

O'Neill's Contrived Characters: Experimentation on Alienation and Self-fragmentation

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*Abstract- Eugene O'Neill, the modern American playwright, doesn't deal with generalized social quandary or political warp rather the characters of his plays are contrived in psychological agony to interpret these problems or distortions. While dealing with *The Hairy Ape* and *Desire under the Elms*, the author of this paper examines the casts of Yank and Ephraim Cabot, the protagonist of these plays respectively, and tries to delve into their struggle-within in the context of 20th century modern American. Being unable to reciprocate with the very essence of modernism due to their own stern primitive beliefs, consequently, they have lost the pace with this ever-evolving modern world. Yank and Cabot are not only isolated from the society just because of the war effect, migration and mechanized social milieu but also suffer being alienated from their own selves. The author here strives to prove that O'Neill's characters are somewhat contrived, and are torn by alienation and self-fragmentation.*

Key Words: modern American society, stern belief, alienation, self-fragmentation, belongingness.

Issues Relating to Yank's and Cabot's Personal Credos

Eugene O'Neill was a pioneer dramatist of modern America. Before he took to writing plays, American drama was confined to farce, comedy and melodrama. O'Neill composed heart rendering and powerful tragedies which were created from his realization about the real world moving around him. In these dramas O'Neill's delineated characters are lonesome and self-estranged. The finest examples of this category we can mention are Yank from *The Hairy Ape* and Ephraim Cabot from the *Desire Under the Elms*. What Yank and Cabot have in common is that both of them are lonely and separated from this modern mechanical society and its evolving values. Albeit they are living in this society,

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they are much aloof from the people, and as a result they end up separating themselves from the core value system of modernity, resulting in total communicate failure.

Yank is aloof from social conventions as he is too much confident in his physical strength and, therefore, he thinks himself the most powerful of this mechanical world:

I'm the end! I'm the start! ... I'm steam and oil for de engines; ...
And I'm steel-steel-steel!

(1.128-129) [1]

Even we see him(Yank) apart from the traditional social ideas like family or home. So where his other shipmates refer to the ship as "hell," Yank considers the ship a "home." When Paddy sings song even in a very drunken sentimental voice, Yank becomes furious and expresses his indifferent attitude towards home or family in a bitter voice:

Shut up, yuh lousy Boob' where d' yuh get dat tripe? Home?
Home, Hell! I'll make a home for yuh! I'll knock yuh dead.
Home!! T'hell with home! Where d'yuh get dat t ripe? What
d'yuh want wit home? (1.124) [1]

Again we see him totally out of social attitude, bewildered and not as a part of social being, utterly lacking civility:

Yank- (viciously) G'wan! Tell it to Sweeney! (He swaggers
away and deliberately lurches into a top-hatted gentleman, then
glares at him pugnaciously) Say, who d'yuh tink yuh're
bumpin'? Tink yuh own de oath? (5.147-8) [1]

Even like other human beings, he doesn't possess any sweet past that can satisfy him or reminiscing his home life he doesn't feel secured. That is why we find him talking to the ape:

Youse can sit and dope dream in de past, green woods, de jungle
and de rest of it. Den yuh belong and dey don't. Den you kin
laugh at 'em, see? Yuh're de champ of the world. But me- I ain't
got no past to tink in, nor nothin' dat's comin', on'y what's
now- and dat don't belong. (8.162) [1]

And ultimately he feels that he doesn't belong to the human race.

On the other hand, while analyzing *Desire Under the Elms* Eugene O'Neill emphasizes on human sufferings, i.e., the experiences of isolation, alienation and self-fragmentation that fascinates him. O'Neill's delineation of man's inner conflicts and isolated state is contributed by man's self-ego and sometimes fate is also related here, though

psychological conflict is mainly responsible for modern man's tragedy especially his tragic end.

