

Expressionism, Symbolism and psychoanalysis of “Self” in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*: A Study



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ABSTRACT:

The Emperor Jones is one of the best creations of Eugene O’Neill, the first U.S. playwright who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936. The story of the play which is the mixture of realism, expressionism and symbolism, depicts the action that take place in the mind of Brutus Jones, the Negro protagonist whose hallucinations are projected. In Jones one may observe sharp criticism of the civilization of the modern white man, for Jones Negroid only in physical appearance and in speech. He is rather the American success story in black face. There is some thing decidedly distinctive about his face- an underlying strength of will, a hardy self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect. His eyes are alive with a keen

cunning intelligence. In manner he is strewed, suspicious, and evasive. His rise to wealth and power from stowaway to Emperor in two years had been achieved by virtue of his possession of none of the characteristics commonly associated with the Negro. During the ten years in which he had served as Pullman car porter he had listened to the white quality and adopted their ways what he learned in those years was the white man’s cynicism, shrewdness, efficiency, selfishness, cupidity and philosophy of self- interest. All his actions are motivated by agreed for pelf and money. But Jones never does quite understand his true “self.”At the outset the dark side of Jones’ character is brought into the greater prominence. He was a criminal condemned to life imprisonment for the murder of a person named Jeff. But he could not be detained behind the bars for a long



time. He escaped from the jail and eventually reached the West Indies. There he became the ruler of an empire in an island within two years by virtue of his intelligence, shrewdness, efficiency and self-confidence. *The Emperor Jones* emphasizes in new style and manner to achieve a philosophic view of man. The colourful native life, the beating of drum, the symbolic reversion back to jungle savagery in the one play and the engine-rhythms, the mask-like dream effects, the ballet rhythms of the other are all the techniques to soft our attention from the crude facts of life to the conception of man's cosmic situation. O'Neill enriched his art by an understanding of the new psychology, not simple Freudianism, but the enlarged awareness of all conscious and sub-conscious realities. Giving his own views on expressionism O'Neill once remarks, "As I understand it, expressionism tries to minimize everything on the stage that stands between the author and the audience. It strives to get the author talking directly to the audience. The real contribution of the expressionist has been in the dynamic qualities of his plays. They express something in modern life better than did the old plays." O'Neill turns his play successfully towards expressionism.

Keywords:

Expressionism; Symbolism; cynicism, Psycho-analysis; self

Introduction: Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* is an Expressionistic play. It is the first play in which O'Neill used Expressionistic technique to express the psychological terrors and obsessions of Brutus Jones, the protagonist. The term "Expressionism" refers to a movement in Germany in the 20th century (1905) with the projection of the highly personal vision of the world. Expressionism is a dramatic technique which enables a dramatist to depict the 'inner

reality', the soul or psyche of his personages, especially the protagonist- *Brutus Jones*. The emphasis shifts from the external activities to the inner reality. The action moves backward and forward freely in space and time in harmony with the thought processes of the character concerned. There is a deeper and deeper probing of the sub-conscious, action is increasingly internalized, and what is goes on within the soul becomes more important than the external actions. Expressionistic method is used when the dramatist aims at a probe into the sub-conscious, even the unconscious. Theatrically "Expressionism" was a reaction against "Realism" and aimed to show inner psychological realities. It is the objectification of the dark depths of the human psyche. The Expressionistic dramatists seek to solve the problem by representing the soul of man in the form of external symbols. They give words to unseen voices to express the secret thoughts of a man's mind or to reveal the workings of his soul. While O'Neill's exploration of Expressionistic technique can probably be attributed to several factors, one of the most important is certainly that it permitted him to explore inner conflicts with greater flexibility and clarity. Issac Goldberg remarks, "O'Neill has yielded to neither the formlessness nor the incoherence of the more extreme expressionists; even when his contact with external reality seems least firm, he yet maintains his grip upon the roots of things." O'Neill used psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Jung in his plays. Psychoanalysis, a body of ideas and a school of thought that aimed at revealing what lies in the unconscious to understand human behavior was an attempt to address the anxiety, the abnormality, the fear of persecution and the fragmentation of "self". He gives words to unseen voices to express the secret thoughts of Jones' mind. The action is focused on the protagonist- Brutus Jones, and the other characters are not individualized. They serve



merely as a background to throw into sharp relief the central character. Jones is not merely an individual Negro; he becomes a study of the basic impulses and attitudes common both to the blacks and whites.

