

**“Roaring Twenties” and Its Impact on the Americans’ Identity Crisis: A
Critical Analysis of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape***

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Abstract

The term ‘Roaring Twenties’ refers to the age in which the American people challenged the cultural norms and traditional standards and headed boisterously towards freewheeling lifestyle and unrestrained culture of entertainment (new styles of dancing, music, dressing triggered by new artistic productions and technological advances). However, O’Neill is not an escapist in the romantic sense of the word; rather an existentialist and a reformer who deals with the issues of daily life in a very realistic and censorious manner. Thereby identity crisis and belonging are the pressing issues that have precipitated by the ‘roaring twenties’ and resulted in challenging and perplexing the entire American nation. Accordingly, O’Neill depicts in his play how the American man in the ‘Age of Wonderful Nonsense’ was ostracized and rejected not only by his fellow men but also by nature and all the surroundings. Thereby, this paper will depict how O’Neill (as a social reformer) dramatized the issue of identity crisis that emanated due to the occurrence of cultural, social, economic and traditional alterations. Therefore, the main contention of this paper is to delineate how the ‘Roaring Twenties’ or the Age of Intolerance exacerbated the identity crisis of the Americans in the 1920s as depicted in O’Neill’s play *The Hairy Ape* (1922).

Keywords- *Roaring Twenties, Identity Crisis, Age of Wonderful Nonsense, Proletariat*

Introduction

Certainly, 'Roaring Twenties' was a period in the American history in which dramatic changes in the social, technological, political and economic domains occurred and led to drastic changes in the peoples' lifestyle. In this period we realize a kind of revolution in all the industrial, technological, economic and social fields i.e. machine replaced the manual labor then more goods were easily manufactured and widely consumed. Undeniably, the changes which the roaring twenties caused brought many pros and cons for the modern man. In the one hand, the 'roaring twenties' brought positive impacts as it created an industrial and a technological advancements that resulted in economic growth, increase of population, new technological inventions, booming of businesses and availability of jobs. But in the other hand, it caused many unfavorable consequences such as the unequal distribution of wealth, religious decadence, dehumanization of human beings, indulgence in materialism and the demise of human affections. O'Neill in his play *The Hairy Ape* delineated how the boons of the roaring twenties have become reprobation for the modern man. More tellingly, O'Neill shows how the modern man is in a search of identity— both the capitalists (Mildred for instance) as well as the working-class (Yank for example) were trying to search for identities and belongings in strange worlds—worlds that have been created by the roaring twenties and became not their own. The identity crisis engendered when the person is denied from his own world. Yank's identity crisis was galvanized as 'Mildred' the daughter of Douglas (president of steel company) denied his belonging not only to the capitalists' society (which was created by the roaring twenties) but also to the entire humanity, calling him a "hairy ape". Therefore, Yank started to look for belonging outside the world of steel as he was dehumanized. But unfortunately, he was ignored and rejected. Thereafter he decided to descend down to the world of animals because they react at least to his presence. But he forgot the fact that the animals will not tolerate and accept those who were rejected by their own society and people. The main contention of this paper is to show how the advancements of the roaring twenties contributed remarkably in engendering the identity crisis of those who do not belong to the capitalist class.

The Roaring Twenties

In the point of fact, the period of 'Roaring Twenties' was also known as the 'Age of Intolerance', 'Era of wonderful Nonsense' and 'Age of Jazz'. Though it was a period of change in the economic, social, political and cultural standards and lifestyles in the American society, these changes were effectively caused by the rapid technological advances artistic productions and economic amelioration. The technological advancements also played a vital role in the growth of the American economy and power as they followed new methods of production and distribution. Consequently, in the wake up of the World War I "America became the richest country in the earth" (Johannes

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Malkmes, 38). Besides, it is known as the era of exciting change and individualistic freedom as women were given the rights of suffrage, work and freedom to enjoy the new changes (Steven Waugh, 467). Contrarily, Rodney P. Carlisle points out the trends that depict the era during the 1920s—“Prohibition, bootleggers and bathtub gin, the Harlem Renaissance, the Lost Generation, the Jazz Age, flaming youth, flappers, and the Florida land boom—represented different aspects of profound shifts in values away from the staid and stern morality of the 19th century” (IX). So, in spite of the religious decadence and the oscillation of the cultural and moral standards, these technological advancements and economic developments designated the United States of America as the second world power.