Desire Under the Elms involves Ephraim Cabot's unusual family set-up with three grown-ups without any wives, and the play opens with a bizarre show as he brings home his newly married (third) wife Abbie Putnam. Ephraim Cabot is a strict puritan and is unable to set up a communication either with his wife or with his sons. He did not have any kind of relationship with sons or previous wives for his attitude of possessiveness of the rocky farm, though he has a so-called social life having a wife and children. However, from the beginning till the end of the play he has always been found roaming like an alien on the very firm he always bragged about and possessed. The never finds peace here in human companionships, rather gets it in the company of animals:

ABBIE. (surprised) Whar air ye goin'?

CABOT. (queerly) Down whar it's restful- whar it's warm-down t' the barn. (Bitterly) I kin talk t' the cows. They know. They know the farm an' me. They'll give me peace.

(2.2.353) [1]

Old Cabot is so much possessive that even after having three sons he weds Abbie Putnam, longing for a son as an heir from her. He does this only because of not being satisfied with his sons. The reason behind is Cabot's own thinking. He thinks that his sons are not able enough to maintain his hard earned farm specially when Simeon and Peter leave the farm for questing their better luck in California and Eben remains alone. He is haunted by a sense of loneliness and insecurity and expresses his worries to Abbie:

CABOT. (looks after him with scornful pity) Soft-headed. Like his Maw. Dead spit 'n' image. No hope in him! (He spits with contemptuous disgust) A born fool! (2.4.357) [1]

As Cabot is a strict puritan, he follows the Old Testament and believes in "hard god." He quotes the Old Testament often when he speaks but that even can't stop him from going to a prostitute (Minnie) and marrying a third wife who is as young to be his daughter. This conduct isolates him from others especially from his sons like Eben is expressing hatred towards Abbie and Ephraim:

EBEN: (fighting against his growing attraction and sympathy-harshly) An' bought yew-like a harlot! (She is stung and flushes angrily. She has been sincerely moved by the recital of her

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troubles. He adds furiously) An' the price he's payin' ye- this farm-was my Maw's, damn ye!- an' mine now! (1.5.339)[1]

EBEN: (breaking in violently) Yew 'n' yewr God! Allus cussin' folks- allus naggin' 'em! (1.4.340) [1]

Ephraim Cabot is a typical puritan and according to his personal credos, money should be earned through hard labour because he is believer of hard god and he believes that god lives in stone:

CABOT: ... When ye kin make corn out o' stones, God's living' in yew! ... God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! (2.2.348-349) [1]

Again, Cabot is so much hardworking person that he had gone to the west in the soft-land but came back to his farm again and overworked his wives and sons and made the rocky farm prosperous. But he is a miser. He can earn money through hard work but he doesn't want to spend it alike other Puritans and that is why a rift between Cabot and his sons is formed as the latter represent the Yankee culture [5].

Only due to his egoistic attitude and personal thinking Ephraim Cabot becomes lonely. He has lost all the relationships with Simeon, Peter, Eben and Abbie and becomes a loner like his "hard god."

Alienation and Self-fragmentation in the Context of Modern America

Modern man cannot have any legendary standing like Greek or Elizabethan characters. Unlike what we have seen earlier that most of the Greek or Elizabethan characters are superior to the common people, modern characters are depicted representing the mass people. They are much more realistic portrayals and tormented for their simple grief stricken lives. A modern American man is exhausted to be torn between his reality and dream to lead a happy and successful life. But, to speak the truth, men like Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman*, Blanche DuBois of *A Street Car Named Desire*, Yank of *The Hairy Ape* and Ephraim Cabot of *Desire under the Elms* couldn't cope up with the modern mechanized life, they suffered to be procrastinated, alienated and self-fragmentized person and met their tragic end.

Arthur Miller in his *Death of a Salesman* presents Willy Loman before the audience with his mental conflicts, problems, procrastination, his false or true ideals, his agony and sufferings, his social and family relationships, and with his expectations and disappointments. He couldn't become rich like his brother though both had the same

upbringing. Even Willy realized when he taught his sons he wasn't being true to himself and he felt fleeting about himself. He became bewildered and self-estranged.

