
Spring 1961

A Near Tragedy

Kathryn Hodgman
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope>



Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

Hodgman, Kathryn (1961) "A Near Tragedy," *Calliope (1954-2001)*: Vol. 8 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol8/iss1/8>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calliope (1954-2001) by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

A Near Tragedy

KATHRYN HODGMAN

When the space of centuries, cultural differences, and different basic styles separate two plays, it is a brash critic who tries to compare them. It is in such widely divergent cases, however, that the critic perforce returns to basic concepts, and begins to classify in an Aristotelian sense. If one were to compare Cleopatra and Queen Victoria, for example, one might say that both had in common the fact that they were members of the human race, white, and queens. There the resemblance would end and dissimilarities would appear. The differences would be the more striking by contrast with the obvious similarities.

Thus, two plays, **Othello** and **The Hairy Ape**, though quite different, have a fundamental thesis in common, namely, the concept of the "Beauty and the Beast." This takes form on two levels, that of the contrast of the two main characters, brawny man and frail, delicate woman; and through these, the contrast of a simple primitive class opposed to a sophisticated, highly developed one.

In contrasting the two characters, both players use the dramatic device of color, or, in a painter's sense, values. Dark versus light, or even black versus white, play continually through both dramas. In informing Brabantio of the marriage of his daughter to the Moor, Iago speaks of "the old black ram" and "your white ewe."¹

In **The Hairy Ape**, O'Neill describes Yank, the hero, as a Neanderthal type, covered with sooty sweat. The heroine, or chief feminine character, is always described as pale, fragile, and dressed in white—a perfect counterpart of the burly, dark form

of Yank. Yank himself is portrayed as overly conscious of this difference. "Did yuh pipe her hands? White and skinny . . . And her mush, dat was dead white, too."²

Continually mentioned in *Othello* and *The Hairy Ape* is the second level of contrast, that of primitive and cultivated societies. Othello, in pleading his case of having deceived Desdemona into marrying him, says, "Rude am I in my speech . . ./And little of this great world can I speak,/ More than pertains to feats of broil and battle."³ Brabantio says that Desdemona—"in spite of nature,/ Of years, of country, credit, everything—"⁴ has fallen in love unsuitably.

As a parallel, Mildred, in *The Hairy Ape*, realizes the physical and moral weakness of her class. "But I am afraid I have neither the vitality nor integrity."⁵ Still, she cannot endure the bestiality of Yank, and the inherent disgust she shows is the motivation of the play. "Ain't she de same as me?"⁶ asks the puzzled Yank, and his consequent insecurity is the motif of the play.

Very closely related to the maladjustment of the primitive and worldly types is the Aristotelian hamartia of the two heroes: extreme gullibility. Though both are self-respecting and feel a pre-eminence in their own societies, there is a basic insecurity which allows craftier men to hoodwink them even beyond the limits of their simplicity. Othello is led to believe in his wife's infidelity by the flimsy evidence of a handkerchief; Yank is led to believe that Mildred has called him a hairy ape, when it was really Paddy, the irascible Irishman who used the term. "Say, is dat what she called me,—a hairy ape?" asks Yank. Paddy answers that she **looked** it at him. Yank, taking the look for the word, or Paddy's implication for the reality, then repeats, "Hairy ape, huh? Sure! Dat's de way she looked at me, aw right. Hairy ape! So dat's me, huh?"⁷ From then on, Yank feels that it is Mildred who has given him this title.

In addition to having the fatal flaw, or hamartia, as Aristotle describes it, the two characters go through a sequence of security, doubt, insecurity, and disaster, ending in death. They thereby meet the demands of Aristotle's perfect tragedy, peripety, or a **reversal** of the hero from a state of happiness to the complete opposite. Also, another point which Aristotle stresses—discovery, or the gradual step by step uncovering of truth to the main character—is visible in both plays. Yank's is

an uneasy discovery of his inability to fit into any group, as he tries each in turn: the stokers, the I.W.W.'s, prison. Each, in a long chain of discoveries, is found not to be the answer. Othello finally realizes his faulty judgment when Emilia makes a death-bed statement of Desdemona's innocence, and tells the truth about the handkerchief. Another proof of the villainy of Iago and the gullibility of Othello is found in the discovery of a letter in the pocket of the slain Roderigo. Othello sees himself, and his cry of "Fool, fool, fool!" is the agony of complete recognition.

