

TO BELONG OR NOT TO BELONG:
A READING ON EUGENE O'NEILL'S *THE HAIRY APE*

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RESUMO: Quando se trata do Expressionismo Americano, Eugene O'Neill é um dos mais importantes dramaturgos. Suas obras trazem a visão de um homem moderno que é vítima do acaso, não acreditando em Deus ou no destino, culpando-se por sua própria miséria. Pessimista, o autor mostra uma criatura aprisionada em um destino insignificante – por essa razão pode ser considerado um dos precursores do Existencialismo. Embora tenha escrito outras peças, *The Hairy Ape* é uma das mais conhecidas se pensarmos em uma tragédia expressionista, tendo sido publicada e apresentada pela primeira vez em 1922. Para citar características do teatro expressionista, podemos destacar um mundo desumanizante; diálogos postos de lado; e também personagens perturbados com percepções distorcidas – predominantemente a figura de Yank, um trabalhador em um transatlântico. Preso em extensos monólogos e animalizado durante a história, ele parece não se encaixar em lugar algum. O questionamento de pertença está diretamente relacionado ao advento de novas tecnologias e à forma massiva como as pessoas vivem em uma sociedade superficial, movida por consumo e aparências. Assim, o objetivo deste trabalho é analisar o movimento do personagem principal a um estágio primitivo em face da evolução tecnológica oriunda do contexto de industrialização, o que acontece por vários motivos: medo, falta de poder sobre classes sociais mais altas e, principalmente, ignorância sobre si mesmo. Ao trazer Yank em uma batalha constante contra a sensação de (não) pertencimento, o objeto literário aqui analisado pode representar uma problemática existencial, em que a tecnologia é a principal causa para a desumanização do personagem. No entanto, considerando a reflexão sobre o *self*, foi possível perceber que não é a única razão, já que ele é incapaz de encontrar o seu mundo interior antes de construir sua persona a partir da perspectiva de outros. Portanto, por não reconhecer seus poderes e limitações, Yank nem sequer pertence a si mesmo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: teatro expressionista; animalização; tecnologia

ABSTRACT: *When it comes to American Expressionism, Eugene O'Neill is one of the most important playwrights. His works bring the vision of a modern man who is victim of chance, not believing in God or fate, blaming himself for his own misery. Extremely pessimistic, the author shows a creature trapped in a meaningless destiny – that is why he can be considered one of the precursors to Existentialism. Although he has written other plays, The Hairy Ape is one of his most well-known dramas regarding an expressionist tragedy, having been published and first performed on stage in 1922. To mention features of expressionist drama in the play, we can highlight a dehumanizing world; dialogues set aside; and also disturbed characters with distorted perceptions – predominantly the figure of Yank, a worker in an ocean liner. Stuck in extensive monologues and totally animalized throughout the storyline, he does not seem to fit anywhere. For sure, the questioning of belonging is directly related to the new technologies advent and the massive way that people live in a shallow society, moved by consumption and appearances. Taking all of this into account, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the main character's movement toward a primitive stage in the face of technological evolution provided by reminiscences of the industrialization context, which happens for many reasons: fear, lack of power over*

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upper and middle classes, and mainly self-ignorance. By bringing Yank in a constant battle against the sensation of (not) belonging, the literary object of analysis may represent an existentialist issue, in which technology is the major cause for him to have become dehumanized. However, considering the reflection on the self, it was possible to realize that it is not the only reason, since he is unable to find his inner world before building his persona from others' perspective. Therefore, by not recognizing his powers and limitations, Yank does not even belong to himself.

KEYWORDS: *expressionist theatre; animalization; technology*

*No amount of fire or freshness can challenge
what a man can store up in his ghostly heart.*
(F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Introduction

Expressionism was an avant-garde movement that emerged in Germany in the early twentieth century “as an answer to the nineteenth century traditional bourgeois lifestyle” (LAZZARIS, 2009, p.14). The artists’ purpose, in general, was to expose subjective elements of Man’s inner world. For sure, the movement spread into many different areas, such as the cinema, literature, architecture, music, arts, photography, theatre, and so on.

The decadence, the grotesque, and the chaotic were all symptoms of a dehumanized world predicting the war. Expressionism is not a homogeneous style but an artistic reaction to the unstable social mood installed in Europe in the beginning of the twentieth century. [...] It seemed that the artists shared a collective feeling of desintegration and disbelief that later would culminate with the First World War (Ibidem, 2009, p.15).

