

# The Creative Launcher

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## Quest of Identity in Eugene O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape*

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### Abstract

Quest is one of the important Archetypes of literature. It is ubiquitous in literature from ancient times. The focus of the present article is to study the play "The Hairy Ape" written by Eugene O'Neill as a narrative of quest of belongingness and identity. The aim is to show how all the elements of quest narrative are present in the plot of this play. The play is the quest narrative in the backdrop of modern civilization. The sense of identity and belongingness is like the Holy Grail quest. All the elements of the quest plot are realistic in place of fantastic. Being expressionistic play all the depths of heart and mind are given an overt expression. This article tries to analyze the quest of identity in *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neil.

**Keywords-** *Quest, Identity, Belongingness, Prolepsis*

Quest is one of the most prominent themes of the world literature from the ancient times to the present. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey from ancient Greece, Legend of Gilgamesh from the ancient Babylonia, Ramayana from India, legends of Holy Grail from medieval Europe, gives us the valid proof that 'the quest' is a dominant Archetype in the world literature. From Homer's Odyssey to J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings to Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code, the theme of quest runs as a life line. Apart from classical and professional Quest Narratives, quest is ubiquitous conspicuously or inconspicuously in all literature. Vladimir Propp's analysis of folk tales in his Morphology of Folktales gives a full account of quest as a theme and all the variants through which a quest narrative passes. The elements and sequence as given by Propp can be traced in any literary manuscript. There can be all the elements in the quest narrative or at least some of the elements in the quest narrative, but it is there, as given

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by Propp. Quest as a theme is not only confined to epics, poetry and novel but it also defines the progress of drama.

In modern American literature also, quest narrative is dominant feature. American literature has the theme of quest of belongingness and identity as a major theme particular of Afro-American literature. The fin mot of modern western drama is the motive of quest, a search for meaningful stance against the panorama of immense anarchy and futility. In a nation of multi-dimensional and multi-cultural society, the issues of identity and belongingness are inherent whether it is India or America. And this feature of society gets an overt expression in literature and particularly in drama, theatre and film production. But the search or quest for identity in the light of classical quest narrative as a basis of critical analysis seems to be undermined. In the history of American Drama the quest for identity as a theme is found in majority of plays and particularly Afro-American plays.

One of the great American dramatists Eugene O'Neill has conspicuously as well as inconspicuously used the motif of quest of identity in various plays. His plays are the records of his spiritual quest. To "dig at the roots of the sickness of today as I feel it-the death of the old God and failure of science and materialism to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning of life in, and to comfort it's fears of death with", has been the primary attempt of his plays to answer. As a matter of fact he strived upon varied manners of speech like realism, fantasy, symbolism, naturalism and specifically expressionism. The sole purpose of using such a varied figures was to find an idiom in which to express the human tragedy- the eternal conflict between man's aspirations and some intransigent, in electable quality in life which circumscribes and limits him, and frustrates the realization of those dreams which seem to make life worth living. This suggests that O'Neill's life was itself bound by the theme of quest of identity. As Robert F. Whitman puts it, "He was always exploring, always hoping, to find a medium of communication that would satisfy his needs both as a dramatist and as a man. The search led him into strange ways, and drown dead ends: but the diversity and violence of both his techniques and his subject-matter tend to hide some of the unifying threads which bind together all his work."

Now coming to some of the critical theories on quest narrative we identify the same elements in different theories from Vladimir Propp to Christopher Bookers. Christopher Bookers in his book *Seven Basic Plots* refers to the quest as one of the plots of a fiction. Regarding the structure of this motif he describes the elements of the quest plot and their sequence as: The Call, The Journey, Arrival and Frustration, The final ordeals, The Goal.

W. H. Auden an essay on J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of The Rings* lists the essential elements of quest story. He also mentions the same elements as given by Brooks but with some different connotation. He also says that there is a goal to be pursued in form of precious objects, or a person to be found. He also mentioned that for attaining a goal a journey is to be accomplished, test to be passed to find who is worthy of the precious object,

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guardians of the precious objects to be overcome which may be the further tests for the hero (arête), helpers who may advise, assist or give some magical powers to the hero.

My focus of study on a play written by an original and great American dramatist Eugene O'Neill, *The Hairy Ape*, is to use those elements of quest narrative to show their correspondence in this drama. This drama is innately and essentially a quest narrative. It has all the elements of classical quest theme, only the subject is real, not metaphorical. The traditional quest narratives are actually metaphorical in their subject. But, what is the subject of quest in *The Hairy Ape*? You cannot forcibly clad any fiction in the dress of a thematic analysis. This play as I've already said is characteristically a narrative of quest for identity and belongingness. Clifford Leech's quote can serve as best introduction to this discussion:

The Hairy Ape has a sub-title "A comedy of Ancient and Modern Life." After its list of scenes we read "Time- The Modern." O'Neill gives a clue to his meaning in a letter to The New York Herald Tribune of 16 November, 1924, where he says the play was to show how man, unable to establish a new harmony through sympathy with his kind. Yank having tried to go forward, to find a way of "belonging" in the world of men, tries to go back to kinship with the gorilla and is killed.

