

6. "The Emperor Jones" : impact of modern
psychology
Or
O'Neill's use of 'Personal unconscious' and 'Collective
unconscious' in the play
Or
"Jones' past determines his present"

How the Play Came to be Written

When *The Emperor Jones* was written the theories of modern psychologists like Freud, Bergson and Jung were very much in the air, and their influence on contemporary writers and their works was profound. However, as O'Neill wrote to Bassett H. Clark, he was influenced only by Jung. "As far as I can remember of all the books written by Freud, Jung, etc., I have read only four and Jung is the only one of the lot who interests me. Some of his suggestions I find extraordinarily illuminating in the light of my own experience with hidden human motives."

Impact of Jung's Theories

The "suggestion" which excited O'Neill in *The Emperor Jones* was Jung's fundamental premise—the existence and power of "the collective unconscious." The mind of a given man contains ideas from "the collective unconscious" which come to him simply by virtue of his membership in the human race as well as ideas inherited from his own specific race, tribe, and family. His mind contains, in addition, unconscious ideas and symbols arising from his unique personal situation to make up the structure of his "personal unconscious." Finally, from his personal unconscious emerges his own consciousness, his ego. By 'Collective unconscious' Jung means one's racial memories which lie buried deep in the unconscious; by 'personal unconscious' he means memories of one's own past actions, particularly memories of one's sins and evil doings, and then there is the "personal conscious" or ego of the individual.

✓ In the play O'Neill has shown how the ego or self of Emperor Jones breaks down under the impact of terror, and how his personal and racial memories crowd in upon him, cause the disintegration of his ego or personal consciousness. *It is in this way that the past of Jones determines his present, and leads to his decay and undoing.*

Disintegration and Regression of Jones

'*The Emperor Jones*', is a record of the gradual breaking down

of Jones' conscious ego and the revelation of his personal and collective unconscious. The first two visions—of Jeff and of the Prison Guard—proceed from his personal unconscious, but the later hallucinations proceed from a racial memory, for Jones had never actually undergone the traumatic experience of being auctioned as a slave, nor had he a direct knowledge of any Congo witch-doctor. Yet under the influence of fear, when his veneer of culture is not there to protect him, his racial unconscious projects frightening visions and completely subjugates his conscious mind.

The Supreme Power of the Unconscious

The sin of pride seen in all tragic heroes had a particular meaning for O'Neill and Jung. Man commits a fatal error when he relies on his conscious ego too much in order to fulfill his needs, without acknowledging the power of the unconscious. Hence, the unconscious is viewed by O'Neill as the equivalent of the Greek gods. His play seems to preach the moral that for happiness man must find the golden mean between humility and pride, reconciling the unconscious needs with the conscious ones. Self-knowledge is something that all should strive for. O'Neill's protagonists seem very much like Shakespeare's Lear "who but slenderly knew himself." They move towards self-discovery painfully, and arrive at it just before the end. Jones like Lear, is slowly stripped of all "lendings" to become "unaccommodated man." The gradual disintegration of his conscious ego, the revelation of his personal and collective unconscious and his flight from himself (the fundamental self from which his blind pride and its self-image have so long separated him, and which inevitably comes into its own) constitute the dramatic movement" (Mary T. David)

7. "The Emperor Jones" as a symbolic play

Or

Different symbols in the play and their effectiveness.

Or

"The stage settings as symbols of thought and emotions."

Or

"Dynamic synthesis of symbol and dramatic action."

Symbolism, Defined and Explained

Symbolism may be defined as the use of any part of a play—character, incident, setting, language, etc.—to suggest an idea or ideas not conveyed by the surface story. In this way, the use of symbol enables a dramatist to enclose vast concepts within little space. It

enables him to suggest the deeper reality and the profounder significance of his theme. It imparts depth and richness of texture to his plays. Even in his earliest plays, O'Neill had used symbolism. However, it is in *The Emperor Jones* and other subsequent plays that symbolism has been used with great effect and mastery. *Symbolism runs throughout the play from the beginning to the end.*

O'Neill's Use of It

In the play, the dramatist has externalised the state of mind of Brutus Jones. "In order to present the past in the present, to reveal the hidden factors of heredity and atavistic (regressive) traits, and to show man's existence on multiple levels, O'Neill made thoughts more important than deeds by minimizing the external and maximizing the internal action, by giving the scene a symbolic setting, and by making the dialogue suggestively non-realistic and the characters abstract. Through these devices the inner experience is objectified, the audience is enabled to see the inner picture of things. *Indeed, despite a lot of running around, bumping of the heads and firing of shots on the stage, our concern remains mainly with what is passing in Jones' mind.*"

