THE TECHNIQUES OF ELEMENTS OF SYMBOLISM AND EXPRESSIONISM: THE HAIRY APE

ABSTRACT:
Symbolism and Expressionism are the recurring techniques of Eugene O’Neill. Both are incorporated in his plays, Symbol refers to anything that signifies or stands for something else. In literature, a symbol is usually something concrete, for example, a place, a character, an action, an object that stands for or suggests something abstract. Expressionism has been defined by Morner and Rausch in the following terms: “It attempts to express emotions, moods, and other aspects of inner experience by externalizing them through the use of non-realistic devices.” In drama it involves drama-like distortions, staccato dialogue, abrupt, fantastic and many-leveled action, and non-realistic stage settings. Eugene O’Neill never made a secret of his influences. His indebtedness to the great Swedish dramatist August Strindberg has often been pointed out, and O’Neill himself devoted half the Nobel Prize speech in 1936 to him: “For me, he remains . . . the Master, still to this day more modern than any of us, still our leader.” The influence is not very surprising, for in temperament and in outlook on life, O’Neill and Strindberg had much in common. In fact, both of these men felt the urge to search restlessly for answers to questions such as: What is man’s place in the universe? Why does he suffer? What is the essence of life? To do so, they dared to project their own soul on the stage, they dramatized their inner struggles.

KEY WORDS: Symbolism, expressionism, The Hairy Ape, Eugene O’Neill, language, setting, character, realistic and non realistic,
A symbol is when it is created by an individual author as something new, something which has not so far been used by any other author. A symbol is universal when it is generally accepted or understood. A private symbol carries significance of the author’s own ideas in a special way. For example, light and dark are universal symbols. They symbolize good and evil. The use of symbols or symbolism enables a writer to suggest vast concepts within a short space. It lends depth and breadth to the topic that a writer deals with. The Hairy Ape is a symbolic play and O’Neill has used symbolism with great effect here. The setting, the characters, especially Yank, the incidents, the title language itself are symbolic. Expressionism is a modernist movement, initially in poetry and painting, originating in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. Its typical trait is to present the world solely from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas. German Expressionism · Expressionism (theatre) · Neo-expressionism · Franz Marc. An important aspect of O’Neill’s technique is his conscious and studied use of symbolism. It is done with care and designed to extend the scope and meaning of the play beyond the limited boundary of straight forward realism. Winther says about O’Neill’s symbolism

“…… symbolisms has lent a poetic quality to O’Neill’s prose; it has universalized his theme; and it has added an emotional quality to his realism. This method has made it possible for him at any moment in his writing to depart from the orderly logical language of prose into the psychological sequence of imaginative language. He has been able to remain true to the realism of his characters, and at the same time suggest those strange warnings, inductions; fantastic ideas that play on the periphery of consciousness, or lie buried in the sub-conscious, but at times assert themselves with painful vividness. He lays down no inflexible dogma but for himself he needs the wider field and the deeper, often dimly felt, meanings that some form of symbolism will give…The drama to him is a powerful medium through which the dark surging of man’s inner life sheds for a moment its unreal mask. His plays show the unreal reality, the concealed truth; they give form and substance to the dream; they land to that airy nothing which is in reality everything.”

As for the setting, The Hairy Ape O’Neill has been used symbolism. The very description of the stokehole conveys an impression of cramped space. It stands for over-populated, uncomfortable, present day
The ship and its engine indirectly speak of the advancement of the world in respect of science and technology. The iron bars of the prison and the cage in which the gorilla is kept suggest, on the other hand, the degenerated state of the civilization brought about by science and technology itself. The skyscrapers in the Fifth Avenue symbolizes the sky high ambition of modern civilized world in respect to material development.

The characters are also symbolic. Yank, the protagonist of the drama, is a complex symbol—he symbolizes the animal nature of man, then the proletariat class, the have-nots, and the individual worker, the primitive Neanderthal Man and every man. He has the instinct and impulses which man has inherited from his biological ancestor, his quick savage reaction to his insult, and desire to kill the insulter. He represents the working class people who have to work in the most depressing conditions as well as the individual worker with his distinctive personal power, here physical. He is again a primitive Neanderthal man, with hairy chest, receding brows, and long, powerful arms. He is the hairy ape. He symbolizes also every man as a victim of the circumstances of life which the modern civilization creates.

Mildred Douglas symbolizes the rich capitalist class who lives a life of comfort and luxury, but are anemic, incapable of vigorous action or originality. The people that come out of the church are gaudy marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of Frankenstein’s in their detached, mechanical purposeless life in the modern civilization.

The incidents themselves are symbolic. The confrontation between Yank and Mildred symbolizes the modern class conflict between the rich and the proletariat. It signals the beginning of Yank’s disintegration and the loss of the sense of belonging. The last scene suggests Yank’s regress from man to animal. The embracing of the gorilla means his sense of identification with the animal world and his being killed by the gorilla signifies he cannot fully belong to the animal world. He is virtually nowhere.

The language used in The Hairy Ape is also symbolic. Mildred called Yank a “filthy beast” and she looked towards him as if she regarded him as an hairy ape. Yank feels insulted in the very heart of his pride.
Henceforth, the feeling that he does not “belong” becomes an obsession with him and it is this obsession which results in the disintegration of his personality. This obsession of Yank is symbolized by his frequent use of the word “belong”. Indeed, the word is repeated throughout at regular intervals, so that the theme of alienation is driven into the consciousness of the audience, as if with the rhythmic beast at a hammer. By means of clipped and uneven phrasing of Yank’s speeches, with the words “belong” or “I do not belong”, interspersed throughout, the dramatist has effectively conveyed Yank’s agitation at his sense of alienation. The growls and roars of the gorilla interspersed throughout Yank’s speech suggest an approximation to a conversation between man and beast.

