The Hairy Ape Annotated Bibliography

"In The Hairy Ape, the contact between classes intended to result in mutual understanding is presented as a violent confrontation that produces only heightened suffering and alienation on both sides of the class divide."


"MILDRED—(Protesting with a trace of genuine earnestness.) Please do not mock at my attempts to discover how the other half lives. Give me credit for some sort of groping sincerity in that at least. I would like to help them. I would like to be some use in the world. Is it my fault I don’t know how? I would like to be sincere, to touch life somewhere. (With weary bitterness.) But I’m afraid I have neither the vitality nor integrity. All that was burnt out in our stock before I was born. Grandfather’s blast furnaces, flaming to the sky, melting steel, making millions—then father keeping those home fires burning, making more millions—and little me at the tail-end of it all. I’m a waste product in the Bessemer process—like the millions."

Mildred’s family is a typical representation of the upper class during this time. Relaxing on the top deck, Mildred argues with her Aunt about going down to the stokehole to see how the “other half” lives. She thinks she is different than her family and would get along with the lower class, but she has no idea what she is really getting herself into.

"MILDRED—(About to faint—to the ENGINEERS, who now have her one by each arm—whimperingly.) Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast! (She faints. They carry her quickly back, disappearing in the darkness at the left, rear. An iron door clangs shut. Rage and bewildered fury rush back on YANK. He feels himself insulted in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride. He roars:) God damn yuh!"

In this quote, Mildred has just watched Yank curse, shout and act wildly. When he turns to looks at her, it terrifies her. She had some idea of how the men working the ship would look because her father had started out working a similar job. When it turned out that these men, especially Yank as fierce as he is, were a lot more barbaric, it scared her.


In this article, the author brings up the idea that the discussion of the class divide needs to be brought up, but it ends up hurting everyone involved when these two opposites are forced together. He
the interactions between Yank and the upper class end up hurting Yank more than helping him and end up leading to his demise.

"As the action begins, Yank has achieved a modus vivendi within the capitalist system, a position more fulfilling than Mildred's empty posing as a sincere social reformer. As the "most highly developed individual" in the fireman's forecastle, Yank represents to the stokehole workers 'a self-expression, the very last word in what they are.'"

In this section, the author explains that in the other men's minds, Yank is at the top of the food chain. The men that work in the stokehole are so confined in their own world, that they have no idea they are at the bottom of the ladder when it comes to the economy.

"Yank has achieved what Maria Miliora refers to as "self-cohesiveness", a sustaining sense of self that enables him to function within a milieu to which he has adapted both physically and emotionally. The central enabling construct of Yank's sense of well-being is a belief that he is superior to the upper classes."

The author goes on to say that Yank himself believes that because of his strength and what he sees as an incredibly important job, he thinks that he is superior to the upper class. This is because he has had such little interaction with them.

"The crucial moment of the play is the brief but intense scene 3 confrontation in the stokehole between Mildred and Yank. During this encounter, O'Neill's stage directions indicate that Yank "feels himself insulted in some unknown fashion in the very heart of his pride" (137). In general terms, the effect on Yank is twofold: it makes him painfully aware of his social inferiority and suddenly conscious of his inadequacies as a human being."

At this point, Mildred has gone into the stokehole and fainted with disgust when she sees Yank. This is the turning point of the play because it completely flips Yank's sense of self upside down. Chura explains that Yank begins questioning every belief he has had about himself up until this point.

"The play may be viewed as a series of calculated trespassings of class boundaries, punctuated with dramatic situations that are recognizable as paradigms of social conflict in the era in which O'Neill wrote."

Again, the author explains that even though this discussion of class is necessary, tensions were high. This is shown in the play when Yank begins feeling like an "ape" with the smallest intrusion from Mildred into his surroundings.

YANK—(Griming horribly.) Hairy ape, huh? Sure! Dat's de way she looked at me, aw right. Hairy ape! So dat's me, huh? (Bursting into rage—as if she were still in front of him;) Yuh skinny tart! Yuh white-faced bum, yuh! I'll show yuh who's a ape! (Turning to the others, bewildermen seizing him again.) Say, youse guys. I was bawlin' him out for pullin' de whistle on us. You heard me. And den I seen youse lookin' at somep'n and I tought he'd sneaked down to come up in back of me, and I hopped round to knock him dead wit de shovel. And dere she was wit de light on her! Christ, yuh coulda pushed me over with a finger! I was scared, get me? Sure! I tought she was a ghost, see? She was all in white like dey wrap around stiff's. You seen her. Kin yuh blame me? She didn't belong,

The article begins by describing how Yank’s language is intentionally barbaric to drive home the idea that he is truly at the bottom of the hierarchy like animals would be. The author then brings up a production of the play that he believed best portrayed Yank the way O’Neill would have wanted, and how this helped show the divide between classes.

