

Received: 20-06- 2023

Accepted : 31-12- 2023

Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*: A Comparative Study of the Failure of Communication and Faith in Silence.

Kenza Tegaoua ^{1*}

¹ Algiers 2 University ,Algeria
kenza.tegaoua@univ-alger2.dz

Abstract

The present paper deals with the pathos of communication in the 20th Century literature; more precisely, how language is no more fulfilling its role as a means of communication which leads to the collapse of verbal communication in favor of silence. Relying on Winston Weathers’ study “Communications and Tragedy in Eugene O’Neill,” the research attempts to extract the failure of communication by conducting a comparative study between the American author Eugene O’Neill and his play *The Hairy Ape*(1922)and the English writer Virginia Woolf with her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*(1925). The final results of this study assert skepticism towards words and consolidate the failure of verbal communication in favor of a new means of communication: silence which is pushed to its most extreme form (death).

Key words: alienation, death, failure, language, pathos of communication, silence.

Introduction:

Eugene O’Neill’s semantic awareness is highly pessimistic and his characters suffer from numerous problems of communication; nevertheless, they express an innate need for articulation and they fight the grief of muteness. Sadly, they reach a tragedy which puts them to silence forever. This failure, according to O’Neill, is due to several factors and obstacles of language are the most important. Accordingly, this paper

* * Corresponding author: Kenza Tegaoua

debunks the way O'Neill's theory of communication is presented in a comparative study between his play *The Hairy Ape* and Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Referring to the problem of language as a means of communication the scholar Kelly Thurman states:

The glass of language is flawed, and as man looks through it back into the past out into the present, his view is distorted and blurred. Individually and collectively, he is linguistically maladjusted. Not understanding himself, he fails to understand others. Such misunderstanding may lead to fears, anxieties, conflicts, disasters which might have been lessened or prevented if men were able to communicate properly (Reported in Weathers, 148).

From the above, we understand that man has become aware of the defects of language, and that words have broken down. This results into a malaise both at the level of the individual and the community leading to loss and confusion. Accordingly, the former undergoes and experiences alienation failing to communicate and to reach his interlocutor. Hence, the individual becomes powerless in front of the tyranny of words and language.

I. O'Neill's Theory of Communication:

O'Neill's theory of communication goes through different steps as his character, Yank, strives to communicate and to transmit his message. In *The Hairy Ape*, he performs and executes O'Neill's semantic awareness via his 'journey' where he attempts to achieve communication.

Yank openly displays an innate desire and need to communicate with others as he asserts: "Say, lemme talk! Hey! Hey, you old Harp! Hey, you se guys! Say, listen to me—wait a moment—I gotter talk, see"(O'Neill). We notice his struggle to make himself heard pushing his interlocutors to listen to him; he openly expresses his need, not to say duty, to talk and utter his thoughts. Winston Weathers explains that Yank is eager to communicate for therapeutic reasons; as he explains: "communications provide us not only with our identities but allows us to maintain our psychological health" (Weathers149). Hence, Yank attempts to relieve his anxieties and fears vis-à-vis communication and language which explains his impulse towards transmitting his words to his interlocutors.

Besides his desire for voicing his thoughts, Yank seems to have developed a non-linguistic means as an alternative way of communication. Given his anxieties and

mistrust of words, he favors the language of the body at the expense of the conventional means of communication. This denotes the extent of his desire and motivation to 'talk'. Weathers identifies the substitute as "tactile communication, where in some physical act or sign serve as articulation" (Weathers 151). Accordingly, Yank provides us with an instance of the language of the eye. In scene 3, he is yelling, swearing and grumping, in a passionate and furious way; then, he stops abruptly when he notices the presence of Mildred:

He sees Mildred, like a white apparition in the full light from the open furnace doors. He glares into her eyes, turned to stone... As she looks at his gorilla face, as his eyes bore into hers, she utters a low, choking cry and shrinks away from him, putting both hands up before her eyes to shut out the sight of his face, to protect her own. This startles Yank to a reaction. His mouth falls open, his eyes grow bewildered.) (O'Neill).

In the passage above, we notice the emphasis on Yank's and Mildred's eyes and sight. Despite the absence of speech and verbalization, there seems to be a telepathic or an inarticulate message that is being transferred from one to the other. In fact, Mildred's eyes transmit her fear and awe towards Yank; whereas, his eyes convey confusion and loss. This mute scene stands for and asserts mistrust of language and the breakdown of words as a means of communication.

