

## *Select Plays of O'Neill*

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O'Neill is a voluminous writer who has left behind him a large body of One-Act plays, as well as a large number of full length plays. Much of this work is inferior and is not likely to survive for long. Of his longer plays, *Beyond the Horizon*, *Anna Christie*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Great God Brown*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, are the greatest. An acquaintance with these immortal classics is necessary for a proper understanding of the different facets of O'Neill's art.

### **1. Beyond the Horizon**

# Scene-wise, Detailed Summary of the Play

## SCENE I

The scene is laid in the audience chamber in the palace of Emperor Jones. It is a spacious, high-ceilinged room with bare, whitewashed walls. The floor is of white tiles. In the rear there is a wide archway opening in a portico with white pillars. The palace is situated on a high ground. In the centre of the right wall there is a smaller arched doorway leading to the living quarters of the palace. The room has no furniture with the exception of one huge chair made of uncut wood which stands at the centre, the Emperor's throne. It is painted a dazzling, scarlet. "Strips of matting, dyed scarlet, lead from the foot of the throne to the two entrances."

It is late in the afternoon but the sunlight is still bright and there is heat in the air. As the curtain rises, a negro woman sneaks in cautiously from the entrance. She is very old, dressed in cheap calico, and bare-footed. A bundle bound in coloured cloth is carried over her shoulder on the end of a stick. She hesitates beside the doorway, peering back as if afraid of being discovered. Then she begins to glide noiselessly, a step at a time, toward the doorway at the back. At this moment, Henry Smithers, a London trader, comes in.

He is a tall, stoop-shouldered man of about forty. His bald head, looks like an egg. The tropics have tanned his face to a sickly yellow, and native rum has painted his pointed nose to startling red. "His little eyes are red rimmed and dart about him like a ferret's. His expression is one of unscrupulous meanness, cowardly, and dangerous. He is dressed in a worn riding suit of dirty white drill, puttees, spurs, and he wears a white cork helmet. A cartridge belt with an automatic revolver is around his waist." He has a riding whip in his hand. He sees the woman and watches her

suspiciously. Then, making up his mind he enters the room. The woman, looking back over her shoulder continually, does not see him until it is too late. When she does see him, Smithers springs forward and catches her firmly by the shoulder. She struggles to get away, fiercely but silently. Smithers tightens his grasp on her. He thinks that she is sneaking away after stealing something. He is of the view that the natives who have disappeared from their houses are hatching some plot.

The old woman is frightened, and prays to him not to tell emperor Jones of her being there. She tells him that all the natives have gone up the hills, leaving her alone and so she also is going to join them. He has now an expression of mean satisfaction on his face. He knows that very soon the natives will beat their "tom-tom" (a kind of drum) and attack the Emperor whom he hates as he has grown so proud. He is still safe, but his downfall is quite near. The old woman springs to her feet and runs out of the doorway. Smithers runs after her, and taking out his revolver says, "Stop or I'll shoot." Then he says indifferently that she may go away to join the other negroes, he does not mind.

Now Jones comes in. "He is a tall, powerfully-built full-blooded negro of middle age. His features are typically negroid, yet there is something 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." He is shrewd, suspicious, evasive. "He wears a coat, with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc. His trousers are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent leather laced boots with brass spurs and a belt with a long barrelled, pearl-handled revolver in a holster complete his make up." All this grandeur does not make him look ridiculous. He is majestic and looks dignified.

Jones does not see anyone; he is greatly irritated, and shouts as to who dared to whistle and wake him up. Smithers now comes forward and says that he whistled to wake him up because he has some important news for him. His Generals and his Cabinet Ministers have all disappeared. There is none there to attend upon him. But the Emperor does not attach much significance to it. It is their usual practice. He tells Smithers that the moment he closes his eyes, they run away from him and drink rum and talk big in the town. He sarcastically asks him why has he not gone that day to enjoy their company. Smithers admits that he does drink with them, but it is done for the sake of the business he transacts with them. The Emperor coughs mockingly saying, "your business."

Smithers grows insolent and the Emperor warns him to talk in a polite manner and reminds him that he should

not forget that Jones is the boss in that land. Smithers is about to challenge this last statement but something in the others' eyes holds and frightens him. He might have been a thief like him, but he is not so now. It is useless to refer to old times. What he was is one thing, and what he is now is another. What he did some dirty work for Smithers, and the work was worth the money that was paid to him. Smithers retorts that it was he who gave Jones "a start" there, when no one else would. He refers to Jones' "breaking Jail back in the States". Jones reacts sharply and says that Smithers himself was in jail more than once. Smithers angrily calls it a lie and asks Jones who told him all that. Jones replies that there are many things which need not be told; they can be seen in "folk's eyes". There is no doubt that he gave him a start, but then he used his brains and became an Emperor from a stowaway in two years.

From their conversation we learn that Jones has deposited a huge amount of money with a foreign bank. He is a cool and calculating man, an anti-romantic, practical-minded person. He has played the role of an Emperor not for its glory but for the wealth that his position allows him to get hold off. "De fuss and glory part of it," he says, "dat's only to turn de heads o' de low-flung, bush niggers dat's here. Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to 'em, an' I gits de money." Smithers should have no grudge against him because he has paid him back for all that he did for him. He has ignored all his crooked ways and the crooked business he has been doing, though for others he had been making laws to stop such evil practices. Smithers mocks at him and points out that Jones himself has been squeezing money from the natives through all possible means, the most remarkable of his ways being the imposition of taxes. And as for Smithers' breaking laws, Jones himself has broken them all just as fast as he made them. But Jones tells him that the laws do not apply to him, they are for others, and not for the emperor. No doubt they both steal but Smithers does *little stealing* whereas he *does big stealing*. For his little stealing Smithers may sooner or later be imprisoned but for his big stealing the natives have made him their Emperor. He steals in a grand manner, and that is paying. This is the *white quality talk* which he has often heard during the last two years, and he did what the whites do, and became emperor in two years.

The emperor boasts that his rise has not been due to luck, as Smithers puts it, but owing to his ability to use his brains. If there has been any luck, it was he who made it. For example, once a native chief named Lem planned to kill Jones but failed. Then Jones shot him down and said that he had a charm on him so that no lead bullet could kill him. Knowing that the natives could not get silver, he spread a rumour that he could be killed only by a

silver bullet and the natives believed him. It was not luck, but intelligence. Since then he has been befooling the natives as if he were a man of miraculous power. He has also spread the rumour that he possesses a silver bullet with which he will kill himself, "when time comes". But it is not all rumour, for he has really a silver bullet with him which he shows to Smithers.

Jones is a man of foresight; he knows that his "game", i.e. the playing of the role of the emperor will not continue for long. That is why he makes hay while the sun shines, he has already amassed huge wealth in a foreign bank. The natives are sure to rise against him and when they do so, he will run away to the foreign country and enjoy his wealth. It is money which counts and not being the emperor of the savage Negroes. When Smithers asks him where he will go, where does he have his wealth, he refuses to tell him all this. Smithers suggests that he will not go to the States; for he is an escaped convict. At this Jones tells him the whole story of his life in the States: "Maybe I goes to jail dere for gettin' in the argument wid razors over dice. Maybe I gits twenty years when dat colored man die. Maybe I gits in 'nother argument wid de prison guard and the overseer over us when we were working at de road. Maybe he hits me wid a whip and I splits his head wid a shovel and runs away and files de chain off my legs and gits away safe." He warns Smithers that if he tells anybody about his (Jones') past he will stop him from exploiting the natives and stealing from them like a thief. Smithers assures him that he has been his friend, and he will never betray him.

