

Revisiting The Hairy Ape: Ecocritical and Post-Humanist Perspectives

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Abstract

This study employs a post-humanist and ecocritical lens to examine *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill, elucidating its ecological insights and critique of early twentieth-century industrial capitalism. While the play has been traditionally analysed through Marxist and Existentialist frameworks, it appears promising to an ecocritical eye as it reveals industrialisation's impact on human and non-human worlds. The analysis utilises various concepts such as Arne Naess' Deep Ecology, Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, and Peter Singer's Speciesism. Using these interpretive frameworks, the study foregrounds industrial alienation, exploitation of nature, and speciesism in the play. *The Hairy Ape* is revealed as a poignant display of degeneration, where each and every entity (human or non-human) subservient to the (industrial) Man is reduced to a mere exploitable resource. Furthermore, the study explores the parallels between ecological exploitation and class-based oppression, both emblematically represented by the central character, Yank. Blurring the distinction between human and non-human under industrial capitalism, *The Hairy Ape* offers fresh interpretive possibilities that can positively inform contemporary ecological discourse.

Keyword: The Hairy Ape, Ecocriticism, Deep Ecology, Speciesism, Post-Humanism

Introduction

Eugene O'Neill is often considered a pioneer of modern theater in America. Several critics have acknowledged that his play *Beyond the Horizon* (1922) marks the beginning of modern American theater (Bordman and Hirschak 74). It has been further argued that no specific unifying factor other than experimentation defines modern American theater (Krasner 144). To that end, Eugene O'Neill's oeuvre is at the forefront. The initial works that got O'Neill his international fame and gave American theater a global and canonical presence were: *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), *Anna Christie* (1921), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), and *The Hairy Ape* (1922) (Wilmeth & Bigsby 292). All these plays showcase an unwavering commitment to experimentation, employing techniques such as psychological realism, symbolism, expressionism, etc.

The Hairy Ape stands out as it reaches the furthest in its form, style, and thematic depth experiments. The play follows the journey of Yank, a beast-like man, working as a stoker on a transatlantic ocean liner, extremely proud of his rough job. But when a wealthy woman faints after looking at him and calling him a 'filthy beast', Yank is disillusioned. He embarks on a distressing quest, looking for something to identify with. He experiences alienation in all the social classes, in all the movements, and even amongst the apes of the zoo, where he is the most hopeful, eventually meeting a tragic end. The bold use of abstraction, expressionism, and industrial alienation makes the play a unique avant-garde work. The existential exploration of the modern man who experiences a deep disconnect from society and the self, using the ape as a metaphor for primal instincts, and the subliminal influence of these instincts on man's sense of self in the machinery of the concrete jungle, establishes *The Hairy Ape* as a landmark in American theater.

Literature Review and Research Gap:

Several studies have been conducted on *The Hairy Ape* from the lens of Marxism and Existentialism. Farhoudi and Zolfaghari call the play a 'trenchant critique of American capitalist culture and the ideology that promotes it' (161), while Alsanafi (20) argues that the play shows how the America of the 1920s and 30s had failed in fostering human dignity and worth. On the existentialist front, it has been shown how existence precedes essence in the case of Yank, the central character in the play (Paramagururaj and Ganesan 23). While the traditional analysis of the play has revealed significantly relevant insights, this study submits that the play

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holds untapped potential for further academic inquiry through an ecocritical lens. An ecocritical reading of the play would explore industrialisation's environmental and psychological exploits, offering fresh insights into the broader relationship between human and non-human life. Foregrounding the oppressive relationship between industry and nature, the play portrays the mechanisation of labour, which leads to a clear disconnect from nature, both spatially and internally. In the play, Yank's crisis develops into a primal struggle between the human and the non-human world, which warrants a post-humanist discussion. Moreover, the commodification and exploitation of nature run parallel to the oppression of the working class in early twentieth-century America. All these aspects suggest that the play can reveal profound insights when looked at from an ecocritical perspective, which can be of immense relevance to the contemporary world as we approach a severe ecological crisis.

