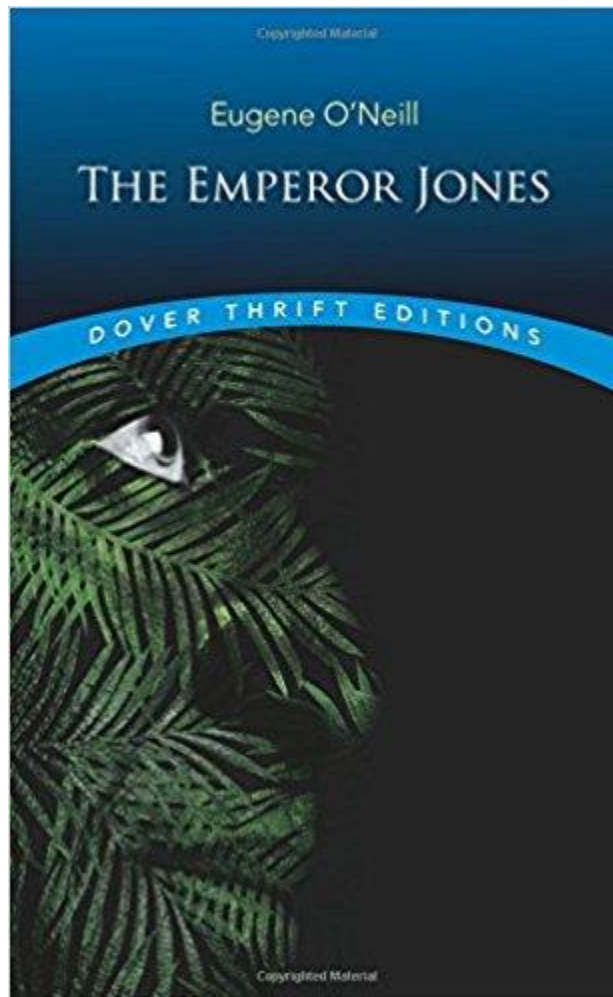


A Psychological Approach to Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*

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Abstract

Eugene O'Neill is widely considered the most influential of American playwrights. He is called the "founder of modern drama in the United States", and holds the title of the first American playwright to earn a Nobel Prize in literature. (O' Neill 794) His play, *The Emperor Jones*, is credited as being one that provided "... several *firsts* in American theatre history: the

Provincetown Players' first major hit, the first major role for an African American actor on the *legitimate* Broadway stage (in houses where the audience was still racially segregated), and the play that secured O'Neill's place as a writer for the high-art, experimental theatre worthy of international attention." (Steen 343) Basically, *The Emperor Jones* made Eugene O'Neill. This paper attempts to research the psychological elements in the play.

Keywords: Experimental theatre, *The Emperor Jones*, Psychological study, Hallucinations, Interior Monologue

A Psychological Study of Brutus Jones's Mind

The play is a psychological study of Brutus Jones's mind, his fears, visions and dream. "Tom-tom is part and parcel of the psychological action; at first it is the call to war; then it merges into the Emperor Jones' vision of the slaves working to its beat; finally, it becomes its own throbbing, feverish temples, all the while it's our heart beating more and more rapidly as we follow his fate." Lastly the Tom-tom is a symbol of man's last heart-beat, as well as his death. The consciousness of Jones has been presented through the cinematographic technique of the flashback, fusing the past and present. Here symbol and psychology merge and the whole play is a long drama. Emperor Jones represents the breakdown of a Negroid person mentally under the stress of fear and fatigue.

Brutus Jones was a bold and unscrupulous exploiter who could enter the forest alone, but gradually he became an object figure, as he was scared by the hallucinations. The hallucinations that appear to Brutus Jones during his wild flight in the forest, are at first personal memories, and then they become racial memories as he regresses deeper and deeper into his primitive past under the pressure of fear. The personal memories are of Jeff, the Pullman car porter, whom he killed in a crap game, the chain-gang from which he escaped, and the 'little formless fears'. The racial memories are of a southern slave auction in which he is for sale, a slave ship in which the Negroes are being brought from Africa, and finally of a Congo witch-doctor who demands Jones' sacrifice.

