

SYMBOLISM IN THE EMPEROR JONES

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Abstract

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (1888-1953) is one of the most renowned playwrights of the twentieth century. He is the father of modern American drama who has written more than sixty plays and regarded as the American Shakespeare. He has shaped the course of American Drama from 1915 to 1930. His works reveal a varied thematic and structural spectrum. O'Neill's works have taken American theatre out of its infancy, and at once endowed it with strength and majesty. They touch upon a large variety of themes, and show theatrical experimentation with virtually all sorts of devices and patterns. Drama is the most objective of the arts, but this great dramatist made personal experience the basis of his plays. This makes an understanding of his life and character indispensable for a proper appreciation of his plays.

All O'Neill's plays are great tragedies but they are not tragedies of the conventional sort in the Aristotelian tradition. They are tragedies with a difference. Their themes and subject matter may be the same, but their form is different. O'Neill's revival of tragedy, unhappy ending, romantic novelty of scene, realism of situation, characters in the depiction of sailors, prostitutes, farmers, negroes, and others of humble station, adoption of Freudian psychology, passionate absorption in the problem of man's rapport with himself and with God, have heightened him to the peak of honour in American Literature. The present study *The Emperor Jones* (1920) created a landmark in the history and growth of American drama and won for O'Neill a permanent place in it. The play owed its popularity and fame to its theatrical rather than dramatic power. It is a study of panic fear in the breast of a half-civilized Negro. It deals with the colorful and dramatic career of Jones. It is an expressionistic play using various symbols.

The Emperor Jones is mainly an expressionistic play and the expressionist seeks to solve the problem by representing the soul of man in the form of external symbols. O'Neill uses metaphor, fable or allegory. He produces figures moving obscurely on a darkened stage to personify good or bad motives. He gives words to unseen voices to express the secret thoughts of a man's mind. O'Neill's link with the expressionistic school becomes quite clear because he has also used a number of symbols in *The Emperor Jones*. There is symbol of the silver bullet, the Great Forest, the tom-tom, and the Crocodile god etc., attracts the admiration of every reader.

The Emperor Jones is the first of the most imaginative of O'Neill's plays, in which direct symbolism and fantasy begin to take the place of more realistic characters who are only indirectly symbolic. In this play, the silver bullet is the symbol of materialism, of that, superstition by which the dishonest rich have made the world believe that their very riches could save them from the revenge of their victims, just as Jones had made the natives believe that he could be killed only by a silver bullet. The silver bullet is also the symbol of the white man's mask under which he works. It is the symbol of his pride of release from bondage, the fetish of his particular pride.

Both button and bullet symbolize the essence of the self of the protagonists, and in both, that self is called an “Emperor.” Peer is the Emperor of the Gyntiana Self, dreaming of ruling Petropolis in the kingdom of Gyntiana, but he is crowned in a Cairo madhouse and his government, founded on “wishes, appetites and desires,” controls a kingdom of lies, dreams and cheating illusions. The Emperor of self is an Emperor of self-deception, whose life-like forms the trumpery substance of his existence. At the end of his life, he realizes that he is empty, an onion stripped of exterior covering to reveal nothing at the center. Down on all fours in the forest, he compares himself to an animal and writes his own mock-epitaph.

The setting is symbolic. The forest with its sensuous blackness represents nature, while its primeval terror represents the primitive consciousness.. Dr. Raghavacharyulu writes, “The edge of the Great Forest is an extensive symbolization of both the glory and horror of his freedom, of both his terrifying patience and his sensuous isolation. The flight is from himself, and the imitated values of the white man are only a temporary defense against the unbearable reprisals of human freedom. Unknown forms of fear and terror emerge from the forest shades, and the power of blackness haunts him, injuring his pride and crippling his will.”

In fact standing at once for the glory and horror of human freedom, the forest assumes numerous shapes (e.g., prison, auction-room, ship, and altar). The flight through the forest symbolizes psychological regressive flight from one’s own self. As mentioned by Doris Falk, the “stone altar near the tree combines the sexual and the religious symbols as if to signify that physical and spiritual births are one.” Jones’s feeling that he has come to a familiar place indicates symbolically that he has returned to the primitive stage of evolution. And now evil which has been his god appears as a crocodile and demands life. In killing it, therefore, Jones kills himself. The action starts in the afternoon which signifies confidence, continues at night which is the symbol of terror, retrogression and disintegration, and ends at dawn which stands for retribution.

The beating of the tom-tom is equally symbolic. According to Edwin Engel, “The beating tom-tom symbolizes the all – pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive. The

tom-tom beats in the camp of the 'bush niggers' to which Jones is helplessly drawn and it beats in Jones's body, representing the primitive blood which charges through his arteries. Beginning at a rate corresponding to the normal pulse beat and only faintly heard, it becomes perceptively louder and more and more rapid as Jones becomes increasingly terror-stricken, as his visions are regressively aboriginal, as he approaches the camp of the bush niggers, when he is finally killed with a silver bullet, the tom-tom instantly ceases.

