

Analysis of the Alienation Theme in Eugene O'Neill's the Hairy Ape: An Eco-Critical Perspective

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Abstract. In the post-industrial era, with the high development of material civilization and the continuous progression of capitalism, the ecological crisis has become increasingly severe, leading to a significant imbalance in the social order. In this context, the lower-class laborers are often caught in an animal-like predicament of survival. In O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape*, the steamship symbolizes the capitalist society, and Yank's tragic fate reveals the disorientation, confusion, loneliness, disillusionment, and disappointment towards social reality among modern Westerners. This play serves as a warning of the crisis of human alienation in the context of post-industrial civilization. Although Yank's exploration fails, it remains a valuable attempt by humans to seek spiritual belonging in an alienated society. The pursuit of self-worth remains a permanent subject for human beings to contemplate. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the theme of alienation reflected in *The Hairy Ape* from the perspective of Eco-criticism, mainly focusing on three aspects: natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill; *The Hairy Ape*; Eco-criticism; alienation

1. Eco-criticism

Eco-criticism, namely the study of ecological literature, originated in the 1970s and rapidly became a prominent field of literary research in the 1990s. American scholar Joseph W. Meeker published his book concerning studies in the area of literature in 1974, introducing the term "literary ecology" and advocating that "the exploration of the relationships between humans and other species revealed in literature should be meticulous and sincere."^[1] In the same year, another American scholar, Karl Kroeber, published his study results in *The Journal of the Modern Language Association*, in which he introduced the concepts in the field of ecology. Then, in 1978, William Rueckert used the term "Eco-criticism" for the first time, explicitly advocated the "integration of literature and ecology", and emphasized that critics "must have an ecological perspective"^[2]. Then, Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm refined these ecological theories in their books, making them more systematic. Later, Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* was published in 1996, providing Eco-criticism with its theoretical framework and important aesthetic principles. Subsequently, Eco-criticism continued to mature in its theoretical structure through ongoing debates.

Eco-criticism aims to address the closed relationship between literature and nature, as well as the inherent connections between literary art and natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology^[3]. After experiencing the development of industrial civilization, the anxieties of modernity, and the fragmentation and chaos of post-modernity, modern writers have shifted their focus from the simple analysis of the natural environment to reinterpreting the relationships between humans and nature, human-human relationships, and the relationship man and himself within specific social contexts, while exploring the belonging of the human soul and emphasizing the pursuit of human self-worth.

2. Analysis of the Alienation Theme

2.1. Alienation in Human-Nature Relations

The principles of ecological criticism require people to love nature and highlight the harmonious relations between human beings and nature. This Eco-critical perspective examines and reflects on

the impact and destruction of the Industrial Revolution on traditional ways of life, expressing people's longing for a harmonious coexistence with nature.

Maintaining a harmonious coexistence with nature is a fundamental human need. For example, in the first scene, Paddy reminisces about the past natural civilization: "Oh, to be back in my youth days, oh! Oh, there was fine elegant ships them days clippers with tall masts touching the sky, fine and strong men was sons of the sea as if the sea is the mother that give birth to them. Oh, the clean skins of them, and their clear eyes, the backs and them chests! Brave as they was, and courageous men surely! We'd be sailing down round the Horn maybe. We'd be making sail in the morning, with a gentle breeze, singing a chanty song with no care to it."^[47] And at that time, humans and nature were in a harmonious state: "Twas them days a ship was part of the sea, and men was part of a ship, so the sea joined men and itself and made it a whole one."^[48] Here the ship celebrated by Paddy is not a product of the steamship from the industrial revolution, but a sailing ship symbolizing the harmony between humans and nature in the primitive age.

On the contrary, the alienation of the relationship between humans and nature refers to the divergence of humans and nature from unity to opposition. In Marx's theoretical perspective, the process of human labor is the process through which humans change the natural state of the natural world to fit human survival, and labor is the way in which humans and nature are unified. He believed that labor activity itself has been alienated under the capitalist mode of production, possessing the characteristics of capitalist exploitation. In this situation, nature is also alienated as an object of exploitation and oppression. The productive forces fostered by the development of technology are the inherent basis of alienated labor, and the capitalist mode of production makes alienated labor a reality. The alienation caused by technological advancement can be obviously seen in Yank's views toward the industrial products, that is, the machines. Most workers, led by Yank, worship machines madly, believing that they are the "source power" of the world: "I'm de ting in coal that makes it bore; I'm steam and oil for the engines; I'm de ting in noise that makes you hear it; I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles; I'm de ting in gold that makes it money! And I'm what makes iron into steel! Steel, stands for the whole ting! And I'm steel steel steel! I'm de muscles in steel, the punch behind it!"^[49] Such kind of fever for the industrial culture is sure to lead to the alienation between humans and nature.

Commonly, the impact and change of technology on nature is seen as "economic and moral progress", and the relationship between humans and nature becomes increasingly alienated. American writer Peter Thorsheim pointed out in his book concerning the Industrial Revolution *Inventing Pollution* that in the process of the Industrial Revolution, what humanity sacrificed was its own connection with nature and the past. "The entire nation is succumbing to the needs of the city and industry, and it is losing its 'natural' characteristics."^[5] Steamship is the microcosm of industrial civilization, and the long-term alienation from nature has made most people become endless working machines without thought, losing their true feelings of life and gradually deepening their own degree of alienation from nature.

2.2. Alienation in Human-Human Relations

In addition to natural ecology, ecological criticism also emphasizes the study of social ecology. The development of industrial civilization and capitalism not only worsens the relationship between man and nature, but also exacerbates social imbalance, that is, the alienation of human relationships.