“Yank’s mind is blunt and blank, his dialogue virtually impossible to read. "I start somep’n and de would moves!" runs a topical passage, "It—dat"s me—de new dat's moiderin’ de old! I’m de ting in coal dat makes it boin.”

Again, here the author writes that O’Neill made Yank’s language as crude as possible so that he would come off as uneducated and barbaric. This helps show how low he was in society during this period.

“In a yellow spotlight saturated with smoke, the stokers strip themselves naked to wash off the grime. And Yank, looking even more simian now that his features are visible, his reddish hair falling over his shoulders like a filthy kepi, begins his long odyssey in search of the woman who insulted him.”

In this production, Yank was dressed to look as similar to an ape as they possibly could. The director wanted him to look as animalistic to show how low in society he was. They really wanted him to look as out of place as possible to get across how big the class divide was at the time.

“Mildred strips to her negligee and starts prancing into the engine room wearing oversize ballet slippers that make her look like a member of the ostrich chorus in Fantasia. Her overstated expressions of disgust after beholding Yank’s repellent mug climax in an exaggerated balletic swoon.”

Even Mildred’s appearance is exaggerated to give the sense of how different people from the upper class were from someone like Yank. In this production, she is dressed as a ballet dancer to show elegance.

“In the climax, against a video of a desolate moon, Kate Valk puts on a fake gorilla head and prepares to crush this hapless man to death. Yank has discovered his primal crime ("I was born"), and there is nothing left for him now but extinction. Still yammering about his failure to fit in ("I’m trou. Even him [the gorilla] didn’t tink I belonged"), Yank experiences his Liebestod in the arms of an equally inarticulate primate, as the rest of the apes celebrate his end in a crazy dance.”

Yank is upset with the way Mildred acted when she saw him in the stokehole. He realizes that she looked at him like he was an animal and that she believes she is better than him. This is where Yank starts to realize the class divide. He had always thought of himself as being at the top of the food chain, and he is now starting to realize how the upper class looks at people in the lower class.
YANK—T' hell wit youse! (*He approaches a lady—with a vicious grin and a smirking wink.*) Hello, Kiddo. How's every little ting? Got anything on for to-night? I know an old boiler down to de docks we kin crawl into. (*The lady stalks by without a look, without a change of pace. YANK turns to others—insultingly.*) Holy smokes, what a mug! Go hide yuhself before de horses shy at yuh. Gee, pipe de heinnie on dat one! Say, youse, yuh look like de stoin of a ferryboat. Paint and powder! All dolled up to kill! Yuh look like stiffs laid out for de boneyard! Aw, g'wan, de lot of youse! Yuh give me de eye-ache. Yuh don't belong, get me! Look at me, why don't youse dare? I belong, dat's me! (*Pointing to a skyscraper across the street which is in process of construction—with bravado.*) See dat building goin' up dere? See de steel work? Steel, dat's me! Youse guys live on it and tink yuh're somep'n. But I'm in it, see! I'm de hoistin' engine dat makes it go up! I'm it—de inside and bottom of it! Sure! I'm steel and steam and smoke and de rest of it! It moves—speed—twenty-five stories up—and me at de top and bottom—movin'! Youse simps don't move. Yuh’re on’y dolls I winds up to see'm spin. Yuh're de garbage, get me—de leavins—de ashes we dump over de side! Now, whata yuh gotta say? (*But as they seem neither to see nor hear him, he flies into a fury.*)

In this quote, Yank has gone in to the city to attempt to confront Mildred about the way she treated him. When Long and him arrive, they notice how differently the upper class live. When a group of upper class men and women stroll by after leaving a church, they ignore Yank completely even as he is yelling and bumping into them to get their attention. It attempts to show how much of a divide there was between classes in this period of time. In the end, it ends up frustrating Yank more than helping him.


This article explains how Yank’s interactions with the upper class cause him to panic and start questioning how he breaks from the chains holding him in the lower class. The author also uses some of the references in the play, to show that during this time America had a huge issue with the class divide and was trying to come to terms with how to fix this problem.

