

EMPEROR JONES AS AN EXPRESSIONIST DRAMA

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The Emperor Jones (written in 1920 and a great theatrical success) is about an American Negro, a Pullman porter who escapes to an island in the West Indies 'not self-determined by White Marines'. In two years, Jones makes himself 'Emperor' of the place. Luck has played a part and he has been quick to take advantage of it. A native tried to shoot Jones at point-blank range once, but the gun missed fire; thereupon Jones announced that he was protected by a charm and that only silver bullets could harm him. When the play begins, he has been Emperor long enough to amass a fortune by imposing heavy taxes on the islanders and carrying on all sorts of large-scale graft. Rebellion is brewing. The islanders are whipping up their courage to the fighting point by calling on the local gods and demons of the forest. From the deep of the jungle, the steady beat of a big drum sounded by them is heard, increasing its tempo towards the end of the play and showing the rebels' presence dreaded by the Emperor. It is the equivalent of the heart-beat which assumes a higher and higher pitch; while coming closer it denotes the premonition of approaching punishment and the climactic recoil of internal guilt of the black hero; he wanders and falters in the jungle, present throughout the play with its primeval terror and blackness.

The play consists of a total of eight scenes arranged in hierarchical succession. The first and the last scenes are realistic in the manner of O'Neill's early plays. The six middle scenes are 'expressionistic', consisting of monologues of Jones, interspersed with descriptions of the Great Forest which forms the setting of the play and which is also an overseeing character in it. It influences both character and action like Hardy's Egdon Heath in The Return of the Native. The scenes can be briefly outlined as follows:

Scene (i) is laid in the Palace of Emperor Jones. It is afternoon. Realistic stage-dialogue between Smithers, a white cockney trader and Emperor Jones. We learn of Jones's past and his future plans. Character contrast has been effectively used to throw light on the central figure. The beating of the tom-tom is heard at the close of the scene and it continues upto the very end of the play. Jones abandons his palace and runs as he knows that his subjects are in revolt.

In Scene (ii), it is Nightfall: On the edge of the forest. Jones cannot find the food he has buried there. The 'Little Formless Fears' creep out from the forest, and he fires at them. As they vanish, he 'plunges boldly into the forest'.

Scenes (iii) to (vii) are laid in the Great Forest. From Scene (iii) to (vii), O'Neill presents to us different hours of the night. Jones sees in his vision, Jeff, the Negro he has killed for cheating at dice. He fires his second bullet; the vision disappears. In Scene (iv), in a vision again, he sees Negro prisoners in whose company he has worked and their guard whom he killed. The guard whips him. He tries to kill him with his shovel. But there is no shovel in his hand. Terrified, he fires, and the vision disappears.

In Scene (v), he finds himself in a slave-market of the mid-nineteenth century. As he is about to be auctioned, he fires and the vision disappears.

In Scene (vi), he is on a slave-ship, working with other slaves. He fires and the vision disappears.

In Scene (vii), he is in Congo, where he sees a sacrificial altar, a witch-doctor, a crocodile-god. He has to fire his silver bullet, the only one remaining with him, to kill the monstrous crocodile-god coming towards him. The vision disappears.

In Scene (viii), we see the dawn of day. It is the edge of the Great Forest. Realistic stage-dialogue between Lem, a tribal chieftain and Smithers, the cockney trader. Jones is dead, getting killed by a silver bullet made by his subjects out of 'money'.

The play has a classical simplicity, an austerity. The action begins on the afternoon of the most crucial day in the life of the protagonist. We learn of Jones's past through the dialogue between Jones and the cockney Smithers. Re-enactment, which is considered to be a classical device, has also been used with great effect. Jones's murders, committed in the past, are presented on the stage as his hallucinations. The action begins in the afternoon and ends by the dawn of the next day. The scene of action is at first, the Palace of Jones and then the Great Forest, at a short distance from there. There is only one single action; and the movement is swift and straight-forward without any sub-plots, episodes, and digressions. By the end of the play, the tragic hero Jones has shed his pride and arrogance and attained a sort of self-knowledge of his inescapable racial origin. However, he dies in false dignity, killed by a silver bullet. As the cockney trader Smithers puts it: "Silver bullets! Gawd blimey, but yer died in the 'eighth o'style, any'ow!" (1061).

The Emperor Jones is the first play having a Negro for a hero. This shows the revival of interest in the primitive, consequent upon the rise of romanticism, both in England and America. It is the first play in which a Negro actor, Charles Gilpin, played the role of the Black character, Brutus Jones. In the words of Travis Bogard :

What Beyond the Horizon had suggested that an ordinary American could become - ... a tragic figure ... was abundantly demonstrated in the account of the rise and fall of Brutus Jones. (Contour in time 134)

The American theatre carne of age with this play.

Expressionism (characterised by theatricality) as a movement started in Europe (Seymour-Smith, 559) and its most important practitioner in drama was the Swedish playwright August Strindberg whom O'Neill acknowledged as his master in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (Ed. Bogard, Unknown O'Neill 427). It represents on the stage in a concrete manner what happens in the mind and soul of some character under the stress of external incidents and circumstances. It is an objectification of the dark depths of the human psyche; in order to represent this, symbols are used extensively. The Emperor Jones is one of the major American plays using this technique. It is carried to a height of excellence by O'Neill's inherited feeling for the stage, his grasp of theatrical effect and technical mastery of pace and suspense. The play opens with a dumb show: "As the curtain rises, a native Negro woman sneaks in cautiously ... she begins to glide noiselessly ... towards the doorway in the rear" (1031).

