

Absurdity Theme in Eugene O'Neill's Middle Period Works:

Take *The Hairy Ape* as an Example¹

ZHOU Xiao-ping²

Abstract: In O'Neill's eyes, the mechanized industrial process of the materialistic America distorted man's spirit and divorced man from the qualities of humanity which gave him dignity and the sense of manhood. As a modern tragedian, O'Neill expressed his doubt of the mechanized society and tried to disclose the awkward situation of modern man. His description of loneliness and alienation of modern man in *The Hairy Ape* echoes the same theme in the theatre of the absurd.

Key words: Eugene O'Neill; *The Hairy Ape*; Absurdity Theme

1. EUGENE O'NEILL AND HIS WORKS

Eugene O'Neill is generally considered as the foremost American dramatist whose works reflect truly the lives and pursuits of the American people in the 20th century and reveal vividly their rich inner world. In his lifetime, O'Neill wrote about fifty plays and won three Pulitzer Prizes. In 1936, he was awarded Nobel Prize for his great contribution to world literature, which was a precedent in the dramatic history of America. Three years after his death, O'Neill, for the fourth time, was granted the Pulitzer Prize for the great theatrical success of his autobiographical play *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). Of all the American playwrights, O'Neill is today best known in England, France, Germany, Russia, and he is highly esteemed by most Chinese dramatic experts. Wang Yiqun, the famous expert in American drama, called O'Neill "father of American drama" (Wang, p.6) and commented that "What America owed to O'Neill is just like what England owed to Shakespeare, Norway to Ibsen, Russia to Chekov, and Germany to Brecht." (Wang, p.9)

O'Neill's devotion to playwriting might be roughly divided into three periods: the early apprentice years (1913-1920), the middle experimental years (1920-1934) and the late mature years (1934-1943). In the first period, the young writer composed mostly one-act plays among which *Bound East for Cardiff* and *Ile* are comparatively popular. The second period is full of experiments and surprises. Works like *All*

¹ This article is funded by Hangzhou Municipal Project of Philosophy and Social Science (D09WX14)
杭州市哲學社會科學規劃課題 (D09WX14)

² Institute of English and American Literature, Hangzhou Dianzi University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang 310018, China.
ZHOU Xiao-ping is a lecturer in Hangzhou Dianzi University. Her major research interest is in American Drama.

* Received on February 14, 2010; accepted on May 28, 2010

God's Chillun Got Wings, Desire Under the Elms, The Hairy Ape, Emperor Jones, The Great God Brown, Strange Interlude, Mourning Becomes Electra, Lazarus Laughed, and Days without End all belong to this period. In the third period, O'Neill produced mainly four plays, one one-act play *Hughie* and three full-length plays *The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into Night, and A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The style of this period was raw, spare, and utterly devoid of theatrical tricks and machinery.

O'Neill's tremendous success as a dramatist depends to a great extent upon the fact that he had something to say about the modern social order that has been worth saying. In O'Neill's eyes, the mechanized industrial process of the materialistic America distorted man's spirit and divorced man from the qualities of humanity which gave him dignity and the sense of manhood. For a period of time, man might be content with or even proud of his position in such a materialistic society. However, the loss of normal identity as a self-sufficient human being will surely smash man's spiritual world sooner or later. *The Hairy Ape* is an extreme instance of the alienation and deformation of modern man living in a cold and materialistic society dominated by mechanized industry.

2. THE HAIRY APE: A MODEL WORK IN O'NEILL'S MIDDLE PERIOD WORKS

Produced in 1922, *The Hairy Ape* is generally "considered one of the foremost achievements of expressionism of the American stage". (Hochman, p.28) Concerning the dramatic techniques and the major theme of this play, the author offered his own opinion in a letter written to his friend Macgowan:

I don't think the play as a whole can be fitted into any of the current "isms". It seems to run the whole gamut from extreme naturalism to extreme expressionism—with more of the latter than the former. I have tried to dig deep in it, to probe in the shadows of the souls of man bewildered by the disharmony of his primitive pride and individualism at war with the mechanistic development of society"... (Bogard, p.241)

The play consists of eight scenes, four in the ocean liner and four outside it, and tells the spiritual struggle and crushing of a stoker.

