

Tragedy of strength: A precarity's study of Yank in *The Hairy Ape*

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Abstract: The paper studies the condition of the vulnerable classes represented by Eugene O'Neill in his play *The Hairy Ape*, highlighting the significant psychological insecurities of the characters. The speeches and atmosphere inhabited by the characters are a projection of their inner turmoil and trauma. The current study will identify how Yank's confrontation with reality and his tragic fate are a result of the precarious condition of his livelihood through a close textual analysis. The paper examines the influence of the struggles of destitutes and victimized bodies in *The Hairy Ape* on the felt vulnerabilities of the socially and economically alienated classes. The paper has employed the idea of precarity internalized by the characters of the play, enabling them to associate emotions and trauma with events, time, and objects. O'Neill has been considered the bard of suffering and is known to represent the lives of individuals with a death drive or tendency to kill oneself, as exemplified in the central character, Yank, in American society.

Keywords: precarious, tragedy, uncertainty, vulnerable, socio-economic

Introduction

Eugene O'Neill is a slice-of-life dramatist who foregrounds the insecurities of the dispossessed stratum of his society. He dramatizes the emotional instability of disempowered individuals of his time who adopt adversity and uncertainties as a consequent survival strategy. New studies are being published on the environmental risks associated with precarity (Stokols & Barankevich 2024; Vu & Nguyen 2024), but how vulnerable conditions have traditionally shaped psychological and existential orientation needs more attention. The current study seeks to explore Yank's confrontation with reality and his tragic fate as a result of the precarious condition of his livelihood through a close textual analysis. The paper aims to examine the influence of the physical

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struggles of destitutes and victimized bodies on the felt vulnerabilities of the socially and economically alienated classes, in the play *The Hairy Ape*. The lens of precarity facilitates our understanding of how socio-economic exclusion can lead to emotional vulnerability. The study has reviewed literary and theoretical works that have observed the social and economic implications of precarity. Furthermore, the theoretical framework of precarity is utilized to bring out how precarity helps create a bridge in the social and literary understanding of the play, as it connects emotional instability with the economic inequality of the characters. The play *The Hairy Ape* is chosen for such an investigation due to its unique blend of fragile identities and the spaces that are utilized by the dramatist to represent profound emotions like the fondness and commitment of an individual to his primitive strength.

Precarity is an intense human condition, differentiated from vulnerability (Hogg et al. 2021) that exposes a segment of individuals to uncertainty and marginality. The socially and economically ignored are exposed to suffering and neglect, which ultimately leads to emotional and psychological precarity. (Blustein et al. 2024) Thus, precarity refers to the situation of an individual who is constantly exposed to economic and socio-political fragility. The subject's disposition then indicates loss of agency and empathy as a consequence of a precarious existence. "Precariat" as understood by Guy Standing (2011) refers to an emerging social class that has no stable occupation, identity, or equal rights. Standing has also divided the precariat based on their emotional fragility on the same lines as Yank, Paddy and Long "The precariat can be divided into three further groups – atavists, who look back to a lost past; nostalgics, who look forlornly for a present, a home; and progressives, who look for a lost future." (Standing 2011)

The concept of precarity in literary circles has been popularized through the work of Judith Butler, a significant critic of contemporary times. In *Precarious Lives: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), she has unravelled the intensity of vulnerability that ensues from the occurrence of an event. Her work is a testament to the importance of the relationship between an anonymous individual and a socially motivated phenomenon. It can be concluded from her work that an individual's sovereignty is permanently at risk. The understanding of precarity needs more attention from drama and theatre critics in the present times, as uncertainty has become a reality

when it comes to human relationships and agency. Standing and Butler have highlighted the structural production of precarity that deprives certain sections of society of recognizability and economic equality. While Standing focuses on the insecurity of work and social rights, Butler brings out the implications of vulnerability as a by product of social structure. Thus, their ideas on precarity unify various groups under a panorama of insecurities.

Eugene O'Neill as an adapter of precarity on stage

Eugene O'Neill attempted to represent the poetics of feelings and emotions. He is a notable dramatist who upholds the narrative and aesthetics of survivability and uncertainty in his plays. O'Neill, being ahead of his time, has successfully unravelled the mystery hidden in the drama of life. Furthermore, O'Neill's oeuvre is filled with the uncertainty of the time, represented through painful memories, pipe dreams, and unfulfilled desires. It is suggested that the tragic fate, in his plays, is induced by the traumatic experiences that can lead the protagonist into vulnerability of mind and body. He has displayed a keenness to capture the precarious in his works through various narrative techniques. O'Neill's dialogues are packed with emotional fragility, depicting the restless condition of Yank and the fellow stokers.