Methodology: The work is mainly based on secondary source of information, such as published documents, books, review, autobiography, journals, critiques etc. The primary text of my paper is O’Neill, Eugene. *The Emperor Jones*. Online, Copyright © 1999-2012 www.eoneill.com. My methodology in this paper is partly structuralist and partly post-structuralist, as I approach narratives first to construct and classify and then deconstruct them. In the process, I do not simply define the concept but also discuss how it deviates from other forms of narrative. The major purpose of my paper is description of the state of affairs as it exists from the play “*The Emperor Jones*” written by Eugene O’Neill. Here O’Neill uses the disconnected, distorted and fantastic form of thoughts in order to show the psychological effects of events on the soul of the protagonist- Brutus Jones. My approach is primarily in the manner in which the play reflects symbolic expressionism and psychoanalysis of “Self” relating man to the mysterious forces.

Formulating hypothesis: Before I proceed any further, I’d like to hypothesize, certainly not with the intention of essentialising, four different possibilities with regard to Expressionism and psychoanalysis of “Self” in Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*. First, O’Neill used Expressionism technique in an efficient manner. Second, O’Neil used expressionistic technique in his play *The Emperor Jones* to explore inner conflicts with greater flexibility and clarity. Third, he profusely employed symbols romantically primitive for better understanding of events.. Fourth, the story of

Brutus Jones is not merely the success story of a Negro, rather the American success story in black face. Last but not least, instead of revealing the grandeur of human soul, Emperor Jones shows that man is essentially a beast and we find that his progress in civilization has made him a bundle of nerves.

Body of the article: Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* is a sordid, depressing or pessimistic tragedy. Before O’Neill, American drama aimed intentionally at amusement and diversion, and audiences were accustomed to leave the theatre delighted with themselves. A note of optimism was usually dominant in the plays then. O’Neill, on the contrary, in his plays, focused on the soul’s torment and purgation. He felt free to find his “persons” limping at the edges of society and knew accurately that the human soul was not to be weighed in terms of class, creed, race, sex, colour or age. He was greatly influenced by the epic drama of ancient Greece and the conception of destiny and retribution, and had wide knowledge in historical sense of drama. He introduced something beyond the scope of the representational realism in his plays. He introduced Expressionism and Psychoanalysis of “Self.” Because he had seen life as something not to be neatly arranged in a study, but as terrifying, magnificent and often quite horrible, a thing akin to a tornado, an earthquake or a devastating fire, and has rendered that life in his plays. He employed symbols, romantically primitive and element of psychoanalysis to the theatre. O’Neill made audiences to share his willingness to rebel against traditional shibboleths and at the same time to handle insolently with the spiritual and intellectual comforts audiences crazily looked ahead. Indeed he opened up new paths from the theatre of his time. In an interview O’Neill said- “The point is that life is itself is nothing. It is the dream that keeps



us fighting, willing & living.” He believed with the Greeks that tragedy always brought exaltation. Man’s ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ is the essence of his tragedy. In The Emperor Jones O’Neill devoted himself to the analysis of victorious evil, setting forth the failures, the disillusion, and the ineffectiveness of an ambitious islander Jones. We find Jones’ ambition intensified by the irony of the futility of the hero’s attempts to escape that creates in us a sense of futility and no feeling of inscrutable forces, as the causes are known.

The play is a magnificent presentation of a feeling that something unpleasant is about to happen. The story is of a Pullman Porter who was arrested for killing another Negro in a crab-game. He was arrested and condemned to life imprisonment. But he could not be detained behind the bars for a long time. He escaped from the jail and eventually reached the West Indies where, applying the tricks of the white man, he soon became the ruler of an empire. Within two years by virtue of his intelligence, shrewdness, efficiency and self-confidence he made himself emperor of the superstitious natives. Fortune was also in favour of him. Once Lem, a native chief, fired at his breast from point blank range. But it was not a fate that he should die. The incident rather offered him an opportunity to spread the rumour that he had a charmed life and that only a silver bullet might be fatal: “Lead bullet no kill him.” In order to make his point stronger and more credible he did have a silver bullet moulded for himself; he began to carry the bullet in his revolver as if to use it during the time of necessary- “when time comes”. He also added with great confidence: “Silver bullet bring me luck anyway. I kin outguess, outrun, outfight, and outplay de whole lot o’ dem all over de board any time o’ de day er night.” The ignorant and superstitious natives could not but believe him. The emperorship was not an emblem of

