

## Literary Analysis:

**James, O'Neil, Frost, Ginsberg, Howells, Fitzgerald, Twain, Freeman**

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In Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*, the author entreats his readers to embrace life and other people without reserve, mainly by demonstrating the devastating emotional consequences of refusing to do so.

Through the character of shy, awkward John Marcher, James provides a case study of what can only be described as acute self-absorption. Though he thinks himself impeccably well-mannered, decent, and unselfish, in reality Marcher is a man who cannot see the world or those who inhabit it clearly. Rather, he sees only himself, his anxieties, and his "secret." This secret, vaguely defined as "the thing that is to come" -- an enigmatic future event that will irrevocably alter his life and define his character, though he knows not how -- consumes Marcher to the exclusion of all else. By the time he becomes reacquainted with May Bartram, John has already spent the better part of his youth waiting for this mystery to reveal itself, to no avail. In the meantime, he has scarcely experienced life, expending slight effort and deriving little pleasure from either his vocation or attachments to others.

When May reappears and agrees to "watch him" and remain ever alert for the emergence of the "beast" (as the two had taken to calling it), Marcher is relieved that at last he has someone to share his burden with. Though May and John become the closest of friends over the years, their relationship is essentially one-sided: Marcher takes care to remember her birthday and bestow gifts with regularity ("one of his proofs to himself that he hadn't sunk into real selfishness"), yet never once does he seek to reciprocate May's devoted attentions by providing emotional support for her. Nor does John entertain the thought of proposing marriage; to do so would be injudicious. "Something or other lay in wait for him," he reasoned, "like a crouching beast in the jungle. It signified little whether the crouching beast were destined to slay him or be slain... A man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger-hunt." What John doesn't realize until too late is that May has been with him on safari all along, listening, questioning, never dismissing his fears or sending him away in disgust. Despite his obvious eccentricities, she grew to love and accept him as he was.

Eventually, both Marcher's insistence on relating to life as a spectator, and his amazing inability to consider (let alone be aware of) anyone else's feelings but his own lead to an ignominious encounter with the "beast" he has dreaded for so long. May Bartram, gravely ill and long since relegated to the role of old maid, knew too well what he could not begin to guess at;

that "the thing to come" had already passed him by -- his life, and his capacity to love. Yet she would give Marcher one last chance to avert his destiny -- a destiny he always assumed was preordained -- by finally recognizing her feelings for him., and returning them. As May drew closer to him in that crucial moment, all John Marcher could do was stare blankly back at her and complain that he still didn't understand.

Only later does Marcher realize the colossal mistake he has made, but by then, of course, May Bartram is dead and he has wasted his life hunting down a "beast" that was staring him in the mirror all the while. The irony that a bloodless, detached attitude toward life, combined with a prodigious appetite for self-involvement, should prove John Marcher's most savage foe is (one hopes) not lost on the reader. By furnishing such a well-crafted and memorable illustration of one man's psychological blindness, Henry James allows us to see our own, which makes *The Beast in the Jungle* not only a great story, but also a cautionary tale of the first order.

Eugene O'Neil, in his play *The Hairy Ape*, makes liberal use of symbolism, and the scene settings he chooses are no exception. Each is intimately connected with the psychological and emotional state of Yank, the play's hulking protagonist.

The first scene is set in the firemen's forecastle of an ocean liner, and it is here, as the leader of the liner's furnace stokers, that Yank holds court. The setting is "a cramped space in the bowels of the ship, imprisoned by white steel. The line of bunks, and the uprights supporting them, cross each other like the steel framework of a cage. The ceiling crushes down upon the men's heads. They cannot stand upright." The fireman's forecastle reminds of nothing so much as an animal's cage, yet Yank does not see that. What Yank sees instead is a place where he has power, where he is respected, and, above all, where he belongs. It is in the fireman's forecastle, and the stokehole where he labors, that Yank has always found a home, because in his universe, it is the stokers and the steel-makers that really matter: "Hell in a stokehole? Sure! It takes a man to work in hell. Everyting else dat makes de woild move, somep'n makes it move. I start somep'n and de woild moves! I'm smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles; I'm de muscles in steel. All de rich guys dat tink dey're somep'n, dey ain't nothin'! But us guys, we're in de move, we're at de bottom, de whole ting is us!"