Smithers now tells Jones that his guards are not performing their duties in the palace that day. Jones takes it lightly and says that they go off to have a drink as soon as he goes to sleep in the afternoon. They must have done so that day also, and they will come back as soon as he rings the bell. He rings the bell to call them but none of them turns up. As a result, in a sudden fit of anger, he flings the bell clattering into a corner and says "Low-flung, bush niggers". Then catching Smithers's eye on him, he controls himself and suddenly bursts out into a low chuckling laugh. He had already told Smithers that he will not stay in power for more than six months. Now he says that he "resigns de job of Emperor right dis minute" because he knows that the "game is up".

He is shrewd enough to conjecture that the natives have gone to the hills, and that they have revolted against him. They have stolen their horses and this is a sure sign of revolt. Jones is alarmed for a second, scratches his head and then remarks philosophically, that he will use his feet to run away. It is three-thirty and the sun will set at about six-thirty. Thus he has enough time to reach the wood before nightfall. But Smithers warns him that

he should not be so sure because the natives, particularly his enemy, old Lem, are thirsty for his blood. But Jones is too proud and tactful to express any fear. He pretends to take it lightly. Smithers cautions him that he will have "to cut through the big forest" for escaping their attack and they, "can sniff and follow trail in the dark, like hounds". But Jones replies that he is not a fool, he knows every nook and corner of the forest and can easily go through it and reach the coast. He says to Smithers: "I'll be cross de plain to de edge of de forest by time dark comes. Once in de woods in de night dey got a small chance o' finding' dis baby. Dawn tomorrow I'll be out at de oder side and on de coast where dat French gunboat is stayin'. She picks me up, takes me to Martinique when she go dar, and dere I safe wid a mighty big bankroll in my jeans. It's easy as rollin' off a log." Smithers suggests that if something goes wrong and they catch him, then what he will do. Jones answer is that he has got five lead bullets in his gun good enough for the common bush niggers and one silver bullet, "to cheat em out o' gittin' me." He adds with great self-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."

Meanwhile, "from the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating." It starts slowly and continues at a gradually increasing rate from this time unintermittently to the very end of the play. Jones starts at the sound. A strange look of fear creeps into his face for a moment as he listens. Then he asks, with an attempt to regain his most casual manner: "What's dat drums beatin' for?" Smithers says that the niggers have begun their religious rites and war dance for getting their courage worked up before they march forward to kill him. He tells him the way in which they will launch their attack: "To-night when it's pitch black in the forest, they'll 've their pet devils and ghosts hounding after you. You'll find yer bloody hair 'll be standin' on end before tomorrow morning. It's a bleedin' queer place, that 'stinkin' forest, even in daylight. You don't know what might 'appen in there. Always sends the cold shivers down my back, minute I gets in it."

Jones is, however, confident of his own powers. He tells him that he is not a coward like him. He fully knows the position of every tree in the forest, and, moreover, the full moon will make the forest easy to cross. The niggers cannot harm him with their heathen spells, because he has been a member of the Baptist Church since he was a porter at the Pullman's in the U.S.A. before he got into his "little trouble". He is sure that the heathen spells and charms cannot harm him; rather, the Baptist Church will protect him. He further says with satisfaction, "And I have got the little silver bullet o' my own, do't

forfeit". At this Smithers remarks that Jones has not really been a sincere member of the Baptist Church; on the contrary, he has had dealings with the witch-doctors of the natives. Jones does not believe in the supernatural powers of the witch-doctors but he pretended to believe in them and it has been a part of his "game" from the very beginning. If a native believed a black thing to be white, Jones always agreed with him fully. So far as his religion is concerned, he forgets all about it when he is busy with his plans of grabbing money.

Jones now looks at his watch and then from under the throne pulls out an expensive Panama hat with a bright multi-coloured band and sets it on his head and says to Smithers with a grin, "See you in jail sometimes, maybe." Smithers wishes him good luck, but says he will not be in his shoes for any amount of money. Jones tells him that he has willed all his wealth in the palace to Smithers. Smithers thanks the Emperor and advises him not to run away through the back door. Jones replies that he, being an Emperor, will not slink out like a common nigger. "And de Emperor Jones leaves de way he comes and dat black trash don't dare stop him, not yit, leastways." He stops to listen to the insistent beat of the tom-tom and says that it must be the sound of a big drum. And then he laughs and adds that they are bidding him farewell if not with a brass band, at least with a big drum. He puts his hands in his pockets and with studied carelessness, whistling a tune, he saunters out of the doorway and goes off to the left. Smithers looks after him with puzzled admiration and says that Jones has still got "is bloomin' nerve with 'im." But the next moment he realises that the negro had been putting on airs just to hide his real fear. He wishes that the negroes may catch him, and kill him. Then he goes into the palace to see the goods which Jones has left for him.

#### Critical Comments

The scene forms the *Exposition* of the play, and O'Neill's expositions are masterpieces. His use of dumb show in the very beginning of the play is very effective. The old woman moving silently and stealthily creates an atmosphere of mystery and foreboding, and the attention of the readers is at once captured. Suspense is created, and they are eager to know the meaning of the stealthy movements of the old woman.

Next we are introduced to Smithers and then to Emperor Jones himself. From their conversation we learn much about the past of Jones, about his character and of his future plans. Obviously, there is a revolt against his tyranny, his courtiers and attendants have deserted him, and he decides to run away that very moment. The beating of the tom-tom, which is to play such a

#### SCENE-WISE, DETAILED SUMMARY

crucial role, is also heard, constantly increasing in volume and intensity. The silver bullet is also introduced, as it shall play such a vital role in the action. It is almost a character in the play. The scarlet colour of the emperor's throne is symbolic of his boastful, flamboyant nature, and the white of the walls symbolises purity, which the emperor does not have, but for which he longs. Smithers' constant use of swear words like 'bloody', 'bleeding' is symbolic of the murders which Jones committed in the past and of his own murder, before the dawn of the next day.

#### Scene ii : Nightfall; at the Edge of the Forest

It is night now and the scene is laid at the outskirts of the Great Forest which is described in detail. "The foreground is sandy, level ground, dotted by a few stones and clumps of stunted bushes cowering close against the earth to escape the buffeting of the trade wind. In the rear the forest is a wall of darkness. Only when the eye becomes accustomed to the gloom, can the outlines of separate trunks of the nearest trees be made out, enormous pillars of deeper blackness. A sombre monotone of wind lost in the leaves moans in the air. Yet this sound serves but to intensify the impression of the forest's relentless immobility, to form a background throwing into relief its brooding implacable silence."

Jones comes to this place walking rapidly. He stops as he nears the edge of the forest, looks around him quickly, as if searching for something. Then satisfied that he is where he ought to be, he throws himself on the ground, dog-tired. The darkness of the forest frightens him. He has had a long run, and he remarks that the job of an emperor is no training for such a long run. He lifts his head and stares at the forest, frightened. He recollects Smithers' words about the deep blackness of the forest and realises that he had spoken the truth. Then he looks at his feet to find if there were any blisters. He takes off his shoes and touches the soles of his feet and finds that there are no blisters. A little rest is needed and then it will be alright.

He sits in a weary attitude, listening to the rhythmic beating of the tom-tom. He grumbles in a loud tone to cover up his growing uneasiness, "Bush niggers. Wonder dey wouldn't git sick of beating dat drum. It sounds louder, now I wonder if dey are starting after me." He stands up looking back across the plain. It is so dark that he would not be able to see his enemies, even if they were only a hundred yards away from him. He tries to shake off such thoughts and to regain self-confidence by saying to himself that the niggers are miles and miles away from him and so he should not get nervous. He sits down and begins to lace up his shoes in great haste, all the time trying to regain his last courage.

Hunger tortures him and so he searches for the place where he

had hidden some food for such an emergency. He tries to find the white stones under which his food was concealed. He crawls to it with satisfaction. He turns over the stone but finds no food under it. He scrambles to the next stone and turns it over but does not find the hidden food. He continues to move from one stone to another, turning them over frantically and finding no food at all. Finally, he jumps to his feet in great fear because he feels he has "lost de place".