Alienation and the quest for identity and belongingness is the basis theme of *The Hairy Ape*. He is concerned with the loss of identity and belongingness of the individual in the multicultural modern America of dehumanized, industrial-mechanical society, localized by degradation of moral and spiritual values.

In this play, the main character Yank named Robert Smith in the first scene lives an idyllic and blissful life. He boasts about his belongingness to the sea and the ship. He rebukes Paddy for his longing to meet his wife. He rebukes his saying that there was a time when the sailors belonged to the sea. But one might think what does the belongingness connote. Actually belongingness refers to the sense of freedom, liberty and security for an individual in a given society or a political system and his amalgamation into a social group. In the first scene Yank believes that he is free and belongs to the ship. He doesn't believe that there are any higher strata of society at the stake of whom his identity is dependent. In this presupposition he is hailed by all the stokers in the fireman's forecastle.

In the second scene Mildred Douglas, daughter of the President of Nazareth Steel, and chairman of the board of directors of the liner, regrets to his aunt about the life she has inherited. She wants to see how the other half of the world that is workers, live in the stokehole. She is very anxious in her desire for the quest to know about the life of stokers. This scene acts as the prolepsis of the quest of identity that is to follow.

It is actually in the third scene that the Base for the quest is set. Again, here in the Stokehole we see that Yank is boasting about his belongingness to the ship. It is in this scene that Mildred gets ready to enter into the Stokehole. While Yank is rebuking Paddy for his

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complaint that his back is broken and saying all the ugly things to him, while he is cussing the whistle-blower Mildred enters into the Stokehole. Yank unknown of the fact that there is a new comers into the Stokehole, is in his fury of cussing, and of late becomes “conscious of all other men staring at something directly behind his back.” “Here whirls defensively with a snarling, murderous growl, crouching to spring, his lips drawn back towards his teeth, his small eyes gleaming ferociously. He sees Mildred like a white apparition in the full light from the open furnace doors”. On listening to his growling speech she is paralyzed with horror and terror. And then when she looks into the gorilla like beastly face with an eye to eye contact she shrieks into cry, closing her eyes with her hands. Observing this reaction he startles and his mouth falls open, and his eyes get bewildered. At this encounter, Mildred, about to faint shouts into the engineers hands, “Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast!” and is taken back and faints. Feeling himself to be insulted in the very heart of his pride, he growls “God damn you!” and hurls a shovel after them at the door which had just closed. With this Yank’s pride in his sense of belongingness is shattered to its base and his boastfulness comes to an end; thus setting him upon an adventures to search his belongingness. This scene acts as ‘The Call’ for the quest for identity and belongingness. Like the quest narrative this scene is full of energy and activity. It is horribly impulsive. Here Mildred is like an angel or a witch who enlightens Yank to reconsider his identity and start his quest for the same.

In the fourth scene we see, Yank, one who was always boasting about his belongingness becomes as quite as an exact attitude of Rodin’s “The Thinker”. He loses his regard for his self personality. One, on whose growl all the stokers became numb is mocked by them for being fallen in love with the white lady. Like a Greek Tragical Hero, he falls from his idyllic and blissful sense of belongingness to the modern existential gloom. He has undergone a radical change. At the end of the fourth scene, in a fit of frenzy, he gets up and sets to take a revenge on the white lady who insulted him only to be stopped by other stokers. This is the beginning of the quest.

In the fifth scene the Yank is on ‘the Journey’ corresponding to the journey as an element of quest in the light of Booker’s and Auden’s theory of quest narrative. He is assisted by another stoker, named ‘Long.’ He acts as a helper; assisting and advising him, along the journey. The fifth scene is set in Fifth Avenue. It is an affluent business and shopping centre of Manhattan, New York. Like a ancient quest narratives it isn’t easy for him to accomplish his mission. He has two quests- one, to take his revenge upon the white lady and another to search his identity and belongingness. His revenge against Mildred, acts as a metaphor to destroy the capitalist system, and his search for belongingness acts as a metaphor for freedom and liberty. Mildred is her protected by beast that can be a dragon, spells, a giant or any other beast in the fantasy fiction. It can a never sleeping monster, Dragon of Colchis (Drakon Kholkikos) in a sacred Grove of Ares in Colchis (Kolkhis) protecting the Golden Fleece in the ancient Greek mythology. But here she is protected by a still more powerful monster of