In broader terms, the stokehole itself represents the "hidden hell" of a class-based, capitalistic society. If this is, as Yank initially believes, the place where all the real work gets done, the place at the bottom that makes everything on top run, the stokehole is nonetheless well concealed beneath the passenger decks of the ship, at a safe remove from those who can afford to pretend it doesn't exist. The stokehole is filthy, confining, and unbelievably hot. The men feeding the ship's furnace with coal toil "in the crouching, inhuman attitudes of chained gorillas," performing their backbreaking task with mindless, clockwork precision. The conditions in the stokehole reduce them to a grunting, faceless collective who labor ceaselessly and without recognition for the benefit of affluent strangers they will never meet. The stokehole, in short, is Eugene O'Neil's definition of hell.

Later, after Mildred Douglas reacts with undisguised terror -- and revulsion -- to "the hairy ape" that confronted her upon visiting the stokehole, Yank searches for her on Manhattan's tony Fifth Avenue, itching to get even. In marked contrast to any environment he has ever known, the street Yank roams is clean and well cared for, lined with shops purveying obscenely expensive goods. When Yank insults a group of effete rich folk as they pass, his taunts are not acknowledged, if indeed they are heard at all. When Yank attempts to strike them, it is he who absorbs the blows. After trying unsuccessfully to elicit the respectful (i.e. fearful) response he is so used to, Yank is eventually beaten to the ground by the police. The rich people pay no attention; rather, they are enthralled by the latest fashion craze -- monkey fur. (Now, really, Eugene, there is something to be said for subtlety.) Yank's sojourn to Fifth Avenue has, for the first time, afforded him a rude acquaintance with reality; completely out of his element, at last he begins to realize who holds true power. From this point onward, Yank's sense of self, along with his neatly symmetrical world-view, dissolves precipitously.

Blackwells Island, the prison Yank finds himself rotting in the following day, is similarly symbolic of the "real world" he has regrettably stumbled into: like the stokehole on a ship, it is both out of sight and out of mind as far as "good people" are concerned. To playwright O'Neil, prison is where society sends its rejects, the laggards who, for whatever reason, refuse to live by the rules. However many malcontents there may be -- whether social, economic, or political -- there will always be plenty of prisons to keep them safely tucked away. At Blackwells Island, explains O'Neil in his stage directions for Scene Six, the prison cells "do not stop, but disappear in the dark background as if they ran on, numberless, into infinity." While imprisoned, Yank comes to understand that, as a member of the uneducated working class, he is little more than an ant to be crushed beneath the wheels of the capitalist machine.

Released from jail, Yank endeavors to join the New York chapter of the "Wobblies," hoping to ingratiate himself with their leadership by pledging to "blow tings up," but fails miserably. Dispirited for the last time by his contact with other human beings, Yank decides that the only place he might call home is a monkey house at the city zoo. There, among all the other hairy apes, he will finally belong. The monkey house, to O'Neil, may constitute a kind of dramatic full-circle, a literal cage akin to the metaphoric one represented by Scene Three's stokehole, to which Yank inevitably returns. On another level, it is symbolic of the working man's futile quest for social acceptance and "upward mobility" in a society that does not value or respect what he does. Unfortunately for Yank, even his adopted pals at the zoo reject him, and he winds up in that literal cage, to be strangled by a gorilla shortly thereafter. This is Eugene O'Neil's final irony, and in a play so gleefully devoted to symbolic exaggeration, the perfect closing touch.

Both Robert Frost and Allen Ginsberg could be considered modern poets, yet one is clearly more "modern" than the other.

Robert Frost wrote A Line-Storm Song in 1913. It is composed of four stanzas of eight lines each. A Line-Storm Song also follows a predictable poetic rhyme scheme: A, B, A, B, C, D, C, D, etc. Because of this, the poem has what is termed a "closed form." Structurally, it offers little in the way of surprises.

As for subject matter, A Line-Storm Poem is dedicated exclusively to one topic -- the simple pleasures of nature and romantic love in a rural setting. Some sample lines:

The roadside flowers, too wet for the bee.

Expend their bloom in vain.

Come over the hills and far with me,

And be my love in the rain...

There is the gale to urge behind

And bruit our singing down,

And the shallow waters aflutter with wind

From which to gather your gown...

Oh, never this whelming east wind swells

But it seems like the sea's return

To the ancient lands where it left the shells

Before the age of the fern...

Even for 1913, this is, one must admit, pretty tame stuff. Reading A Line-Storm Song, its abundantly evident that while Robert Frost may have been a very accomplished poet, he wasn't exactly an innovator. Neither in form (the rigid stanzaic pattern, the sing-song rhyme scheme) nor content (facile meanderings about "birds," "bees," and "love in the wet woods") does Frost depart much from traditional poetic custom. Although Robert Frost is certainly capable of constructing more complicated and emotionally disturbing poems



(such as The Fear or "Out, Out --") A Line-Storm Song just simpers along inoffensively, hardly the worst piece of work published by a major poet, but not terribly memorable, either.