Hunger and darkness confuse and bewilder him. He scratches a match on his trousers and looks around him. The beat of the far-off tom-tom has increased in intensity and rapidity. He mutters in a bewildered voice, "How all dese white stones came here, when I only remembers one"? Suddenly, he realises his mistake in lightening the match. His enemies might see him in the light of the match. He stares at the plain behind him apprehensively, his hand on his revolver. He is in great fear, for there was only one white stone beneath which he had hidden the box containing his food, but now there are so many white stones. It means that he has come to a wrong place. The very thought terrifies him.

As he turns his back on the forest, little "Formless Fears" creep out of its deeper blackness. "They are black, shapeless, only their glittering little eyes can be seen. If they have any describable form at all it is that of a grub-worm about the size of a creeping child. They move noiselessly, but with deliberate, painful effort, striving to raise themselves on end, falling and sinking prone again." Jones turns about to face the forest. He stares at the tops of the trees, seeking vainly to discover his whereabouts by their confirmation. "These shapeless Fears are externalisations of Jones' inner terror and bewilderment."

He cannot recognize the trees which he had known very well earlier. This terrifies him. With sudden forced defiance, he says in an angry tone, "Woods, is you tryin' to put somethin' ovah on me?" The formless creatures on the ground laugh at him mockingly. They move towards him in twisted attitudes. Jones looks at them, leaps backward with a yell of terror, taking out his revolver as he does so and shouting in a quivering voice: "What's dat? Who's dar? What is you? Git away from me befo' I shoots you up, you don't?"—Then losing his head, he fires his revolver. There is a flash, a loud report, then silence broken only by the far-off, quickened, throb of the tom-tom. The formless creatures disappear into the forest. Jones remains motionless listening intently.

The sound of the shot, the reassuring feel of the revolver in his hand, have somewhat restored his shaken nerves. He says to himself with renewed confidence: "Dey're gone. 'Dat shot fire 'em. Dey was only little animals—little wild pigs, I reckon, Dey may

have rooted out yo' food an' eat it." Then he realises his mistake in firing the revolver, and says in great fear "Gorry, you give de game away when you in great fear fire dat shot. Dem niggers hear dat far. Time you beat it in de woods widout no long waits." He starts for the forest—hesitates before the plunge—then urging himself in with manful resolution, he goes into the darkness of the Great Forest.

#### Critical Comments

It is a powerful scene. The background is provided by the Great Forest which like Hardy's *Egdon Heath* is almost a character in the play influencing and shaping the action. Jones reaches its edge just before nightfall, hungry and tired. He fails to find out the food which he had hidden under a white stone. This shakes his self-confidence, and his inner terror has been objectified by the figures of the shapeless fears that come out of the forest. The disintegration of Jones begins and the process is completed in the forest before the dawn of the next day.

*The scene is a sustained piece of monologue, and O'Neill has made effective use of Negro dialect.*

#### Scene iii : Nine O'Clock : In the Forest

As the curtain rises Jones is seen in the forest. The moon has just risen. "Its beams drifting through the canopy of leaves, make a barely perceptible, suffused, eerie glow. A dense low wall of underbrush and creepers is in the nearer foreground, fencing in small, triangular clearing. Beyond this is the massed blackness of the forest like an encompassing barrier. A path is dimly discerned leading down to the clearing from left, rear, and winding away from it again toward the right."

Nothing can be distinctly made out. Except for the beating of the tom-tom, there is silence. Then gradually the figure of the negro, Jeff, can be discerned sitting at the rear of the triangle. He is middle-aged, thin, brown in colour, is dressed in a Pullman porter's uniform and cap. He is throwing a pair of dice on the ground before him, picking them up, shaking them, casting them out with regular, rigid, mechanical movements. Heavy footsteps of someone approaching along the path from the left are heard, as also Jones' voice, a bit louder than before."

Jones is glad that now he will be able to see his way in the light of the moon. There will be no more of his striking his head against the trees and no more scratching of his feet by the bushes. He is perspiring and brushes off his face on his sleeve. He has lost his Panama hat. "His face is scratched, his brilliant uniform shows several large rents." His long run through the forest has exhausted

him. He is aware that he has no longer the glory and majesty of an emperor, yet he consoles himself by the thought that it is all a part of the "game." He must have journeyed for a long time, so hot and tired he feels. But he hopes that by the end of the night, "when you gits dar safe and has dat bankroll in your hands you laugh at all dis." He begins to whistle but checks himself abruptly because his whistling would make his enemies hear his voice and find him out. He hears the drum-beat and thinks that it is approaching nearer and nearer. Therefore, he must move. He takes a step forward, then stops, worriedly because he has heard a "queer clicketty sound" and fears that some nigger is "shooting dice."

He is frightened. He walks quickly into the clear space, then stands transfixed with fear as he sees Jeff (whom he had murdered). He moves towards Jeff. He is forgetful for a moment of his surroundings and really believes that it is a living man whom he sees. He says to Jeff cheerfully: "Jeff, I 'se sho' mighty glad to see you. Dey tel me you done died from dat razor cut. I gives you." He stops suddenly, bewilderedly, because he now remembers that Jeff was certainly killed. He stares fascinatedly at Jeff who continues his mechanical throwing of dice. Jones' eyes begin to roll wildly. He shudders with fear and asks if he is really Jeff or a ghost. He takes out his revolver in a frenzy of terrified rage and tells Jeff, "Nigger, I kills you dead once. Has I got to kill you ag'in?" With these words, he shoots at Jeff. When the smoke clears away, Jeff is no longer to be seen. Jones stands trembling; then with a certain reassurance he says: "He's gone, anyway. Ghost or no ghost, dat shot fixed him."

The beat of the far off tom-tom is perceptibly louder and more rapid. Jones becomes conscious of it and fears that his enemies are quite near. He feels that it was foolish on his part to fire his revolver; the sound must have told them where he was at the time. So he runs away from the place. Forgetting the path, he plunges wildly into the underbush in the rear and disappears in the shadow.

#### Critical Comments

The scene is laid in the interior of the forest and in the light of the Moon. Jones can see the figure of a negro, Jeff. Jeff was the man whom he had murdered in the past. Thus the figure of Jeff is an externalisation of his memory of his own past crimes and sins. Jones is terrified and his fears are further intensified by the "clicking of the dice" and the incessant beat of the tom-tom which now seems to be quite close to him, Jones loses self-control, and fires at the figure of Jeff, and the figure immediately disappears. Terrified, Jones runs, but in his terror takes a wrong path. He has regressed and lost the majesty of the emperor. His name, that is

gone, his scarlet dress is torn, and there are scratches on his face and feet. He has lost his earlier self-confidence. He is now a frightened, tortured soul trying to escape his own inner fears and terrors. He has hallucinations, and his past sins and crimes confront him in objective, physical forms.

The scene also is a sustained piece of monologue interspersed with the sound of the tom-tom, and descriptions of the eerie forest. Effective use has also been made of negro dialect.

The forest symbolises the primitiveness of the negro as contrasted with the culture and civilisation of the whites. It also symbolises the inner darkness of Jones, his confusion and bewilderment. The image of light in surrounding darkness symbolises Jones' spiritual isolation.

#### Scene iv : Eleven O'Clock : In the Forest

As the curtain rises, there is seen a wide, dirty road that runs diagonally from right, front, to left, rear. "Rising on both sides, the forest walls it in. The moon is now up. Under its light, the road glimmers ghastly and unreal. It is as if the forest had stood aside momentarily to let the road pass through and accomplish its veiled purpose. This done, the forest will fold in upon itself again and the road will be no more."