While composing *A Street Car Named Desire* Tennessee Williams actually lays down the wearisome facets of modern life that have shocked traditional standards and have offered the redundant older civilization to be refined. Blanche DuBois, the fascinating protagonist, dominates the play from its very start to the final scene. Blanche is a sophisticated lady from the family of the DuBois. She lives in their farmhouse named "Belle Reve" which means "sweet dream" in Mississippi. She is a highly educated lady with specialty in English and French. She gets married with a young boy Allan, and becomes distorted with his suicide when she expresses her abhorrence of his homosexuality. After the death of her husband and with the loss of Belle Reve she becomes frantic and becomes addicted in drinking. As a result, to get rid of her loneliness she starts having sexual pleasure with men only for one night respectively. What Stella does, Blanche cannot do that--she can't cope up with the middle class situation after losing her property. That is why where Stella makes a family whereas Blanche is unable to make her life stable for her fake. No one believes her at the end and she meets her tragic end.

In *The Hairy Ape* Eugene O'Neill portrays the very character of Yank who is the foundation, middle, and also the pinnacle of this drama. Being too much disgusted by his home life of only eating and beating, he has left home and finds employment as a stoker in a ship. He is illiterate and behaves like an illiterate labourer, misrepresents words using slang terms. Being a lower class member, he doesn't get opportunity to be a civilized person. As he doesn't possess any sweet memory of his home life so he never cares and carves for home. He thinks the ship as his home and feels disgusted when his shipmates express their feelings for home. He is an egoist person who thinks that he himself is the strength behind all power and without him nothing can be run in this mechanized world.

Yank expresses his disgust towards modern world to which he doesn't belong. His first shock comes when he encounters Mildred Douglas, a rich insipid girl who is the daughter of the president of Steel Trust. She is totally different than Yank. She is the representative of capitalist upper class society. She is pale, colorless and artificial and we see her reacting when she has met with Yank:

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He sees MILDRED, like a white apparition in the full light from the open furnace doors. He glares into her eyes, turned to stone. As for her, during his speech she has listened, paralysed with horror, terror, her whole personality crushed, beaten is, collapsed, by the terrific impact of this unknown, abysmal brutality, naked and shameless. As she looks at his gorilla face, as his eyes bore into hers, she utters a low choking cry and shrinks away from him, putting both hands up before her eyes to shut out the sight of his face, to protect her own. This startles YANK to a reaction. His mouth falls open, his eyes grow bewildered.

MILDRED- (about to faint- to the engineers, who now have her one by each arm- whimperingly) Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast! (3.137) [1]

As a result, Yank's whole concept of his belongingness becomes shaky and he feels the lack of identity and he vows to have revenge on her. He searches for his new identity because question arises in his mind that if he doesn't belong to the stock hole then where he belongs?

In fact, what he wants is recognition. This is not only a problem for Yank, but the problem of the whole social system to which persons like Yank belong. Eugene O'Neill has closely studied this crisis of identity in American society. In this connection, Heinrich Straumann remarks: "Viewed in the larger context of nineteenth and twentieth-century writing, this motif grows into one of the three distinct great themes of American literature, viz. the search for identity based on a fundamental feeling of uncertainty about what the individual essentially is and where he belongs...." [4]

Being contemptuous to this modern society he goes to the gorilla thinking it as one of his race because from everywhere in this society he has to hear himself as a hairy ape. He invites ape and is seized and brutally killed by the animal. Before his tragic end his last words are:

YANK- ...He got me, aw right. I'm trou. Even him didn't tink I belonged....Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in? (8.163) [1]

Helpless Yank, Willy or Blanche, as isolated and self-alienated modern men, seek their recognition in this crammed full so-called modernized society. Losing their identity, they have lost the very perception of belongingness in this world and ultimately they have to pay for this sacrificing themselves. These are the traits that very beautifully and

sharply brought before the readers and the playwrights have proved their dramatization in the modern American milieu.

