

## Dialectics of Self-fashioning in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*

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### Abstract:

American writers in the early twentieth century have focused on the constant battle between individual subjectivity and the social and political environment. Eugene O' Neill in *The Emperor Jones* (1920) portrays the life of Jones, an ex-convict to show the inevitability of frustrations that characterize many individuals in the impoverished African American community. O'Neill chose a foreign country and Jones for symbolic purposes as the protagonist voices his opinion, explains his role in society and draws attention to unfulfilled dreams and frustrations in a Hegelian dialectics of the master and slave bondage in an attempt to engage the audience's sympathy. Jones's struggle in the jungle is portrayed as search for a respected class identity rooted in a desire for a role that shows no bondage in the social and political life in America. Self-fashioning dialectics in *The Emperor Jones* (1920) becomes a form of resistance against the hegemonic negative attitudes towards African American men and emphasize the importance of taking leadership in the African American community.

**Key words:** African American, The Emperor Jones, Eugene O'Neill, Hegelian, modern plays

### Dialectics of Self-fashioning in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*

Self-fashioning as a term is coined by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). The concept has a unique relationship with the Renaissance and the way the aristocracy created an image that sought to portray themselves and their roles in society. Modern American writers, however, use a self-fashioning subjectivity to portray the protagonist as constantly clashing with the surrounding environment. In most modern literary works, therefore, a theme of a demanded recognition for individuals and especially for embittered and often voiceless groups of the lower classes becomes central in many plays. Moreover, modern playwrights emphasized self-fashioning attempts by protagonists as futile, and often an individual is often publicly staged as a representative of a larger disadvantaged group. Therefore, modern plays could be understood from a Hegelian dialectic which sheds light on the strenuous relationship between the individual and society. The Hegelian dialectic shows modern ways of thinking as trapping individuals and locking them up within frameworks that prohibit growth. The master-slave which constitutes a major component of the Hegelian dialectic emerges in the words and actions of the major character that portray a master-slave relationship which seems to intensify a feeling of loneliness and bitterness.

Eugene O'Neill showed the social and political situation in America in *The Emperor Jones* (1920). Davis King shows the major role O'Neill played on the American theatre in the book his wife Agnes Boulton published in 1958 *Part of a Long Story* about her marriage to Eugene O'Neill (1918-1929). The divorce according to King shows that Boulton had a different version of O'Neill who sought to dramatize in his plays his own life (King, 2010). In many of his plays O'Neill comments on the democratic state in America and particularly about the racial subject (Gassner, 1965). Furthermore, O'Neill saw blacks as struggling with whites issues and plagued with the same "tormenting desires" (Diggins, 2007, p. 138). In the *Emperor Jones*, the main character is a social type and the play is exclusively providing the protagonist with ways to ventilate his dreams and frustrations. The problems of the protagonist are portrayed as American problems and were later emphasized in other plays in the thirties of the twentieth century. O'Neill shared with other Irish playwrights the portrayal of the low self-esteem of middle class individuals in modern society (Hagan, 2010). Mark Kobernick later plays showed "that as O'Neill matured he was able to envision life dramatically in its fuller complexity" (Kobernick, 1989, p. 32). Anne Fleche also demonstrates how O'Neill attacks U.S. capitalism and greed and its exploitation in his plays (Fleche, 1997, p.12). O'Neill especially focused on the African American experience to reflect Jones's ambition to change the audience in transforming the negative nature of the relationship between black men, a large minority and who are mostly lower class individuals. Moreover, Jones in the play seems to call American society to view black individuals in a more positive light. The playwright uses the protagonist as a tool of self-refashioning of the lower classes' perceptions of themselves. The individual who is prone to weaknesses appears to the spectators as a tragic character. The problems of individuals are often seen in terms of a dialectic where the thesis of being a royal sovereign and an anti-thesis of being an ex-convict and a slave draw the reader's and spectator's attention to the issue of leadership in the African American community. Moreover, the audience is made aware that an initial step of a positive self-fashioning of a tormented psyche and a social position for the lower classes as a necessary element in improving their condition.