These are some of the major similarities in the two plays, and they bind them rather closely, so that the essential differences are more apparent. The major difference is so great that it removes **The Hairy Ape** from the nature of a tragedy in Aristotle's terms. Aristotle's second point in his list of the important elements of tragedy is that of character. The fact that it is a character, noble and faulty, who eventually sees the plan of the universe, or some great truth, and adjusts himself to it, is the essence of tragedy as Aristotle considers it. Without this reality of a real character, **The Hairy Ape** becomes a tract on class conflict. Yank is never a real person. He is an expressionistic version of man at a low level in our social system. The men are part of a group which makes an "uproar swelling into a sort of unity, a meaning—" the bewildered, furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage."⁸ Yank is a sort of emanation of the group. O'Neill says himself that "the public saw the stoker, not the symbol, and the symbol makes the play either important or just another play."⁹ In another instance, O'Neill says that Yank is "every human being." He never is just a stoker, or just Yank. Othello is, however, a real character, one whose characteristics every one knows, personally. He is impulsive, fearless, just, loving, uneasy, and jealous. We can see our faults in Othello, but we are never Othello. Our hearts feel pity and fear for Othello, but the class struggle of Yank is something we can look at with the same detachment with which we view a tract. Arthur Miller voices this when he says, "Our lack of tragedy may be partly accounted for by the turn which modern literature has taken toward the purely psychiatric view of life, or the purely sociological. If all our miseries, our indignities, are born and bred within our minds, then all action, let alone the heroic action, is obviously impossible."¹⁰

That which O'Neill uses for symbols in his play is often outworn, such as the people on Fifth Avenue, or the Wobblies. These symbols actually are so dated, and so belonging to a separate slice of time, that they give his play a rather faded quality, like a piece of "moderne" furniture. The play *Othello*, while in a fixed era and time, has a universality which makes it timeless.

Krutch in his critical essay, *The Tragic Fallacy*, says that the tragic fallacy upon which heroic tragedy was built "presents man's passions as important throughout all time and all space; the very fact that he can sin means that this universe is watching his acts; and though he may perish, a God leans out from infinity to strike him down."¹¹ *Othello* does not mention God, but he has a stern sense of justice. The justice he meted out to a Turk is his own sentence. As he stabs himself, he says, "I took by the throat the circumcised dog/And smote him thus."¹² He has judged himself with the same quick justice he gave others. He faces his universe nobly, and it is a universe that has law and order, cause and effect. He speaks of some service he may have done the state, of one that "loved not wisely but too well,"¹³ and says he was "perplexed in the extreme."¹³ This survey was not enough for him to excuse himself. He was "great of heart."¹³ He was a part of the Tragic Fallacy.

Yank sums up his philosophy with a "What the hell!" He fits in nowhere and finds no meaning in life. He never has the tragic vision, never has a great struggle. O'Neill says, "The struggle used to be with gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt 'to belong'."¹⁴

Thus a comparison of the two plays shows that O'Neill's play is not tragedy in the Aristotelian sense at all. Is it tragedy, or is it propaganda? Does Yank, as a symbol of man trying to find his place in the world, "a harmony which he used to have as an animal, and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way,"¹⁵ inspire a sense of pity or fear? Does he give us new insight into man and his plight today? This is perhaps, finally, a personal answer, and mine is that the play is propaganda.

"As soon as an author slips propaganda into a play everyone feels it and the play becomes simply an argument."¹⁶ With these words of O'Neill's, I feel he has judged his own play, and described the final comparison between *Othello* and *The Hairy Ape*.

1. **Othello**, Act 1, Sc. i, lines 88-89.
2. Gassner, John, **Twenty-five Best Plays of the American Theater**; Eugene O'Neill, **The Hairy Ape**, Sc. IV, p. 13.
3. **Othello**, Act I, Sc. III, line 81.
4. **Othello**, Act I, Sc. III, lines 80, 87.
5. Gassner; O'Neill. **The Hairy Ape**, Sc. II, p. 8.
6. Gassner; O'Neill. **The Hairy Ape**, Sc. IV, p. 13.
7. Gassner; O'Neill. **The Hairy Ape**, Sc. II, p. 14.
8. Gassner; O'Neill. **The Hairy Ape**, Sc. I, p. 3.
9. O'Neill (New York **Herald Tribune**), Nov. 16, 1924, Sects. VI-VIII.
10. Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," **New York Times**, Feb. 27, 1949, Sect. II.
11. Krutch, **The Modern Temper: A Study and a Comparison**, p. 135.
12. **Othello**, Act V, Sc. II, lines 355-6.
13. **Othello**, Act V, Sc. II, line 344, line 346, line 361.
14. O'Neill, "The Plays of Eugene O'Neill," **N.Y. Herald Tribune**, Nov. 16, 1924, Sects. VII-VIII, p. 14, col. 2.
15. O'Neill, **N.Y. Herald Tribune**, Nov. 16, 1924, Sects. VII-VIII, p. 14, col. 1.
16. O'Neill, **New York Herald Tribune**, p. 14, col. 1.

After a Quarrel

Engloomed with new-pained, sharp despair
 I plod the chores despondently,
 Amid echoes in the house.
 What right had we, once loving pair,
 To sound the halls so violently,
 Tear at the family's roots?

Small Tim sits on the lowest stair,
 His eyes, blue curiosity.
 Thumb-comfort in his mouth,
 He holds a shredding Teddybear.
 Proud in his skill, learned recently,
 He sits, prim and secure.

DIANA SCHELLENBERG