Theoretical Framework

As per Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism takes an 'earth-centered approach' and deals with 'the relationship between literature and the physical environment'(xviii). Ecocritics look at the representation of nature and physical settings, and evaluate the value system of the text in relation to ecological wisdom (Ibid. xix). The Hairy Ape presents immense possibilities for this kind of analysis. This study employs three central eco-critical ideas to look at *The Hairy Ape*. Firstly, the paper utilises 'deep ecology' to analyse the text. Arne Naess, in his paper titled 'The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary' articulates deep ecology as an 'ecosophy' (a portmanteau of ecology and philosophy), presenting seven general tenets (95-98). Deep ecology challenges the normative man-nature relationship and advocates for a perception shift. The Hairy Ape resonates with deep ecology, displaying the intrinsic connection between industrialisation and unfettered ecological exploitation. Secondly, the paper also uses the post-humanist approach to understand the treatment of human and non-human elements in the play. Post-humanism challenges the traditional Western anthropocentric view, which prefers humans to other entities in the world, owing to certain distinct essential qualities of humans (Paige). The development of the condition of Yank captures a very interesting moment where the boundary between the human and the non-human is blurred. Finally, the study employs ideas from critical animal studies, posited by Peter Singer in his book *Animal Liberation*, who takes the post-humanist approach one step further. He challenges what he calls 'speciesism', finding common traits between humans and nonhuman animals, and analyses the treatment nonhuman animals have to undergo.

Analysis:

Before a closer eco-critical analysis, it is important to clarify the conceptual stance of this study regarding the treatment of the working men in the play. The study perceives the working men as part of nature in the man-nature binary. Their dehumanisation renders them not part of the industrial civilisation, but merely its instruments. The Man uses these working men to run the industrial machine, just like he uses coal and other natural resources. Hence, the study posits that the value of Yank and other working men in the play has been reduced to natural resources meant to be exploited by the Man.

Arne Naess characterises deep ecology as the 'rejection of the man-in-environment image in favor of a relational, total field image' (95). The man-in-environment is the traditional view where nature becomes a resource or backdrop for human activity. The setting of the first act in *The Hairy Ape* (O'Neill Act 1) serves as a figurative representation of this man-in-environment image, while simultaneously problematising the relationship it reveals. The firemen's forecastle emerges as a mechanised man-made space, metaphorically representing nature under human exploitation. A cage-like atmosphere is revealed through imagery showing the workers 'imprisoned by white steel' (Ibid.). This is a distorted version of nature which is dominated by Man for industrial purposes. The industrial Man exploits natural resources such as labouring men and coal, which together power the ship, a human enterprise. The intense and incessant activity of men in the room is representative of the rampant exploitation that emerges out of this man-in-environment image. Furthermore, their 'furious, baffled defiance' (Ibid.) emphasises the disconnect from the environment, forcing these men to

live in an artificial construct that subjugates them, as well as the natural world they exploit.

Although the forecastle can be seen as a distorted version of nature, the men are not exactly representative of 'civilisational humans'. They are depicted as primitive, akin to Neanderthals, which subverts the typical man-in-environment relationship, forcing the readers towards a relational view, where man and environment are interrelated. These 'hairy-chested' men with 'resentful eyes' take back humanity to earlier stages of evolution. Sharply contrasting with the modern, industrial background, this imagery blurs the lines between primal and civilisational realities. Furthermore, it also reveals that despite human domination over nature, the lower class of men is reduced to the most animalistic state. The men become akin to nature and are meant for vigorous exploitation. This relates to the 'anti-class posture' of deep ecology, which suggests that ecologically informed attitudes foster diversity, countering class-based exploitation (Naess 95-96).

In his seminal work, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Leo Marx argues that the American experience is defined by the pastoral ideal and the challenges posed by industrialism against it (4). Paddy's nostalgia echoes this exact theme.

Paddy: ... Oh, to be back in the fine days of my youth, ochone! Oh, there was fine beautiful ships them days—clippers wid tall masts touching the sky—fine strong men in them—men that was sons of the sea as if 'twas the mother that bore them. Oh, the clean skins of them, and the clear eyes, the straight backs and full chests of them! Brave men they was, and bold men surely! We'd be sailing out, bound down round the Horn maybe. We'd be making sail in the dawn, with a fair breeze, singing a chanty song wid no care to it... (O'Neil Act I)

Paddy compares this industrial world with the pre-industrial pastoral past when he was young. He remembers that men used to be clean with straight backs, referring to the dignity of labour in pastoral times. Furthermore, the romanticisation of the ecological conditions in the past, which also corresponds with better working-class conditions, reveals that the industrial world has shown utmost disregard for nature.