In an agitated state of mind he shoots at of the visions, and ultimately is killed by the silver bullets fired at him. The play is written in the tradition of the expressionistic plays, a mental study of the hero. “The edge of the great forests, his extensive symbolization of the glory and the horror of his freedom, of both its terrifying patience and his sensuous isolation.”

The fight is real for him, “and the imitated values of the white man are only temporary defences against the unbearable situation, seen as reprisals against human freedom. Unknown forms of fears and terror emerge from the forest shade, and the power of blackness haunts him, injuring his pride and crippling his will. He descends through successive levels of the super-ego and personal unconscious until he descends into the darkling maelstrom of his racial unconscious with an atavistic directness.”

Expressionistic Scenes

Scenes II to VII which take place at night in the forest are expressionistic. But in these fantasy scenes in the moment is straight forward. O’Neill writes with an eye on the clock, and the passing spiritual decay and regression of Jones, and the end of each scene is marked by Jones firing a bullet. Indeed, there are as many bullets in his revolver as there are scenes, and in each scene some vision from his ‘personal unconscious, his collective unconscious is presented, and the vision disappears as soon as a bullet is fired. Jones spiritual regression goes on, side by side with his divesting himself, one by one, of the trappings of emperor-hood and the thin veneer of his primordial self; physically also he has achieved total identity with his race.

The expressionist seeks to solve the problem by representing the soul of the man in the form of external symbol. He produces figures moving obscurely on a darkened stage to personify good or bad motives. He gives words to seen voices to express the secret thoughts of the man’s mind. O’Neill has also used symbols in *The Emperor Jones*. For example, Brutus Jones symbolizes the irrational and Brutish in every man, the silver bullet is the symbol of his bride, and it also stands for worldly wealth, greed for money.

Symbols and Characters

The dark and dense forest symbolizes the inner darkness and confusion of Jones; his escape through the forest is symbolic of his escape from his own self, from the memories of his criminal past; his divesting himself one by one of the trappings of emperor-hood is symbolic of his regression to his racial past, to an uncivilized negro.

In an expressionistic play, the number of characters is cut down to the minimum. The attention is focused on the central figure and the other characters neither are nor do they individualize. They serve merely as a background to throw into sharp relief the central figure. In *The Emperor Jones* the attention is focused throughout on Brutus Jones, and the other characters are, merely background figures.

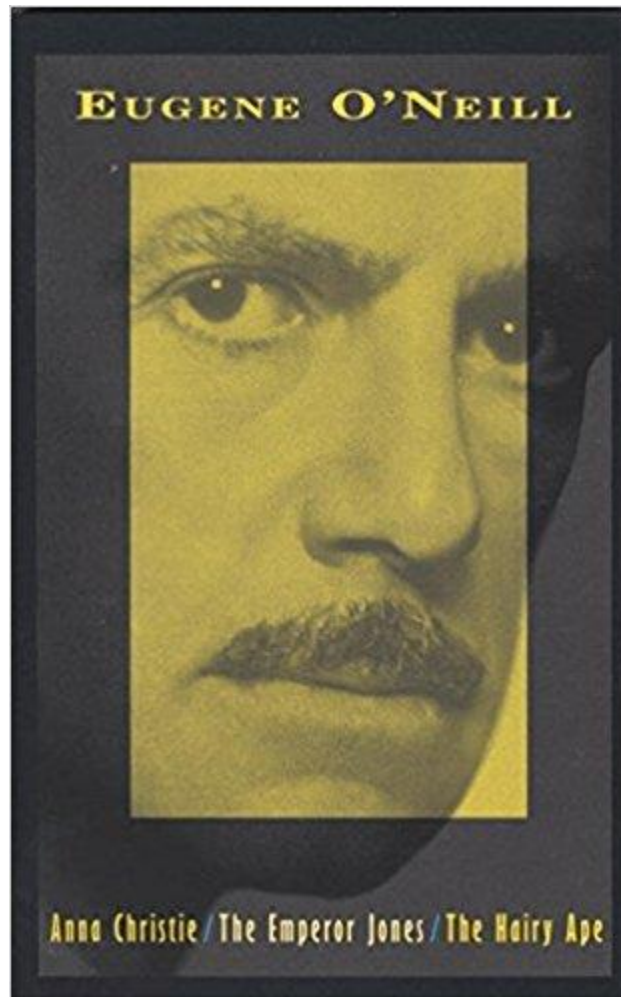
Thus Smithers serves galley-slaves, the group of convicts led by the prison guard, or nearly visions from his past intended to externalize the psychological terror of the Emperor and his disintegration and regression under the impact of fear, they have no life and reality; they are merely illusions of a fevered and agitated mind.

