In the play *The Hairy Ape*, Eugene O’Neill is tempting the audience to look at the Industrial Revolution as a regression in human development, the forwarding of a class system in society, and man’s inability to feel like he belongs in any class other than his own. O’Neill shows the reader that, as the play goes, Yank regresses to an animalistic state. He also gives the reader the view of the differences between classes by displaying that Yank and Mildred will never be in the same class in society. Through Yank’s regression, O’Neill shows that this period in time inhibited lower class men from being able to push forward in society because men only felt like they belonged where they already fit in society.

Throughout *The Hairy Ape*, O’Neill illustrates the decline or regression of the character Yank. He demonstrates that the industrialization of America causes Yank to regress to an animalistic state. He uses Yank as a microcosm of the effect on men in the working class by technological advancement and industrialization. This is similar to Pavlov’s dog in the sense that workers transform into machines because they are turned on and off by a whistle at work. This transformation is just the beginning of the decline as O’Neill continues to show the audience. The most vivid indication of O’Neill’s view of men sinking into an animalistic state is in his stage direction in the first scene. O’Neill describes the scene of the firemen gathered on the liner. He depicts the scene with the men seemingly in a cage-like area, and the men being similar to cavemen or Neanderthals. A Neanderthal is man’s closest state to being an animal by most accounts. O’Neill paints a picture of the industrialization of man as transforming man into an ape-like creature. Another example of O’Neill’s take on man being ape-like is his depiction of Paddy, one of the oldest firemen, as “extremely monkey-like” (O’Neill Scene I). The fact that Paddy is one of the oldest and most experienced firemen displays O’Neill judges that men
regress farther back the evolutionary track as they continue working. The regression throughout the entire play becomes evident in Scene VIII as O’Neill reveals to the audience Yank’s location. Yank is at the zoo in the monkey house. This marks the regression from a Neanderthal on the ship in the first scene to being an ape in the end.

The interaction between Yank and Mildred ascertains the reality of a class system developing during the Industrial Revolution. Mildred lies in the upper class, while Yank is in the working class. Although the two of them are in different classes, they share comparable grievances on class and society. Mildred expresses that she is a “waste product” of her upbringing (O’Neill Scene II). She feels she has benefitted from all the financial advantages provided by her father’s steel company, yet she does not feel a sense of purpose. The passion she lacks is frustrating to her because she feels no one in her class feels this passion. Mildred wishes to touch a life outside of her class, but she cannot do this in society. This fact exceedingly frustrates Mildred. Yank, however, believes that his class has this passion. Yank aspires to break down the walls established by a class structure and demonstrate the significance of the working class. Both Mildred and Yank realize that the class system in American society controls people’s outlooks on who he or she is and what he or she can achieve in life.

Whether one belongs is also a theme in that O’Neill instills in The Hairy Ape. An important fact to Yank is “who belongs” (O’Neill Scene VI). Early in the play, Yank establishes that he belongs to the ship while the other people on the ship are “baggage” (O’Neill Scene I). Yank determines that belonging depends on whether or not a person can be constructive in society. He reiterates this view by stating that the firemen belong because they are vital to the
operations of the ship. The entire play is essentially Yank’s journey to find belonging outside of his class. The fact that he cannot belong in Mildred’s class affects Yank throughout the play. Mildred represents this place in society that Yank will never be able to achieve. The search that Yank is on leads him all the way to the depths of being a monkey in a cage in the last scene.

O’Neill describes society in this play in a discerning light. He requests that the reader view the problems of class in society. His depictions of men regressing to an animalistic state, the truth about class in society, and man’s search for belonging express his beliefs that the Industrial Revolution was a setback for American society in the sense that it caused a broad gap between the haves and have not’s. O’Neill utilizes the interaction of Mildred and Yank to show how people from different classes view the world contrarily, and as long as society is this way, the lower classes will struggle to advance or belong outside of his or her level in society.
Works Cited