After he displays his desire to communicate; now, Yank encounters several difficulties that impede communication. Weathers assigns the first obstacle to the individual's incapacity to articulate (Weathers 152). In Yank's case, his inability to formulate and to express his thoughts is conveyed through his resort to various manners of speech. In some instances, he gives long speeches; while in others he uses interjections as answers, passing by heavy swearing and yelling. This shift of ways of speech stands for both his search for the suitable means to reach his interlocutor, and his weak position towards proper articulation.

As another obstacle towards a successful communication, Weathers mentions the receptor's either incapacity or refusal for communication (Weather 153). This means that even when the individual overcomes his problems with articulation; he finds difficulties to reach his interlocutor who refuses or cannot communicate. Yank seems to be aware of that for he often concludes his statements with "see?" or "get me?" such as when he says: "Aw hell! Nix on dat old sailing ship stuff! All dat bull's dead, see?", "He ain't got no noive. He's yellow, get me?" (O'Neill). It would appear

that Yank wants to make sure his information was understood and that it reached the interlocutor. Moreover, when he looks for Mildred, after she called him an ape; she refuses to meet with him, therefore, to communicate with him. At this point, he acknowledges the failure at the level of the receptor; which conveys another failure of communication to which Yank becomes sensitive.

The final obstacle that Yank encounters is language itself. Weathers mentions that O'Neill "shows us our human predilection to use meaningless labels to identify one another...[and]...how we respond, emotionally and irrationally, to the connotative associations that accompany certain labels" (Weather 155). From this misuse of words, one understands the author's skepticism towards language as a means of communication. Accordingly, after that Mildred called him a "Hairy Ape", Yank displays a strong emotional response to such connotation:

Yank—(Fiercely.) I'll brain her! I'll brain her yet, wait 'n' see! Say, is dat what she called me—a hairy ape?

Yank—(Grinning 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, bewilderment seizing him again) (O'Neill).

Clearly, Yank responds violently to such demeaning appellation and despises her choice of words. Adding to his anxieties towards language, Mildred has wounded him using the same tool to which he is extremely sensitive; her words have put an end to his desire to communicate. As a result, he sinks into seclusion rejecting communication for good.

Following O'Neill's tragic vision, all attempts to achieve communication meet with failure. Hence, the final step leads Yank to fear and rejection, favoring silence to words which Weathers explains as follows:

O'Neill's characters plunge into the tragedy of non-communication not only out of this fear of what communication will bring, but more frequently out of a hostile recognition of the uselessness of communication, the hopelessness of achieving it, and of deceptions which inadequate communications produce (Weather 158).

We understand that verbal communication becomes useless and words grow barren. Characters develop deeper skepticism towards language and speech which enhances their anxieties and fears, leading to complete alienation. This feeling is so considerable

and oppressing that they sink into monologues, passing by alternative interlocutors, reaching the extreme form of silence: death.

Accordingly, Yank says: "On'y—you se won't get me. Nobody gets me but me, see?" (O'Neill). This stands for his consecutive failures in communication; he becomes consumed by the fact that he is no more understood and dips into tragedy, caging himself with an ape. In front of the impasse of communication, he turns to it as an alternative interlocutor, and enters in a long soliloquy with it. Yet, the ape (as an adjective and animal) has destroyed him both psychologically and physically. Yank is so alienated that he is even convinced that the ape understands him; he continues: "Sure I get yuh...Yuh got what I was sayin'" (O'Neill). Here, Yank rejects communication with humans, creating a bond with the ape; however, he feels that the animal is actually better than him when he says: "You belong! Sure! Where do I fit in?" and adds: "What's the use of talking?" (O'Neill). At this point, he is aware of the failure of communication, and abandons any attempt to reach it. His alienation has reached its apex, and this is why he embraces the deathly hug of the ape, "with a spring he wraps his huge arms around Yank in a murderous hug" (O'Neill). In this final scene, Yank dies reaching the ultimate form of O'Neill's tragedy of communication: eternal silence or death which is also found in Woolf's novel.

II. *Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and O'Neill's Tragedy:*

Besides O'Neill's play, there are other literary texts that deal with his tragic theory of communication namely, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* which conveys various instances that abide by his view. Most of her characters are an illustration of his pessimistic vision; they are alienated and in a quest of something that will bring complexion to their fragmentation. The common thread that webs their quests is their fights for communication, resorting to different ways.

