

The Hairy Ape Theme

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Themes

Existentialism: The Hairy Ape is essentially a story of human identity crisis. At first, Yank believes he is the very center of civilization. It is through his strength and labor that the ship moves and the world advances. But when Mildred insults him by calling him a beast, his inner world collapses. He begins to question: who is he, really? The wealthy society does not acknowledge him, the workers' union does not trust him, and even the police see him as insignificant. This rejection throws Yank into an existential void. He feels he has no place in society. His strength and his pride all become meaningless. In the end, he identifies himself with a gorilla. Human society has not accepted him, so he turns to the animal world. But even the gorilla destroys him. This shows that when man loses his identity, he finds no refuge anywhere. The play raises the central existentialist question: Who is man, and what is his true place?

Masculinity: In the play, Yank symbolizes masculinity. His broad chest, muscular arms, and powerful body embody raw strength. He shovels coal and drives the engine. He believes that this strength places him above everyone else. The other workers regard him as their leader. But with a single word, Mildred shatters his manhood. He is called an animal. In wealthy society, his strength has no value. The workers' organization also dismisses him, believing that strength alone is not enough, that intellect, strategy, and politics are necessary. Yank cannot grasp these things. He only believes in physical power. As a result, he gradually becomes isolated from society. In the final scene, his attempt to identify with the gorilla shows that he has been reduced to mere animal strength. O'Neill demonstrates here that brute force alone cannot earn human dignity. Masculinity built solely on muscle and raw power cannot last. Yank's downfall exposes the fragility of such strength-based manhood.

Racial Degeneration: In the play, O'Neill portrays the workers as half-human, half-animal beings. Inside the stokehole, their laughter, quarrels, and songs resemble the noise of a den of beasts. Their sweat-drenched bodies and dirty clothes reduce them from the level of civilized men to that of animals. Yank, too, gradually descends into this state. After Mildred calls him a filthy beast, he begins to believe her words are true. In prison, when he tries to bend the iron bars of his cell, he seems like a real animal. At the end, his desire to merge with the gorilla,

and ultimately dying at its hands, becomes the ultimate symbol of racial degeneration. Industrialization and social division have reduced the working class from humanity to animality. The play reveals how, in modern society, workers are increasingly dehumanized. They are denied dignity as human beings and are instead degraded into creatures in the eyes of civilization.

Social Recession by Industrialization: The play strongly highlights the impact of industrialization. Paddy recalls the old days when ships were driven by sails and wind. Then, there was freedom, beauty, and harmony with nature. But now everything is coal, smoke, and machines. Workers live like caged animals inside the stokehole. Industrialization has imprisoned them. They are no longer free; they have become slaves to the machine. At first, Yank believes that powering the machine makes him strong, but later he realizes that the machine has separated him from humanity. Society too looks down upon the working class. The wealthy indulge in luxury, forgetting the sacrifices of the laborers. This leads to social decay. Human relationships break apart. The play shows how industrialization exploits human strength but does not accept workers as human beings. This contradiction symbolizes the crisis of modern industrial society.

Isolation and Alienation: Throughout the play, Yank becomes the embodiment of alienation. At first, he was the leader among the workers. But after Mildred calls him an animal, he collapses mentally. From then on, he can find no place anywhere. The wealthy society scorns him. The workers' union, the I.W.W., suspects him of being a spy and throws him out. Even the police dismiss him as insignificant. All these rejections leave him utterly alone. He realizes that no class in society accepts him as one of their own. At one point, he begins to feel that only animals are his true companions. He seeks friendship in the gorilla's cage, but there he meets death. This loneliness illustrates how, in modern society, man becomes isolated. Class division, industrialization, and the pride of strength combine to rob man of his true identity. Yank's death ultimately symbolizes the loss of identity and the deep loneliness of modern existence.