

## **The American Dream Redefined: A Study of Eugene O'Neill's**

### ***The Hairy Ape***

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#### **Abstract**

The American dream is the first thing to be mentioned in any discussion of American literature. The meaning of the term the 'American dream' gets changed in course of time. Particularly, twentieth century met world level upheavals that questioned the existence of the dream. Eugene O' Neill is a well known playwright of the century whose has a great social concern. His view on the negative impact of the concept of American dream is beautifully presented in the play *The Hairy Ape*.

**Key words: American dream, Eugene O'Neill, Hairy Ape etc.,**

#### **Introduction**

The American Dream is the national philosophy of the United States of America which is ingrained in the Declaration of Independence. For the creators of the Declaration of the Independence the dream embedded the political freedom and the belief in the pursuit of happiness, and for Abraham Lincoln it meant the upward mobility in society. The global level upheavals such as the two World Wars, The Great Depression and the Great Dust Bowl Disaster shattered the dream of America and started to question the national creed. Twentieth century writers projected this falsity of American dream and began to redefine the dream gradually. Eugene O'Neill was one of the popular literary icons of the century who brought American

literature an international acclaim. In his plays, O'Neill dealt with the negative impact of the ethos of America.

### **The Falsity of American Dream in *The Hairy Ape***

The term, American Dream has been used ever since the new continent was discovered. To the early settlers, the dream was morale and a propelling force in all of their endeavours. Centuries later, the rise of science and other social factors changed the destiny of the nation. O'Neill severely criticizes this modern civilization, and particularly of the American way of life. He believed that by concentrating too much on the production of wealth, and the accumulation of luxuries and material things of life, the Americans had lost their original purity and integrity. O'Neill is of the view that the American civilization is the great failure in history because it is characterized by the emptiness of the soul. Happiness and comfort are only for dull, ordinary persons whose aims are one, and who have no higher goal in life than to achieve worldly pleasures. O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* is an expressionistic play in which the ape is a symbol of modern man who has lost his old harmony with nature. The industrialized America looks at modern man as accessories in the system. O'Neill emphasizes the fact that workers are exploited to create wealth for the few, but shows how in our machine age they are deprived of the sense of harmony and mental wellness that comes from doing something that seems indispensable. As the proverb lauds 'Work is worship', a man's true personality is his work. He pursues happiness through his work and finds ways to fulfill his dream. But the system does not allow him to do so. It exploits him and shatters his dream (the love for his work).

The falsity of American dream is projected through the central character Yank. Yank is seen as normal individual who pursues happiness through his hard work. He believes the promise of the nation and works hard. The first scene presents Yank as a strong believer of his physical strength; and as having an equally good sense of belonging to the stokehole. It is expressed by him as,

I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles; And I'm what makes iron into steel; steel that stands for the whole thing! And I'm steel,--steel— steel! I'm the muscles in steel, de punch behind it! (*The Hairy Ape* Act I Scene I)

It is impossible for Yank to main this attitude when he realizes how he appears to a cultured sensibility and that he is owned and controlled by the owner of the industry. To him, hard work is the trademark of masculinity and a great source of inspiration in one's life. But the poor stoker fails to realize that the mechanical life has led to a loss of human identity. His confrontation with Mildred Douglas is a remarkable event in his life. It is in scene III, when Mildred calls him 'a filthy beast' that the disillusionment of Yank begins. Rage and bewildered fury rush back on Yank. From that time onwards Yank begins to think over his existence on the earth. His sense of belongingness is shattered completely. Particularly, in the Fifth Avenue, he sees the rich people who live carefree life. The price tags on the jewels and the monkey's fur laugh at him and make him furious. However, he completely fails to realize that this great material progress has been achieved at the cost of spiritual values; thereby sending man back to stone age, reducing him, in the process, to a hairy ape. Yank's monologue in the last scene is evident that the concept of American dream is yet to be defined.

Christ, Where do I get off at? Where do I fit in. Aw what the hell!—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 form bot' of em' ( *The Hairy Ape* Scene VIII)

The Hairy Ape is thus centres on Yank's loss of faith and identity in the world in which he lives. Yank, in his search for his self, discovers that he is alone, isolated and the world is impossible to live in. One can recall the fellow American Robert Frost's words 'the earth is the right place to live and love' (*Birches*) and can ask himself/herself whether it is acceptable or not.

## **Conclusion**

O'Neill shows in this play that the truly vicious effects of the capitalist state are not physical, but spiritual. In olden days even when the worker was overworked and less fed, he was happy because he enjoyed his work. Therefore no reform in the present system is going to improve matters. Modern society has taken wrong turning, and there is no hope for it now. Though Yank wants to come back to his position as everyman, he sees no hope. The playwright does not appeal to the emotions by having Yank lose a beloved. Yank is alone as far as any family relationships are concerned. It is not job that Yank is seeking. What he wants is to know that he belongs. There lies his happiness. He is a symbol of the deep protest that rises like a wave against the civilized modern society. The country gave him false promises. The American dream is again questioned.

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