The very title The Hairy Ape is symbolical of Yanks degeneration into an animal like being, and his language is that of a half-human, half animal being, closely resembling the growls, and roars of the gorilla. Symbolism is an all-pervasive technique used by the dramatist in The Hairy Ape. He has employed symbols in almost all the major elements of the play. The very setting of the drama lays the background for the symbols in the other elements. It has set the tone and color to the general symbolic atmosphere of the play, so that the symbols in the other elements look relevant and consistent with each other as constituent elements of the whole. The characters being another major element in a drama are also symbolic. They owe most of their histrionic significance to their symbolism. They stand out bold against the broad horizon of the play by virtue of their quality of being symbolic. Even the incidents are symbolic, and the interrelationship of characters and incidents are largely established through the medium of symbolism. Consistent with the whole plan, the language itself is symbolic, and the drama has its impact upon the mind of the audience through its symbolic language. And even the very title is not devoid of symbolic significance.

The dramatist is able to encompass vast concepts within a small space by the use of symbols. His technique of using symbols widens the meaning and significance of the play, and lifts it from the plane of individuality to the plane of universality.
In The Hairy Ape the playwright has adopted non-realistic method, that is though he has used realistic scenes, he has used them for non-realistic purposes. The setting of the opening scenes, for example is realistically presented, but the playwright warns the reader that “The treatment of this scene, or of 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 realistic setting has been to create an impression of overcrowding in the way of an expressionist.

The stokers, including Yank, have also been realistically presented, “Hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes. All the civilized white races are represented, but except for the slight differentiation in color of hair, skin, eyes, all these men are alike. Yank, the central figure of the play, is seated in the foreground. He seems broader, fiercer, more truculent, more powerful, more sure of himself than the rest. They respect his superior strength—the grudging respect of fear. Then, too, he represents to them a self-expression—the last word in what they are—their most highly developed individual.” Thus Yank is the representative of a class; he serves to create the impression of man as “hairy ape”. He symbolizes the primitive, the animal like man. Equally realistic as well as equally symbolic is the scene II. Both Mildred and her aunt are symbolic of the artificiality and enervation sensed by the contemporary mechanized and materialized urban life. The description of the inhabitants of the Fifth Avenue in scene V is equally expressionistic. “The crowd from the church enters from the right, sauntering slowly and effectively, their heads held stiffly up, looking neither to right nor left, talking in toneless, simpering voices. The women are rouged, calcimined, dyed… The men are in tail coats, tall hats, spats, canes etc. A procession of gaudy marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of Frankenstein’s in their detached mechanical unawareness.” In the description we get the exaggerated distortion of reality so characteristic of an expressionistic play.

According to Allan G. Halline, a critic “… this play is the purest example of the type that O’Neill wrote… In The Hairy Ape the feelings and attitudes of the characters, as well as the intent of the author are
brought out by heightened language, choral treatment of characters, distorted and symbolic sets, stylized acting. A majority of O’Neill plays, it may be noted, are expressionistic in one degree or another.”

The number of characters in this expressionistic play is reduced to the minimum. The attention is focused on the central figure, and the rest of the characters are not individualized. They merely serve as background to the full picture of the protagonist. Except Paddy and Long, all the stokers are merely a shadow of voices, contribution to the development of the main character, Yank. The prisoners of the Blackwell Island and the denizens of the Fifth Avenue are presented as mere shadows, not individualized. This technique enables the playwright to focus on the obsession of Yank and the state of his soul. The interaction between the characters does not develop them, or their relationships; they are merely juxtaposed.

The dialogues are also expressionistic. The characters talk in broken sentences, clipped language indicative of their state of mind. Certain expressions are repeated there as also interior monologue. The entire action of the play is focused on the consciousness of Yank, the central figure, the only living personage in the play. The dramatist has exploited the technique of the “interior monologue”, to lay bare the suffering, anguished soul of Yank. The long monologue of Yank after he has been thrown out of the I.W.W with the conviction that he belonged to it; now his conviction receives a rude, shattering shock, a shock which is too much for him. He finds that the I.W.W is the conventional women’s stuff which would like to feed and dress his body and give him shorter hours of work. But the thing which hurts him is not in his belly, it is deep down at the bottom, and the I.W.W cannot touch him. In other words, his suffering—and that of the modern worker—is spiritual and not physical and it is the spirit which is being ignored in the modern mechanized age. Man has been degraded and dehumanized. He has been reduced to a machine, merely to a thing of steel. The full bewilderment of Yank is thus expressed. “I am a busted Ingersoll, dat’s what. Steel was me and I owned de woild. Now I ain’t steel, and de woild owns me. Aw, hell! I can’t see — it’s all dark, get me? It’s all wrong! (He turns a bitter, mocking face up like an ape gibbering at the moon.) Say, youse up dere, Man in de Moon, yuh look so, wise, gimme de answer, huh? Slip me de inside dope, de information right from de stable—where do I get off at, huh?” He belongs neither to earth, nor to heaven.
CONCLUSION: With all his expressionistic techniques, O’Neill does not lose control of the form of drama. Goldberg’s remark is worth quoting here. “O’Neill had yielded to neither the formlessness nor the incoherence of the more extreme expressionists; even when his contact with external reality seems least firm, he yet maintains his grip on the roots of things.” O’Neill’s expressionistic art in The Hairy Ape is quite successful. It has enabled him to achieve his purpose.

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