The economic growth during this period became more than doubled between 1920 and 1929. This made American a very big consumer society. They changed their lifestyle and became so excited with something new including music (Jazz for instance), artificial beauty, even slang language. Regardless of these developments, many Americans were suffering the challenges of the new mass culture and unfamiliar developments. Consequentially, they triggered a new conflict within the psychology of many Americans that appeared for O’Neill in the identity crisis and alienation.

In addition, the 1920s was a remarkable period in American experience and history. Before the World War I, American identity used to be referred to the cultural and psychological bases of the 19th century, but in the 1920s American identity seemed to break its wistful attachments from the past and head towards the modern era. Thereby the 1920s was the period of the extreme contradiction, prosperity economic and technological advancements that resulted some psychological restlessness and social ailments. In consequence, the Americans became perplexed as they were trapped between the modernization and tradition. But in the same way some Americans were happy and optimistic with the new developments while some others were confused, aghast and tired with these developments as they ransacked the peoples’ humanity.

Basically, the era of 1920s was called the ‘age of wonderful nonsense’ because the technological revolution, the economic growth and the impact of victory in war produced lost generation, denial of prohibition and “disillusioned rejection of everything serious”. People started wearing the same dress, listening the same music, speaking the same slang, playing new sports and marathons, smoking and performing the same dance (Green, 293). Besides, it was called ‘the age of jazz’ because the entire nation and thereafter all the world began listening, learning and performing the jazz music (jazz music is a kind of music created by black musicians and afterwards swept the entire American society). Another label for the roaring twenties was the ‘lawless decade, because the entire nation defied and denied the amendment of the 18th century which prohibit the selling, purchasing, buying and consuming, alcohol. Precisely, there were some ‘Roarings’ that potentially

sent America into the modern age such as the roaring mass culture, the roaring of technology and the roaring of economy (Bowling, 2012).

The Roaring Mass culture

Certainly, the term 'Mass Culture' was used as a surname for the modernized American society by imploring to the middle class Americans. Different aspects were involved (change of traditions, use of technology, economic availability, open migration, equality of rights for example) in such modernization before the emanation of mass culture. Thereby, the American society in the 1920s became urban society with mass cultures that consequently "reshaped the work standards, home traditions and social relations throughout the entire country. In this particular period" (1920s), the American society was roaring culturally (different cultures of different ethnic groups), economically (the American industrial revolution generated multifarious economic opportunities) and socially (different ethnicities with different cultural backgrounds). Accordingly, this mass culture permitted the participation of people from both genders as well as from different backgrounds which consequentially resulted in creating technological, social, industrial and economic revolutions in all the domains. The previous marginalized groups became productive segments in the society. In such away a great deal of interaction resulted in unity within the American society regardless to some political and social conflicts (Boehm and Corey, 189). Despite, O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape* depicted how mass culture and modernization affected negatively the relations between and acceptance of human beings in the American modern society.