Jones stumbles to the place from the forest on the right. "His uniform is ragged and torn. He looks about him with surprise when he sees the road, his eyes blinking in the bright moonlight. He flops down exhaustively and pants heavily for a while. He is melting in the heat of the forest. He is tired of running. He tears off his coat which he feels like a straitjacket and flings it away from him. He is now stripped to the waist, but now he can breathe more comfortably. He loosens his spurs, takes them off and flings them away disgustedly." He has got rid of his "frippety Emperor trappings" and so will be able to move more comfortably.

Listening to the insistent beat of the tom-tom in the distance, he feels that his enemies are quite near. But then he has run so fast and so continually that there must be enough distance between him and his enemies. He reassures himself with the thought that the natives will not be able to catch him. But his legs are tired and it is with difficulty that he can stand up. Looking at the road he says that he had never seen it before; the forest seems to him to be full of queerest things. He does not want to see and more ghosts. He is terrified at the thought of being caught any killed by the niggers, musters his courage by recollecting the words of a parson of the Baptist Church that niggers cannot harm a Christian. He thinks that as a Christian, he is civilized and different from the ignorant black niggers. He then suddenly

realises that his fears are caused by hunger and fatigue. It is an established truth of psychology that a hungry man has hallucinations. The figure of Jeff was one such illusion. He prays to God to save him from such ghostly illusions. He decides to rest, and after a short while to move further. Looking at the moon he says that half of the night is over and by morning he will be near the coast where he will be quite safe.

Then Jones has another illusion. His heated brain makes him see a small gang of negroes. "They are dressed in striped convict suits, their heads are shaven, one leg drags limpingly, shackled to a heavy ball and chain." Some carry picks, the others shovels. They are followed by a white man dressed in the uniform of a Prison Guard. A Winchester rifle is across his shoulders and he carries a heavy whip. At a signal from the guard, they stop on the road opposite where Jones is sitting. Jones, who has been staring up at the sky, unmindful of their noiseless approach, suddenly looks down and sees them. His eyes pop out, he tries to get to his feet and run, but sinks back, too numbed by fright to move. He prays in a choking voice: "Lawd Jesus!"

The Prison Guard cracks his whip and at that signal all the convicts start to work on the road. "They swing their picks, and their shovels, but not a sound comes from their labour." Their movements are mechanical, rigid and slow. The Prison Guard motions Jones sternly to take his place among the others. Jones gets to his feet as if hypnotized. He mutters like an obedient slave: "Yes, suh. Yes, suh. I 'se comin'." As he moves, he curses under his breath with rage and hatred, "God damn yo' soul, I gits even wid you yit, sometime."

As if there were a shovel in his hands he goes through weary, mechanical gestures of digging up dirt, and throwing it to the roadside. "Suddenly, the Guard approaches him angrily, threateningly. He raises his whip and lashes Jones viciously across the shoulders with it. Jones cries with pain." The Guard turns his back on him and walks away contemptuously. Instantly Jones straitens up. With arms upraised, as if his shovel were a club in his hands, he springs murderously at the unsuspecting Guard. In the act of crashing down his shovel on the white man's skull, Jones suddenly becomes aware that his hands are empty. He cries despairingly to his fellow convicts to give him a shovel. The convicts stand fixed in motionless attitudes, their eyes on the ground.

The Guard seems to wait expectantly, his back turned to the attacker. Jones shouts with baffled, terrified rage. He pulls out his revolver: "I kills you, you white debil, if it's de last thing I evah does. Ghost or debil, I kill you again." He fires point blank at the Guard's back. Instantly the walls of the forest close in from both sides, the road and the figures of the convict-gang disappear

in the surrounding darkness. "The only sound are a crashing in the underbush as Jones leaps away in mad flight and the throbbing of the tom-tom is heard, still far distant, but increased in volume of sound and rapidity of beat."

### Critical Comments

It is a powerful scene, very effective on the stage. It is one long monologue interspersed with descriptions of the forest. Tired, hungry and lonely, Emperor Jones divests himself of the trappings of an emperor, i.e. his gaudy dress and his spurs. This is symbolic of his spiritual deterioration, of his regression to the primitiveness of the negro. The re-enactment of the murder of the Prison Guard, like the vision of murdered Jeff in the previous scene, is an expressionist projection of the sense of guilt buried deep down in the "unconscious," of Jones.

The scene has much psychological realism, for as psychologists tell us, men, when hungry, tired and lonely, are likely to have such hallucinations. The terror of Jones is intensified both by the sound of the drum, which is increasing in intensity and rapidity, and the great forest still dark, ghastly and unreal.

### Scene v : One O' Clock ; Great Forest —a Large Circular Clearing

The action takes place two hours later the same night. As the curtain rises, we see a large circular clearing which is enclosed by gigantic trunks of tall trees. *In the centre is a big dead stump worn by time into a curious resemblance to an auction block. The moon floods the clearing with a clear light.* Jones enters through the forest on the left. "He looks wildly about the clearing with haunted, fearful glances. His trousers are in tatters, his shoes out and misshapen, flapping about his feet. He moves cautiously to the stump in the centre and sits down in a tense position, ready for instant flight." Then he holds his head in his hand and rocks back and forth, moaning and playing miserably: "Oh, Lawd, Lawd! Oh, Lawd, Lawd!"

He calls himself a sinner and pleads for God's mercy. He confesses his sins, one after another, though he also tries to justify himself. He killed Jeff because he was "cheatin' wid loaded dice" and the Guard because he struck him with his whip. Another sin he committed was that when the foolish negroes made him the emperor, "I steals all I could grab." Now he feels sorry for what he did and seeks God's mercy. He invokes God to stop the tom-tom, the sound of which haunts him, and to prevent his enemies from catching him. He gets to his feet, evidently reassured by his prayer, with some confidence. He is not afraid of real men, but these ghostly figures frighten him. Therefore, he prays that he may not see any more such ghostly sights.



His shoes are now useless and so he unlaces them, pulls them off, holds them in his hands and regards them mournfully. Then he says: "Look at you now. Emperor, you'se gittin' mighty low." He sighs dejectedly and remains with bowed shoulders, staring down at the shoes in his hands as if reluctant to throw them away. While his attention is thus occupied, a crowd of figures silently enters the clearing from all sides. There are middle-aged men who are evidently well to do planters. There is one smart, authoritative individual—the Auctioneer. There is a crowd of curious spectators, chiefly youths, who have come to the slave-market for diversion. *All exchange courtly greetings in dumb show, and chant silently together.* There is something stiff, rigid, unreal, mechanical about their movements. They group themselves about the stump. Finally a batch of slaves is led in from the left by an attendant—three men, two women, one with a baby in her arms, nursing."

The white planters look them over appraisingly, as if they were cattle. The Auctioneer holds up his hands, taking his place at the stump. He touches Jones on the shoulder, authoritatively, motioning for him to stand on the stump—the auction block. "Jones looks up, sees the figures on all sides, looks wildly for some way of escape, sees none, screams and leaps madly to the top of the stump to get as far away from them as possible. He stands there, paralyzed with horror."

The Auctioneer points to Jones, appeals to the planters to see for themselves that there is a good fieldhand, in sound health. He is quite strong, still in spite of his being middle-aged. He says, "Look at the back. Look at those shoulders. Look at the muscles in his arms and his sturdy legs. Capable of any amount of hard labour. Moreover, of a good disposition, intelligent and tractable. Will any gentleman shout the bidding?" The planters raise their fingers, make their bids. They are apparently all eager to possess Jones.

While this has been going on, Jones has been seized by the courage of desperation. He is suddenly convulsed with intense hatred and fear. He jerks out his revolver—just as the Auctioneer knocks him down to one of the planters—looking angrily from him to the purchaser. "And you sells me? And you buys me? I shows you, I'se a free nigger, damn yo' souls". He fires at the Auctioneer and at the Planter and instantly the walls of the forest fold in. "Only blackness remains and silence broken by Jones as he rushes off, crying with fear, and by the quickened, ever louder beat of the tom-tom."