Especially in theatre, German Expressionism was influenced by the Swedish playwright August Strindberg. “With Strindberg it begins what later will be called ‘dramaturgy of the self’ and will define the dramatic literature frame for decades”² (SZONDI³, 2001, p. 53-54). Strindberg believed that the description of the entire life of only one man would be more revealing than the life study of a whole family, for example. Maybe because of that the expressionists, as a whole, explored the self, Man’s inner truth. Quoting the playwright, Szondi (2001, p. 54) says that “it is possible to know only one life: your own...”⁴

Drama, the literary form par excellence of the dialogic opening and frankness, receives the task of representing hidden psychic events. It solves the task by concentrating on its central character, restricting itself to him in general (monodrama) or apprehending others from his perspective (dramaturgy of the self)⁵ (Ibidem, 2001, p. 58).

² Com Strindberg se inicia o que mais tarde levará o nome de "dramaturgia do eu" e definirá por décadas o quadro da literatura dramática. [My translation]

³ All the Szondi quotations used here were translated from Portuguese into English by myself, since I could not find the English version and use it directly.

⁴ Só se conhece uma vida, a sua própria... [My translation]

⁵ O drama, a forma literária por excelência da abertura e franqueza dialógicas, recebe a tarefa de representar acontecimentos psíquicos ocultos. Ele a resolve ao se concentrar em seu personagem central, seja se

It is common to say that German Expressionism influenced the expressionist theatre in the United States, but there are people who do not agree with this statement and artists who do not assume any German leverage on their work. Anyway, “Expressionism was not an isolated movement; it reverberated throughout the Western world, especially the United States. Playwrights like Eugene O’Neill, Elmer Rice and Sophie Treadwell were deeply influenced by the techniques applied by the German movement...” (LAZZARIS, 2009, p. 22).

Influenced mainly by August Strindberg, Eugene O’Neill is the most important playwright when it comes to American Expressionism. Even though he wrote many plays with expressionistic aspects, *The Hairy Ape* is one of his most well known plays and one of the most interesting for me. It was published and first performed on stage in 1922. The main character is a man, Yank, who does not seem to belong anywhere. The questioning of belonging is directly related to the advent of new technologies and the massive way that people lived in a shallow society, moved by consumption and appearances.

The man, the thinker, the animal

In expressionist drama we can see a dehumanizing world, disturbed characters with distorted perceptions and fantasies, powerful states of mind, preference for monologue instead of dialogue, etc. In Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* – a comedy of ancient and modern life in eight scenes, we are able to visualize some of these characteristics, mainly in the figure of Yank, who becomes totally dehumanized in the course of the narrative, and also stuck in extensive monologues that can reveal his inner world.

The play has eight scenes. The first one takes place in the firemen’s forecastle of an ocean liner, an hour after sailing from New York. There is a group of workers, drinking and talking: “The men themselves should resemble those pictures in which the appearance of Neanderthal Man is guessed at” (O’NEILL, 1959, p. 77). The prominent characters are Paddy, a drunken Irishman, Long, a socialist, and Yank, the most representative figure of muscular force: “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. [...] He represents to them a self-expression, the very last word in what they are, their most highly developed individual” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 78).

They start a conversation on belonging. For Yank, it is very clear that they belong to the ship (or to the system) and that their force is very important to society. So his sensation of belonging comes from his physical power over the ship’s engines, whereas some of them believe that the fact of being in the working class turns them into nothing more than pariahs. Referring to other people who are not workers, Yank says that they are just baggage: “Who makes dis old tub run? Ain’t it us guys? Well den, we belong, don’t we? We belong and dey don’t. Dat’s all” (Ibidem, 1959, p.82). And he reinforces the idea: “All the rich guys dat tink dey’re somep’n, dey ain’t nothin’! Dey don’t belong. But us guys, we’re in de move, we’re at the bottom, de whole ting is us!” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 86).

In the second scene – in a section of the promenade deck, two days out, during the morning – we get to know Mildred Douglas, a young lady who is curious to see the ship’s

restringindo a ele de modo geral (monodrama), seja apreendendo os outros a partir de sua perspectiva (dramaturgia do eu). [My translation]

working class. She seems a spoiled girl and represents the upper class. In this part, we just see her talking to her aunt about the arrangements for her to visit the other social class in the stokehold inside the transatlantic.

The third scene represents a landmark for Yank, since it is when he undergoes a crisis of identity. In a confusing situation, the girl, Mildred, sees him speaking in an animalistic way, as a brutish, unthinking laborer. Scared, she calls him “filthy beast” and “he feels himself insulted in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 96).