glamour to him but a means of extorting money from the natives as much as possible. He cared less for man but much for money: “dat’s only to turn de heads o’ de low-flung, bush niggers dat’s here. Day wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to ‘em, an’ I gits de money.” Life has no other meaning to him except earning more and more money and wealth. He says to Smithers, “You didn’t s’ pose I was holding down this Emperor job for de glory m it, did you? Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to ‘em, an’ I gifts de money.” He earned huge amount of wealth by exploiting the natives, taxing them heavily and by resorting to all sort of unfair means. He was lifted up into vast revenue. He took life as an adventure. This worshipper of Mammon took no rest till he made a plan of escape in case of revolt against him. His scheme was to runaway through the great forest to the sea-coast and finally to Martinique where he would lead a comfortable life. But destiny thought different. A great crisis came soon in his life when the natives revolted against him and chased him in the great forest. Smelling the revolt by the native, Jones ran through the forest. Fully prepared for an uprising of the people of the land he has tyrannized, he escaped to the topical forest as he heard the sound of drum beating Tom-tom in the distance and this indicated that the revolt was gathering strength. The natives were whipping up their courage to the fighting point by calling on the local gods and demons of the forest. “*The tom-tom seems on the very spot, so loud and continuously vibrating are its beats.*” The beating of the Tom-tom at a distance, gradually increasing in intensity and rapidity of movement, has been effectively, so as to convince the world of its reality and it coincides with the increasing terrors of the protagonist. Jones realized that his reign was over and started to make his escape to the coast where a French gunboat was anchored. But under the



dim moonlight forest he could no recognized the familiar landmarks and lost his way in the forest; even he could not find the food he had buried there. He would get nothing to eat. The darkness of the forest frightened him. There was no hope of light and grace in this dark world but only the signs of fears. He became unnerved. In the deep and dark forest he saw a series of terrifying visions which had recapitulated not only the main events of his life but also the primitive history of his race. Instead of gaining strength Jones lost psychologically. Down on all fours in the forest, he compares himself to an animal and writes his own mock-epitaph. His dress was ragged and torn, and his soul was anguished and tortured. "My All his plans went in vain". Then he resolved to fight and died in harness. His end came when he was killed by the silver bullet shut at him by rebellious natives. We see a psychological dilemma at the time of his flight into the jungle. Dr. Raghavacharyulu writes, "The edge of the Great Forest is an extensive symbolization of both the glory and horror of his freedom, of both his terrifying patience and his sensuous isolation. The flight in from himself, and the imitated values of the white man are only a temporary defense against the unbearable reprisals of human freedom. Unknown forms of fear and terror emerge from the forest shades, and the power of blackness haunts him, injuring his pride and crippling his will." He tries to suppress his weakness, but his sub-consciousness mind does not let him have any peace.

As Jones moves in the forest at night to escape from the natives, fear takes over him and he disintegrates owing to the constant beating of "tom-tom" and anxiety ridden hallucinations, and sees his victims one after another. He sees a series of strange visions one after another. Jones first sees the "Little Formless Fears" creep out from the forest, and he fires at them. As they vanished, he