The Roaring of Technology

Furthermore, the aspect of 'Roaring Technology' in the 1920s denotes to the rapid technological advancements in transportation (airplane, cars, airships, trains and ocean liners), industries (machine replaced the manual work in most of the professions) medicine (the discovery of penicillin 1928), telecommunications (radio, wire phone, fax) and in all domestic appliances (electric iron, refrigerator, toaster, washing machine, electrical blanket). Pertinently, James Cimentopines, technological advances in the 1920s appeared explicitly in "three fields communication, transportation and fabrication materials" (499). As a consequence these technological advances and productions contributed in making daily life easier and more pleasant. Besides, these advancements did gather the individual and group to have enjoyable time together. They facilitated in enhancing the national connectivity and communal activities which culminated in establishing "homogenization of national culture" (Boehm and Corey, 189). Another benefit of roaring of technology in the 1920s is that "it changed the way the Americans live, work, play and communicate" (Greenberg et al., XV). Contrarily, O'Neill in his play *The Hairy Ape* portrays how the people in the machine age became like machines and how such norm of living oscillated the human relations and led to the dehumanization

of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. But the reader here may wonder about how these technological innovations used to be financed? Ciment argues “technological innovations in the United States in the 1920s used to be financed by the commercial laboratories or research corporations and by the 1927 there were more than 1,000 American corporations” (499).

Roaring of Economy

Similarly, the 1920s used to be recalled as exciting period in the history of the United States especially for its unprecedented economic roaring. After the World War I the United States decided to construct a peacetime economic progress. Most of the Americans benefited from the economic progress of their country as they began to earn enough money to buy the new products while others as O’Neill depicted remained the same indigent proletarians. However, the strength of the American economy in the 1920s established the environment for multifarious improvements in the Americans’ daily life. In fact, the roaring of the American economy in the 1920s was caused by the good educational system, the independence and freedom of women, the technological advancements, the establishment of many industrial projects, the increase of population though migration which resulted increase in consumption and production and the social unity among the Americans (Jarmul, 2010). So, the roaring of economy was formed by a kind of interrelated factors. To begin with the increase of population then the use of machinery for production and transportation which led to the increase of production and consumption and consequentially the revenue increased the income and the outlay of the people. Subsequently, food became plenty and cheap due to greater productivity and the sufficient incomes which all resulted in mass marketed consumption. Therefore some writers assert that the period was called roaring twenties because of the vibrant economic progress and prosperity which the American business and industries achieved after World War I.

Undoubtedly, the era of the Roaring Twenties was an exciting period in the American history as it witnessed unforeseen and unprecedented technological, economic, cultural and industrial advancement and progress. Thereby, the period of roaring twenties was considered as the ‘Golden Age of Capitalism’ which lasted to the mid1970s. But the questions that pose themselves here are: did all the Americans benefited from the boom of roaring twenties? Did all the Americans enjoy the same affluence? Was there equal distribution of richness for all the Americans? In fact, some writers assent while others who dissent about these assumptions. O’Neill in his play *The Hairy Ape* articulates unhesitatingly the unfair distribution of wealth among the Americans in the 1920s as the wealthy people became wealthier and the proletarians became poorer. William O. Kellogg in his book *E-Z American History* asserts “there was prosperity for many in the urban centers but the prosperity was not evenly distributed. There were poor in the cities and few African Americans shared in the good times” (222). O’Neill created the character of Yank and Mildred to depict the inequality and gap

between the proletariat and the proprietary capitalist class. Besides, he depicts explicitly how the proletariats encountered alienation, denial, debasement and dehumanization in the society they serve. O'Neill shows how the modern man lacks gravely the intrinsic passion (for himself as well as for the other) that the nature and animals have, though it is untamed affection. Yank was a symbol of the modern man who does not know why he came to this world. O'Neill shed light in his play about the internal trauma and psychological complex which the modern man encounters after realizing the insignificance and indifference which the bourgeois society granted him.