Yank Smith, a stoker in the bowels of a transatlantic liner, was possessed of a proud dignity that he "belongs" to his age. His confidence and self-respect was toppled for the coming of Mildred (daughter of a millionaire) who called him "filthy beast" in disgust. Bewildered and humiliated, Yank set out to seek a place where he could belong. After experienced imprisonment and refusal by a socialist cell, he finally died from a tremendous hug from a gorilla in a zoo.

2.1 Four Kinds of Cages

The society Yank lives in is a society full of cages. There are cages to cage animals; cages to cage laborers; cages to cage criminals; and cages to cage thoughts. The first kind of cage is of the zoo, the second of the ship, the third of the prison, and the fourth of the society. In the following passages, we will analyze in detail these four kinds of cages.

2.1.1 Cage of the Zoo

In the last scene of this play, the playwright described the monkey house at the zoo:

One spot of clear gray light falls on the front of one cage so that the interior can be seen. The other cages are vague, shrouded in shadow from which chatterings pitched in a conversational tone can be heard. On the one cage a sign from which the word "gorilla" stands out. (*Anthology of American Literature*, p.1130)

Superficially, this is an objective description of one corner in the zoo where gorillas are caged. Actually, it is an ingenious echo to the beginning part of Scene one, in which the stokers are crowded in firemen's forecastle, shouting and drinking. Interestingly, in the description of gorillas, we see words related to human being, for instance, "chatterings" and "conversational"; while in that of men, we find words related to animals: "beast" and "hairy-chested". This is absolutely not a coincidence but the playwright's intentional comparison by which the theme of man's alienation is clearly disclosed. Being workers of the most modernized country, how do Yank and his fellow firemen live?

2.1.2 Cage of the Ship

In the beginning of scene one, we are introduced to the construction of the sleeping place for the stokers: "Tiers of narrow, steel bunks, three deep, on all sides... Benches on the floor before the bunks... The lines of bunks, the uprights supporting them, cross each other like the steel framework of a cage." (Anthology, p.1130)

In such a cramped "cage", Yank and his fellow stokers cannot stand upright, which accentuates the natural stooping posture caused by shoveling coal. In such a shabby resting place, human dignity, politeness, sense of shame, and everything related to civilization gave way to excessive drink and endless cursing and fighting.

In scene four, one of the stokers, Paddy, a bitter man who idolizes the old fine days of clippers and cherishes the memory of the harmonious relationship between seaman and the sea, ridicules the true condition of the stokers working in the stokehole after the abrupt visit of a wealthy lady Mildred who got fainted:

And there she was standing behind us, and the Second pointing at us like a man you'd hear in a circus would be saying: in this cage is a queerer kind of baboon than ever you'd find in darkest Africa. We roast them in their own sweat— (Anthology, p.1118)

In this radical speech, Paddy parallels lady Mildred to a circus visitor, the second engineer on the ship to the circus man, and the stokers to "a kind of baboon". The stokehole is like a cage in a zoo, a group of baboons that are without thoughts or individuality are exhibited to a fairy-like or ghost-like lady who wants to "investigate how the other half lives and works on a ship" and wants to have a new thrill by visiting the dirty stokehole. Compared with the cage-like sleeping place, this cage-like working place is much more insulting. In the previous one, the stokers are human beings, however low their social position is. In the latter one, they are degraded to a kind of animal—baboon, however high it ranks in the animal world. The labourers are stripped off the last clothes of dignity: living as human beings.

2.1.3 Cage of the Prison

In scene six, two other cages appear: the prison as a bigger one and the cell as a small one. Yank is in a prison. The cell he is locked in is built up with heavy steel bars. Suddenly awakened and feeling the cold steel, Yank's first utterance is "Steel, Dis is de Zoo, huh?" (Anthology, p.1123) Obviously, he takes the cell as one of the cages in the zoo. In fact, the cell in a prison is a special kind of cages. While the cages in the zoo lock animals which might hurt zoo visitors, the cages of the prison lock individuals who cannot be tolerated by the society or the political regime.