Whatever else has been said of him, no one has ever accused Allen Ginsberg of writing inoffensive poetry. Howl was published in 1956, becoming an instant classic for the "beat generation" it immortalized. Easy to see why: Howl has no set stanza structure and no rhyme scheme, no narrowly defined subject focus, and, frequently, no pretense toward good taste. It is a distinctly American, post-World War II piece of work, emblematic of the pre-fab '50's, a time of growing economic prosperity, suburban boom, Eisenhower, and relentless pursuit of "the good life." Yet the 1950's were also the decade of willing subservience to the oppressive dictates of social convention, the terrifying and unthinkable reality of an instrument of mass destruction known simply as The Bomb, and an almost pathological national obsession with the "threat" of Communism. Howl is an explicit rejection of contemporary American values, celebrating almost every conceivable moral vice and at the same time lamenting the loss of those unable, or unwilling, to comply with mainstream cultural expectations. Those who:

howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts, who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,

who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine until the noise of wheels and children brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked and battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear light of Zoo,

who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amidst blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality.

who rose incarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabachthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.

Ginsberg's catalogue of declarations and complaints reads like one long, chaotic run-on sentence, careening across the page from one irreverent social observation to the next with a hyperkinetic intensity that either leaves the reader enthralled or scratching his head in bedazzled confusion. Howl is by turns incisive, ground-breaking, and sophomoric, and the twin creative influences of beat poetry, experimental jazz and illicit drugs, are readily apparent. One may quibble with its artistic merit, but Howl is undeniably, thoroughly, modern; though dated, its form, content, and style speak to our age in a way that Robert Frost's A Line-Storm Song cannot.

William Dean Howells' *Editha* is an indictment of the "My Country, Right or Wrong" attitude shared by many Americans near the turn of the 20th century -- particularly in regard to the Spanish-American War of 1898, to which Howells was staunchly opposed. *Editha* is the story of a young woman so naively patriotic, and so unbending in her beliefs, that she is willing to shame the man she claims to love into going off to war, heedless of the consequences. To Editha Balcom, the war in a foreign land (never specifically alluded to by Howells) is "a holy war... a sacred war, a war for liberty, and humanity, if ever there was one." She even believes that God in His Heaven has decreed that the war be fought. But George Gearson, Editha's intended, is not so sure. In fact, he is dead-set against the war and any American involvement in it. George's reluctance does not deter Editha, however, for she is determined that he will do "something worthy to have won her -- be a hero, her hero."

To that end, Editha gathers together every memento and love letter Gearson has ever presented to her, sending them all back with the admonition, "the man I marry must love his country first of all, and be able to say to me, 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, Loved I not honor more.' " Then she adds the kicker -- "Your heart will make my words clear to you" -- a coy ultimatum that nonetheless renders any equivocation on his part impossible. So, faced with the prospect of losing her affections, George enlists in the service, joins the fighting, and winds up dead. After a suitable period of mourning, Editha (dressed appropriately in black) calls upon George's mother, as he had requested in the event of his death. Expecting to find an elderly Mrs. Gearson devastated by the loss of her son and grateful for comfort, the young lady is confronted instead with a strong, worldly woman who is well aware of Editha's culpability for George's end. Mrs. Gearson is equally aware of Editha's simple-minded jingoism, and its unforeseen result: "When you sent him you didn't expect he would be killed... No, girls don't, when they give their men up to their country. They think they'll come marching back, just as gay as they went... if it's an empty sleeve, or an empty pantaloons, it's all the more glory. You thought it would be all right for your George to kill the sons of those miserable mothers that you would never see the faces of. I thank my God that they killed him first, and that he ain't livin' with their blood on his hands... What you got that black on for? Take it off, take it off, before I tear it from your back!"

Howells could have easily concluded his story right there, content in the knowledge that he had delivered his message of moral outrage in no uncertain terms. Yet he adds to that message immeasurably by leaving his readers with the distinct impression that while Editha may have experienced feelings of guilt and thus learned her lesson, in truth her remorse is fleeting and, ultimately, she remains blind to the folly of unthinking, knee-jerk patriotism. *Editha* is an example of idealism gone awry -- a perverse, if inevitable, by-product of "the American dream."