The Network of Symbols

One of the most effective devices to render the soul of Jones is the creation of a sub-terranean network of symbols—a use never again equalled in subtlety by O'Neill. The name of the protagonist, Brutus Jones, prepares us to see the brute in *Everyman* (Jones). The action starts in the afternoon which signifies confidence, continues at night which is the symbol of terror, retrogression and disintegration, and ends at dawn which stands for retribution. Real action takes place in the daylight, whereas the visions appear in moonlight. The setting is symbolic. The forest with its sensuous blackness represents Nature, while its primeval terror represents the primitive consciousness. In fact, standing at once for the glory and horror of human freedom, the forest assumes numerous shapes (e.g. prison, auction-room, ship, altar); flight through it symbolizes psychological regressive flight from one's own self. No wonder it proves a circular race so typical of the activity of the mind. Brutus Jones' losing his hat, coat, spurs, shoes, etc., leaving him naked at the end, is a physical symbol of the corresponding stripping of the layers of civilization to reveal the barbarian savage within him. The silver bullet, the symbol of materialism of the 'whites', undoes Jones, each of the earlier shots being like a nail in his coffin. As **Doris Falk** points out, the "stone altar near the tree combines the sexual and the religious symbols as if to signify that physical and spiritual births are one." Jones's feeling that he has come to a familiar place indicates symbolically that he has returned to the primitive stage of evolution. And now evil which has been his god, appears as a crocodile and demands life. In killing it, therefore, Jones kills himself.

Colour Symbolism

The characters, the setting, the silver bullet and the beating tom-tom are all symbols through which Jones' inner anguish, terror, decay and disintegration, have been externalised. There is colour symbolism also. Two colours are dominant in the audience hall of Emperor Jones—the white and the dazzling scarlet. He escapes through the great forest which is black and there is frequent mention of the red colour of the blood. These colours and colour-contrasts are not merely decorative, they are valuable symbols which increase the expressive range of the language. Thus whiteness which pre-dominates in the audience hall has not only a moral but also a racial meaning, and Jones' tragedy consists, in fact, in his inability to distinguish between the two. Jones has made his way from a humble origin to his present high position by imitating the cunning and wickedness of white business people. But when the "nigger part", which wants to throw off "the white devil" within him, proves the stronger he returns to the black forest of his childhood to atone for his sins. (He is gradually stripped of his 'white' imperial veneer and emerges visibly as increasingly black; by recognizing his guilt, he returns to his original innocence (nakedness). "Thus the whiteness of the audience chamber, which at first seemed factual, revealing Jones as an innocent man, has proved to be substitutive, revealing only his longing for purity, i.e. his factual lack of it."

(The whiteness also symbolises the tomb. Therefore it not only forebodes Jones' physical death, it also implies that Jones' white imperial existence is a death-in-life. Scarlet, the other dominating colour, is also symbolic. To Jones it is an imperial colour; its true connotations are sinfulness, worldliness and blood. Smithers stresses the last meaning by his constant use of the British swear-words "bloody" and "bleeding". He refers to Jones as "the bleeding' nigger" an accurate description, as we have seen, of Jones' status when he suffers his bloody death; and he calls the forest, where Jones meets his end, "a bleedin' queer place." Jones' career is bloody. Blood-stained, he had entered the palace two years earlier; his Emperorship has been marked by bloodshed; and he atones for his brutalities with his own blood.

The Tom-tom : Its Symbolic Significance

The beating of the tom-tom is equally symbolic. According to Edwin Engel, "The beating tom-tom symbolises the all-pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive. The tom-tom beats in the camp of the 'bush niggers' to which Jones is helplessly drawn and it beats in Jones's body, representing the primitive blood which charges through his arteries. Beginning at a rate corresponding to the normal pulse beat and only faintly heard, it becomes perceptively louder and more and more rapid as Jones becomes increasingly

terror-stricken, as his visions are regressively aboriginal, as he approaches the camp of the 'bush niggers', when he is finally killed with a silver bullet, the tom-tom instantly ceases."

Some Other Symbols

Further, the objectification of the contents of Jones' haunted mind functions as a protracted symbol of fate in the shape of the biological past. The madness of the fear-obsessed Jones demonstrates that man is the sum not only of his own past experiences but also those of the race, a notion that is based upon the assumption of a physical as well as spiritual continuity between ancestors and descendants.

The crocodile stands for the evil of the self. Doris V Falk says, "From the symbolism of the dance and the use of the silver bullet, we know that the evil represented by the crocodile is the evil of the self,—that in killing it Jones has killed himself—at least, that distorted image of the self which was his life-motivation. He has performed the justice demanded by the dance."

Conclusion

In short, in the present play, O'Neill has achieved a remarkable synthesis of symbol and dramatic action, of the inward and the outward. Brutus Jones emerges as a gigantic universal figure whose terror strikes, a responsive chord in the hearts of all. We are all involved in his fate ; he moves every one of us.