This captures the attention of the audience and creates suspense. The beating of the tom-tom at a distance, gradually increasing in intensity and rapidity of movement has been used effectively to convince the world of its reality; it coincides with the increasing terrors of the protagonist. The tom-tom also becomes a force like the Great Forest which influences both character and action. In this

play, O'Neill has also used the Negro dialect confidently and effectively. The main popularity and success of the play lies in the use of sustained monologue throughout the central scenes; this is its unique feature.

The Emperor Jones, though structurally simple and homogeneous, has the character of a complex work of art, suggestive of a number of themes and ideas. Critics and scholars have interpreted it in different ways. Some feel that the play is only about the evil of pride and arrogance and its disastrous consequence. Some see a deeper meaning that O'Neill was convinced that the real cultural roots of the Negro lay in Africa from where he had come, leaving the primeval jungle across the Atlantic, to be sold as a slave in the United States of America. Jones, though never a slave, has within himself a racial memory and his story is an enactment of the Negro story in reverse. He is introduced at the height of the power that he has grabbed for himself through unscrupulous exploitation of the ignorant natives but he regresses from a series of hallucinations to his primitive state, triggered by terror in the tropical forest. O'Neill probably makes his hero symbolic of something more universal, the primitive forces that lurk beneath the civilized human being. This view is also expressed by some regarding it as a study in atavism, that is, a gradual regression and disintegration of the central figure and his return to his primitive state. Travis Bogard feels that divorced of its theatricajife and superficial social concerns, it is theological melodrama where the dark crocodile god whose creature he rightfully is, he rejects under the Christian influence, takes vengeance on him (Contour in Time 142).

A view taken by several important critics says that the author explores the complexities of 'being' within the individual soul. They see it as a record of the shedding of masks acquired by the Negroes through their association with the Whites and their gradual attainment of self-knowledge through suffering. Jones comes down through the successive levels of the super-ego, ego, and personal unconscious, and finally goes into racial unconscious with an atavistic directness. As Carpenter puts it:

The psychological theories of Carl Jung with the quasi-religious interpretation of the psychology of the unconscious also influenced O'Neill at this time, The Emperor Jones is both a drama of physical primitivism and one of the subconscious soul of man. But the greatness of the play lies in its very lack of explicitness and in the dramatic unity and skill of its conception and realization. (89)

Let us deal more at length with the view that the progress of Jones is the progress of self-understanding. The major motivation of Eugene O'Neill in the totality of his plays is the exploration of the aspect of man's coming to terms with himself in the scheme of things which governs his life and action. In this play, however, he does not go into detailed problems of men coming to terms with their self as he does in the later plays like Strange Interlude or the finest of his plays Long Day's Journey into Night. As The Emperor Jones is an early play, we do not find the sophistication of the later plays though we can see the suggestion of these in embryonic form in this play also as critics have pointed out.

Though The Emperor Jones has speeches of self-reproach calling himself a nigger as he confronts his destiny, we cannot say that he grasps the truth of his self. He dies in the tangled jungle of his own mind, but the audience know his exact situation. The stages through which he passes on his way to a supposed self-knowledge merging into racial consciousness are identifiable with the expressionistic devices that the dramatist employs. The beating of the tom-tom,

the circular run of the former Emperor reduced to a savage running through the jungle, the demons and apparitions that torment him and his shooting them with his lead bullets, reserving the silver bullet show his struggle against going back to his native self of negrohood. His first apparition in the vision of a Negro he has killed back in the United States and other visions slide back into old race fears; he sees himself being sold in a slave market and then, most horrible of all, a Congo witch doctor tries to lure him to death in a river where a crocodile-god is bathing. The former Emperor Jones fights within himself and prays with the imposed values of the White man. At this point, the problem of human belonging becomes a propitiation of contending life-forces. And the play becomes a ritualistic drama in which the Black man pretending to a level higher than his destiny becomes a victim and a symbol of the archetypal man combining both the attributes of the victim and the demon hero (Raghavacharyulu, 28). In essence, the Emperor Jones attains self-knowledge as he confronts many fears and fights them with Baptist consolation, and succumbs to his racial consciousness devouring him. The technique of dramatic monologue has been exploited to the full in his depiction, A noteworthy fact is that his self-knowledge remains a tangle of fatal confusion in his mind killing him.

O'Neill does not go deep into the complexities of the individual coming to terms with his place and responsibility in this play as pointed out earlier. But as Lisa M. Schwerdt (ed. Martine, 72-74) points out that the play has been so structured as to move from a personal level of interaction through the social level ^far-reaching relationships of man to humanity. Leaving scenes (i) and (viii) which provide the realistic frame of the play, (ii) and (iii) show the individual as responsible for relationship with himself and a haunting vision. Part of scene (iii), together with scene (iv) show man interacting with other men. Scene (iv) leads into (v) showing social institutions and the social level on which man interacts. Scene (v) and (vi) function together in presenting a class or group and man's relationship with it on a less personal level. The impersonality of scene (vi) leads to the extreme of scene (vii), man's relationship with humanity. Thus, the whole structure shows how O'Neill interested himself in how man regarded himself and also how he lived in relation with others and how he behaves under social structures. The Little Formless Fears that Jones encounters are shaped and undefined and they are not externalizations of the inner frames of mind which the author gives us in mature plays like Strange Interlude and Long Day's Journey into Night. Thus the play The Emperor Jones is a blueprint for the future, a depiction of the detailed struggle in achieving self-knowledge, becoming refined and full-blown in his late plays like Strange Interlude and Long Day's Journey into Night.

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