Laurin Porter (1993) has suggested that feelings of greed and transcendence are prominent in the Cycle plays of Eugene O'Neill. Porter claims that O'Neill portrays the emotions of socially excluded, poverty-stricken, and downtrodden individuals, who have lost a complete sense of identity as their illusions shatter when faced with reality. Yank, in *The Hairy Ape*, having worked in an unstable working environment, rejoices in the economic displacement "Dis is home, see? What d'yuh want wit home? [Proudly.] I runned away from mine when I was a kid. On'y too glad to beat it, dat was me. Home was lickings for me, dat's all." (O'Neill 2004, Scene I, pp. 5–6) and fragility of his condition at first, only to be struck with the pangs of reality after being yelled at as a "filthy beast" (Ibid, Scene III, p. 10) The blunt exclamation made by the daughter of a steel magnate makes Yank crudely aware of the existing hierarchical divide between him and Mildred. He is immediately seized with overwhelming emotions that shatter his pride in bodily strength and movement.

The stokers in the play *The Hairy Ape* represent the working class; they are depicted as a group of people who have been displaced in their

efforts to earn a livelihood. The physical and emotional fragility of the characters is highlighted in the environment they inhabit—a dark, infernal space reeking of sweat and curses of the drunken stokers. The condition of the stokers is evident through their stooping postures, further symbolizing their psychological and physical alienation (Rundle 2008) from mainstream society. Robinson (1995) has observed that O'Neill understood that "Yank's hyper masculinity does indeed contain an underlying insecurity: as we shall see, it is threatened by one encounter with a woman." Yank is portrayed as a delusional character who becomes increasingly vulnerable as he transitions from darkness to light. The insecurity he feels is socially rooted, manifested in his inability to locate the force against which he has to fight, finally losing his life at the hands of the Ape. Yank's grief of a lack of identity or dignity, and not about the laborious work or inhaling a significant amount of dust in the stokehole, essentially engenders material precarity in the play. The livelihood of the stokers is always at physical or psychological risk. They are prone to accidents due to low safety standards, poor working environment with exposure to coal dust, and extreme heat, leading to frequent injuries and deaths. The threatening condition of their lives is useful in considering the oppressive, brutal, exploitative experiences of life inside the stokehole.

Precarity of emotional fragility

The scenes are arranged according to Yank's emotional state. The first scene is a witness to his excessive pride as he glorifies his physical agility "I'm de heart of it! Sure, I belong!" (O'Neill 2004, Scene I, pp. 8–9) Yank also bonds with other stokers, "We move, don't we? We're the engines!" (Ibid, Scene I, pp. 8–9), relating their shared vulnerability and struggle for self-definition. The oppression that emanates from the furnaces and boilers, filled with coal dust, brings the stokers together as they are seen revelling and cursing after getting drunk. Yank, through his drunken monologues, "He can't breathe and swallow coal dust, but I kin, see? Dat's fresh air for me! Dat's food for me! I'm new, get me? Hell in de stokehole? Sure! It takes a man to work in hell. Hell, sure, dat's my fav'rite climate. I eat it up! I git fat on it! It's me makes it hot! It's me makes it roar!" (Ibid, Scene I, pp. 7–8) brings out the emotional attachment to his work of shovelling coal into a furnace on a ship. Butler (2012) recognizes such vulnerabilities and argues that Yank's disregard for his life is a product of society, as his precarity is due to exploitative labour conditions during industrialization. By

transforming precarious feelings into nostalgia and pride in enduring and isolated existence and emotional fragility, industrial systems gradually dispossess stokers of their identity or any sense of existential security.

Yank is exposed to humiliation after being called “Oh, the filthy beast”, which sparks utter rage and hostility towards the authority Mildred symbolizes. The incident leaves him shocked as he cannot accept the demeaning assault on his self-esteem. Yank's sentiment is wounded by being rejected in a space he thought belonged to him. Mildred, the daughter of the President of Steel Trust, by dismantling his spirit, underscores the degrading ease with which the upper classes dare to dispossess the socially and economically weak. The meaninglessness forces Yank to find a place of belonging, but he remains unsuccessful in his endeavours “Christ, where do I fit in? I don't belong.” (O'Neill 2004, Scene VIII, p. 38)

Sillars (2020) has pointed out that the primitiveness of the stokers is not just due to their appearance as an Ape but also because of their inability to belong to the spaces inhabited by the industrialists. The stokers are primitive in their insistence on physicality and strength. Yank's further identification with the Ape “So, I'm a busted Ingersoll, dat's what. Steel was me, and I own it. Steel, dat's de stuff, and de men dat's made out of it. But I ain't steel no more. I ain't de stuff.” (O'Neill 2004, Scene VIII, p. 39) alienates him from the industrialists, fellow stokers, and his work. The tragedy that unfolds after this incident dramatizes the doomed fate of Yank, who embarks on a self-destructive journey.

