



BODHI

International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

An online, Peer reviewed, Refereed and Quarterly Journal

Vol : 2

No : 2

January 2018

ISSN : 2456-5571



**CENTRE FOR RESOURCE, RESEARCH &
PUBLICATION SERVICES (CRRPS)**

www.crrps.in | www.bodhijournals.com

THESE DAYS AND THOSE DAYS: AN ECO CRITICAL STUDY OF THE HAIRY APE

Dr. S. Abdullah Shah

Assistant Professor of English, Islamiah College (A)

Vaniyambadi, Vellore District, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The concern for ecology and the continuous threat of the misuse of our environment has drawn the attention of writers in the recent days. The writings that deal with environment are known by various terms such as eco criticism, eco poetics, eco feminism, green cultural studies, environmental literary criticism etc. This paper is an attempt to highlight eco critical elements in Eugene O'Neill's play The Hairy Ape. An attempt is made to study how the sea is polluted after industrialization and how mechanization affects the lives of the sailors.

Key Words: *Eco Criticism, sea, sailors, Industrialization.*

The world of literature is replete with the works dealing with the beauty and the power of nature. Literature throws light upon the environmental destruction caused by human beings. The concern for ecology and the continuous threat of the misuse of our environment has drawn the attention of writers. All the genres of literature emerge out of the inspiration derived from the environment. Deliberations about literature and environment are currently flourishing throughout the world. The writings that deal with environment are known by various terms such as eco criticism, ecopoetics, ecofeminism, green cultural studies, environmental literary criticism etc.

Ecocriticism came into existence with the publication of two works both published in the mid 1990s: *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, second, *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. According to William Rueckert in his essay "*Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*" the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature is Ecocriticism (Glotfelty 107).

This paper is an attempt to highlight eco critical elements in Eugene O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape*. Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was one of the most famous playwrights of the 20th century. He spent several years at sea, where he suffered from depression. In spite of his suffering, he had a deep love for the sea. In most of his plays, sea became an eminent theme. Even as a child,

O'Neill was always attracted to the sea, beginning from his summers spent in New London, Connecticut, where his father bought Monte Cristo Cottage, overlooking the Thames River, which flows into the Atlantic. To this day, the cottage resounds to foghorns and sea noises. From an early age O'Neill had his

own rowboat and later a motor dory. As a child he was photographed sitting reading on a rock overlooking the water, now commemorated by a statue near the railway station. (Ranald 341)

The sea plays an important role in O'Neill's life and in his plays. He lived like an outcast, spending the evenings in the Opera. Dickinson rightly pointed out that,

More than any other American Playwright, O'Neill has been absorbed into the reality of life, not in the form of problem but in the form of moral and personal stresses. To him the sea always took first place. Behind the sea loomed up other realities no less majestic, no less inspiring (61).

O'Neill filled his plays with life's rebels, misfits, and failures. It is because he lived with them in intuition, and in some sense identified himself with them. Each play deals with the experience of a sailor's life and his association with the sea. Citing a 1930's critic, Joel Pfister wrote that O'Neill partly functioned as a tour guide for a middle and upper class fascinated by exhibits of 'exotic' workers (115).

In the play *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill condemns the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. This play appealed to many labor unions in US who were fighting for betterment of work conditions. This play made Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to maintain a file on O'Neill.

The play opens in a ship's forecabin where the firemen are all happily drinking. One of the firemen, Yank is the central character of the play. He believes that he belongs to the sea. Mildred Douglas, the daughter of a Steel Businessman is also travelling in the same ship's deck. She wishes to visit the stokehole of the ship to experience the lifestyle of the working class. The second engineer escorts her to the stock hole. The men at work are shocked by Mildred's visit. On seeing Yank's face, she shouts and calls Yank 'a filthy beast' and faints into

escort's arms. Yank becomes angry and throws his shovel at the door.

After the ship's return to port, Yank and Long walk down Fifth Avenue in New York where Yank argued with some wealthy people coming out of a church. So he is arrested by the police. He is caged like an animal in the zoo. When the other prisoners ask him what crime he committed, Yank explains the incident that happened in the stoke hole. One inmate suggests Yank to join a labor Union and revenge Mildred and his father. But the Union people rejected his application on seeing Yank's unstable condition. Yank becomes agitated and finally visits a zoo. He concludes that his and animals' situation is same. He opens the cage door and tries to exchange a handshake with gorilla. The gorilla grabs, crushes, and drops him to the ground. When he is dying, he realizes that doesn't even belong to the hairy apes.

These Days and Those Days

In this play, we find the eco critical elements in the dialogue (scene I) of the character Paddy, a worker on the ship. He spends his time thinking about the good old days, when he could feel the fresh wind and the waves. Now sailing has become mechanized form of water travel. He reminiscences the days in which the ships were drawn by men instead of machines: "We make the ship to go, you're saying? Yerra then, that Almighty God have pity on us! Oh, to be back in the fine days of my youth" (O'Neill, Scene I). In the past, sea was free from pollution and the sailors had clean skins and clear eyes: "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!" (O'Neill, Scene I)

In those days, the clippers had tall masts touching the sky and workers had the clear skins, the clear eyes, the straight backs and full chests. Neither the sea nor the sailors were affected in the sail: "Oh, there was fine beautiful ships them days—clippers wid tall masts touching the sky—fine strong men in them" (O'Neill, Scene I). But the Industrialization made the sailors' skin and their backs were bended like Neanderthals. Now the sailors are unable to breathe a fair breeze in the sea.

The sea is also polluted by dust and smoke coming from the stock hole. After the mechanization the dust, the smoke and the noise coming from the ship affected the sea animals' lives: "the bloody engines pounding and throbbing and shaking—wid divil a sight of sun or a breath

of clean air—choking our lungs wid coal dust—breaking our backs and hearts" (O'Neill, Scene I). The dust affects the lungs of the sailors and causes health hazards.

The same dust settles on the surface of the sea and risks the lives of the sea creatures – "black smoke from the funnels smudging the sea, smudging the decks" (O'Neill, Scene I). From the words of Paddy we know that there was not a sound on the deck in the past. In the the past, the Sun and the green sea gave energy to the sailors: "Sun warming the blood of you, and wind over the miles of shiny green ocean like strong drink to your lungs" (O'Neill, Scene I). But now there is a lot of noise in the ship: "the bloody engines pounding and throbbing and shaking" (O'Neill, Scene I). We can conclude that the sound and vibration coming from the ship affect the sailors and sea creatures.

Conclusion

In this play, we find that the sea is affected by air pollution, water pollution and noise pollution. The life of the sailors in the ship is also affected by these pollutions. Industrial wastage was also dumped into the sea after mechanization. Even though we don't find know whether the ship in *The Hairy Ape* carries any industrial waste, it is a common practice in 1900s for the industrialists to dump the waste in the sea. Moreover Mildred's father is the owner of a steel industry. Without knowing the truth that one day a theory called Eco criticism will emerge, O'Neill left some elements of eco criticism in his sea plays.

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