2.1.4 Cage of the Society

Besides the above three kinds of cages, there is a fourth kind of cage—the invisible and most cruel cage created by the mechanical society: the spiritual cage that separate Yank and the like from the wealthy and aloof classes.

Before we analyze this invisible cage, let us have a look at the natural and social condition Yank lives. On the one hand, the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century tremendously pushed forward the development of the world science and technology. Till to the early time of 20th century, steam engine remains the most important motive power in the world. Various kinds of inventions of new machines reduced the intensity of labor and improved greatly human being's living condition. On the other hand, the high-developed industry caused the rising of the capitalist class, separated human beings from the nature (for instance, the stokers worked and lived in the bowels of a ship where they can see no blue sky and breathe no fresh air), and brought out waste gas, waste water, and industrial residue. In a society dominated by machine and capitalists, a group of people become the radical socialists, such as the stoker named "Long" in this play. The so-called socialists attack the corruption of the capitalist system and try to improve the economic and political condition of the working class. Another group of people become the pessimistic spectators, such as the old "Paddy" in the play. Possessed of a nostalgic mood, this kind of people criticizes the modern age and lives in his memory of old time.

However, there is a third kind of people who admire the pounding and shaking engines with a strange enthusiasm. Yank is the extreme example. As a stoker, Yank has "hairy chest", "long arms of tremendous power". Yet he is not a common stoker—he seems broader, fiercer, more truculent, more powerful, more sure of himself than the others. He lives in a spiritual cage which is the result of the society of mechanized industry. This invisible cage is constructed with materials consisting of self-defined authority, extreme individualism, and blind optimism. However this cage is outwardly strong and inwardly weak. In the following passage, we are to analyze this kind of cage intertwined with the uncommon experience of Yank.

First, self-defined authority: Because of his superior physical power, Yank is respected by most of his fellow stokers and his speech shows certain authority. When he asks for a drink, the rest eagerly give him their bottles; when he refutes Long's preach of socialism, the rest anger with him and cry to beat Long.

Second, extreme individualism: Regarding machine as his spiritual God, Yank is indifferent to the politics and to earthly considerations. He despises the proletariat tone of Long and curses home and woman, which are symbols of warmth and gentleness to these hard labored stokers. It seems that he cares nothing but the engines and his work.

Third, blind optimism: Yank refutes Paddy's dreams of old days and delivers a long and significant speech to express his sense of glorification.

"Sure I'm part of de engines! ...Coal dust... Dat's fresh air for me! ... It's me makes it hot!
It's me makes it roar! It's me makes it move! Sure, on'y for me everything stops.... I'm de end!
I'm de start! I start somep'n and de woild moves!... I'm steam and oil for de engines, ...I'm
steel-steel-steel!" (Anthology, p.1110)

Regarding coal dust as his fresh air and food, believing everything stops for his sake, and seeing himself as steam and oil, Yank cages himself in the cage of the society that exploits him both physically and spiritually. If the play ends with this utterance, Yank in our eyes is no more than a wild and ignorant stoker and there is nothing like nobility in him.

2.2 Absence of Self-Identification

However, Yank's life changes greatly with his confrontation with Mildred, a skinny woman, the devil in his short life. Her appearance smashes all his dreams of "belonging" and breaks his spiritual cage of authority, individualism, and optimism. Without the confining of the spiritual cage, Yank gets the chance to see through the society he lives in clearly; at the same time, without the mental protection of the spiritual cage, Yank gets bewildered, indignant, uneasy, lonesome, and finally desperate. All through his psychological progress, however, Yank's fighting spirit has never disappeared and this gives him some touch of a tragic hero. Our analysis begins from the first bewilderment of Yank.