Yank's and Cabot's Problem--Society Versus Man

Eugene O'Neill portrays both the characters of Yank and Cabot as misfits in this society. They are alienated from the society and also from themselves. Being egoists both of them have lost all the social relationships. Self-ego is one of the basic impulses of human being and with this prime concern O'Neill has created Yank and Cabot as egoists. In lieu of dealing with the political problem he deals with the psychological problems and human relations where we see man is losing his social contacts. In O'Neill's plays especially in *The Hairy Ape* and in *Desire under the Elms*, we find the experimentation of this key factor.

As for Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, earlier he had home but being contemptuous of only eating and beating at home he left home forever. Now he has neither sweet memory nor long-cherished remembrance for his home nor he does want to return home. Home is like hell to him whereas all his shipmates are longing for going home, ship is hell to them. But to Yank ship is the only thing which gives them recognition. He is proud to belong to the world of powers, machines, engines, steam, coal, steel. But all his self-arrogance becomes resentment and class-consciousness arises inside him when Mildred Douglas, an aristocrat lady visits the interior of the ship and shows her repulsion towards Yank mentioning him as a "filthy beast." This comment and her reaction seeing him questioning his concept of belongingness to this world breaks all his arrogance and pride about the brutal physical strength that he possesses. He desperately starts searching the right place for him where he can belong. As the play proceeds on, in the meantime, the police for assaulting some Fifth Avenue passerby arrests Yank, and after that he becomes known about the organization called the I.W.W. He thinks this organization will help him as this is the organization of "Industrial Workers of the World," to have his revenge on the upper class society. But there also the officials of that organization reject him:

SECRETARY- ...Oh, hell, what's the use of talking? You're a brainless ape.

YANK- (in a vague mocking tone) Say, where do I go from here?

POLICEMAN- (giving him a push-with a grin, indifferently) Go to hell. (7.159-160) [1]

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Moreover, O'Neill gives emphasis on the effect of heredity of his characters. He admits the significance of biological-psychological influence for developing individual's personality. Man in O'Neill's play is bound by his heredity that sometimes acts as his nemesis. He is neither fully free nor fully bound to choose his own life [4].

As we see in Yank, he doesn't have a good family life or well upbringing, that's why he remains illiterate and leads his life as a fireman in the stock-hole of the ship. His degraded familial background handicaps him. But Yank doesn't give up rather he is determined and courageous enough to hold his position in the stock-hole through hard labour. So he is neither dependent on social implementations nor conscious about class discrimination. To O'Neill, Yank is both a representative of lower class and an individual where he strives to get an identity from the so-called modern mechanized society where human being is being dehumanized by industrialism. In the capitalist society lower class people or proletariats are not valued properly as valuable human beings. This is portrayed in *The Hairy Ape* when Yank goes to the Fifth Avenue. There the church-goers elite people don't regard Yank as a human being. They talk with themselves and apparently ignore him and pass on. Yank has a look on the window display in two stores and stands with Long looking at the jeweller's shop and Long wails at the displayed price with which they make in ten voyages sweating in the stokehole. Elite class people buy those as toys and one of the price amounts displayed there would buy a year's food for a starving family. Here O'Neill shows the clash between society and man and this can be one of the appropriate reasons behind Yank's being contemptuous to this society. But Yank can't survive because of not being recognized as human being in the bourgeois society. As human community has rejected him, he goes to the zoo to establish his alliance with the apes, hoping that at least gorilla will accept him but unfortunately he has to meet his death when gorilla crushes him. In fact, Yank can go neither forward nor backward and the ultimate result is death after being isolated from all of the social aspects. Thus Yank as an individual failed to get aligned with society or social values.