Identity Crisis and the Impact of Roaring Twenties

Identity crisis dramatized in the complex social system and the uneven distribution of wealth that effectively prop up such inequality in the society. D. E. Wynter Pertinently explains "O' Neill dramatized the issue of identity crisis in *The Hairy Ape* as Yank the representative of the proletarians finds it implausible to fit in the microcosm of the rich capitalistic system in the society as depicted by Mildred. Thereby he was alienated, detested, dehumanized and denied any acceptability in the society and also the nature (gorilla) (15). Therefore he resolved to go and therefore hug the gorilla not only to fit socially but also to forget the unresolved dilemma of the modern man who became unable to explicate why he came to this world. O'Neill in *The Hairy Ape* begins with depicting the symbol of technological advancement (ocean liner) that used to be owned only by the capitalist class in the society.

In 1920s, technological inventions contributed informing "The Golden Age" of America as we see the introduction of ocean liner as one of the developed creations of the age. Here in the play, O'Neill exposed a dramatic conflict between the proletariat and the proprietary capitalist class in the American society. This social conflict was inescapable challenge in the 1920s as the Americans were not granted equal share of the fruits of the golden age. Yank, a stoker stands for the hard-working labor class and Mildred, the daughter of the owner of transatlantic liner, is considered as the representative of proprietary bourgeois class. The later used to dominate and utilize the first group in order to keep running their business and increase their richness. It was the time where the ships used to move not by the wind but by the labor of stockers who were depicted by O'Neill in the first scene as "beasts in a cage" (O'Neill, 3). This symbolically shows how the capitalist class intervened and changed not only the normal microcosm of man but also the entire universe. Meanwhile, it reflects how the world of the capitalist class is moving only by the labor and power of the stokers who shovel the coal in the furnace. Looking back to the Shakespearian drama we find the man used to struggle with his fate and sometimes God however the modern man 'Yank' for instance is struggling for identity and belonging. The setting of the play is in a journey from New York and on the same liner O'Neil brought the two incompatible classes capitalism and proletariat. In the one hand Mildred was

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depicted in the second scene as delicate, pretty and beautiful while Yank in the other hand was described as filthy, naked giant with animalistic shape 'gorilla' (O'Neill, 15).

In addition, O'Neill depicted the stockers as 'Neanderthals' and in the course of the voyage Paddy disclosed their alienation and dehumanization as they have been "caged in by steel from a sight of the sky like bloody apes in the zoo" (O'Neill,12). In a consequence, Yank begins stressing the contrariness between people in the upper deck 'capitalists' and those in the lower deck 'proletarians'. Thereby, Yank found that they were stockers who belong to the ship as it is their only place saying "who make dis old tub run? Ain't it us guys? Well den, we belong, don't we? We belong and dey don't. Dat's all" (O'Neill,9).Symbolically, the ship stands here for the society to which all have the right of belonging. Therein Yank exposed the class struggle and the rights of belonging to the technological advancement of the roaring twenties as they make by their labor the gyres of development move on. For a while he started thinking how to belong to a machine then the chorus began repeating "drink don't think", meaning to say be unconscious and let those people think. In short, the roaring of technology contributed significantly in creating imbalance in the society as it privileged one class at the expense of the other. The technology and advancements used to be centered in the hands of the capitalist who considered the proletarians as pariah. Consequently, these technological advancements increased the labor of the proletarians not for their profit but for the benefit of particular group in the society who constantly consider the mas pariah.

Unrelentingly, Yank as the representative of the working-class continues searching for belonging in order to confirm that the proletarians are not pariah, they belong while the capitalists "rich guys dat think dey' resomep'n, dey ain't nothing! Dey don't belong. But us guys we're in de move we're at de bottom, de whole ting is us! (O'Neill,14).Repetitively, Yank insists for their belonging to the society as they do all the things to move the engine of the technological and economic advancement of the roaring twenties. Meantime, he asserts that the capitalist class does not belong because they do nothing for these developments, except enjoying the revenue, dehumanizing and denying the proletarians any belonging. Accordingly, the roaring twenties resulted advancements that rendered unequal distribution of richness. The capitalists' greed for wealth and their indulgence in materialism instigated them to dehumanize and deny any belonging for the working-stratum in the American society. According to FabianeLazaris "The decadence, the grotesque and the chaos were all symptoms of a dehumanized world". Thereby, "expressionism is not a homogenous style but rather an artistic reaction to the unstable social mood installed in several countries in the 20th century" (15).