plunges boldly in to the forest. In the great forest he sees Jeff, the Negro he had killed for cheating at dice. He fires his second bullet; the vision disappears. Then he sees his fellow prisoners and the prison-guard he killed. The guard whips him. He tries to kill him with his shovel. But there is no shovel in his hand. Terrified Jones fires and the vision disappears. Jones finds himself in a slave-market of the mid-nineteenth century. As he is about to be auctioned, he fires, and the vision disappears. Again he is in a slave-ship, working with other slaves. He fires, and the vision disappears. Finally he is in Congo, where he sees a crocodile-god. He has to fires his silver bullet to kill the crocodile, for it is all he has left. But the irony is that it is also a vision, and disappears. The first two visions of Jeff and of the Prison-Guard proceed from his personal unconsciousness, but the later hallucinations proceed from his racial memory. For Jones had never actually undergone the traumatic experience of being auctioned as a slave, nor had he a direct knowledge of a Congo Witch-Doctor. Yet under the influence of fear "his racial unconscious projects frightening visions and completely subjugates his conscious mind." The awkward visions that rise before his eyes are such as fear beholds and truer to genuine reality than would be a blank stage. Jones has confused whether the visions are real or purely hallucinatory. They had a dull appearance without any colour and vitality. All these visions highlight Jones' torture and anguished soul laid bare before the readers. The shadow referred to the shadow of fear or the anxiety death which led to frustration. These shapeless fears are externalizations of Jones' bewilderment, confusion, agitation, obsession, inner terror and horror. These are the cleaver pieces of psychoanalysis of the "self" of Brutus Jones. Ultimately his fear turns into great panic and the exhausted and lost Jones meets his final end i.e. "Death". Jones, wandering all night through the jungle



in hopes of escaping the vengeance of his rebellious subject, is an image of an abstract consciousness agonizing in fear of death and passing through several stages of disintegration. The final scene is very tragic and gruesome. Jones goes down to defeat and death, but he never asks to be forgiven like true tragic hero. The tragedy ends with the tragic death of Brutus Jones-“We cotech him. Him dead.” It was his pride and the excessive over confidence that made his decline and death. We see an interesting complexity in the manner of Jones’ destruction. The beating of the tom-tom is used as the most effective device in the play to objectify the inner terror of Jones. According to Chaman Ahuja the beating of the tom-tom is “at first a call to war, it gradually becomes a presentiment of a brooding fate, i.e. a call to death; next, it merges with Emperor Jones’ visions of the slaves working to its beat; and later still, it becomes successively the voice of his inner guilt and the throbbing, of its temples. What is more, all the while it is our own heart, beating more rapidly as we follow it. The unseen noise tom-tom that projects Jones’ rising panic is part of the psychological action; but since that is the dramatic action as well, we may say that through the tom-tom the symbolic and the dramatic actions are synthesized. What is more, by including panic in the audience, it helps them to share the emotions of the terrified Jones-a wonderful feat in participation mystique. ” The beating of tom-tom is seen to be the instrument of fate for determining the doom of the individual concerned.

Eugene O’Neill is a great social critic as well as a great tragic artist whose tragedies soothe, console and strength. They never depress and dishearten the audiences. They are so much apotheosis of the human spirit as, the great tragedies of Shakespeare or of the ancient Greeks. The Emperor Jones is masterly study in fear. Here we have an obsession which

does not lead it to melodrama, and an entirely successful use of the Expressionistic method, through which the individual and racial memories of Brutus Jones are objectified. It is a play of profound disillusionment, but not of total blindness. There is something of the purge of pure tragedy to the play. But in the killing of Brutus Jones with a silver bullet, there is hint of pride still unconquered. As the malicious white man Smithers leaves over Jones’ corpse, he exclaims- “Silver bullets! Gawd blimey, but yer died in the ‘eighth o’ style any’ow!” Brutus Jones would have been proud to know that he had been killed with silver bullet- a final triumph for his quick wit and superiority. Issac Goldberg remarks, “The Emperor, not to be slain except by a silver bullet, is killed by just such a bullet moulded by his credulous vassals.” Thus the supernatural beliefs have a psychological effect.

Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones follows Expressionistic technique and makes use of symbols, metaphors, fables and allegories as the ordinary language are not enough to reveal what is goes on within the mind. O’Neill has used a set of symbols through which the inner anguish, terror, decay and disintegration of Brutus Jones have been externalized. Brutus Jones himself is a dual symbol. First, he is a symbol of a Negro who clamours for freedom; he is a slave who seeks to release from the burden of a white man. Secondly, he is every man’s soul who aspires of self- understanding. His journey through the forest is symbolic of soul’s quest towards self-realization and self-understanding. He is also a symbol of man’s vain boast of power. Besides Jones, there is symbol of the silver bullet, the Great Forest, the tom-tom, and the Crocodile god etc. The silver bullet is the symbol of the light that will provide salvation to “soul.” The silver bullet is the symbol of the superstition or charm by which Jones made the native



