank's search for identity. Prior to this moment, Yank identified himself with the industrial machine, feeling a deep connection to the steam, smoke, and steel that constituted his world. After this insult, he begins to question his place in society and his relationship to the world around him. His reaction to

Mildred's judgment is not just emotional, but deeply psychological, representing the rupture of his sense of self. He is no longer able to reconcile his physical power with the social hierarchy that now excludes him.

Yank's struggle with belongingness is central to his alienation. The moment of humiliation represents the breakdown of the identity he once held, leading him to embark on a futile quest for a new place in the world—one where he can belong. His inability to resolve this crisis underscores the play's central themes of existential disillusionment and the individual's search for meaning in an indifferent and mechanized society. Yank's reaction to Mildred's insult is a critical turning point in his psychological and existential journey. He is fueled by a desire for revenge against Mildred. The insult she inflicted on him becomes symbolic of the larger social system that marginalizes him and others like him. Yank's quest for vengeance is not merely personal; it represents his broader desire to assert his worth and to challenge the social structure that he now sees as oppressive. In his mind, seeking revenge on Mildred is a way of reclaiming his dignity and reaffirming his sense of power, which has been deeply shaken by her rejection. As Yank says,

I scared her? Why de hell should I scare her? Who de hell is she? Ain't she de same as me? Hairy ape, huh? [*With his old confident bravado.*] I'll show her I'm better'n her, if she on'y knew it. I belong and she don't, see! I move and she's dead! Twenty-five knots a hour, dat me! Dat carries her but I make dat. She's on'y baggage. Sure! [*Again bewilderedly.*] But, Christ, she was funny lookin'! Did yuh pipe her hands? White and skinny. Yuh could see de bones trough 'em. And her mush, dat was dead white, too. And her eyes, dey was like dey'd seen a ghost. Me, dat was! Sure! Hairy ape! Ghost, huh?

After his humiliating encounter with Mildred, Yank embarks on a futile quest for revenge and self-validation, which leads him to Fifth Avenue—a symbol of the upper class and the world that has rejected him. His experience in Fifth Avenue further deepens his sense of alienation. As he strives to make connections, he is met with cold indifference and rejection from the people he encounters. This social isolation reinforces his growing realization of the chasm between the working class, which he identifies with, and the upper classes, who view him as inferior. His attempts to break through this barrier are in vain, and each interaction serves as another defeat in his quest for belonging. Yank's next attempt to find meaning comes through his encounter with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Hearing of the IWW while in prison, Yank hopes that this radical labor movement might offer him a sense of purpose and solidarity. However, his experience with the IWW also ends in rejection, as they, too, cast him aside.

At this point in the play, Yank is a man who no longer fits within the framework of society. He is rejected by the upper class, cast aside by the labor movement, and unable to find a space where he belongs. His isolation is complete, but he is also incapable of retreating to the simplicity of his former existence in the stokehole. The play thus depicts Yank as trapped between two worlds, neither of which will accept him. The climactic moment of the play occurs in the zoo, where Yank stands face-to-face with a gorilla in its cage. This moment is highly symbolic, as Yank addresses the gorilla as a fellow being, a "brother," with whom he believes he can forge a bond. He even attempts to lead the gorilla to Fifth Avenue, an act that symbolizes his desperate desire

to belong, to find meaning, and to make a connection with something or someone that recognizes him as an equal. However, the gorilla's violent response—wrapping its arms around Yank and crushing him to death—serves as the tragic conclusion to his search. The gorilla's brutality reflects Yank's own brutal existence and the ultimate futility of his quest for identity and belonging in a world that has rejected him.

Through *The Hairy Ape*, Eugene O'Neill explores the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and class disparity on the individual. Yank's journey reflects the struggle for identity and belonging amidst a rigid social hierarchy that denies him recognition and respect. The title itself—*The Hairy Ape*—evokes Yank's regression as he metaphorically retraces humanity's evolutionary path, ultimately identifying more with a gorilla than with modern society. This symbolic connection highlights the play's subtitle, *A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life*, juxtaposing humanity's primal origins, represented by the gorilla, against Yank's conflicted existence as the "modern hairy ape." In doing so, O'Neill critiques the modern industrial order, illustrating how it alienates individuals like Yank and reduces them to mere cogs in an oppressive social machine.

Conclusion

Hence, Eugene O'Neill introduced new dimensions to American playwriting by addressing complex psychological, social, and existential themes. Through his innovative use of expressionist techniques, O'Neill expanded the boundaries of American theatre, moving beyond realism to engage with the inner lives and crises of his characters. In *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill utilizes expressionism to dramatize the alienation and dehumanization of the working class. The play's symbolic settings, rhythmic dialogue, and stylized, exaggerated gestures serve to externalize the psychological turmoil of its protagonist, Yank, who confronts the harsh realities of an impersonal industrial world. The use of surreal, mask-like imagery and dream-like sequences underscores Yank's profound isolation and his futile search for identity and belonging within a rigid social hierarchy. Thus, O'Neill's expressionist approach in *The Hairy Ape* not only captures the existential plight of individuals estranged by modern society but also affirms his status as a pioneering force in American drama, whose work continues to resonate with themes of alienation, identity, and human dignity.

References

- O'Neill, Eugene. *The Hairy Ape*, Namaskar Books, 2022.
- E. Porter, Thomas. *Myth and Modern American Drama*, Wayne State University Press, 1969.
- S. Oliver, Egbert. *American Literature*, 1966.
- Biggsby, C.W.E. *Modern American Drama*,
- Styan, J.L. *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Volume 3, Expressionism and Epic Theatre*, Cambridge University Press. <https://books.google.co.in/>
- Eugene O'Neill- An Introduction- Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site (U.S. National Park Service) <https://www.nps.gov/euon/learn/historyculture/eugene-o-neill-an-introduction>.

Bogard, Travis. *Contours in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1972.

[Mathias Sparr \(Author\)](#), 1999, *Expressionistic Elements in Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape and The Great God Brown*, Munich, GRIN Verlag, <https://www.grin.com/document/94694>