Thereafter, the third scene brought the encounter between the proletarians (the stockers) and the capitalists (the daughter of Douglas, Mildred) but the end was traumatic. In fact, Mildred came with an identity that she has inherited from her family with affluent style of living while Yank was a

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pariah who contrarily was attempting to acquire a sense of belonging and identity even to the world of steel that grants him shelter and source of living. Both Yank and Mildred were trying to cherish and become what they are not in actuality. Mildred was looking for humane identity while Yank was searching for existential fair identity in the American society. Mildred's identity was made by her class whereas Yank's identity was malformed by the capitalists who only wanted [t] him to be their slaves. Therefore Yank was in a constant search of belonging and identification.

Consequentially, when Mildred attempted to visit the other 'half of the world' she lost her conscious and expressed what her class informed her about those people. So, in her attempt to be what she is not, she does harm for her and the people around her. Thereby, by describing Yank as a "filthy beast" (O'Neill,25) she terminated completely the sense of belong which Yank was trying to cherish. Her utterance exacerbated his identity crisis as she denied not only his belonging and affiliation to the capitalistic society but also the common humanity. Thereafter, Yank was stunned and harmed in his identity. His sense of belonging at that very moment suffered from a sever jolt. He feels extremely humiliated, totally alienated and mentally disoriented. His alienation and harm were intensified after 'Paddy' illustrated Mildred insult by saying "it was as if she seen great hairy ape escaped from the zoo" (O'Neill,30). In fact, the encounter destabilized Yank's identity belonging and pride of his power (his physical strength resembled that of a beast) as a consequence he began questioning "what's she come from? Who made her? Who give her de naive to look at me like dat? (O'Neill, 27).In fact, it was the roaring of technology that resulted in unequal distribution of wealth which consequentially enslaved and dehumanized some people for the benefits of the other. In the end 'Long' emotionally disclosed the reality that "we are free and equal in the sight of God" only (O'Neill,29).

In the fifth scene, the dilemma of belonging and the pain of Mildred's words became apparent. Therefore, Yank's self-identity began oscillating. He attempted to placate himself by claiming identity and belonging on the basis of equality as human beings. But the acuteness of her words urged him to deny her belonging and belay his belonging by saying "Ain't she de same as me? Hairy Ape? Huh! I'll show her, I'm better 'n her, if she only know it I belong and she don't" (O'Neill,32). In his statement Yank explains that the pariah and the business men are equal human beings who belong to the same parents 'Adam and Eve' but the technological and economic advancements of the roaring twenties resulted a schism in the society which subsequently granted privileges and identification not for all the people but for some. Persistently, Yank asserts that the proletarians do belong because their labor makes the gyres of development and advancement move constantly while the capitalists are "dead" i.e. unproductive and ineffective.

After three weeks, Long brought Yank to Fifth Avenue in order to mitigate his distress and divert his attention from shock which he faced on the deck. But he was traumatized by the life style of

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the affluent class who slay the animals in order to take off their skin and sell it in exorbitant prices. Thereafter he was provoked by the life style of the opulent class as they used to spend recklessly at the expense of the pauper working-class people. Yank attempted to enter to the other world but he failed. Initially, he decided to articulate his identity peacefully by saying “yuh don’t belong, get me! Look at me, why don’t youse dare? I belong dat’s me” (O’Neill,40). But all were busy in their material life and therefore he was disregarded. Subsequently, Yank was infuriated by the indifference of the church-goers and the people in the streets and as a consequence he decided to impose his identity violently to those who look at him indifferently. He impinged onto a gentleman, stopped another form getting into the bus and approached towards a woman (Rachana, 29). Hence Yank changed himself unconsciously into a shadow of a hairy ape (especially after experiencing the peoples’ indifference and lavish style of living) for the sake of asserting his belonging and identity. But nobody was curious about, a policeman was informed and consequently Yank was arrested. Here we realize how the materialism in the roaring twenties played serious role in ripping up the social fabric and confining the identity of particular group of people as it made them strangers in their own society. It created two worlds in a society with (working-class and affluent class) in which the people of each cannot tolerate those of the other.