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Babylon Revisited* is a quintessentially American story, dominated by themes of "dissipation" (a Fitzgerald favorite), the desire for personal redemption by discarding an unwanted past, and, ultimately, possibility lost. Set in post-Depression Paris, it is the tale of a man who seeks to escape the misdeeds of his youth and reclaim a future by reinventing himself as a responsible father. Charles Wales, once a heavy-drinking expatriate

living the high life on the continent before the crash of '29, returns to Paris to reunite with his daughter, Honoria. To do so, he must wrest control of the child from sister-in-law Marion, who blames Charlie's drinking for the death of Helen, his wife. Charlie comes close to realizing his goal, but he is unable to bring it to fruition.

Though Wales tries desperately to skirt his past, from the beginning it will not go away, frequently intruding into even his most optimistic and forward-looking thoughts: "He suddenly realized the meaning of the word 'dissipate' -- to dissipate into thin air, to make nothing out of something. In the little hours of the night every move from place to place was an enormous human jump, an increase of paying for the privilege of slower and slower motion." His dead wife Helen haunts his dreams. Even though, with effort, he manages to put her out of his mind and concentrate on regaining Honoria and "my chance for home," the ugly past, in the form of ex-friends and unrepentant drinking companions Lorraine and Duncan, will not let him begin over again. Crashing drunkenly into his sister-in-law's house, they ruin any immediate opportunity for a chance at a new life.

By the end of the story, Charlie is still paying for the mistakes he's made, his hopes for a fresh start growing dimmer: "He would come back some day, they couldn't make him pay forever. But he wanted his child, and nothing was much good now, beside the fact. He wasn't young any more, with a lot of nice thoughts and dreams to have by himself. He was absolutely sure Helen wouldn't have wanted him to be so alone." But alone he is, his dream of redemption through beginning anew -- so essentially American -- almost completely shattered.

Eugene O'Neil's satirical "comedy" *The Hairy Ape*, as previously noted, is the story of an unmitigated failure, and it, too, is an inversion of an American ideal. More than anything, the character of Yank wants to belong, to be a part of something meaningful, to matter. Yet with each successive scene in *The Hairy Ape*, it becomes increasingly apparent that an invisible barrier prevents him from actualizing this desire; that barrier is certainly social, but it is also economic.

Yank is a brute; physically, he is so strong that none of the men who work in the ocean liner's stokehole dare cross him. Temperamentally, he is a bully, revelling in the fear he engenders in his contemporaries and his status as king of the firemen's forecastle. Yet the moment he is faced with someone outside his own social and economic milieu, in the person of super-rich steel heiress Mildred Douglas, he instantly loses his preeminence as a figure of power, and his identity as well. To the slumming Mildred Douglas, he is not a person, but a thing; a grotesque, sub-human horror writhing in its own filth and primitive habits -- in short, a hairy ape.

Though he tries to redress this perception, all of Yank's attempts to convince his social and economic betters that he is a force to be reckoned with end in humiliating defeat. He cannot even find Mildred Douglas, let alone get even with her; the verbal and physical blows he directs at the rich people he encounters somehow rebound painfully back upon him. He is beaten and



thrown in jail; a bid to join the Wobblies, seemingly a natural ally, meets with abject failure. By the end of the play, Yank is the supreme outsider -- not even the apes want him. He doesn't belong anywhere, can't regain the sense of meaning he once bragged of so proudly, and has, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist. He no longer matters, and as the symbol of Eugene O'Neil's alienated and marginalized working man, one has the feeling that Yank has been deluding himself in that regard all along. Yank represents the downside of the American dream, someone that has labored all his life believing in his own importance and the vital nature of his work, who finally understands that he is a person of no consequence. He is quite alone in the world, and quite dispensable.

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, on the other hand, is in strange fashion an American success story. Rather than grow up to become President of the United States, Huck Finn represents an American icon just as powerful, if not more so -- the anti-hero. Throughout *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the protagonist demonstrates a marvelous capacity for ingenuity, irreverence, and integrity, all the more remarkable because his beliefs and behavior fly directly in the face of accepted Southern mores in the pre-Civil War era. Huck is probably the best straight-out liar in all of American literature. He can convince anyone of almost anything: that his imaginary family is stricken with a dangerous disease (so slave-hunters won't search his raft and find the runaway Jim), that he's a girl (which nearly worked), or that he's Tom Sawyer (a conceit allowing the real Tom to pass himself off as "Sid," a long-lost Sawyer cousin). Huck Finn also knows how to get himself out of some mighty tight jams; to escape the abuse of his good-for-nothing Pa, he faked his own death, and later managed to rid himself of both the "King" and the "Duke," two equally unsavory characters. Yet Huck never takes unfair advantage or intentionally hurts any of the people he meets in the course of his adventures, despite the fact that some of them (most notably his father) richly deserve such treatment.