believe that he could be killed only by a silver bullet. The silver bullet is also the symbol of the white man's mask he wore. The great forest symbolizes his patience and sensuous isolation. Dim moonlight symbolizes hollowness and upcoming danger. The flight of Jones through the forest is not from the native, but from himself. The crocodile stands for the evil of the "self." The sound of beating the drum "tom-tom" symbolizes the inescapable presence of the primitive. Drum beating means civil war or a war between the emperor and the natives. The drum beating is the direct revolt against the authority of Jones. The insistent beat of "tom-tom" creates a sense of helplessness in the mind of Jones. His wail reached the highest pitch of sorrow and desolation. He had then achieved complete identity with his race who was robbed of life's vital needs. His suffering, he felt, was the suffering of his race. There was dawn outside, but the silver bullet, shut at him by the rebellion natives, enabled panicky Jones to experiment the dusk of his life. His life is isolated and incomplete like a single piece of bone from the entire human body. The drum beating is as if a death-knell to Jones. Now his mental control has "failed" and his subconscious mind is betraying him. The horror of the sound of "tom-tom" does not leave him for a moment. He is in an advanced stage of delirium brought about by his sense of guilty. The sound of "tom-tom" closes when Jones is killed with a silver bullet. The drum beating sound "Tom-tom" is a part and parcel of the psychological action of the play; at first it is the call to civil war; then, it merges into Jones's vision of the slaves working to its beat; finally it becomes his own throbbing, feverish temples, and all the while it is our heart beating more rapidly as we follow his fate. 'Here is a soul in turmoil and the audiences are fully involved in his turmoil.'

The progress of Jones is progress in self-understanding. It is the stripping off the mask of self layer by layer, just as bit by bit his emperor's uniform is ripped and finally he confronts his destiny in nakedness. Jones is a symbol of man's vain boast of wealth and power: "Bloody liar! But tell me what's up. There's somethin' funny goin' on. I smelled it in the air first thing I got up this mornin'. You blacks are up to some devilment. This palace of 'is is like a bleedin' tomb. Where's all the ands?" CP (1913-1920) TEJ, Sc i, P.1032 He is not a Negro but a human representative with all the weaknesses and strength of a man. Symbol and psychology merge well in his character. The aim of O'Neill is to express the subjective emotional experiences of Jones. He tries to show what happen to the soul of Jones. Following the line of psychoanalysis propagated by Freud and Jung his task is the exploration of the psyche of Jones. The play is a study of the psychology of Jones who is hunted by his past crime and the memories of racial consciousness. Heredity and environment are the forces that trap the individual in his past quest of happiness and integrity. However, one tries to live out one's past, or transcend environmental forces, it is impossible to obliterate primitive fears and overcome the racial biases. Mary Thoms David points out, "the terror of the jungle reduce the proud Jones to a cringing, crawling African Savage before his end." Till the death of Jones the audiences are carried away on a wave of expressionism. This helps the audience to understand better the character and mind of Brutus Jones.

Conclusion: Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones is a tragedy of psychology of Brutus Jones who is hunted by his past crimes and the memory of racial consciousness. Expressionistic technique has been used for the externalization of the fears and terrors of Brutus Jones. The Psychology



of fear and its disintegrating effects has been effectively presented in the character of Brutus Jones. Emperor Jones is the victim of the personifications of his lonely fears in the forest. He is less the symbol of Negro than he is symbol of man's ignorance and fear, lightly covered by a coating of so called culture or intellectuality. Jones represents the breakdown of a Negroid mentality under the stress of fear and fatigue. Jones helplessly escapes through the forest not from the natives at all, but from himself. The play is a story of a man's escape from the civilized success to primitive terror which lies deep in him. Psychologically speaking the theme of the play is the destruction of an individual by two conflicting levels of consciousness- the id and the super ego. The play uses disjointed inner thoughts of Jones like the use of the stream of consciousness technique. In order to render the inner terrors of Jones, O'Neill has made extensive use of interior monologue. He applies relentless psychological truth, the remorseless interplay of cause and effect in the hero's destiny. Here symbol and psychology merge; analyses have found it a remarkable study, fundamentally as true of the white man as of the black. The gradual disintegration of Jones' conscious ego, the revelation of his personal and collective unconscious and his flight from himself constitute the psychoanalysis of his "Self".

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RESUME:

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