

## EXPRESSIONISM IN ‘THE HAIRY APE’

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Expressionism was a new technique used in the dramas of Stindberg. Expressionism became a theatrical movement round about the First World War. It was a movement in the world of arts in Germany. It was in its height between 1910 and 1925. It began in painting and quickly spread to include literature, music and architecture. It is a literature of the extreme, a literature of rebellion. The precursors, in painting, were Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and the Norwegian Edward Munch. The precursors, in literature, were French poets Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and above all the Swedish dramatist August Stindberg. Expressionism was never a well-defined movement. However, the prominent feature is a revolt against the artistic and literary tradition of ‘realism’, both in subject matter and style. The expressionist undertakes to express a personal vision of human life and human society.

Drama was a prominent and widely influential form of expressionist writing. Expressionist dramatist tended to represent anonymous human types instead of individual characters. They replace plot by episodic renderings of intense and rapidly oscillating emotional states. The dialogues are often fragmentary. Expressionism, in theatre, was an attempt to break the ossified mould of naturalism and bring in a little breath of fresh air. The critic R.S. Furness makes the following observation regarding the spirit of expressionism: “The soul under stress, racked and burning in fearful incandescence – this preoccupation may be called expressionist”.

The literary elements like plot, characters, and dialogues undergo a change in the expressionistic play. In structure it avoids the neat pattern of cause and effect. It has a number of short scenes. Each scene is almost detachable from the rest. If there is any logic, it is the logic of a dream. The technique is extremely subjective regarding characters. The mind of one character is explored in depth while others are reduced to types. These types may be projections of the central character or aid in the revelation of that character.

Further, the language of the expressionistic play is highly personal, lyrical and condensed. The expressionist dramatist uses telegram-like style in

which syntax is compressed. There is, always, identifying characteristic intense feeling. The expressionist does not make a statement. It is the disturbing quality of language that arrests the attention of the audience. The use of non-literary devices like sound, lighting, and setting is another important aspect of expressionistic aspect of expressionistic play. They are used to communicate the new vision of life. Some characters put on masks, paint themselves in outrageous colours. Expressionism had begun to flag by 1925 and was finally suppressed in Germany by the Nazis in the early 1930s. But it has continued to exert influence on English and American, as well as European, art and literature. We can recognize its effects, direct or indirect, on the writing and staging of such writers as Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, and Eugene O’Neill and so on. Expressionism is a dramatic technique which enables a dramatist to depict ‘inner reality’, the soul or psyche of his personages. O’Neill began his career as a writer of realistic plays. But in **The Emperor Jones** and **The Hairy Ape** he has adopted non-realistic methods. The realistic technique has not been entirely abandoned but they have been used to serve non-realistic purposes. Thus in the opening scene of **The Hairy Ape** the setting has been realistically given. But the dramatist warns us, “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”. Thus the realistic setting is intended to create an impression in the manner of an expressionist.

The stokers have also been realistically described. 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 in man. The scene no. ii is also symbolic. The characters, Mildred and her aunt are symbolic of the artificiality and enervation caused by the contemporary mechanized and materialized urban life. The description of the inhabitants of the Fifth Avenue in Scene V is equally expressionistic. Eugene O’Neill has provided a detailed description. There is the distortion of reality so characteristic of an expressionistic play. By this time, Yank’s self-

confidence has already been shaken. He is already obsessed with the idea that he does not 'belong'. The description is expressive of his sense of bewilderment, fear and horror. In an expressionistic play, the number of character is cut down to the minimum. The attention is focused on the 'central figure'. Other characters are not individualized. They serve merely as a background to throw into sharp relief the central figure. In **The Hairy Ape** other characters are merely a chorus of voices. Among them important are Paddy and Long. Similarly, the prisoners in the prison-scene are mere nameless voices. All this enables the dramatist to focus on the obsession of Yank and proceedings in his mind.

Expressionistic technique is followed in dialogues too. The characters in **The Hairy Ape** express themselves briefly, often in monosyllables. Their conversation is symbolic of their attitude. It reveals what is passing within their souls. The pattern of scenes is again expressionistic. The scenes are short and the number of scenes is cut down to a minimum. Each scene is a further stage in the deeper and deeper probing of the central figure's consciousness. These scenes are not logically related nor sketched with the completeness of a realistic play. Much is left to imagination of the audience. The connections between the scenes are emotional and not logical.

The entire action of the play is focused on the consciousness of Yank. He is 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. office is a clever piece of psycho-analysis. The mental confusion of Yank has been skillfully

rendered. He had come to the I.W.W. with the conviction that he belonged to it. But his conviction receives a shattering shock, a shock which is too much for him. His suffering is spiritual and not physical. It is the spirit which is being ignored in the modern mechanized age. Man has been degraded and de-humanised. The last scene of the play, i.e. Scene VIII, is one long monologue. The gorilla in the cage is the only interlocutor. It is an admirable study of Yank's thought-process. It fully brings out the dis-integration of Yank's personality. Carried away by his obsession, Yank sees himself as a hairy ape. He addresses the gorilla as a 'brother' and thinks that they both belong to the same club, the club of 'the hairy apes'. Obsessed with the idea of revenge, he no longer capable of any reasoning or rational thought. His mind has been thrown completely off the balance. The gorilla at least belongs to nature, but Yank does not belong even to that beautiful world. He belongs to the world of man. But he has been rejected and thrown out by that world. He would like to have his revenge on that rejecting world. He lets the gorilla out of the cage, shakes hand with it. But the gorilla crushes him to death, and as he dies he mutters in deep anguish, "Even him did not think I belonged. Crist, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in?" Alienation and isolation, is the common lot of man in the modern industrialized and urbanized society.

**The Hairy Ape** is an expressionistic play. O'Neill's expressionism is based on reality. The play does not have the complete formlessness of the expressionistic plays of the contemporary German and Scandinavian dramatists. There is not total decay of plot and character. There is realism in the delineation both of setting and character.

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