#### Critical Comments

As the night advances, Jones becomes more and more tormented and anguished and prays to God to forgive his sins. He divests

himself further of the trappings of an emperor and becomes a poor hunted, half-clad negro. His regression to negro, the primitive, is complete. The dark forest standing sinisterly round him, and the rapid and insistent beating of the tom-tom, have combined to madden him and complete the process of his disintegration.

The hallucination that Jones has in this scene is not the projection of his own "unconscious." It is the first Jungian touch that O'Neill provides in the play, for the auction scene set in a Southern State of America is part of Jones' *collective unconscious*. It is part of the racial memory of Negroes, which Jung calls the "Collective Unconscious."

#### Scene vi : Three O'Clock, a Clear Space in the Forest

As the curtain rises, we see a cleared space in the forest. The branches of the trees meet over it forming a low ceiling. The tree trunks have an arched appearance. "The moonlight is almost completely shut out and only a vague wan light filters through. There is the noise of someone approaching from the left, stumbling and crawling through the undergrowth. Jones' voice is heard crying and moaning. He does not know what he should do. He has no bullet (except the silver one) to scare away the ghostly figures, if he sees them again. The forest is dark and the moon is not visible. He prays to God to put an end to that darkness.

At last Jones reaches the clear space and intends to lie down and rest there. "His trousers are torn and he seems to be wearing only a loin-cloth. He flings himself face downwards, and pants with exhaustion." Gradually it seems to grow brighter in the enclosed space and two rows of seated figures are seen behind Jones. All are negroes, naked save for their loin-cloth. "At first they are silent and motionless; then they begin to sway slowly forward toward each other and then back again in unison. At the same time, a low, melancholy murmur rises among them, increasing gradually as if directed and controlled by the throb of the tom-tom in the distance."

It gradually becomes a long wail of despair. Jones starts, looks up, sees the figures, and throws himself down again to shut out the sight. A shudder of terror shakes his whole body as the wail rises up about him again. But the next time, his voice starts to wail—as if he were charmed—with the others. As the wail becomes more intense, he rises to a sitting posture similar to that of the others, swaying back and forth. His voice reaches the highest pitch of sorrow, of desolation.

Soon, the light fades out, the other voices cease, and only darkness is left. Jones can be heard rising to his feet and running off, his voice becoming slower and receding as he moves farther and

farther away in the forest. *The tom-tom beats louder, quicker, with a more insistent, triumphant sound.*

#### Critical Comments

In this scene, Jones' identification with his race is complete. He is half-naked like the other negroes, and he wails with them, for he now suffers and is miserable like them. We are not told of his suffering, but it is enacted on the stage expressionistically. Gone are the pride and arrogance of the emperor, the process of his regression and disintegration is nearly complete. *It is another touch of Jungian "Collective unconscious".*

#### Scene vii : Five O'Clock : The Foot of a Tree by a River

The curtain rises on a gigantic tree by the edge of a great river. There is a structure of boulders which looks like an altar. "Jones' voice is heard from the left rising and falling to the rhythmic beat of the tom-tom. As his voice sinks into silence he enters the open space. The expression on his face is fixed and stony." "He looks around at the tree, the rough stone altar, the moonlit surface of the river beyond, and passes his hand over his head with a puzzled bewilderment." He kneels with devotion before the altar. Then he stands up and murmurs incoherently "What—what is I doin' ? What is—dis place ? Seems like I know dat tree—an' dem stones—an' de river. I remember—seems like I been hear befo'." He trembles with fear and prays to God to protect him.

Then he crawls away from the altar miserably close to the ground. From behind the trunk of the tree the figure of the Congo Witch-Doctor comes out. "In his hand he carries a bone rattle, in the other a charmed stick with which he casts his spells. He comes noiselessly to the clear ground and stands between Jones and the altar and begins to dance and chant. As if in response to his dancing, the beating of the tom-tom grows to a fierce exultant boom. Jones looks up, assures a half-kneeling, half-squatting posture and remains rigidly fixed there, as if paralysed. The Witch-Doctor dances, and his voice rises and falls. *Gradually his dance becomes clearly one of narrative and in pantomime and his voice an incantation, as if to exorcise some devils.*

"Jones has become completely hypnotized. His voice joins in the incantation and in the cries. He beats time with his hands and sways his body to and fro from the waist. The whole spirit and meaning of the dance has entered into him, has become his spirit." Finally the dance ends with a howl of despair, but is soon begun again in a note of savage hope. There is a way of salvation. The forces of evil demand sacrifice. They must be satisfied. "The Witch-Doctor points with his wand to the sacred tree, to the river beyond, to the altar, and finally to Jones with a ferocious command." Jones understands the meaning of this. "It is he who

must offer himself for sacrifice. He beats his forehead abjectly to the ground, moaning hysterically, "Mercy, Oh Lawd ! Mercy ! Mercy on dis poor sinner!"

The Witch-Doctor springs to the river bank. He calls to some God to come out of its depths. Then he starts moving backward slowly. The huge head of a crocodile appears over the bank and its eyes, glittering greenly, fasten upon Jones. He stares into them fascinatedly. The Witch-Doctor prances up to him, touches him with his wand, motions with hideous command toward the waiting monster. Jones creeps on his belly nearer and nearer, moaning continually, "Mercy, Lawd ! Mercy !"

The crocodile comes out on the land. Jones creeps towards him. The Witch-Doctor's voice shrills out in furious exultation, the tom-tom beats madly. Jones cries out in a fierce, exhausted spasm of anguished pleading "Lawd, save me ! Lawd Jesus, hear my prayer ! "Immediately, in answer to his prayer, comes the thought of the one bullet left with him. He takes out his revolver shootingly defiantly, "De silver bullet. You don't git me yit." He fires at the green eyes in front of him. The head of the crocodile sinks back behind the river bank, the Witch-Doctor springs behind the sacred tree and disappears. Jones lies with his face to the ground, crying with fear as the throb of the tom-tom fills the silence.

#### Critical Comments

This is a powerful scene, very effective on the stage. The regression of Jones to his primitive self, is complete. This is symbolised by the fact of his being naked up to the waist, his muttering of the incantation chanted by the Witch-Doctor, his moaning and wailing like the other natives, and his swaying his body like them to the rhythm of the incantation. The figure of the Witch-Doctor is a fascinating one, Jones is charmed by it, and obeys his commands as if hypnotised. His identification with his race is complete.

According to Marry T. David, "O'Neill has invested the scene with rich symbolism, for sexual as well as religious symbols blend here. Jones has shed the last layer of his civilized outward self and has gone back to the dark primitive world of the unconscious, where physical and spiritual birth are one. The altar and the kneeling posture of the protagonist suggest the spiritual significance of the scene, heightened by the dance of the Witch-Doctor, suggestive of the dance of expiation and the idea of sacrifice."

O'Neill explicitly mentions the idea of salvation, to be attained through sacrifice to appease the forces of evil. *Jones has worshipped evil all his life and now it demands his life. The crocodile symbolises the evil of the self for which alone he has lived till then.* In killing it,

Jones has killed the ugly self that he has projected all along and it is not accidental that the silver bullet has to be used for this. For the self that has to be slain is mixed up with the evil of materialistic greed that the silver bullet symbolises.

#### Scene viii : Dawn, the Dividing line of Forest and Plain

The last scene is laid, like scene ii, near the dividing line of forest and plain. It is day dawn. The tom-tom seems to be quite near, so loud is its beating. Lem enters, followed by a small squad of his soldiers, and by Smithers. A revolver and cartridge belt hang from his waist. His soldiers are in different degrees of nakedness. Each one carries a rifle. Smithers is dressed exactly as in scene i. One of the soldiers, evidently a scout, is peering about keenly on the ground. He points to the spot where Jones entered the forest. Lem and Smithers come to look at it.

