The Hairy Ape

According to O’Neill, the Industrial Revolution widened the gap between social classes. He seems to believe that the change did not create more wealth for everyone as a whole, but rather took money from some to give to others. This “exchange” created a very distinctive upper class, and a large lower class. The change did not just cause monetary distinctions between the classes though; these distinct new classes began to view and treat each other differently as well.

*The Hairy Ape* focuses on Yank, a lower class “fireman” on a Transatlantic Ocean Liner. Yank is the stereotypical lower class individual; he is strong from manual labor, poorly educated (as can be seen through his broken speech), suffers from aggressive substance abuse (alcohol), and has poor control over his emotions, often flying into fits of rage and violence. O’Neill would not blame him for any of his faults though, these are simply the result of his environment, something which Yank had no control over. Yank is clearly an example of the lower class, fitting in well with his other shipmates. The lower class as a whole had been trained to mock self improvement, chanting “Drink, don’t think!” (O’Neill, Chapter 1) when Yank says he is trying to “tink” (O’Neill, Chapter 1). However, Yank gets angry when Paddy tries to think about the past, acting exactly the same as his shipmates. Unlike the upper class, where money and class and reputation determine rank, social order is decided by violence and physical strength in this lower class. The biggest, hairiest ape is the leader, and Yank happens to be just that ape. While this has always been true to an extent, the Industrial Revolution changed things. Paddy, in a drunken stupor, laments this change, longing for the days of old when manual laborers were treated
well and the work was happy and in the open air. O'Neill lays out the setting in the beginning of the story, describing Yank's work environment as “cramped space in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel.” (O'Neill, Intro) Unlike the workers of the past, who worked in the open air on the top deck of the ship, workers of this era work in the blackened depths of the ship, breathing in coal-soaked air and rarely seeing sunlight.

In stark contrast to this poverty is the upper class, represented briefly by Mildred and her Aunt, who are both family members of the owners of the biggest steel producer in the world. She is well educated, literate, and nicely dressed like the rest of her class, but she is also entitled, disrespectful, and wasteful (willing to ruin her white dress by going down to the coal room, saying, “I have fifty dresses like this. I will throw this one into the sea when I come back.”) (O'Neill, chapter 2). This class even has different standards for how families should treat one another. Mildred and her aunt go back and forth, constantly insulting one another, until Mildred eventually slaps her aunt in the face and leaves. Had Yank slapped one of his parents or aunts, if he had any, he likely would've been beaten to within an inch of his life. This upper class lives in a dream world, hardly aware of the struggles of the lower class. When Yank walks around Fifth Avenue in his work clothes, the people barely even notice him. It seems that the divide between the classes is so wide that the upper class cannot even see the lower class at times. While the money from the Revolution definitely improved their lifestyle, it came at a cost. The upper class largely lost the ability to communicate and get along with each other, as well as
with the other classes. Money hardened them, stealing their ability to make real, lasting relationships.

O’Neill believed that the Industrial Revolution redefined the American class system making things dramatically better for a few and equally worse for a lot. On top of this, he believed that change to be permanent, or at least very difficult to overcome. Mildred sought, at least on some level, to understand the lower class, but when she saw Yank working in the coal room, she almost passes out and calls him an ape, unable to even be in the same room as the lower class. Yank, on the other hand, is tired of being overlooked. He goes to Fifth Avenue and tries to just get the upper class people to notice him, but is unable. He then tries to join a club to overthrow this upper class, but is kicked out (literally). He then goes to the zoo and befriends an ape, saying that they are the same. He opens the cage to shake the ape’s hand and he is crushed by the beast and thrown into its cage. This scene serves as the ultimate metaphor for Yank’s situation in the world. While he wants to change classes, he never will be able to; he is trapped in the cage of his social class.

Overall, O’Neill was obviously not a big fan of the Industrial Revolution. He believes that it helped to advance American as a whole, but not individually. Most people fell into lower classes, suffering worse working and living conditions. Those who slipped into the upper class suffered as well losing the ability to create real and meaningful relationships.