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capitalism, the very sense of her identity and belongingness. The walls of social hierarchy act as the dragon to protect her. This satisfies another aspect of quest narrative. Yank, who is enraged upon the insult hurled against himself and makes the issue personal, Long rebukes him for that and says, "I wants to awaken yer bloody clarss consciousness. Then yer'll see it's 'er clarss yer've got to fight, not 'er alone'", this suggest that he is to be emancipation hero. To compose Yanks anger Long as an advisor gives him advice, not to do something unnecessary when they see that a number of people are coming. Long says to Yank:

Church is out. Ere they come, the bleedin' swine. (After a glance at Yank's lowering face-uneasily) Easy goes, Comrade. Keep yer bloomin' temper. Remember force defiles itself. It ain't our weapon. We must impress our demands through peaceful means- the votes on-marching proletarians of the bloody world.

This advice is like the advice of a wizard or the witch that helps a hero. For instance, in a traditional quest narrative in *The Waters of Life* in *The Grimm Collection* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, three sons have to take a quest to find and bring waters of life. All three sons are met by a dwarf who questions them. The first two brothers rudely refused to answer and are punished by imprisoning them in ravine. The youngest son answers him nicely and is rewarded by him. The dwarf, advises him like Long advises Yank in *The Hairy Ape*. Being the hero of modern civilization to fight against the dangers in the quest of revenge and identity, isn't possible to him and thus instead of fighting against, demons, giants, cyclops' or witches he indulges into mocking the people of this locality instead. At the helm of affairs he doesn't mind to what Long advises him. Yank deliberately bumps into the people who are walking along the road. He is still angry at the calm behavior of those pedestrians who say "I beg your pardon." He wants to fight with them but doesn't get any chance. Here he goes to ridicule a lady, boasting again on his belongingness. He praises himself for being a man who is at the base of modern civilization, in steel, in steam, in smoke. Just then, on hearing the shout of this lady for the monkey fur that is on display in a shop, he is enraged to see people rushing to the shop. This situation is like the mock of the quest narrative in which a hero has to fight against the contenders. Unable to pull out the rail curbing he goes out to pull out a street lamp post to swing it like a club. A man runs over to his side, unbalancing his move and falling himself down. In fit of rage Yank's hurls over to the face of man. He calls the police, and thus The Yank lands to prison.

In next scene Yank falls into prison on Blackwell Island for not listening to the advice of Long. It is also one of the important features of the quest narrative. Here he narrates his story to the fellow prisoners. There are enough some prisoners who tell him about the Wobblers that is the members of the organization I.W.W (International Workers of the World). Just like that happens in Quest stories. There are same people who meet the Hero during the journey help him in his quest by giving him advice some magical weapon, a key, a map or



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anything else. In this play just like that he is given a copy of Sunday Times which has an article on the rights of the workers given by I.W.W. At the end of the scene he tries to escape from the prison but is bullied down. After a month, freed from prison he reaches the office of the I.W.W. Here he is given card for half a dollar. Here, The Yank gets carried away and says that he is going to annihilate everything belonging to the President of the Steel Trust. The passion and vehemence with which he expresses the hostile attitude towards the Capitalist he is suspected to be an agent provocation and thus kicked out of the office straight into the road. This was his last attempt to find belongingness to the human society. He feels dejected and alone, unable to find his identity and belongingness. This also one of the stages of a quest hero as narrated above.

Next scene is timed on next day set in the monkey house of the zoo. Here he sees a huge gorilla sitting on a bench like the statue of Rodin's "The Thinker" in a cage. Being disowned by all he finds his self compatible with the gorilla in the cage. He shares his ironical plight with the gorilla in the cage. At the end he narrates his whole plight to him as his own kin, seeming to belong to him at last.

Seeing gorilla's plight as his own, it being caged like his own, he opens the door of the cage to set him free. The gorilla cautiously steps out of the cage, goes to Yank and stands looking at him. Keeping his mock tone, Yank extends his hand. Something, perhaps the tone of mockery, suddenly infuriates the animal. With a jump he wraps his huge arms around Yank in a murderous hug. There is a crackling, snap of crushed ribs- a gasping cry, a still mocking, from YANK. At the end, the gorilla after killing YANK, throws him into the cage. In despair he sighs that he doesn't belong to him either. Fallen dead on the floor of the cage he tries to stand by the support of the bars of the cage. And it is here that the Yank belongs at last.

At the end Yank was the victim of his quest of belongingness. He belongs at last, not to the world of modern civilization, even rejected by his ancestor kin, and in finding his eternal belongingness in the singularity of existence, that is death. Even if the subtitle says that it is a comedy, it ends with the note of tragedy. Yank finds belongingness where everybody does, whether rich or poor. Here we find that the play has all the elements of the quest narrative. It is the realistic quest narrative in the modern setting with a socialist purpose.

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