The setting of the play is a jungle symbolically portraying the difficult existence of a black individual. As the story unfolds, the consequent events prove the influence of the environment on the disintegration of the protagonist and his close circle of friends and servants. Jones speaks in the play uninvited before an imaginary audience stating his opinions. O'Neill, therefore, gives voice to lower class individuals through Jones who is trying to portray in a moment of revelation, declared in the midst of passionate events, his dreams and expectations. The recognition of his lonely situation in the jungle makes Jones come to the conclusion that he does not have to accept the hegemonic view of society because his fate has already been determined by greater forces beyond his control. Therefore, the protagonist and the spectators at the end come to the conclusion that Jones should not feel guilty for his actions with the natives or regret his dictatorship because an individual cannot transcend his class limitations. The master-slave relationship in the black protagonist's psyche becomes central to our understanding of the inability of a better situation for black males in American society.

The soliloquies in *The Emperor Jones* (1920) are carefully constructed by O'Neill. The purpose of the conversations is for the audience to come up with a social statement on the possibility of belonging to an upper class for the protagonist on stage. The play expands from a private struggle to a public arena so as to create an ambivalent attitude towards the major protagonist. For instance, the detached response from Mr. Smithers joining in the conversation with the "dumb" servant, as a member of Jones's household is presented with complexities. Jones's struggle, as portrayed in the monologues, shows him constantly fighting with other members of his tribe, who are the real hindrance in the social and political ladder and a memorable scene in the play deals with his fight with death at the end.

The master-slave relationship that Jones has with his subjects and social milieu is based on financial considerations. Moreover, Jones uses his authority as self-elected emperor to attain his goals. Jones already builds his expectations on capital as the dividing and classifying factor among classes. Jones's perspective is the social method practiced by the general public that codifies people with money as leaders and the poor as subjects. The play further shows the jungle as the place where the relationship becomes fully displayed for the audience and other characters, and the nature of the bondage becomes visible because the protagonist shows them the expectations coming from a relationship built on slavery. The idea of a slave is often associated with ownership and rights expected from the "slave." The problem in the situation is that the slave enters the relationship consensually accepting a submissive role. The nature of the problem emerges as the audience become fully aware that a subjugated person lacks a will of any sort.

The play has a popular attraction due to the nature of exposing an ordinary man who has the social and financial ambitions of many people. Jones has ideas that are relevant to popular culture and even modern musicians such as Bob Dylan might have probably taken some lines from the play (Pettit, 2012, p. 273). However, the audiences also see in Jones a wounded individual wandering as a homeless man and his only contact is a white male. The protagonist's call for solidarity is central to the play because the events of the play activate the audience's empathic imagination of the violence that Jones may have been subjected to prior to assuming his current position as emperor.

In terms of style, O'Neill uses symbols to portray social issues that demonstrate the bondage relationship of master and slave. There is an extensive use of symbols as in the title *The Emperor Jones* (1920), black music and the American dream. The symbols are interconnected. Furthermore, the emperor as a symbol is not only relevant to Jones but to Jones's relationship with other characters. The peculiarities of his person expose the divisions and rifts in his public and private affairs. Moments of his life arrive in time to reveal to the audience and the terrain provides extraneous subplots of problems of the African American community. The focus remains on Jones because every time he tries to move from self-centeredness to an absorbing embrace of others, the social milieu is inchoate with his plans and dreams. Furthermore, social members also prevent his initiatives by refusing to accept his position as a ruler. The inability to cope with social pressure reveals the play's thematic emphasis on ultimately addressing individual redemption. Jones states that he underwent a series of trials and discusses abuse which made him leave home at an early age. Jones's perspective on his case is used to criticize American society and to suggest that other cultures might have been able to construct a more just society. The contrast between the whites and Jones thrives on the ambiguity produced by presenting the reader with the possibility inherent in different ways of constructing and imagining the world. The problem of Jones's memory of a primordial past could not overshadow his experience of American society.