Though Ephraim Cabot is also a victim of the fate, he has problems of adjustments with the modern society too. Being a puritan he believes in hard god and follows the Old Testament very strictly. But he is also an egoist and this very instinct is responsible for his aloofness from the society. Puritans are basically money savers and they don't want to spend money. But when the Puritans have migrated from England to

New England in America, the newer generation immersed themselves into a reality, which is the Yankee culture, making way for the American capitalism [3]. They are not money holders like their predecessors and this is what we find in the characters of Simeon, Peter and Eben. But Old Cabot can't cope up with this changing society. As for example, we see him doing hard works and he also makes his wives and sons work hard and becomes rivals of his own children:

EBEN. (fiercely) An' fur thank he killed her!

EBEN. Didn't he slave Maw t' death?

PETER. He's slaved himself t' death. He's slaved Sim 'n' me 'n' yew t' death-

EBEN. She'd got too tired. She'd got too used t' bein' too tired. That was what he done. (with vengeful passion) An' sooner'r later, I'll meddle. I'll say the thin's I didn't say then t' him! I'll yell 'em at the top o' my lungs. I'll see t' it my Maw gits some rest as' sleep in her grave! (1.2.322-4) [1]

Simeon and Peter are also disgusted with the life only for their father and they don't hesitate wishing him dead or mad. Only the principle of worshipping the hard god grabbed by Ephraim is the basic reason behind his isolation from his sons as well as from the society. Cabot is dominating the play from the beginning till end by his stubborn will-force. He is a stone-like figure in this play. He can never set up any harmonious relation with anyone other than the rock and stone of his farm. He works very hard but suffers from loneliness for his self-designed barrier to believe in hard god. This belief in hard god establishes a superiority complex inside him, which is like a wall that cannot be penetrated--initiating a vacuum between him and the society.

Both Yank and Cabot are not aware of the society around them. Their self-pride and superiority complex keep them apart from others. They can't make themselves comprehensible to the society. Both Yank and Cabot are confined to their own world--as long as they live within their own selves they are alright with themselves. But the problem arises when they are left to act around the social environments. So there is always an ensuing clash between them and society. As social being they can't handle the social conventions. Cabot is a worshipper of hard god and life long he remains an isolated person for his blind belief. Neither the hard god himself nor any women or son can diminish his loneliness. And Yank is adamant in his brutal physical strength and thinks himself the power behind moving the world. Not being aware of their own

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follies, they suffer when they are in the realm of social set-up due to their not being able to act in accordance with social response. And this lack of reciprocation stemming from their own frailties plays the pivotal role behind their tragic doom.

O'Neill's Contrived Characters: A Study of Modern Existence

Apart from having some viewpoint on the modern predicament in relation to the fate, Eugene O'Neill deals with the psychological pressure of human mind, which is responsible for the tragedy of modern man. Modern man is being victimized for surviving his own existence in this capitalist modern society in O'Neill's plays. This is so because he never felt at home in the socio-cultural and economic milieu of the capitalist-materialist culture of grab-and-loot around him [4]. As a modern dramatist O'Neill deals with the problems of the modern men and their very existence. In his plays like *The Hairy Ape* and *Desire under the Elms* he portrays his characters as contrived and tormented to endure themselves in this world. Characters as Yank or Ephraim Cabot are the contrived people who are found all along negotiating with their doom. They couldn't survive in this everyday changing world. They are portrayed as searchers with no appropriate destination. They remain the searchers of their own identities, their own existence, as to what they have lost in holding their stern ego and self-pride. They are not capable of admitting every situation and change their mentality in course of time. This acts as the biggest problem of their life and becomes the rival of their lives even. Both Yank and Cabot are presented as studies of modern existence through O'Neill's splendid dramatization.

After scrutinizing *The Hairy Ape* we see the playwright lays emphasis on the psychology in the context of the modern set-up. We observe here the clear-cut discrimination between the bourgeoisie and proletariat class in the modern capitalist world. Working class people are exploited to create wealth for the elite class people and human beings are becoming insensible of harmonious relations among them, especially in between these two distinguished class. These working class people have no access in the highly industrialized society and roam as searcher of their identity and become alienated from the beginning till the end of their life.