The fourth scene takes place in the firemen’s forecandle over again. “Yank has not washed either face or body. He stands out in contrast to the other workers, a blackened, brooding figure. He is seated forward on a bench in the exact attitude of Rodin’s ‘The Thinker’” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 96). Meanwhile, the others, “most of them smoking pipes, are staring at Yank half-apprehensively, as if fearing an outburst; half-amusedly, as if they saw a joke somewhere that tickled them” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 96). Yank has an attitude a bit less violent now, since he is really trying to think instead of making speeches. “Yank sits down again in the same attitude of ‘The Thinker’” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 97).

As he affirms, he was trying to fallen in hate, probably because of the apparition of Mildred Douglas in the last scene: “She was all white. I tought she was a ghost. Sure” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 99). And he decides to “fix” her, for the reason that he understood that she had called him “hairy ape”. “Hairy ape, huh? Sure! Dat’s de way she looked at me, aw right. Hairy ape! So dat’s me, huh? [...] Yuh skinny tart! Yuh white-faced bum, yuh! I’ll show yuh who’s a ape! [...] I’ll show her I’m better’n her, if she on’y knew it. I belong and she don’t, see! I move and she’s dead!” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 100-101).

Then, deciding to teach her a lesson for animalizing him as if he were a monkey, in the fifth scene, Yank is in the Fifth Avenue, expecting to carry out his vengeance. Long is with him and both of them are observing showcases and people. There is a kind of impossibility of communication between Yank and the crowd, because everyone seems to avoid or even to ignore him. People are lifeless, manipulated by consumerism, a real “procession of gaudy marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of Franksteins in their detached, mechanical unawareness” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 106).

By arguing with ladies and gentlemen and therefore going to prison, Yank learns his first political lessons; his consciousness had led him only to attempt to resolve a personal matter, but instead it took larger proportions in the face of an entire bourgeois lifestyle, which had been confronting him and his manners, even in silence.

In the sixth and seventh scenes, Yank is still trying to fit somewhere, alternating between man and animal. “His position is parallel to the floor like a monkey’s” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 114). He never found Mildred Douglas again and now he is dealing with burocrats once more: he tries to associate to the I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World), but they do not see things the way Yank sees. One of Yank’s most interesting monologues, which shows us what passes in his inside, is this one:

Cut out an hour offen de job a day and make me happy! Gimme a dollar more a day and make me happy! Tree square a day, and cauliflowers in the front yard – ekal rights – a woman and kids – a lousy vote – and I’m all fixed for Jesus, huh? Aw, hell! What does dat get yuh? Dis ting’s in

your inside, but it ain't your belly. Feedin' your face – sinkers and coffee – dat don't touch it. It's way down – at de bottom. Yuh can't grab it, and yuh can't stop it. It moves, and everything moves. It stops and de whole woild stops. Dat's me now – I don't tick, see? – I'm a busted Ingersoll, dat's what. Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me (Ibidem, 1959, p. 120).

At the end, in the last scene, Yank goes to the Zoo, where he could perhaps finally feel at home. He starts to talk to a gorilla. “Ain't we both members of de same club – de Hairy Apes? [...] On'y yuh're lucky, see? Yuh don't belong wit'em and yuh know it. But me, I belong wit'em – but I don't, see? Dey don't belong wit me, dat's what” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 122-123). And the monologue extends while the gorilla is there, almost quiet, looking at his face: “yuh're at de bottom. You belong! Sure! Yuh're de on'y one in de woild dat does, yuh lucky stiff! And dat's why dey gotter put yuh in a cage, see?” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 123).

Later on – after a long speech – Yank ironically dies in the animal's embrace. “The gorilla left the crushed body slip to the floor; stands over it uncertainly, considering; then picks it up, throws it in the cage, shuts the door, and shuffles off menacingly into the darkness at left” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 124). The man still has time to speak over again and he seems depressed in realizing that even the animal did not think he belonged.

The journey ends up with the dead man inside the cage, and we are led to the very significant final sentence of the play: “And, perhaps, the Hairy Ape at last belongs” (Ibidem, 1959, p. 124). These words can provide a huge reflection on Yank's identity. If he belongs somewhere, where does he really belong to? After deconstructing his feeling of power over the ship and discovering that he did not belong neither with the socialites on Fifth Avenue nor with the labor organizers on the waterfront, he experiences the sensation of dying before he could understand his place on Earth.

This way, his metamorphosis goes from the simple man, someone who feels comfortable with his ordinary condition at the very beginning; passing by the thinker, a man able to question situations and people; and, finally, the animalized figure, totally distorted and incoherent, which loses itself amid the sensation of emptiness caused by an external chaos that was arising from the excruciating modern world.