Thereafter, Yank was released from prison and denied any access in the material world as represented in the organization whose members are only rascals, jailbirds, murderers and cutthroats. As a consequence, he started echoing the feelings of isolation, rejection, loneliness and ontological insecurity. Meanwhile he continues brooding about his identity and the world to which he will go especially after he rejected the world of steel everlasting as they denied granting him any belonging into their world. Therefore their indifference and denial forced him to look for another world to belong but not the world of human beings which became “hell”. Yank realized that the world of animals is far better than the world of man which has been complicated by the materialism of the roaring twenties. He perceived that the gorilla in the zoo is more affectionate than the modern man because it at least reacts to his presence. Consequently, he resolved to belong to the gorilla’s world and strengthen his relation by embracing it. But unfortunately the gorilla crushed his body by its mighty power till he died. The gorilla did not understand and reacted in self-defending manner, because the gorilla could not accept the man who was rejected by his own people. So when the man failed to belong to his people how he can belong to the world of animals? (Rachana, 30). Yank’s last utterance “he got me, awright. I am trou. Even him didn’t tink I belonged” (O’Neill,60). Ultimately, Yank realized that he cannot belong to the world that is not his own and his last statement shows that the last pride of man is to die outside the cage only. His different attempts of belonging show symbolically the purposelessness of modern man who does not know why he came into this world.

Pertinently, Zahraa Adnan Baqerpoints out “During his quest of identity Yank moved from purity into evolutionary developments through modern technology to the fingers of society and finally to animality (5). Freud in his theory of psychoanalysis talked about incapability of the man’s complete self-awareness and how he cannot explore the recess of his rationality. In fact, the mind of man is fathomless pit. O’Neill in his play *The Hairy Ape* was attempting to substantiate that the modern man should search for his belonging, identity and self through questioning the meaning of existence. Attempting to descend down to the animals’ level bring his end as it is not his real world (Baqer, 5). Yank ends up his struggle and quest of identity by admitting his helplessness, rootless and despair “Christ where do I get off at? Where do I fit in? (O’Neill, 60). His statement here shows how the modern man was tantalized by the materialistic gains and at the end was left homeless. It also depicts how the roaring twenties gave wealth, place and identity for particular people of particular class (s) while other people of other class (s) were denied any access of these things and became stateless, indigents and aliens and insignificant.

Conclusion

To sum up, the roaring twenties was period that played significant role in echoing the issue of identity crisis especially for the proletariat though it was considered as the Golden Period in the American history as it introduced unprecedented economic, technological and industrial advancements in all the fields. But in its negative side it cracked the social fabric and divided the society into capitalist and proletarian with a huge schism in between. It fermented both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat to search for identity and belonging as they became discontent with their present identification and materialistic lifestyle. Besides, the period was labeled as the age of intolerance and thereby this paper depicts how the technological, economic and industrial advancements in the 1920s beget the issue of identity crisis in the American society. In his play *The Hairy Ape* O’Neill depicts how the roaring twenties resulted in unequal distribution of richness as the capitalists dominated the wealth and lived lavishly while the working-class remained poor and also denied any sense of belonging to the society. Yank stands for the working class who work constantly for the benefit of the affluent class but at the end was ignored and denied any chance to belong to the capitalists’ world. Thereby he went to search belonging in the world of animals which looks better than that of the human world but they too rebuffed admitting him to their world as he was rejected by his own people and reacted in their own [violent] manner to protect their microcosm.

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