Smithers tells them that this is the spot, where Jones entered the forest. But this discovery is of no use to them, for by that time Jones must have reached the coast safely. But Lem is sure that he will be able to catch his enemy. He makes a motion to his soldiers who sit down in a semi-circle. Smithers tells them that they should hunt for Jones in the forest. Sitting there is of no use. Then a sound of snapping twigs comes from the forest. The soldiers jump to their feet, catching their rifles alertly. Lem remains sitting with an unchanged expression, but listening intently. He makes a quick signal with his hand. His followers creep quickly into the forest, and each enters it at a different point.

Lem and Smithers continue to talk. Soon the reports of several shots come from the forest, followed by savage, exultant yells. The beating of the tom-tom abruptly ceases. Lem looks up at the white man with a grin of satisfaction and says that they have caught Jones and he is dead. To Smithers' inquiry as to how he knew that Jones was dead, Lem replies that because Jones could not be killed by a lead bullet, they moulded silver bullets and he must have been killed by one of them.

Soon soldiers come out of the forest, carrying Jones' limp body. He is dead. They carry him to Lem, who examines his body with great satisfaction. Smithers leans over his shoulder and says in a tone of frightened awe, "Well, they did for yer right enough, Jonesey, me lad. Dead as a bloater (*Mockingly*) Where's yer, 'igh, an' mighty airs now, yer 'bloomin' Majesty? (*Then with a grin*) "Silver bullets. Gawd blimey, but you died in the 'eight o' style, any 'ow."

The body of Jones is then carried out by Lem's soldiers, and Smithers exclaims, "stupid idiots, the lot of them. Blasted niggers." Despite the evil within him, Jones was a much better man than the negroes who have killed him.

#### Critical Comments

After five expressionistic scenes, the dramatist reverts in this scene to the realism of the first scene. Smithers, Lem and his soldiers are real, and not merely illusions of a heated brain. The setting is realistic and so are the different characters." O'Neill depicts Jones as a tragic hero who died as he had lived, with a certain amount of grandeur, false though it was—the natives had shot him with a silver bullet. The grudging tribute paid by Smithers: "Gawd blimey, but yer died in the height of style", restores the initial impression of Jones' majesty.

## Select Textual Problems

### 1. The title "The Emperor Jones" : Its Aptness and Suitability

#### Essentials of a Good Title

A good title should indicate the contents of the play, just as a signboard indicates the goods that are sold in a shop. O'Neill first intended to entitle the play, *The Silver Bullet*, but on second thought he dropped the idea and named it as 'The Emperor Jones'. Thus he named it after the chief protagonist. It was a happy choice for the play deals entirely with the life, career and tragic death of Jones.

#### Jones : A Criminal and Ex-convict

The play opens on the afternoon of a crucial day in the career of Jones and it ends with his tragic death at the dawn of the next day. Throughout the play attention is focused on Jones. In Scene i, through a dialogue between Jones and Smithers, a white trader, we are told about the past of Jones. We learn that he is a negro who worked as a Pullman carter in the States for a number of years. There he acquired the veneer of western civilisation, but failed to control his animal instincts and impulses which came to the surface at the least provocation. Thus he committed two murders, was jailed for life, but he broke out from the prison and made good his escape to an island in the West Indies. In other words, he is a criminal and ex-convict.

#### The Legend of the Silver Bullet

He is shrewd, calculating and entirely crooked. On reaching the island, he could so impress the simple, ignorant natives that within two years, he rose to be the Emperor of the island. He taxed

the people heavily, and also extorted money from them by every other means possible for him. In this way he amassed huge wealth in a foreign bank. Once Lem, a tribal chief, tried to kill him by shooting at him from point blank range, but he was not killed. He used the incident to great advantage to create the myth that he bore a charmed life, and he can be killed only by a silver bullet. In order to make this myth credible he carries a silver bullet in his revolver, and intends to shoot himself with it, if the circumstances make it necessary. The superstitious natives fully believed that he bore a charmed life.

#### His Lust for Money

Jones is not interested in playing the role of an emperor. It is not the glamour of kingship which he craves for, he lusts only for money. Moreover, he knows that the natives would soon revolt against him, and he has carefully planned out his future course of action. He would escape through the great forest which is close-by, and for the purpose he has hidden there some food under a white stone and has carefully familiarised himself with the route he intends to take. Crossing the forest he would reach the sea-coast where he would be quite safe from his revolting subjects. Then he would freely and comfortably live on the wealth he has already amassed. The Scene i shows that he is intelligent, crafty, proud, self-confident and far-sighted.

#### His Hallucinations : His Regression

On the afternoon of the day on which the play opens, the natives are already in revolt against him. Jones runs away according to his plan. The *Scenes ii to vii* which follow are sustained pieces of monologue, the speaker being the runaway emperor Jones. Throughout, the attention is focused on Jones and the monologue is expressive of what is happening in his soul or psyche. He has illusions or hallucinations which are objectifications of his racial and personal memories. Thus the shapeless figures of nameless fears, which he sees at the edge of the forest are symbolic of the fear-complex within him. The vision of Jeff—a negro whom he had killed—he sees in *Scene iii* is an externalisation of his guilt-complex and so is also the vision of his fellow prisoners and the prison-guard whom he had killed. The vision of the auction in the slave market, the visions of the slave-ship and of the Congo Witch Doctor, the altar and the crocodile-god, are so many externalisations of his racial memories or what Jung calls the "collective unconscious". At the end of each scene, Jones fires his revolver and the hallucination comes to an end. The last bullet, the silver bullet, is fired at the crocodile god. In each scene, Jones strips himself of some part or the other of the trappings of an emperor and by the end of *Scene vii* he becomes a primitive negro dressed

only in a loin-cloth. His regression to his primitive negro-origins is complete.

### His Tragic End

In the last scene of the play, too, Jones is the centre of attention. The beating of the tom-tom strikes terror into his soul, he becomes panicky, forgets the route, and takes a circular course. The result is he returns to the edge of the forest where he had begun his last journey, and where his enemies are waiting to kill him. He is killed by a silver bullet which the natives had moulded for the purpose.

### The Significance of "The"

In short, the play is concerned entirely with the life, career and tragic death of Jones, and the dramatist has rightly entitled it after him. It is also to be noted that he has named it as "*The*" *Emperor Jones*, and not as *Emperor Jones*. The use of *The* is significant. It suggests that Jones is an emperor with certain specific, distinctive and individual qualities of his own. He is both a type and an individual. He is not merely a common criminal and adventurer, not merely a symbol of the primordial in every one of us, but with certain qualities of head and heart which distinguish him from the common run of mankind. He is superior both to the English trader Smithers, and to the other natives on whom he rules. And as Smithers puts it, he dies in the height of style, and not like a common run-away criminal. He triumphs even in his death, for he is killed by a silver bullet—and not by an ordinary lead one—and is thus able to preserve the legend he had created. Both in his life and death he is distinctive and superior and *The* of the title stresses his superiority and individuality.

### The Title : Its Ironic Significance

The title of the play is also a fine instance of O'Neill's use of irony. The full name of 'Jones' is 'Brutus Jones'. Jones is everyman and 'Brutus' implies the irrational 'brute' in every man. It is ironical that a mere brute, an irrational animal, should be the emperor. Chaman Ahuja rightly points out, "there is an ironic indictment of civilisation which on the one hand goads people to criminality and on the other punishes them. Again, what Jones is and what he imagines himself to be, what he plans and what he meets, are ironically juxtaposed. His perfect planning comes to nothing because although he has prepared himself against outside enemies, he has neglected the forces within him. That is to say, it is Jones that kills Jones. Ironically, too, he runs the whole night to reach the starting point only to be killed with the silver for which he had sacrificed his soul. What is more, Brutus Jones does not die in the height of style. Perhaps he lay there unconscious since the crocodile scene and was shot dead ; or,

perhaps, he died of fear then, and his hunters only killed the dead ; or possibly, being unarmed now, he was trying to conceal himself when he was over-powered. Whichever alternative we adopt, Jones' death seems pathetic and ironic rather than tragic."