The white and black juxtaposition sheds light on the possibilities that black men are given in society. The inherited frustrations that are passed down from one generation to another are perhaps the basis on which the audience are asked to imagine a racial future. The hegemony that the older generation exerts on the newer one identifies the battlefield for black individuals as one characterized by an inner struggle among blacks. The play, however, does allow for a positive ending for blacks because a line of communication between both subjects and rulers opens and ends with the death of Jones as a new era commences.

Typical of many modern American plays, the funeral scene at the end of *Emperor Jones* (1920) shows the tragic ending that is presented in Arthur Miller's influential play *Death of a Salesman* (1949). The ending in both plays have emphasized middle and lower class social concerns especially the relationship between rulers and subjects as paramount in understanding and analyzing a modern society. O'Neill's portrayal of the lives of black men show Miller's emphasis on modern tragedy as belonging to the poor and middle class man irrespective of race and affirms positive feelings like forgiveness for the protagonists in audience members. The appeal also lies in the address to common issues of a person subjected to a position that are relevant to people from different cultural backgrounds. The universality of the ordinary, obscure and singular mark an individual's frustrations which have made both plays important as pieces of literature worthy of analysis. Jones's inability to act reflects the hardship and often fragmented efforts of integrating people in the social environment. Jones becomes a social case that presents the audience with an introspective way of how black individuals are perceived by the whole nation.

O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920) echoes earlier English works on the role that governments play in shaping individuals. In Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be A King* (1888). The novella shows the adventurous life that two British soldiers have undergone in British India and their attempts of becoming kings in Kafiristan Afghanistan (the name has been changed to Nuristan). The story is based on real life events that happened in Kipling's life and the narrator

of the story is a character modeled after Kipling himself. The two adventurers Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan are described as likeable to the narrator's own tastes. However, the narrator does not approve of their blackmailing. His sympathy, however, is centered on what they seem to think is their mission as he listens to their plans of becoming kings:

Therefore, such as it is, we will let it alone and go away to some other place where a man isn't crowded and can come up to his own. We are not little men, and there is nothing that we are afraid of except Drink, and we have signed a Contract on that. Therefore, we are going away to be Kings. (Kipling, 1888, p.1859)

The narrator through the adventurer's speeches emphasizes that the reader should regard the two individuals who attempt to engage in a task of becoming masters as a serious one and to be misunderstood by the reading public as a foolish concept of bigotry. On the contrary, their task seems a natural outcome of a government that has instilled in the average citizen an overpowering feeling of a white supremacy echoing his famous poem on "The White Man's Burden" (1899). Therefore, one finds in Kipling's poems such a feeling of a "double standard" employed by the government towards its own individuals as manifested in the poem of "The Widow at Windsor" (1892). The last stanza of the poem echoes Carnehan in the retelling of his adventure:

We' ave' eard o'' the Widow at Winsor,

It's safest to leave 'er alone:

For' er sentries we stand by the sea an' the land

Wherever the bugles are blown.

(Poor beggars!- an' don't we get blown!)

Take' old o'the Wings o'the Mornin',

An flop round the earth till you're dead;

But you won't get away from the tune that they play

To the bloomin'old rag over'ead!)

Then' ere's to the sons o' the Widow,

Wherever,'owever they roam.

'Ere's all they desire, an' if they require

A speedy return to their'ome.

(Poor beggars!-they'll never see'ome!) (Kipling,1892, p 1879).

Similarly, the narrator ends his story by reminding the readers of the nobility of his task as Carnehan states that "the Emperor in his habit as he lived-the King of Kafiristan with his crown upon his head. Poor old Daniel that was a monarch once" (Kipling, 1888, p. 1876).

Therefore, the frame narrative becomes a criticism through which the narrator becomes critical of the colonial situation and the hegemony of state over its own people. Moreover, the narrator is also portraying to the reader the general public's evaluation of the foolishness of the act of wanting a social and political status.