As Yank works as a fireman in the stock-hole of a ship he is not least conscious of the class discrimination. He is aware just of his brutal physical strength, which is the only possession of his life. But when he has met Mildred Douglas, the aristocratic lady, he becomes stunned

observing her reaction and her calling him a beast. He turns to be revengeful but he isn't conscious about social class barrier even then. Going to the Fifth Avenue, he first realizes that bourgeois people never turn to be cordial with the lower class ordinary people, in fact, they never count Yank as a human being. Yank gets shocked at their behaviour and his whole concept of belongingness is wrecked. He becomes puzzled thinking that what would be his actual place in this society, where can he get his recognition for his own belief. Then thought comes over, and he is driven from his security to a frenzied run through New York City, seeking again the primitive sense of "belonging" that he has lost. His effort is disastrous, and he dies in the cage of the great ape in the Central Park Zoo. Thus, *The Hairy Ape* studies a man's attempt to come into harmony with his world to find to whom, to what, he can belong [2].

Psychological problem is one of the reasons for Yank's alienation but there are some other reasons behind this--effect of war and machines. Eugene O'Neill has experienced the World War and this experience he applies in his play where the character Yank is the victim of the First World War effect. After the world war the society is being mechanized and the class distinction becomes a top issue. Here Yank is deprived of his recognition from the ruling class people only for being the working class people. What he holds in his mind about himself is that he is the power behind all the machines, but there he is the captive of the mechanized society, which makes him isolated from all and from himself, too.

Ephraim Cabot, the protagonist of the play *Desire under the Elms* acts as the strict Puritan migrated from England to New England in 1850. Here the main problems with the protagonist are migration and a stench yet strong belief in Puritanism for which he can't cope up with the changed situation. Cabot is a stern believer of the Old Testament and hard god. According to him god is hard, not easy. God is lonesome and this strong belief makes him so harder that he doesn't have fine-tuned relationship with anyone, neither with his wives nor with his sons. As the time changes the social phases must be changed. So after migration in New England the next generation of the hard Puritans becomes much liberal in thinking and belief system. These Yankees have different views about their lives. They are capable of changing themselves according to the time but Old Cabot in this play is a stubborn person who doesn't want to change his belief, the very belief that is made redundant and has no or negative effect in the new US scenario[5]. The blind worshipping of

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hard god prevents him from having any sort of relationship with anybody, and mentally he feels world apart from the society and at last he loses his identity and become alone in this modern world. At the end of the play he is left all alone, and high and dry, with none to inherit the farm after his death:

CABOT. (with one sardonic) Ha! (He begins to recover. Gets slowly to his feet-strangely) I calc'late God give it to 'em-not yew! God's hard, not easy! Mebbe they's easy gold in the West but it hain't God's gold. It hain't fur me. I kin hear His voice warnin' me agen t' be hard an' stay on my farm. I kin see his hand usin' Eben t' s teal t' keep me from weakness. I kin feel I be in the palm o' His hand, His fingers guidin' me. (A pause- then he mutters sadly) It's a-goin' t' be lonesomer now than ever it war afore-an' I'm gittin' old, Lord-ripe on the bough.... (Then stiffening) Wall-what d'ye want? God's lone some, hain't He? God's hard an' lonesome! (3.4.378) [1]

Both the protagonists of *The Hairy Ape* and *Desire under the Elms* are being probed by O'Neill to substantiate the fact that one's place in the modern society does not automatically guarantee the existence's worth. The utmost strives that they go through are the trials, which render them estranged, but with a certain degree of insight. In fact, they are alienated from the society and perplexed from the social progression in course of time due to their lack of adjustments from within or from without. Moreover, this alienation makes them suffer from psychological torments and keeps them fragmentized even from their own selves, and this is what O'Neill successfully explores in his plays.

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