## 2. Brutus Jones : His Character and Personality Or "Jones is Both a Symbol (Type) and an Individual"

### Symbol of 'Everyman'

Brutus Jones is the central figure in the play. As his name signifies, he is both Jones, *i.e.* *Everyman* as well as a 'brute', symbolising the animal instincts and impulses which are common to all men and which always lurk beneath the surface, however civilised and polished a man may be. Thus Jones is a symbolic figure, but he has also his own individual and distinctive qualities. Attention throughout is focused on him, and the other characters are merely thin shadowy background figures, intended to throw his character and personality into sharp relief.

### His Personality

In the very opening scene of the play his personality has been described in detail. We are told that, "He is a tall powerfully built, full-blooded negro of middle age. His features are typically negroid, yet there is something 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 shrewd, suspicious, evasive. He wears a light blue uniform coat, sprayed, with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on his collar, cuffs, etc. His pants are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent leather laced boots with brass spurs, and a belt with a long barrelled, pearl-handled revolver in a holster complete his make up. "Yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it." This description clearly shows that his features may be negroid, but he is different from the other negroes and there is something distinctive about him. He has more intelligence, more strength of will, and is more self-confident than other members of the race who are generally crazy, weak of will and servile. *His gaudy dress is symbolic of savage fondness for loud colours.* But he is so majestic and stately in his manners that his gaudy dress does not make him look ridiculous. He has a way of carrying it off which is distinctive and unique.

**A Murderer and Ex-convict**

Brutus Jones is an ex-Pullman carter, a murderer and an escaped convict. He worked for ten years in the humble position of a carter. In a fit of uncontrolled rage, he murdered another negro, Jeff, for cheating at dice. He was sentenced to life-imprisonment, but made good his escape from the jail by killing the prison-guard. He reached an island of the West Indies, and within two years, by virtue of his cunning and superior intelligence, he became the emperor of the island. As a Pullman carter he had listened to the conversation of the whites, acquired a knowledge of their crooked ways and dishonest dealings, and used that knowledge effectively to subdue the natives and rule over them.

**Exceptionally Shrewd and Crafty**

Emperor Jones is exceptionally shrewd and crafty. He is also self-confident, bold and determined. His mental level is much higher than that of the other negroes, who are lazy, ignorant, servile and superstitious. Jones is easily able to befool them and subdue them and extort money from them. He is a crook and he robs the natives without any scruple. As he tells Smithers, the white trader and smuggler, he is a big thief but, "for little stealing" (like that of Smithers), one may be imprisoned, but for the "big stealing" (like that of Jones), one may be made an Emperor.

**His Cunning : Exploitation of His Subjects**

Jones is a very cunning man. He knows how to play with the blind faith of the common men and women of the island. Believing that the natives will never get silver anywhere in the island, he has spread a rumour that he can be killed only with a silver bullet. They believed it to be true and Jones is able to govern them like an autocratic emperor. "I got brains and I used 'em quick," he says, "And dere all dem fool bush niggers was kneelin' down and bumpin' deir heads on de ground like I was a miracle out o' de Bible. Oh, Lawd ! from dat time on I hav dem all eaten' out of my hand. I cracks de whip and dey jump through." He says to Smithers that it is "talking big" that makes one "big", as long as people believe his words to be true. He talks "large", he says, when he has no solid ground to support an idea. He knows how to befool the natives—learning their language and teaching them elementary English—have been a part of his foul tactics. His 'talking big' is a symbol of Yankee bluff.

**His Lust for Money**

He lusts for money, and has amassed huge wealth in a foreign bank on which he hopes to live comfortably for the rest of his life. He knows that "the emperor game" will soon come to an end, and then he will run away to the safety of that foreign country

and the enjoyment of his wealth. He says to Smithers, "You didn't s'pose I was holdin' down dis Emperor job for the glory in it, did you? Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to 'em an' I gets the money."

**Prudent and Far-sighted**

He is far-sighted enough to realise that his days as an emperor would soon come to an end, and so he has planned his escape with great care and foresight. He has buried food under a white stone on the edge of the great forest and has well familiarised himself with the route to the sea-coast. He tells Smithers, "And when I sees dese niggers gittin' up deir nerve to tu'n me out, and I see got all de money in sight, I resigns on de spot and beats it quick." The moment he learns that his guards, Generals, Cabinet Ministers and all the natives have gone on the hills, he leaves his palace and runs away. He says to Smithers "Look-ahead, white man. Does you think I se a natural bo'n fool? Give me credit fo' havin' some sense, fo' Lawd's sake. Don't you s'pose I se looked ahead, and made sho' of all de chances?" He is confident of not being caught or killed by the natives owing to the legend of the silver bullet: "*Silver bullet bring me luck anyway. I kin ouguess, outrun, outfight, an' outplay de whole lot o' dem all ovah de board any time o' de day or night.*"

**A Practical Man of the World**

Jones is a shrewd, practical man of the world, who considers everything from the utilitarian point of view. As we have already noted, he is not fascinated by the outward glamour of kingship, but uses it to extort money from the natives because he knows that money is the key to the enjoyment of life. He knows that soon he will have to run away and like a practical man of the world has made elaborate preparations for his escape, well in advance. *The legend of the silver bullet which he has created is another instance of his practical nature.* His attitude even towards religion is utilitarian. He has been a member of the Baptist Church, because the church promised to protect him from the devils and ghosts which the natives had sent in pursuit of him. But he also feigns respect for the witch-doctors while he is on the island, since "it don't git me nothing to do missionary work for de Baptist Church. I se after de coin, an' I lays my Jesus on de shelf for de time bein."

**Bold and Self-confident**

He is a bold and self-confident adventurer who boldly goes out of the main gate, and does not sneak out of the back door. He is quite sure that none of the natives would be able to stop him or prevent his escape. But by the time he reaches the edge of the forest, his self-confidence begins to give way. He is tired and hungry

and incessant beating of the tom-tom gets on his nerves. Then he fails to find his food, is apprehensive that the natives have stolen it, and this means that they have fore-knowledge of his plans. His inner terror makes him see the little forms of nameless Fears, and he shoots at them.

### His Degeneration

*This is the beginning of the process of his regression and disintegration.* Through the six forest scenes, step by step, he strips himself of his strapings of emperorship, and by the seventh scene is transformed into a primitive negro, wearing only a loin-cloth. This physical regression goes hand in hand with spiritual disintegration. Visions from his "personal unconscious", strike terror into his soul and these are followed by visions from his collective or "racial unconscious". Each vision disappears when he shoots at it, and each of the illusion leaves him more terror-stricken, more nervous than before. By the end he is a nervous wreck and is killed by a silver bullet fired at him by the natives. Ironically enough and contrary to his expectations, they could obtain enough silver to mould silver bullets to kill him.

### The Tragic Flaw—Pride

Thus does emperor Jones come to a tragic end. Pride and over-confidence are the tragic flaws in his character, and they cause his downfall, disintegration and death. He has always been contemptuous of his own laws, and also contemptuous of the natives over whom he ruled, and from whom he extorted his huge wealth. He considers himself to be superior both to Smithers and the natives over whom he rules. His pride is the pride of a bold adventurer, who has freed himself from bondage and servility, and by the use of his wits has acquired both power and pelf. Success has made him over-confident, proud and arrogant. Pride and over-confidence lead to his downfall and tragic end. Analysing the causes of his downfall one critic writes: "In Brutus Jones we have a powerful dramatic characterization of an individual destroyed by two conflicting impulses in his nature. There is, on the one hand, the arrogant, flamboyant, self-confident emperor, contemptuous of the servility and superstitiousness of his own race, his heart filled with the conviction that "for de big stealin' day makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall O' Fame." This is the lesson he has learned "in ten years service on de Pullman carts, listening, to de white quality talk"; on the other, there is the bewildered, frightened Negro, victim of his past, both racial and personal."

his progress in civilization has made him a bundle of nerves."