“O'Neill's play tells the story of the stoker Yank, who, in the author's words, has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way.”

The author explains that Yank had a huge ego before his interactions with Mildred. As the play goes on, he loses the “harmony” he once had when he begins to question what makes the upper class so much better than him.

“It is no coincidence that the action of the first half of the drama unfolds in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, a liminal territory halfway between the "New" and "Old" worlds, signifying an American identity in limbo, still coming to terms with its past--and imagining its future.”
In this section, the author goes on to compare Yank losing his “harmony” with the setting of the ocean liner in the play. Just like how the U.S. was trying to come to terms with its identity, Yank is doing the same trying to figure out what to do with himself now that he realizes who he really is.

“Whereas Mildred's downward intrusion into Yank’s realm had destroyed Yank’s self-concept and "crushed" the "personality" of the slumming reformer, Yank's intrusion into the world in which the gorilla is king also brings about his physical destruction.”

After Yank gives up on trying to get even, he ends up at the gorilla’s cage in the zoo. The author explains that Mildred’s intrusion into the lower class destroys Yank the same way that Yank going into a lower class than his ends up destroying him.

“In The Hairy Ape, O'Neill suggests the stark alienation of lower-class existence and views this alienation not as mitigated but as exacerbated by upper-class intrusions.”

The author argues that even though some people from the upper class intended to help the lower class by “intruding”, all it ended up doing was making the divide larger. Lower classmen ended up feeling more worthless by constantly seeing how well off the rich were compared to themselves causing anger and hatred. This is what we see with Yank.

“YANK—.....Yuh got what I was sayin’ even if yuh muffed de woids. (Then bitterness creeping in.) And why wouldn’t yuh get me? Ain’t we both members of de same club—de Hairy Apes? (They stare at each other—a pause—then YANK goes on slowly and bitterly.) So yuh’re what she seen when she looked at me, de white-faced tart! I was you to her, get me?.....”

At this point in the play, Yank has given up trying to get back at the people he feels have harmed him. He visits an ape at the zoo in town because he feels that it is where he belongs. Yank starts to believe that he will never be able to break free of the “cage” that society has placed him in and believes that things would be better if he regressed to a more primitive state.


This article begins by giving a synopsis of each of the scenes in the play. Shuman, then goes on to break down some of the themes of the play, including the isolation and alienation Yank feels when people of the upper class enter his life. The author also tries to give a sense of how both sides of the divide felt about the other.

“Eugene O’Neill masterfully translates these themes into Darwinian terms, choosing a protagonist so low on the evolutionary scale as to be almost indistinguishable from the real apes. Yank has found his place, his womb, as it were, in the protected environment of the stokehold, a place where no more developed human would care to be.”

Again, the author explains that Yank is so isolated in his lifestyle he truly believes he is at the top of the food chain no matter how terrible the conditions are because he does not know any better.
“In the twinkling of an eye, Mildred makes Yank see what he really is. Having already been shown to be prone to fixations, he develops an obsession about Mildred and her kind that ultimately destroys him. He wants to destroy all that Mildred is and stands for, but her society is stronger than his. It is organized against the likes of Yank, and he does not stand a chance against it.”

Shuman argues that all it takes is the smallest interaction between the two classes to destroy Yank’s sense of self. It ends up tearing apart every shred of confidence he had in himself and makes him realize that he is as low as it gets.

“The great irony in the play is that Mildred’s society barely knows that the Yanks of the world exist. A day after she sees Yank and faints from the shock, Mildred will be back in her normal routine; the dirty, sweating, half-naked stoker will remain but a vague, mildly unpleasant memory for her. Meanwhile, the poison of Yank’s hatred for the Mildreds of the world boils within him, and he swears a vengeance that society — Mildred’s society — will not allow him to execute.”

Here, it is brought up how little the upper-class care about the other side. The author explains that even though Yank is destroyed by this interaction, Mildred could care less and will simply move on with her life as if nothing has happened. He goes on to say that something needed to change when one person’s life is destroyed, and the other could care less.

“Yank is an unpleasant distraction to be overlooked, rather than confronted, by the people he affronts. When he finally oversteps the limits and hits one of the pillars of this well-dressed, Sunday-strutting society, he is removed officially but still ignored.”

The author points out that no matter how hard Yank tries to get back at the upper-class, they are not even willing to give him a second of their attention. To them, he is not worth their time and it is what ends up being his undoing.