To belong or not to belong

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2005), the verb *to belong* means “1. To be in the right or suitable place. 2. To feel comfortable and happy in a particular situation or with a particular group of people.” This definition, in my opinion, is too superficial if we assume that the problem with Yank is not related to be or not to be in the right place or with the right people. The issue is deeper than that: it has to do with his inside.

Eugene O'Neill's best works bring the vision of a modern Man who is victim of chance, not believing in God or fate, blaming himself for his own misery. Extremely pessimistic, O'Neill shows a creature trapped in a meaningless destiny – that is why he can be considered one of the precursors to existentialism. For sure, existentialism as a movement came after *The Hairy Ape*, but this does not prevent us from using its concept for the character's analysis, since it would be very illuminating.

For existentialists, existence precedes essence. “This means that there is no human nature, a definition of what man would be before the act of existing: there is no precedent essence, which would determine what each individual will be or should be”⁶ (BORNHEIM, 1996, p. 195). Hence, in principle, Man is what is, independently on the cultural background.

Man is inhabited by a fallacy: the desire of being, which is the desire of being grounded by an other who is not himself. Existential Humanism demands that man be ‘the groundless ground of all values’, that he invents himself from nothing, instead of being self-determined by something that is external – the family, the State, a political party, religion, values or any kind of social, biological or psychological determinism⁷ (Ibidem, 1996, p. 198).

If man needs to invent himself from nothing, on the other hand, his conscience depends on another conscience in order to exist somehow. “I am only when the other recognizes me as such”⁸ (Ibidem, 1996, p. 198). Thus, intersubjectivity just happens when there is a relation between a subject and an object that could recognize the first. For Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, the mistake lies when one examines the subject from the object’s point of view: “When one interprets history from the object’s category such as, for example, economic laws, human subjectivity is abandoned, the man is disfigured”⁹ (Ibidem, 1996, p. 201).

For those reasons, Yank does not belong whatsoever: first of all, because he just recognizes himself from the working class’ perspective; secondly, because others in the plot do not truly accept him as an equal human being; and thirdly, because we, as readers, tend to explore his configuration by means of an objective category, that is, the context at that time: reminiscences of the Second Industrial Revolution. Certainly, it is impossible to dissociate one from the other because, although the existentialist reasoning makes sense, we cannot ignore the historical context behind a literary work.

As a result, Yank is disfigured by the context, but more: he allows this to happen, perhaps because of ignorance and fear. The confident man who we see at the beginning is nothing more than a creature molded by the physical force common to his social class. Of course O’Neill was concerned with the workers and their miserable conditions at that time, even because it is visible that he does an acid criticism on the difference among classes. However, Yank represents an identity issue that can be applied for all times: a man who does not know who he is and how he has to behave in the modern world, full of new technologies and different advances in many fields.

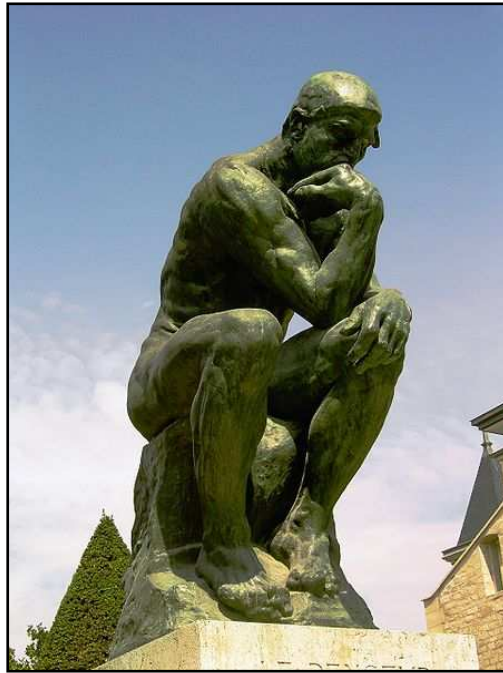
⁶ Isso significa que não existe uma natureza humana, uma definição do que seja o homem anterior ao ato de existir: não há uma essência precedente, que determinaria aquilo que cada indivíduo vai ser ou deve ser. [My translation]

⁷ O homem é habitado por uma falácia: o desejo de ser, que é o desejo de fundamentar-se a partir do outro que não ele mesmo. O Humanismo existencialista exige que o homem seja "o fundamento sem fundamento de todos os valores", que ele se invente a partir do nada que ele é, ao invés de autodeterminar-se por algo que lhe é exterior - seja a família, o Estado, um partido político, a religião, os valores ou qualquer tipo de determinismo social, biológico ou psicológico. [My translation]

⁸ Eu só sou na medida em que o outro me reconhece como tal. [My translation]

⁹ Sempre que se interpreta a história a partir da categoria do objeto, através, por exemplo, de leis econômicas, a subjetividade humana é abandonada, o homem é desfigurado. [My translation]

Furthermore, the author also contemplates us with the image of the famous sculpture *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin in the course of the narrative (see Picture 1). “It depicts a man in sober meditation battling with a powerful internal struggle. It is often used to represent philosophy.”¹⁰ The comparison between the sculpture and Yank is obviously ironic, even though the man was probably really confronting something in his core. And again we have that transformation that I described previously: the man who starts to think and then turns into an animal in face of modernization. Therefore, needless to declare that technology is the major cause of the sensation of not belonging experienced by the main character.