5. **'The Emperor Jones' as an Expressionistic Play**

Or

**The blending of realism and expressionism in the play**

Or

**"'The Emperor Jones' as a great play in the  
expressionistic mode"**

Or

**"O'Neill's rendering of Psychological reality"**

**Expressionism Defined and Explained**

**Expressionism is a dramatic technique which enables a drama-**



tist to depict 'inner reality', the soul or psyche of his personages. The emphasis shifts from the external to the internal 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 internalised, and what goes on within the soul becomes more important than the external action. "Instead of a dramatic sequence of events, there is concentration on 'the stream of consciousness', the surface of life becomes disjointed, scattered, as in a dream, to suggest the inner reality which lies beneath the surface. Not concerned with externals, the expressionist explores the idea, the source of conduct, until reality becomes sub-conscious, and character mere abstraction. Scenes are often brief; they sometimes succeed one another without time-sequence; they have neither order nor unity, and they suggest, as they alternate between reality and fantasy, between objective action and analysis, the disorderly, disconnected features of psycho-analysis."

### Expressionistic Technique : Salient Features

As J.W. Marriott rightly points out, "*a realistic play is based upon superficial observation of detail—a mere photography : but expressionism has been likened to an X-ray photography.*" Expressionistic method is used when the dramatist aims at a probe into the unconscious. In naturalistic or realistic plays, speech and action are used to give an idea of the working of the mind, but the method is inadequate because speech does not invariably reveal the working of the mind. Speech many a time is used to conceal rather than reveal the thought. No human being wants to be seen for what he really is. This is why an expressionistic play-wright depends for correct understanding of human psyche on slips of tongue, dreams, and informal moments of the concerned character. *In order to help the audience to understand the inside of a character, the expressionist uses symbols, metaphors, fables and allegories. He produces blurred figures on the darkened stage to personify good or bad motives. Even unseen voices are heard to express the secret thoughts of the character. Eerie noises, flickering lights and recurrence of the same sound, are used to depict the conflicts of wills, and struggles between the dark desires. In short, the expressionist uses the disconnected, distorted and fantastic form of a dream in order to approximate as closely as possible to the stream of consciousness of the given character.*"

### Masterly Rendering of Jones' Inner Terrors

*The Emperor Jones* was the first play in which O'Neill used Expressionistic technique to express the psychological terrors and obsessions of Brutus Jones, long before he had heard of Expressionism or had read the expressionistic plays of Strindberg. Writes Issac Goldberg "here we have a masterly presentation of the dege-

nerative process of fear. The Emperor, once he has fled the palace—the first step in his fear, despite all his bluster, which was a sign of fear in the first place—wanders through the forest in rapid regression to primitivity. The tom-tom effect is remarkable, and is the culmination of O'Neill's natural response to such sensory stimuli. This is no mere sound accessory, as it is in the early plays with their fog whistles, their raindrops, their whining children, and the whirl of the wireless. The 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 his own throbbing, feverish temples, and all the while it is our heart beating more and more rapidly as we follow his fate."

#### A Long Monodrama

"The play is one long soliloquy, practically. But fear talks much to itself. The visions that rise before his eyes are such as fear beholds, and truer to genuine reality than would be a blank stage. It is the surge of the Emperor's speech that makes these spectres live for us as they do for him. This part of the play is really a piece of monodrama, in that it achieves complete identification of the auditor with the actor, and presents surrounding reality not as it appears to those outside the action, but in subjective terms of the actor's self. There are hints of the cinema in the gradual unfolding of the past as the play progresses—a series of "flashbacks", as it were; but this is no mere imitation of a medium; it is inherent in the character of the play; it is the play that could not have been presented otherwise. Here symbol and psychology merge; analysts have found it a remarkable study, fundamentally as true of the white man as of the black; the Emperor Jones is, in addition, or simultaneously, an unobtrusive symbol of man's vain boast of power." In short, *The Emperor Jones* is a gripping play which would not have been possible without the use of expressionistic techniques.

#### Focus on the Central Figure

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 are not individualised. They serve merely as a background to throw into sharp relief the central figure. In *Emperor Jones* the attention is focused throughout on Brutus Jones, and the other characters are merely background figures. Thus Smithers serves as a foil to the Emperor and the slaves in the auction scene, the galley-slaves, the group of convicts led by the prison guard, are merely visions from his past intended to externalise the psychological terrors 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.

#### Extensive Use of Symbols

In an expressionistic play, the dramatist makes extensive use of symbols to render inner or psychological reality for which the resources of the ordinary language are not enough. O'Neill, too, has used symbols for this very purpose in the present play. To cite only a few examples: Brutus Jones symbolises the irrational and brutish in every man; the silver bullet is the symbol of his pride, and it also stands for worldly wealth and greed for money. The dark and dense forest symbolises 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 emperorhood is symbolic of his regression to his racial past, i.e. to an uncivilised negro. There are only a few examples chosen at random and they can be multiplied *ad infinitum*. Indeed, there is a whole network of symbols.

#### Extended Use of Interior Monologue

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 i.e. Scenes ii to vii which take place at night in the forest are extended pieces of monologue. They are in the nature of long soliloquies. It is 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, as his criminal past confronts him in the form of visions from his "personal sub-conscious, and later he is made to realise his oneness with the natives over whom he had tyrannised through racial memories which lurk still deeper down in his sub-conscious. Jones' stream of consciousness makes us fully aware of his spiritual disintegration and regression, and it is highly effective on the stage. Here is a soul in turmoil and the audiences are fully involved in this turmoil."

#### Blending of Realism and Expressionism

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 protagonist. However, O'Neill has skillfully avoided this pitfall of the expressionistic play. Indeed, realism is the basis of O'Neill's expressionism. Scene i and scene viii consist of realistic dialogue. 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 reactions of Smithers and the natives. It is explained to us through Lem that the natives had been casting spells all the night, and that they had also moulded silver bullets. The tom-tom continued to beat at one place though it seemed to Jones that it was coming nearer and nearer to him.

## The Fantasy Scenes : Straightforward Movement

Scenes ii to vii which take place at night in the forest, are expressionistic. But even in these fantasy scenes the movement is straightforward. O'Neill writes with an eye on the clock, and the passing of time is clearly indicated. Each scene is a further step in the 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" or his "collective unconscious" is presented, and the vision disappears as soon as a bullet is fired. Jones' spiritual regression goes side by side with his divesting himself, one by one, of the trappings of emperorhood and the thin veneer of western culture. By the end, not only has Jones regressed spiritually to his primordial self, physically also he has achieved total identity with his race.

### Some Unifying Factors

Edwin Engel writes, "After the first scene, the action occurs between dusk of one afternoon and dawn of the following day in, or on the edge of, the Great Forest. The successive episodes are synchronized with Jones' revolver, the chamber of which contains approximately as many cartridges as there are scenes; as the gun is discharged, the scene changes, approaching the point where the sixth bullet, the silver one, coincides with the completed reversion to savagery. The beating tom-tom, also serves as an important unifying factor, symbolizing as it does the pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive. Together with the revolver, it governs the inexorable movement towards the primeval, spatially and temporally. For the tom-tom beats in the camp of the 'bush niggers' to which Jones is helplessly drawn, and it beats in Jones' 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 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." *Thus the internal and external action have been fully synchronised and the formlessness and chaos of the usual expressionistic play has been skillfully avoided.*

### Conclusion

In short, "*The Emperor Jones* is the greatest of American plays in the expressionistic mode." As Mary T. David puts it, "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 unique features that made the play an instant success."