The tom-tom drum further symbolizes the pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive. With its sounds the primitive blood of Jones charges through his arteries. Furthermore, the throb of the tom-tom is the most effective device used in the play to objectify the inner terrors of Jones. As stated by Chaman Ahuja, "At first a call to war, it gradually becomes a presentiment of a brooding fate, i.e., a call to death; next, it merges with Emperor Jones' visions of the slaves working to its beat; and later still, it becomes successively the voice of his internal guilt and the throbbing of his temples. What is more, all the while it is our own heart, beating more and more rapidly as we follow it. The tom-tom that projects Jones' rising panic is part of the psychological action; but since that is the dramatic action as well, we may say that through the tom-tom the symbolic and the dramatic actions are synthesized. What is more, by inducing panic in the audience, it helps them to share emotions of the terrified Jones – a wonderful feat in participation mystique." However, the sound which is most important, and which is heard persistently throughout the play is the beating of the tom-tom on a distant hill.

The tom-tom sound is the symbol of relentless destiny of Jones. Its increased volume of sound and rapidity of beat induces terror and nervousness in *The Emperor Jones*. At the end of Scene VII, Jones sees in it some baffled but revengeful power. As mentioned by Isaac Golden, "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."

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

O’Neill has made use of color symbolism in many of his plays, such as, *Thirst*, *Warnings* and *The Emperor Jones*. The emperor’s audience chamber has whitewashed walls, a floor of white tiles, and the portico having white pillars. Since Brutus is a Negro, a black man, the white colour has both a moral and a racial meaning. Jones has made a spectacular rise by imitating the shrewd and clever ways of white men, both the Americans and the Europeans (Smithers), but his blackness in the form of his heredity causes his tragedy. In this flight through the forest, he falls into the depths of the black forest of his ugly past. It should also be noted that whiteness is also the symbol of death – in – life, Jones’s white imperial existence is nothing but a death-in-life, and to Smithers whiteness is the symbol of the tomb. The scarlet colour has also its significance in the play. To Jones it is a symbol of imperial authority, but in fact, it stands for materialism, sinfulness, violence and blood. Again and again Smithers makes use of its last meaning by swearing “bloody” and “bleeding”. He calls Jones “the bleedin’ nigger.”

The characters are also used as symbols. Brutus stands for the brute power of man, his animal instincts and impulses. Thus, Brutus Jones is the symbol of everyman. He is also a symbol of man’s vain boast of power. He as the Negro is the symbol of displaced superstitious humanity, of innocence and violence, of elemental simplicity and primal humanity. His blackness and his African ancestry, his life-pattern is of special interest in the play. The madness of the fear-obsessed Jones demonstrates that man is the sum not only of his own past experiences but also those of the race, a notion that is based upon the assumption of a psychical as well as a physical continuity between ancestor and descendant. Loss of his hat, coat, spurs, represents the stripping off the layers of civilization.

The hopeless flight through the forest of Jones is symbolic of a flight from self. Doris V. Falk finds, “Jones’ hopeless flight through the forest is not from the natives at all, but

from himself-the fundamental self from which his blind pride and its self-image have so long separated him, and which inevitably comes into its own. This is the primary symbolism of his movement of the forest in a circle, hypnotized by the rhythm of a drum beat and ending where he began. The progress of Jones is progress in self-understanding, it is the stripping off of the masks of self, layer by layer, just as bit by bit his emperor's uniform is ripped from his back, until at the end he must confront his destiny-himself-in nakedness."

In this play, the Negro is the symbol of displaced superstitious humanity, of innocence and violence, of elemental simplicity and primal humanity. Jones is a symbol of man's vain boast of power. His blackness, his primitive African ancestry, his life-pattern of pursuit and flight are of special interest in the play, but this play cannot be taken as O'Neill's contribution to the study of the Negro problem, the play is less concerned with the Negro problem than with the ultimate meaning of man's life in the mysterious universe confronting him. Jones is not a Negro but a human representative with all the weakness and strength of the sons of Adam. Symbol and psychology merge well in his character. In him the dramatist has not presented a realistic picture of a Negro character. Like Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, he is fundamentally a man and his experiences are true of the white man as well as the black.

In his use of symbols in *The Emperor Jones*, O'Neill acknowledged the validity of Jung's theory that great literature strikes a responsive chord in all men because its central metaphors can be traced to archetypal images buried in the unconscious mind of humanity. In Jung's words: "The secret of artistic creation and of the effectiveness of art is to be found in a return to the state of *participation mystique*- to that level of experience at which it is man who lives, and not the individual, and at which the weal or woe of the single human being does not count, but only human existence. That is why every great work of art is objective and impersonal, but none the less profoundly moves us each and all."

Thus O'Neill achieves a dynamic synthesis of symbol and dramatic action. The focus of the play is inward, but it is consistently inward, and the final revelation is the logical climax of revelation which has gone before. However, as always in O'Neill's best plays, outward reality

has the first and the last word. Brutus Jones emerges as unforgettably himself; a gigantic figure brought low by the very forces which exalted him; universal, but not Man; individual. The greatness of O'Neill's plays are directly autobiographical works. They are clearly as much a triumph of self-confrontation as of their achieved mastery of dramatic form. Their late matured, painfully bared directness of gaze surely reveals the root of O'Neill's variously projected patterns of entrapment, of the recurrent idea of a 'curse' of the usurpation of the present condition by the past.

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Cf. Stark Young's review in *The New republic*, December 30, 1925.