Not Focused on Individuals

The expressionists are not concerned with individuals at all. They write of capitalism, industrialism and so forth, but they make no attempt to personify any one of these in a realistic guise. They have no quarrels with individuals but only with systems. In this respect, the leftists believe that *The Emperor Jones* is an expressionistic play. A. Abramov asserts, "Anna Christie is not a prostitute but a human being, a personality used as a symbol of society's destruction of women. *The Emperor Jones* is the tragedy of an outcast whom the capitalistic civilization has excluded from society.

Edwin Engel in his book, *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* has supported this view. He says, "it's in Jones himself that we are to observe sharp criticism of the civilization of modern white man, for Jones is Negroid only in physical appearance and in speech. He is rather the American 'success to read' in black face." During the ten years in which he has served as

Pullman car porter he had listened to the white quality and adapted their ways. What he learned in those years were the white man's cynicism, shrewdness, efficiency and philosophy of self-interest.



Pattern of the Dialogue

Not only is the structure of the plot in an expressionistic drama loose, but also the pattern of the dialogue is different. The substitute of symbolic types for individual human beings has caused a change in dialogue. The expressionist does not attempt realistic conversation. In an expressionistic play dialogue is used to reveal the free-speech level and disjointed inner thoughts of the character.

In *The Emperor Jones* O' Neill has used realistic dialogue only in the first and the last scenes, and in the remaining six scenes, instead of realistic dialogue the dependence is on monologue, and what happens inside the mind of Jones; it is because of the use of this expressionistic technique of di-mono drama, the action of this play occurs within the agitated mind of the single character.

In order to render the inner terrors of the chief protagonist, O Neill has made extensive use of interior monologue. There is conventional dialogue only in the first and last scenes of the play. The remaining scenes II to VII which take place at the night in of long soliloquy. It's through this extended use of interior monologue that the dramatist has given us a peep into the anguish of the terror-stricken soul of Jones.

He prays to God for his mercy and protection, and his criminal past confronts him in the form of visions from his "personal subconscious and later he is made to realize his oneness with the natives whom he had tyrannized, through racial memories which lurk still deeper down in his subconscious. Jones' migration and regression, and its highly effective on the stage. Here is mega soul is in turmoil and the audiences are fully involved in this turmoil."

Pessimistic Nature, Formless and Chaotic

The tone of most of the expressionistic plays is pessimistic and they end on the note of tragedy. The end of *The Hairy Ape* is tragic, so is of *The Emperor Jones* the final scene is important for the portrayal of Jones as a tragic hero who dies as he lived, with a kind of grandeur, false though it was.

An expressionistic play is usually formless and chaotic, the action moves backward and forward in time in keeping with the thought processes of the chief protagonists. However, O Neill has skillfully avoided this pitfall of the expressionistic play. Indeed realism is the basis of O Neill's expressionism. Scene I gives us details of the past of Jones, essential for an understanding of his present. The last scene, again a piece of realistic dialogue, gives an account of his death, and the different reaction of smithers and the natives, is explained to us through

Lem that the natives had been casting spells all the night, and that they had also molded silver bullets.

The tom-tom continues to beat at one place though it seemed to Jones that it was coming nearer and nearer to him. The internal and external actions have been fully synchronized and the formlessness and chaos of the usual expressionistic play has been skillfully avoided.

To Conclude

Hence *The Emperor Jones* is the greatest of American expressionistic plays. The story of the flamboyant Negro, enacted to the frenzy of the tom-tom, the sustained monologue and the rapidly shifting setting framed into one single desperate action, were all the unique features that made the play an instant success.

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