This struggle between the pastoral and the industrial becomes even more pronounced at the end of the third act when Mildred faints at the 'filthy' sight of Yank. Mildred looking at Yank is the embodiment of Frankenstein looking at the monster he has created. A conscience-stricken industry comes face-to-face with what it has selfishly done to nature. Mildred recoils at the raw image of Yank, who has been reduced to a natural resource meant for exploitation, which is the direct consequence of the industrial enterprise that sustains her privileges. Furthermore, these privileges, in turn, ironically equip her with the sensibilities to be repulsed at the site of the industry's irredeemable victim—the primal man.

In his famous 1975 work *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer builds the concept of speciesism to describe the moral and ethical preference that humans give to their species over others. He argues that the rationale given to justify speciesism is very similar to the rationale given to justify sexism or racism, such as superiority by virtue of intellect, physical makeup, cultural norms, etc. Problematising such stance, Singer questions this justification, and advocates for a radical reconsideration of the ethics around the treatment of non-human species (Singer 1-24).

Yank's harrowing transformation, from a proud labourer to someone stripped of his human identity, culminates in his fatal end in the gorilla cage of a zoo. This expressionist transformation from a 'superior' species to an 'inferior' one provides a ripe space for a discussion through the lens of the concept of speciesism. Yank's end as an 'ape' emphasises the deep ethical and philosophical divide between human animals and nonhuman animals, mediated by an arbitrary hierarchy decided by human animals. While it is true that Yank's transformation from a human to an ape is presented in the play as an emblematic tragedy and not as a romantic return to nature, it is revealed through the lens of Singer that this tragedy stands firm on the foundation of speciesism. It is the granted assumption of the superiority of humans over other animals, adopted by the text, that makes this transformation a fatal 'degeneration'. Furthermore, the zoo in the play serves as a pivotal location where speciesism becomes manifest. It is a space where animals are confined for human

entertainment. The door of the cage symbolises the fine line of rationale that is used to justify speciesism. Yank's attempt at identifying with the hominid in the final act, and opening the door of the cage, is an unserious and ironical attempt at subverting speciesism, which ultimately reinforces it further, leading to the 'degeneration' of Yank.

Moreover, the play also reveals a significant intersection between speciesism and social class oppression. As mentioned previously, Yank and the other working men of the play are mere natural resources meant for exploitation by the industrial Man. Hence, Yank is already an inferior species to Man, and this status is determined due to his social class in the capitalist hierarchy. Even though Yank realises his ape-hood towards the end of the play, he has always been an ape for the Man. He is being subjected to speciesism—due to his social class—from the very beginning of the play. Hence, Yank's descent into animalism is merely a late realisation of how his oppressor has always viewed him, owing to his social class.

Conclusion:

The study attempts to tap into the ecocritical potential presented by *The Hairy Ape*. A powerful testament to the experimental nature of modern theatre, the play offers rich insights into both human and non-human relational dynamics. An ecocritical lens reveals the themes of industrial alienation, environmental exploitation, and speciesism, drawing parallels between social oppression and nature's exploitation by the twentieth-century industrial society. This study highlights how figures like Yank are not only socially exploited as workers, but are also portrayed as extensions of the natural world, which reduces them to mere resources contributing to the industrial machines, which will eventually empower the industrialist, leading to more exploitation.

With a post-humanist stance, this study employs several ecocritical perspectives such as deep ecology, machine in the garden, and speciesism, to illuminate newer dimensions of the play. The study highlights how O'Neill challenges the anthropocentric world-view by blurring the boundaries between humans and non-humans. This aspect helps draw significant parallels between social oppression and the exploitation of nature. The stark contrast between the man and The Man, reveals the industrial-pastoral binary which takes several forms, such as the modern and the primitive, the civilised and the savage, man and nature, etc. Finally, the study evokes the idea of speciesism, highlighting the strong underlying presence of this arbitrary belief throughout the play.

Overall, this study transcends the traditional socio-political and existential understanding of *The Hairy Ape*, positioning it as a work with immense ecological significance. It resonates with the current concerns about environmental degradation and human alienation. This study retraces the avant-garde nature of the play, revealing its fresh literary potential, which can positively inform contemporary ecological discourse.

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