Picture 1. A photo of *The Thinker* by Rodin located at the Musée Rodin in Paris.¹¹

Final considerations

The new technologies invented at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, such as the telephone, the radio, the cinematographer, the telegraph, the phonograph and the typewriter had become common home and office devices by the 1920's, which would originate massive changes in the way that people communicate. (...) The composition of the plays was probably based on an attempt to criticize ironically the alienation that the new technological advances had brought to society (LAZZARIS, 2009, p. 30).

Another literary example from the 1920's that deals with technology is Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, in which people are also marionettes, superficial, stuck in futility and uncontrolled materialism – just like the rich people on the corner of Fifth Avenue in *The Hairy Ape*, walking around town like robots moved by consumerist desires.

¹⁰ WIKIPEDIA. *The Thinker*. Available in: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Thinker>.

¹¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Thinker,_Rodin.jpg>

“The Second Industrial Revolution, also known as the Technological Revolution, was a phase of the larger Industrial Revolution in the period from the last half of the 19th century until about the time of World War I.”¹² Although *The Hairy Ape* was written after this phase of history, as well as other works it surely suffered its impact. For sure, any kind of changes at this level is more interesting for the rich, because they have money and power. What should an ordinary man as Yank do if his muscular force was replaced by machines?

He was lost amid the chaos, certainly, since it represented something totally new: there was not only technological development, but advances in the way that people behaved, communicated and thought. Besides, if we stop to think about our reality nowadays, we will perceive that it is as frightening as the context for those people at that time. We already have robots, cyborgues, artificial intelligences. Moreover, we are moved not only by consumerist desires, but by a great amount of information and problems related to the environment, as well.

At times of global warming, it is an appealing concept: humanity did not work, let's leave the planet to a higher intelligence. The Singularity – historical event in which mankind will go through a stage of massive technological advances in a short period of time – is getting closer. [...] When the first upload of an individual's consciousness is made to the HD of a brand new body, what was the "one" will be the "other." So we will see face to face what until then we saw through a dark mirror. If we will like it or not, it is another story¹³ (BRESSANE, 2010).

Just as Yank, we do not know who we are anymore and if we still belong somewhere. For all of us, the sentence beautifully pronounced by Yank in one of the monologues that I have mentioned – “I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me” – is very significant, since it carries a sensation of being nobody in face of something so much bigger than us, mere human beings. And the distorted language does not represent only the social class where he comes from, but it is a purposeful confusion in consonance with disturbed thoughts, consequence of the chaotic ambience.

Concluding, maybe Bressane (2010) is right in pointing out that “being simply human is not enough”¹⁴ now. The universe really owns us and we do not have much choices in the world, except in what concerns ourselves as individuals who are able to (re)create their inner truth from nothing, as proposed by the existentialists.

And I affirmed previously that technology was the major reason for Yank having become animalized. Nevertheless, taking this reflection on the self into account, now it is possible to comprehend that it is not the only one: he was incapable to find his inner world before building his person according to the place where he inhabited, that is, according to

¹² WIKIPEDIA. *Second Industrial Revolution*. Available in: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Industrial_Revolution>.

¹³ Em tempo de aquecimento global, é um conceito atraente: a humanidade não deu certo, deixemos o planeta para uma inteligência superior. A Singularidade – evento histórico em que a humanidade atravessará um estágio de colossal avanço tecnológico em curtíssimo período de tempo – está cada vez mais próxima. Quando o primeiro *upload* da consciência de um indivíduo for feito para o HD de um corpo novo em folha, o que era o “um” passará a ser o “outro”. Então, veremos face a face o que até então víamos por meio de um obscuro espelho. Se vamos gostar disso ou não, é outra história. [My translation]

¹⁴ Ser simplesmente humano já era. [My translation]

the eyes of others. So, for all of us, the prospective answer might be finding our core at first, and then speculating on the external forces that guide us. Maybe there is no human nature – or essence –, but we still do exist, and by existing we have to belong at least to ourselves.

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