One of Huck's more endearing qualities is the innocent irreverence he frequently brings to his narrative, whether discussing the religious sermons he must endure at the hands of the insufferably pious Miss Watson, his father's drunken rants against politicians, or the pretentious death-poems of the morbid Emmeline Grangerford. Though he delivers his observations with dead-pan sincerity, the reader cannot help thinking that, just the same, Huck is perfectly wise to the foibles and absurdities of human nature.

Most significantly, Huckleberry Finn is initially beside himself with shame for aiding and abetting Jim's flight, but in a crucial change of attitude -- one that defines him as a classic American anti-hero -- Huck decides that what he feels in his heart, rather than what society tells him is right or wrong, is the only true moral compass to live by:

I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get started right when he's little, ain't got no show...  
Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on, -- s pose you'd a done right and give Jim up; would you felt better than what you do now?

No, says I, I'd feel bad -- I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.

This is the kind of free-thinking attitude often condemned by the moralists of Twain's time, but Huck's insistence on living life according to his own code of ethics -- whether pertaining to race, religion, or parental authority -- is about as American as any personal philosophy can be. The conscientious, iconoclastic principles he chooses to follow, as well as his restless spirit of adventure, make Huckleberry Finn an outstanding example of an American success story.

Mary Freeman's *The Revolt of "Mother,"* published in 1891, is also an American success story. It's the tale of an obedient yet deceptively strong-willed wife and mother who finally gets her due from a husband used to having things his own way.

Sarah Penn "was a small woman... her forehead was mild and benevolent between smooth curves of gray hair; there were meek downward lines about her nose and mouth; but her eyes, fixed upon (her husband), looked as if the meekness had been the result of her own will, never the will of another." What Sarah wants from husband Adoniram is simple: a new house after forty years of living in a hovel and breaking her back with domestic chores without complaint, a decent place in which to give away her daughter Nanny to marriage. But Adoniram, intent instead on building yet another barn in which to house his cows, does not listen. He only opens his mouth to utter a single repeated phrase: "I ain't got nothin' to say." In his mind, the conversation is over.

Sarah, however, will not give up so easily. If her own life has been a hard lot, she is bound and determined the same will not be true for Nanny. Though she says nothing as the new barn is raised -- seemingly defeated -- Sarah quietly considers her next move. The barn reaches completion and is ready for use by the third week of July; Adoniram planned to move his stock in on a Wednesday, but the day before, a letter arrived which changed his plans. The letter was from Hiram, Sarah Penn's brother, offering a good deal to Adoniram for "jest the kind of a horse I want." Sarah at last sees her opportunity ("it looks like a providence"), and as soon as Adoniram is gone, she instructs her children to help move all of their belongings into the new barn.

The townspeople are aghast at Sarah's impudence. They gather in the general store to debate whether she is "a lawless and rebellious spirit," or merely insane. Even the local minister pays a visit to the Penn homestead to dissuade her from such an obviously heretical act. Sarah is unmoved: "There ain't no use talkin', Mr. Hersey, I've thought it all over an' over, an' I believe I'm doin' what's right... it's betwixt me an' the Lord an' Adoniram. There ain't no call for nobody else to worry about it."

When Adoniram returns to see what Sarah has done, he is speechless. The little protest he is able to sputter out in his wife's direction is met with steely -- though gently communicated -- resolve. After a hearty supper allows Adoniram a needed interval to acclimate to the shock of his new surroundings, he and Sarah repair to the porch. A few moments later, Sarah realizes that her husband is silently sobbing to himself. "I'll -- put up the -- partitions, an' -- everything you -- want, mother," says he, as Sarah Penn lifts an apron to her face, overwhelmed by her victory. Adoniram finally understands the strength and indomitable will his wife possesses, "the spirit that her meek front had covered for a lifetime."

Mary Freeman's *The Revolt of "Mother"* is a literary work at least three quarters of a century ahead of its time, a proto-feminist triumph uniquely American for its rustic New England setting and utilization of authentic regional dialect. Its message, also very American, is precisely the opposite of O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape* -- that the individual, acting in accordance with his or her beliefs, can effect positive change: one person does, after all, matter. Given that darker variations of the American dream, such as those portrayed in *Editha* or *The Hairy Ape*, still possess a lamentable salience, even today, it is fortunate indeed that we can also look to stories like *The Revolt of "Mother"* (or *Huckleberry Finn*) for consolation, and, perhaps, guidance.