The spiritual pillar of Yank that makes him despise so many things and persons is his strong belief—he belongs. This short sentence implies an eternal ideal cherished by human beings generation

after generation: to live in harmony with nature and society. Yank is uneducated and cannot express this in detail, yet he is indeed possessed of a primitive confidence that he is the man who belongs. He belongs to the engine, to the ship, and to the machine age. The wealthy passengers in the first cabin are in Yank's eyes "slobs" and "baggages". Once called "filthy beast" by one of the "baggages"—Mildred Douglas, daughter of a millionaire, Yank gets really bewildered and indignant because such a definition pulls him from the chair of a hero down to an animal! Furthermore, he gets no body to take revenge on because he does not even have another chance to set eyes upon the one who insulted him.

To find a satisfying answer for him, Yank sets out to seek Mildred or people of her kind and his tragedy begins at the moment he walks out of the ship to seek position in the universe.

Standing on the Fifth Avenue, where the sidewalk is clear enough to eat a fried egg on it, where many luxurious goods are exhibited in the stores, Yank in his dirty dungarees feels terribly uneasy and lonesome.

"All dis gives me a pain. It don't belong.... All dis is too clean and quiet and dolled-up, get me! It gives me a pain." (Anthology, p.1120) Yank gets pains because he is like a round peg in a square hole. The utterance of "It don't belong" just indicates the wavering of his former belief that he belongs. The subsequent appearance and behavior of the wealthy people even stress the unfitting condition of Yank the poor stoker. O'Neill's expressionistic technique in this scene is excellently blended with the bitter social criticism of the indifferent attitude of the riches toward the under class and the futile struggle of the latter to have a voice in the society. Whatever Yank says or shouts to the gentlemen or ladies, he receives a monotonous cold and polite answer: "I beg your pardon." Even when Yank bumps into them, such violence doesn't jar them the least bit, oppositely, it is Yank who recoils after each collision. Yank is totally ignored by these people and the final result he gets is to be put into prison for a ridiculous reason that he makes a gentleman lose his bus. Yank in this scene is not fighting against the rich people, but against the indifferent and unfair society controlled by these privileged.

In the prison, Yank gets to know that the father of Mildred is the president of the steel trust—an information that smashes all his confidence and brings him a feeling of desperation. He takes a new look on his former condition:

"Sure—her old man—president of de Steel Trust—makes half de steel in de world—steel—where I tought I belonged—drivin'trou—movin'—in dat—to make her—and cage me in for to spit on! Christ! (Anthology, p.1126)

If Yank is the steel he describes in the first scene, then he is the product of Mildred's father who makes half the steel in the world. Awaken of the cruel fact and outraged by what he has received from the society, Yank now wishes himself to be the fire that can melt steel and destroy everything that betrays his old belief. He goes to the I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World, a labor organization) to seek acceptance and approval. In this last spiritual shelter, Yank is considered as a spy for his radical behavior and is thrown out rudely. The only comment he receives is: "You are a brainless ape." (Anthology, p.1129) Totally desperate, Yank traces his "original sin" bitterly: "...I was born, see? Sure, dat's de charge..." (Anthology, p.1130)

Disillusionment and aimlessness drive Yank to walk to the zoo and talk to a gorilla. When he unlocks the cage and intends to shake hands with it, the gorilla gives him a fatal hug and throws him into the cage. Overburdened with the spiritual cage, Yank dies in an authentic cage. Maybe, here he finds peace for himself.

Yank finally destroys himself in a battle against the social system. Yet Yank's problem is not a problem of unemployment but of absence of self-identification. He is crying out against a social system which has not only exploited man's body but his spirit as well.

3. EPILOG

As a dramatist who carried on the past and opened a way for future, O'Neill was greatly influenced by Strinberg, Ibsen, Shaw, Chekhov, the Greek tragedians, to name just a few, and he also influenced greatly on the later playwrights such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, etc. We are not sure whether the school of theatre of the absurd (in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) was ever influenced by O'Neill, yet the absurdity theme of loneliness and alienation in his middle period works, especially *The Hairy Ape* just echoes the same theme in the theatre of the absurd.

REFERENCES

- Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd. ed., Vol.2, Part 2. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985.
- Bogard, Travis and Jackson R. Bryer, eds.. (1988). *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hochman, Stanley, ed. (1984). *Mcgraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama. 4 Vols.* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- WANG Yi-qun. (1992). *Contemporary American Drama*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.