In capitalist society, the alienation of individuals is first reflected in the exploitation and oppression relationship between capitalists and workers. Under the influence of capitalism and industrial civilization, people lose their autonomy and are dominated by external material or spiritual forces, which leads to the inability for personal development. It also contributes to the fact that their personalities cannot be fully developed, but only one-sidedly or abnormally developed. They cannot affirm themselves but deny themselves; they cannot be satisfied but feel pain; and they cannot freely develop their physical and mental abilities. Instead, they are physically humiliated and their minds are destroyed. This is true of the workers depicted by O'Neill, who are dominated and exploited by

the forces of capitalism, functioning as working machines at the bottom of the steamship filled with coal and black smoke. They are unable to appreciate the benefits of industrial civilization or find solace in their day-to-day labor, which destines the gap between the underclass and the capitalist class to be unbridgeable and social alienation to be inevitable.

Under such circumstances, interest becomes the purpose of interpersonal communication, and the closeness of interpersonal relationships is determined by people's "value" for others. Egoism has become the mainstream, and harmonious and friendly interpersonal relationships no longer exist. In this alienated modern society, when an individual has no utilitarian value to society, it is as if they have lost their own value of existence. At the same time, people cannot recognize the meaning of their own existence from their relationships with others. When Mildred meets Yank during the visit to the steamship, she is so frightened that she faints and calls Yank a "filthy beast". Therefore, Yank is angry and puzzled, so he embarks on the road of revenge; Yank and Long run around in the street, provoking passers-by and trying to get their attention in this way. However, his madness fails to attract the attention of these people and he is sent to prison. In prison, Yank is taunted and tortured by the prison guards, and when he tries to join the WFTU after his release from prison, he is rejected and severely beaten. In this process, the image of the "the thinker" also appears, which is extremely ironic: Yank's behavior is a search for a way out, a contemplation of his own self-worth, but in this alienated society, he is not only ignored by the upper class, but also refused to join the organization of his own class.

Therefore, it can be seen that when an individual has no use for society, it is equivalent to losing the value of their own existence. The tragedy of Yank is also the tragedy of modern industrial civilization. From this point of view, the main idea of *The Hairy Ape* has revealed the evil of capitalist society^[6].

2.3. Alienation in Human Spirits

In *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm presents an important concept: the "dichotomy of existence". The root of alienation lies in the dichotomous state of existence in capitalist society. He believes that "human existence is different in this respect from that of all other organisms; it is in a state of constant and unavoidable dis-equilibrium"^[7]⁶⁰ Due to humans' ability of "reasoning", awareness of their eventual death and of their limited power, individuals constantly seek methods of self-redemption in order to escape this existential contradiction. This unique existential predicament and pursuit of self-worth is a significant theme in ecological criticism.

In industrial capitalist society, the existence condition of humans has not improved with social progress, but has instead fallen into deeper contradictions. On one hand, humans enjoy abundant material life, while on the other, social relationships become increasingly tense, with growing feelings of loneliness, tension, insecurity, and a worsening sense of panic. Factors such as a mechanized way of life, complex social relationships, the pressure of survival and competition, and concerns about war intensify the dichotomy of human existence. Despite attempts to resist these challenges, individuals cannot escape them. Therefore, the inner world of individuals cannot attain true happiness, but instead becomes extremely lonely and insecure, leading to symptoms of mental fragmentation, ultimately falling into the alienation of mental disorder. Yank experiences the process from self-satisfaction to a spiritual predicament and is unable to recognize the value of his own existence. In the final act, he delivers a long monologue: "You are the champion of the world. But I can't got no past to think in, nor nothing to come, I belong to nowhere. Sure, you're the best off! You can't think, can you? You can't talk either. But I'm eager to make a bluff at talking and thinking the most, give away wit it most! and that's where the joker comes in. I ain't in the hell and I ain't in the heaven, got me? I'm in the middle trying to separate them, taking all the worst things from the bottom."^[4]³¹ Yank's mention of the contradiction between "earth" and "heaven" embodies this "dichotomy of existence".

"Whether or not the individual is healthy, is primarily not an individual matter, but depends on the structure of his society."^[7]⁹⁶ Under the structure of capitalist society, Yank attempts to prove his

worth through struggle, but ultimately realizes that he cannot escape his own existential predicament, nor break through the barriers set by capitalist society on the human spirit.

3. Conclusion

In many traditional ecological criticism works, the authors do not realize the profound meaning contained in the ecological phenomena, ignoring the connection between ecology and the human spiritual world, and often ultimately falling into the cliché of just calling for “environmental protection”. Although O’Neill is not a typical ecological writer, the Eco-critical concept embodied in *The Hairy Ape* still reveals the spiritual dilemma of humanity amid the alienation of capitalist society.

In O’Neill’s plays, the tragic fate of the characters is not solely due to individual choices, but rather, the entire human destiny is filled with tragic colors in the development of the times. In the torrent of the Industrial Revolution, Yank’s three times of contemplation are awakening. He constantly encounters barriers in different classes and ultimately ends in failure. Nevertheless, O’Neill still attempts to impart a kind of spiritual power to the characters to “seek hope in hopelessness”, yearning for the answer to the typical Western philosophical question -- “Where do we come from, where are we going”. His death is endowed with a heroic sentiment, possessing a sublime tragic spirit. Yank’s efforts to find belonging and his spirit of struggle against fate give modern people the confidence to purify their hearts, reflect on themselves, find spiritual belonging, and rediscover the meaning of life.

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