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Race Relation In Eugene O'neill's Play "The Emperor Jones": Interpretation Of The Character Of 'Brutus Jones'.

Abstract:

"The Emperor Jones" (1920) by O'Neill is one of his finest plays that had won the admiration both of the spectators and critics. It is the first serious tragedy about a Negro. The play shows that even an ordinary American Negro could be the subject of a tragedy and Brutus Jones, a Negro, might rise to lofty heights of a tragic hero. According to some critics the play may be interpreted as a record of the shedding of masks acquired by the Negroes through their association with the Whites, and the gradual attainment of self-knowledge through sufferings. According to some other critics the play is a study in the gradual return and disintegration of Brutus Jones and his return to his primitive state. In the play there is the use of a Negro as the leading character. But it is not a question of superiority or inferiority of a race, but of the historical symbol which the Negro Brutus has become through centuries of bondage.

Keywords: Negro, race, civilization, blacks, colonial, Whiteman

Apparently the story of the tragedy is of a pull-man porter who was arrested for killing another Negro in a crap game, who broke jail by killing the White foreman. He escaped to a small island of the West Indies and there he applied the tricks of the Whiteman and soon he made himself 'emperor' of the superstitious Negroes. With the assistance of Smithers, the Whiteman trader, he has worked out his scheme of robbing the natives—"Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does. For the little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late. For de big stealin' dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o' Fame when you crooks." Smithers has no respect for the Negro. He accuses the Negroes—"You blacks are upto some devilment. This palace of' is is like a bleedin' tomb" In the play O'Neill shows the feeling of panic and fear in the breast of a half-civilised Negro. He represents the breakdown of a Negroid mentality under the stress of fear and fatigue.

Jones's "Negroid" characteristics emphasize his physicality and thus sustain the racist stereotype of a black predisposition for physical pursuits over intellectual ones. Jones's distinctiveness and "grandeur" lie in his self-reliant individualism, a hallmark of the idealised American character which is at the root of the crudest capitalism and imperialism. This collection of white and black features is an instance of what Fanon terms "the white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body"; moreover, it limits the problem of colonial identity and the deferrals and displacements it engenders. Jones highlights his Emersonian self-reliance when he tells Smithers that his "luck" in convincing the natives about the silver bullets is of his own making: "I makes dat luck, you heah? I loads de dice! Yessuh!"

Brutus Jones is the chief character in 'The Emperor Jones'. The whole plot revolves around him. He is both 'everyman' as well as a 'brute'. As brute he symbolises the animal instincts and impulses. Congenitally all men possess these characteristics in smaller or larger measure. They lurk beneath the surface. Even civilized men are not totally immune from this. Although Jones has been symbolised as such, yet he has his own individuality. Jones is a full tall, powerfully built, -blooded Negro of middle age. There is something distinctive about his face. He has strength of will. He is brimming with confidence. His eyes have a sign indicating his inherent intelligence. He is shrewd and suspicious. Although he is negro, yet he is much different from other negroes on account of his own individual distinctive qualities. His gaudy dress is symbolic of savage fondness for loud colours. He is majestic in his bearing. Jones is very shrewd and crafty. He is self –confident, bold and possesses determination not to be shaken easily. He befools others and extorts money from them cleverly. He has no regret in unlawfully depriving the natives of their money and property.

Jones is a murderer and an ex-convict who has escaped. For ten years he worked in an humble position. He murdered another negro, Jeff in anger for cheating at dice. He was sentenced to life-imprisonment, but he escaped. He reached an island and by his cunningness became the emperor of that island. He had listened to the conversation of the whites and very intelligently and shrewdly had learnt of their crooked ways and dishonest dealings. He was clever enough to use that acquired knowledge in his interest. He is a great exploiter. He plays with the blind faith of the common men and women of the island. He has spread a rumour all around that he can be killed only with a silver bullet. He is aware of the fact that the people of the island would never get silver. So, in their opinion he would remain invincible. He thrives on the beliefs of the people and is in an easy position to govern the island as the emperor. He knows how to befool the natives. So, he exploits them in many ways to his own advantage.

Jones has insatiable lust for money. He has amassed huge wealth and deposited it in a foreign bank. He knows that his game of playing the emperor of the island would be over sooner or later. Therefore, he has planned in advance to run away to the foreign country when such an eventuality arises. He would then enjoy the money in that foreign country. This is his cunning as well as his meanness. He is far-sighted. He is quite aware that his exploitation of the people would soon end, and therefore, he has planned well for his future. He has buried the food under a white stone on the edge of the forest. He has well familiarised himself with the route to the sea-coast. As soon as he comes to know that his guards and ministers and all the natives have gone on the hills, he leaves his palace and runs away. He is confident that he cannot be caught, nor can be killed by the natives owing to the legend of the silver bullet.

Jones is cunning, clever, shrewd and far-sighted. He is a practical and worldly-wise man. He considers everything from the utilitarian point of view. He uses his eminent position as the emperor of the island to extort money since it only with the money that he can enjoy life fully well. He is not the least fascinated by the grandeur of the imperial authority. His attitude towards religion is also utilitarian. He had become the member of the Baptist Church, because the Church had promised to protect him from the ghosts sent by the natives in pursuit of him. Jones is bold and self-confident. He boldly goes out of the main gate instead of sneaking out of the back door. He is confident of his sure and safe escape. When he reaches the edge of the forest, his self-confidence is a bit shaken. He feels tired and hungry. Incessant beating off the tom-tom disturbs him much. He fails to find food.

Brutus Jones is losing hope. He is getting disheartened. His disintegration starts. His down fall is imminent. He strips himself of his strapings of emperorship slowly and gradually, and then is transformed into a primitive negro. He wears only loin-cloth. Physical regression and spiritual disintegration go side by side. Visions from his unconscious terrify his soul. Visions from his collective or racial unconsciousness also follow. As he shoots at them, the visions disappear one by one. He gets terror-stricken. He becomes totally nervous. He is killed by a silver bullet fired at him by the natives. The natives of the island had managed to procure silver in sufficient quantity and make bullets out of it so as to kill Jones. Pride and over-confidence bring the tragic end of Brutus Jones. They act as the tragic flaw. He was contemptuous of others- Smithers as well as the natives. He has acquired power pelf by stratagem. Instant success had made him proud and arrogant, cruel and inhuman. Pride and over-confidence led to his disgrace and death.

Jones, as has already been noted, is an individual and a type. The play is in essence the story of failure of science and materialism. In Jones' character we find a sharp criticism of

modern materialistic civilisation. Jones is Negro only in Appearance. By outlook and training he is an American Whiteman. He acquired the Whiteman's cynicism, shrewdness, efficiency, selfishness and cupidity. He shares with the Whiteman the utilitarian attitude to religion. He is rather the American 'success story' in black face.

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