Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Society

O’Neill’s, *The Hairy Ape*, discusses this industrialization, society, and the early attitudes and misconceptions about labor unions, specifically the Industrial Workers of the World. The play is centered around Yank, a fireman in the bowels of a transatlantic ocean liner who works shoveling coal into the furnaces of the ship with the crew. O’Neill depicts these men as “Neanderthal like” and “hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low, receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes” (*The Hairy Ape*, Act I). As these men represent all of the working class throughout the play, a feeling of harshness is evident whenever they are discussed through the use of pounding fists, drinking, and yelling, implying that industrialization has changed them to the point of them becoming animalistic. This is also seen as Yank and the other men joke about and are called “hairy apes” and “filthy beasts” (*The Hairy Ape*, Act III). As society moves forward in industrialization, man is moving backwards on the evolutionary scale. These same darkened men are seen in the jail cell with Yank and it is not until he eventually reaches the IWW that O’Neill introduces working class members of society in a positive light. They are introduced as “two are playing checkers. One is writing a letter. Most of them are smoking pipes,” (*The Hairy Ape*, Act VII), all of these being activities that are generally associated with upper class, in comparison to the ape like firemen who are drunkenly singing in the opening scene. This transformation demonstrates how O’Neill believes that labor unions had a positive impact on society and subsequently the lives and attitudes of working people.
In correlation to O'Neill’s depiction of workingmen, he writes the upper end of society in a very light and indifferent manor. On the ship to New York, this is seen in Mildred’s Aunts disapproval of Mildred interacting with the “other half,” and how she “loathes deformity” (The Hairy Ape, Act II). This, along with Yank and Long later being ignored by the church people, demonstrates the loathsome attitudes of the upper class towards the working class and how they simply choose to ignore those below them as well as their living conditions. Another way in which O’Neill shows negativity towards the working class and the idea of better working conditions, is in the newspapers depiction of the IWW. The media is seen as being controlled by the upper class in that it describes the organization as “an ever-present dagger pointed at the heart of the greatest nation the world has ever known,” as well as, “they plot with fire in one hand and dynamite in the other they stop not before murder to gain their ends” (The Hairy Ape, Act VI). By trying to shut down this organization and those like it through the media, the upper class wishes to further the gap between themselves and the workers in society.

Along with O’Neill’s use of writing conflicting characteristics between the classes of society in order to express his views, he also suggests solutions to fixing the problems within the societal divide. The first of which is seen with Patty, a fireman on the ship, talking about the way things used to be and how times were better. This, however, cannot become a reality because society has come to far to go back, and is expressed through Patty only ever talking in a drunken stammer. Similarly, Long, a socialist, sees the divide in society as a issue that needs to be settled with a balance of power. This idea is dissolved when Long is said to “slink
away” (*The Hairy Ape*, Act V) from a fight after trying to pull Yank out of it, he has no courage to stand up for what he believes in. Like his personality, a balance of power would not be enough to stop the class war and would eventual fizzle out. The last fix suggested is through Yanks violent personality and willingness to fight. This fight eventually gets him killed by an actual ape and thrown in a cage, and is therefore not a possibility for change; the idea is quite literally crushed. Yanks death is representative of the death of working society via industrialization and is an outcry by O’Neill for a needed change. The irreversible impact the Industrial Revolution has had on the divide in society between the upper and lower classes is so great that O’Neill points his audience towards the opinion that unions such as the IWW are the best method to bring about change.
Works Cited