Precarity embodied through inhabited spaces

Brugnoli (2012) has called attention to the imagery of “prison” recurring in the play and goes on to highlight a series of opposing forces involved in the spaces inhabited by individuals from different classes. The symbol of prison brings out the idea of socio-economic confinement of the workers in a society. Mildred's exclamatory disgust after looking at Yank, “filthy beast,” echoes the precarious condition of Yank in the dark boiler room, who is covered in sweat and dirt. Brugnoli has also emphasized the importance of psychological violence that is caused by viewing oneself through someone else's eyes. Yank finds himself trapped in Mildred's gaze, witnessing the horror that she feels upon seeing him. Mildred's need to “see” how the “other halves” live establishes the exposed and defenceless condition

of the lower classes. The issue of class politics is raised by Long when he redirects her retort to their economic slavery, “It ain’t her fault, it’s her class. You’ve got to ‘it the Capitalist class. That’s where the trouble’s at. The bloody first cabin swells don’t think o’ you as men. They think you’re dirt—wage a slave, that’s what you are.” (O’Neill 2004, Scene VI, pp. 33–34) Long brings out Butler’s idea of vulnerability and misrecognition.

The play *The Hairy Ape* also revolves around the fear of being excluded, as it represents their inability to belong, highlighting an existential issue that haunts the working classes. Binda Sah (2019) and Roy (1968) have noted that characters in *The Hairy Ape* are mostly seen to be struck by excessive rage, frenzy, and dilemma as they perpetually confront the loss of meaning in their lives. Yank’s unwavering believes in his strength, “I’m de end! I’m de start! I start somep’n and de would moves! It—dat’s me!--de new dat’s moiderin’ de old! I’m de ting in coal dat makes it boin; I’m steam and oil for de engines; I’m de ting in noise dat makes yuh hear it” (O’Neill 2004), crumbles after the ghastly encounter with Mildred. The insult not only exposes Yank’s vulnerability but, as understood by Butler (2009), also renders his life unliveable. Long and Paddy, the socialist and nostalgic stokers, cannot provide Yank with the support or insight he requires to regain his lost sense of identity. Yank rejects their vague extremities of romantic idealization and ideological orientation, as it doesn’t free him from his invasive thoughts. Left without revenge or a solution, his frenzied mind articulates “I ain’t on oith and I ain’t in heaven, get me? I’m in de middle, tryin’ to separate me self but I can’t.” (O’Neill 2004, Scene VIII, p. 40)

Pessimistic strength of Yank

The play *The Hairy Ape* has been notably studied as a drama that represents the strength of a man who is unafraid of toiling in the scheme of things. The emotional volatility, anger, and awareness of their disadvantage fuel them into becoming a destructive force in society. Such a transition can also be seen in Yank, who is forced to associate with a real Ape in a cage (Rajeshwar 2022), representing brutal strength and a grotesque space. Even though Yank’s strength can transcend him, the collective identity as a stoker and a past filled with emotional baggage hold him back, exemplifying Standing’s (2011) notion that different groups within the precariat respond distinctly. While Paddy is found reminiscing over the past, Long finds

a way to blame it on society, none of which includes quitting a position and embarking on a doomed search in the middle of nowhere. Yank, unlike others, has an uncanny pride in Yank. Furthermore, Dutta (1984) says that “Yank doesn’t artificially enact the primitive excess but derives it from the concept of Masculine Primitive.” The irony of Yank’s tragedy lies in his miscalculated understanding of power as the ability to swallow and breathe coal dust. Yank’s desperation to belong after his terrifying encounter with Mildred is caused by the fragmentation of the reality that used to empower him with agency and a great ability to command the fellow stokers.

Furthermore, the play brings out the anguish of an individual who was once satisfied with his situation but is found completely devastated after a striking event. The tragedy of Yank resides in his fragile sense of self and his inability to emotionally recover from a situation that obliterates his pride in existence, while burying him deep into an echoing chamber moored on the shore of utter desolation.

The collapsing identity and anxiety exhibited by Yank, studied by Sumitha (2023), strip him of dignity, agency, and self-worth. She goes on to comment on the racial, cultural, and emotional insignificance of the workers in the lives of the wealthy and upper classes. Both Standing and Butler also agree with the fact that the precariat is a socially designated condition in which a group of people are pushed towards social and economic uncertainty, exposing a chasm that is visibly apparent in the play when Long says, “Hinsultin’ us! Hinsultin’ us, the bloody cow! And then bloody engineers! What right ‘as they got to be exhibit in’ us’s if we was bleedin’ monkeys in a menagerie? Did we sign for hinsults to our dignity as ‘onest workers? Is that in the ship’s articles?” (O’Neill 2004, Scene II, pp. 17–18)

Long is frustrated with the eroded and undervalued life of the stokers as he believes they are exposed to chronic labour, asymmetric obligations, and a suffocating working environment. The stokers are at the disposal of the upper classes to be studied and exploited, which are continually compromising their space and identity with little sympathy for their sentiments. Thus, O’Neill’s play, *The Hairy Ape*, is a significant study to understand the traumatic impact of the class divide that exists in a society.