Lucrezia, Septimus' wife, feels alienated not only in England but also from her husband. She constantly tries to reach out to him and to understand him. Therefore, like Yank, she also craves for communication; as she wants Septimus to open up to her, hoping he would feel better. This induces the therapeutic reasons mentioned above. In fact, Septimus' opening up to her would soothe both the husband and the wife. Sadly, all her attempts meet with disappointing failures for he refuses to communicate his thoughts to her, nor anyone else. He even feels disturbed and

annoyed when she tries to reach out to him. Ergo, both end up being silent, giving up any attempts to communicate, favoring internal dialogues instead. Like Yank, after her efforts to get to the interlocutor, she favors silence which amplifies her alienation both in her marital and social life.

Richard and Clarissa Dalloway share the same troubles of communication; as a matter of fact, the maid is their intermediary which results in silence and non-communication. Nevertheless, Richard tries to reach out to his distant and absent wife; like Yank, he opts for an alternative to words, in favor of the language of the hand. He believes that it makes them happier; in fact, he holds Clarissa's hand instead of openly telling her that he loves her. Notwithstanding, Richard fails because she is not receptive and neither verbal nor tactile language prevails. Consequently, this lack of intercourse creates an abyss between the couple and both end up indulging in silence. Their communication becomes useless, inadequate and meaningless; they realize that it is false communication between two alienated persons; and that there is no way out, except for silence.

As previously mentioned, Yank and Mildred had a silent conversation, where words were replaced by the language of the eyes. Likewise, Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway have developed and expanded the same language. They are involved in some sort of secret and telepathic language. Peter seems to understand her simply through her look, her tone or her behavior; in fact“ they had always this queer power of communicating without words” (Woolf 34). This dismissal of words conveys not only mistrust in language as a means of communication, but also to its inefficiency to describe his feelings; therefore, Peter opts for an alternative language which does not require verbal utterances. This silent language is the assertion of the failure of language and the breakdown of words.

After Yank's constant failures, he cages himself with the ape, abandoning all forms of communication; likewise, Clarissa 'cages' herself in her bedroom while her living room is full of guests. This symbolizes her withdrawal from the rest of the society and for her refusal to communicate preferring internal dialogues and monologues. Clarissa is lost; she is torn apart between different roles she performs in society: a wife, a mother, a perfect hostess and a woman. This variety of 'personas' pushes her to wander and to be lost in London, society, the house, and among her

family and guests. These also require from her to adopt a suitable speech to each persona. As a result, she becomes incapable of articulating her inner self, the real Clarissa, the one we discover in her internal monologues. This explains why she refuses to communicate and to verbalize her inner thoughts; she prefers the 'cage' where Clarissa exists and is not fading away. Through her silence, she is simply persevering and protecting her inner self from the corrupting forces of language.

Septimus is not different from Clarissa, or from Yank. Like them, he is alienated and prefers silence to communication. He is aware that any attempt would meet failure because no one understands his postwar trauma. He expresses no desire for talking since it has no longer therapeutic benefits; on the contrary, uttering his thoughts harms him. As previously mentioned, he is annoyed when Lucrezia tries to reach out to him; moreover, Dr. Holmes deems his words as 'nonsense'. Hence, Septimus refuses his interlocutors and 'cages' himself in his inner cocoon which shields him from the outside world. Like Clarissa and Yank, he loses faith in language, plunging further in silence until he reaches its final form as he commits suicide. He chooses the soothing silence of death, as opposed to the disturbing noises of language surrounding him.

III. Conclusion:

From the above, we conclude that O'Neill's theory of communication moves from hope to despair. At the beginning of the journey, Yank has faith in language and communication in general; then, he is disillusioned by the latter and develops an alternative way which doesn't require words. Despite his efforts, he constantly encounters obstacles, at different levels, that put an end to his faith and hope towards communication. From that final failure, Yank dips into silence pushing it to the extreme form: death.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, we have seen that O'Neill's theory is not restricted to his works. After comparing Yank to most characters, we have proved their failures with language and communication. In fact, all end up being silent, rejecting verbalization. This asserts the expansion of O'Neill's theory to other literary productions.

Notwithstanding the tragedy, we can extract an optimistic message from death because "death is an attempt to communicate" (Woolf 134). It is true that Yank and Septimus are desperate and suffer from language; but they have given up and it was a

mistake. Hence, we ought to take that as a warning about the ‘danger’ of sinking into the pathos of communication and silence; one ought to not commit their mistakes for communication remains necessary.

IV. Works cited:

O'Neill, Eugene. *The Hairy Ape*. The Project Gutenberg EBook, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4015/4015-h/4015-h.htm>>.

Weathers, Winston. «Communications and Tragedy in Eugene O'Neill.» *A Review of General Semantics* 19.2 (1962): 148-160.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2003.