O'Neill in *The Emperor Jones* (1920) dramatizes Kipling's story because both writers emphasize stories of ordinary men in the wilderness as the means by which a narrative of supremacy emerges in western societies. The narrative technique in "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888) focuses on revealing the nobility of the two adventurers and winning the sympathy of the audience towards more compassion since the colonial task seems to be instilled by the government. The individual sees in taking advantage of the colonized nations as a simple and crude adventure of a retelling of a supremacist government that fails to uplift its own people and that the world has shrank into a crude struggle of two individuals who attempt a foolish mission of establishing a dynasty of "Emperors." The novel and the play both carry with it the pathology of the national inheritance of colonialism: impatience, distrust, and an ironic sense of ideals. The list of grievances arising from the outcomes of supremacy translates into a sluggish mainstream of a western concept that seeks in the nomadic quality of the venture a heroic status quo of ordinary individuals. The self-reliant quality of wanting to become kings expresses a mind narrowed, focused, fixed and impatiently fulfilling a longing of the promised fruit of a national supremacy.

*The Emperor Jones* (1920) has a limited number of major characters and discusses important topics related to youth and delivered with the "literacy of an ex-con" as the stage directions show Jones to be a semiliterate individual with a bombastic appearance. However, the stage directions also focus on his character because even though "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" (O'Neill, 1931, p. 150). Therefore, the playwright seems to emphasize the respectability and nobility of the protagonist. The sympathy that O'Neill shows to the audience lies primarily in the figure of the hunted who is unable to communicate to the world his adrenaline rush. He is consistently being pursued by powers beyond his own expectations.

The play portrays Jones's linguistic mistakes as revealing a lot of problems in his life. Jones in his speech addresses questions of social justice and the colloquial almost vulgar language becomes dominant and thematic. The democratic invitation to speak to a nonexistent audience reveals the rhetoric of a radical individualism in Jones who tries to show his viewpoint on the course of events. However, the privilege to ventilate his opinions in a jungle is shortly interrupted by apparitions urging him to hurry. This symbolic gesture to thwart his attempts of moving from the everyday peripheral to an imaginary center can only point to the larger obstacles facing black men. Critical opinion has often emphasized O'Neill's dramatization of the tragic loneliness of men and the fact that a motif exists in most of his plays which portrays men as victims of societies (Jayachandran, 2013, p. 68). O'Neill in particular found individual Western men to be vulnerable to the social drive of seeking and gaining political power. As Eienkel points out that "each man believes he is protected by his chameleon-like ability to play a certain role, ultimately the inability of James Tyrone and Brutus Jones to deal with the true reality of their audiences destroys them" (Eienkel, 2012, p. 110). Both playwrights, namely,

Eugene O'Neill and August Wilson therefore, regard the plight of the protagonists in the plays as an inevitable and mirroring the real problems of individuals.

Eugene O'Neill thus strikes with August Wilson a similar cord on the relationship of the governed and the governor in showing the symbolic role of the protagonist. What spectators see in August Wilson is the absent presence of a black lonely man unable to voice his opinion that is reminiscent of the visible and invisible process of the representations of race in American history and literature. Jones represents the problems of a supremacy that arises from being a citizen and the scenes in the forest highlight his loneliness. The audience is given an ample time to contemplate him for a long period of time and thereby the protagonist stands in the mind of the spectator to figure out the reasons and motivation behind his actions. The protagonist thereby reminds us of the futility of any individual aspirations and especially black males. Justin Elam in *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson* (2006) dedicates in a chapter entitled "Men of August" the importance that Wilson revealed in his analysis of the "historical stigmatization" imposed on black men and intended to represent and promote a view that is in "contradistinction to the mainstream perception of black men as a problem" (Elam, 2006, p. 128). Moreover, the struggles are overwhelming and many African American writers were sympathetic and demonstrated their support.

Contemporary African American playwrights such as August Wilson show the inability of black individuals and specifically the black man to uplift himself. The cyclical plays are a grand scale attempt at resurrecting African American culture. According to Shannon (2009) in "Framing African American Cultural Identity: The Bookend Plays in August Wilson's 10-Play Cycle". the book ends of plays which constitute a bridge for the rest of the cycle represent an attempt at a revision of cultural history (Shannon, 2009, p.38). The view is also shared by many critics (Gantt, 2009). Wilson found black men in society as being criticized for refusing to take part in the problems facing the black community. Wilson saw that the presence of black men was thinly veiled in American society and was often represented ambivalently in a stereotypical negative way. The picture was even worse in literature and Wilson tried to combat that negative image as one created by circumstances beyond any individual control. The reality of being pressured into individual choices is not limited to social pressures. Most importantly, Wilson comes to see the problem as becoming one of self-realized predictions in which black individuals are unable to escape the slave and master bondage inherent in the psyche of their existence.