Socio-economic vulnerability of stokers

The American Dream, which promised to fulfil the aspirations of its people and eradicate their anxiety by transcending the vulnerable class

valued for their worth, remains highly compromised even today (Kaur 2023). The author of the article has suggested that Emerson's American land of dreams morphed into a wasteland devoid of hope and equality. The space inhabited by the stokers is antithetical to the ideas of liberty and equality that were upheld by the notion of American exceptionalism. (Fernández-Caparrós Turina, 2021)

The condition of the workers or the "other halves" (O'Neill 2004, Scene II, pp. 15–16), dramatized with realism by O'Neill, is rooted in the nation's deepening class division. The incidents of the play unfold against the backdrop of industrialization, which was responsible for the dehumanization of the working classes at the hands of the economically empowered. The rising inequality and materialism delineated the working classes and exposed them to oppression and discrimination. Alsanafi (2022) has asserted the indifference of the wealthy neighbourhoods like Fifth Avenue in the play towards the underprivileged section of society, highlighting the disconnection between the two classes. The narrator comments on the indifference of the crowd, "But as they seem neither to see nor hear him, he flies into a fury." (O'Neill 2004, Scene V, pp. 28–29)

The quintessential narrative of the estranged feelings between the capitalist (Nickle 1998) and the working class brings out the. Tale (2023) has suggested that O'Neill offers a strong critique of the economic superiority of a class of people based on their social standing. Yank's range of feelings, from pride to rage to alienation and despair, exemplifies systemic dispossession of an individual can be seen "The bloody first cabin swells don't think o' you as men. They think you're dirt—wage a slave, that's what you are." (O'Neill 2004, Scene VI, pp. 33–34) Plunka (1999) has mentioned that the representation of the transatlantic liner in the first scene not only brings out the health issues of industrialization in repetitive evocation of "smoke, coal, steel, heat, noise, and pounding engine of the Bessemer process have reduced humanity to a subrace paying homage to an omnipotent godlike force", but exposes the multifaceted socio-economic vulnerability of the misrecognized classes. Like Nietzsche, O'Neill has been considered a pessimistic playwright for his depiction of extreme psychological conditions that his characters endure. The techniques adopted by the playwright exemplify their isolation, loss of faith, rootlessness, and meaninglessness, to name a few. Yank's utter disappointment and disillusionment with the world create a void in his life that no one can fill. Finally, he accepts his situation and embraces

the fact that the real Beast in the cage is infinitely stronger than him. In the end, Yank dies disheartened at the idea of his ability to belong somewhere.

Conclusion

Eugene O'Neill, in *The Hairy Ape*, has shown that the emotional fragility of Yank emerges after the disruption of illusion. Yank's personal tragedy unfolds not only from the harsh working conditions of the Stokers but also from the emotional instability that exposes him to social and economic exclusion. Like Butler's argument, the play demonstrates that life without agency and dignity wounds the Stokers' psyche, revealing their vulnerability within a strongly divided community. The tragic irony of individuals like Yank lies in their self-destructive passions for the primitive reliance on strength. Being deprived of autonomy, choice, or formal education, which could help evade a doomed life, they remain imprisoned in small vessels and narrow ideologies of their own making. The unfolding trajectory aligns with Standing's notion of precarity as a socio-economic condition, which renders an individual defenceless and insecure. Yank and the fellow stokers are exposed to humiliation and disgrace without the liberty to defy subjugation or retrieve lost honour.

Yank's emotional journey from pride to suffering exemplifies the exploitative conditions of the workers. Yank's false sense of belonging to the ship and the boiler room embodies his dispossession and dehumanized existence as a result of economic hierarchization. The harsh and enduring subsistence, coupled with the feelings of misrecognition and humiliation, are certain tools utilized by the authoritative upper classes to administer the working classes. O'Neill locates his tragedy in the oppression of the working class and their servitude to the mechanized system built for their exploitation. Consistent with Standing and Butler, O'Neill validates that socio-economic structures are responsible for eroding the self-esteem of the working classes. Thus, establishing that industrial modernity has corroded the dignity of the working classes, as it is responsible for the physical and psychological violence prolonged through systemic exploitation.

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