O'Neill was a precursor for future African American writers in showing the inextricability of racial influences on the portrayal of black men. Wilson sums up the current tangible transformations of black individuals in a changing and expanding society in a rarely depicted positive manner because the plays are an empirical study of character that leads to the uncovering of the stated as well as the underlying reasons for the unacceptable behavior in black men of the lower classes. In *Fences* for example, Wilson shows the tragedy of the black individual (Wilson, 1991). Similar to Jones, Troy the garbage collector-promoted to garbage-truck driver is an illiterate men whose actions reveal an inhospitable society. The mistakes committed by Troy reveal a sub-text with a desire towards self-acknowledgment as he had repeatedly pointed out to his wife. Therefore, Troy's infidelity is portrayed as belonging to a larger social context in which spectators are encouraged to view his frustrations as a desperate attempt at self-refashioning according to standards which Troy hopes will be eventually accepted by society at the end of the play. The ventilation of the silenced and obscure individuals of the

African American community can also be traced by Wilson who provokes the audience to take another look at the men rather than disparaging the attempts made by individuals as ridiculous. Therefore, the cyclical nature of the plays indicate an ongoing treatment of a common theme that is prevalent among a community and the nature of the transgression as a tradition inherited and generated by narratives of a failed youth. The characters are the narrators of their stories who project their fears in performance. Furthermore, the protagonists reflect the darkness of their beings and surroundings. The validity of their own lives is judged in the performance of an alien environment that symbolically foreshadows the natural recurrent theme of defeat and slavery.

O'Neill's treatment of black men's status is similar to African American female writers such as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). The play focuses on Walter's internal struggles of being a father and husband who is barely making a living as a limousine driver. The hope of becoming wealthy is portrayed as an inciting factor in the play and is one that determines the relationship of the character to his community. The driving inner will by the protagonist to make his situation better is portrayed as belonging to himself since his wife Ruth is not exerting any pressures on her husband concerning the financial state of the family which is far from satisfactory. The connection between Walter and his environment is portrayed from the ostensible level as one of a clearly sympathetic playwright to the plight and the ambitions of an African American individual. The central authority of the text comes from a sympathetic playwright who regards the hardships of males in a community in which puts strain on both sexes. The play also displays a distinct observation of the notorious ignorance of historical background that most Americans suffer from when discussing and judging black men.

To briefly sum up a discussion on the social injustice demanded by society on the black individual is an inexhaustible topic. Several American playwrights have attempted to reveal the magnitude of the modern man's physical and psychological burden. *The Emperor Jones* (1920) shows O'Neill's use of a Hegelian dialectics of an internal monologue of a black individual who is both a royal and a slave, and the performance on stage shows the vulnerability of the lower classes and the futility of escaping class categorization and restrictions in a capitalist society. Therefore, "self-fashioning" becomes a heroic attempt of an individual member battling a larger and a more powerful existence of a hostile social milieu which denies leadership in the African American community to black individuals. The play is a powerful statement on the usefulness and possible heroism of making attempts by individuals in a modern society to become important in society even if the ending is tragic for the protagonist because the far-reaching positive effects for the community are immense.

### **Conclusion:**

Eugene O'Neill explored in *The Emperor Jones* the modern predicament of being an individual trapped in a master-slave relationship and unable to escape his social upbringing and environment. The protagonist in the play tried to self-fashion an identity separate from a society that denied an individual his worth. Therefore, a spectator sees the futile attempts performed by the individual to gain self-respect as a predicament and an indicator of the impossibility of gaining any respect. The play observed under the Hegelian dialectic allows the readers to view the actions of Jones as worthy of our sympathy.

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