

Eugene O'Neill's Blackness in *The Emperor Jones*

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Abstract—In modern American Drama, the playwrights seemingly have not been studying racial representations enough. Therefore this paper explores the black representation of Eugene O'Neill, attempting to help make up for this literature regret. *The Emperor Jones* of the playwright reveals his intimate involvement with his racial counterpart, who appears in play after play. This paper proves the United States to be a post-colonial society through critical analysis by borrowing current theories of race (blackness and whiteness) and post-colonial theory.

Index Terms—Eugene O'Neill, blackness, *The Emperor Jones*, racialism post-colonialism

I. EUGENE O'NEILL'S HISTORICAL POSITION IN AMERICAN DRAMA

In order to study in depth Eugene O'Neill's approach to blackness it is more than necessary to first historically position the playwright and his work. As T. S. Eliot argues in his influential essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," all writers partake in tradition, and O'Neill is no exception. As he has left his lasting mark on American drama, he also was shaped himself by prior traditions of American literature and, more specifically, of American theatre. These literary traditions mainly relied on stereotypes in their depiction of non-whites such as Sambo and Uncle Tom. Such stereotypes mainly served a sociopolitical objective: they reflected and confirmed the Anglo-American image of the Afro-American.

Eugene O'Neill occupies a distinctive place in American drama. As an Irish-American, his concern for the black American may be considered unusual. Yet some scholars cite his cultural identity as a valid reason for his interest. According to Virginia Floyd's *Eugene O'Neill at Work* (1981), the playwright, motivated by the discrimination against his Irish-American family by "wealthy Yankee New Londoners," determined to explore and to expose injustice, especially against nonwhites (p. x v iii). Deborah Wood Holton (1995) is one of many scholars to point out the links between O'Neill's writings and his travels, especially to the rain forests of Honduras in 1909, his experience as a reporter for the New London Telegraph, and his friendships with black Americans, especially with Joe Smith (p.32). Smith, the model for some of O'Neill's black characters, was a black gambler whom O'Neill met in 1915 at the Hell Hole, an Irish saloon in Greenwich Village. Virginia Floyd (1981), notes that they were close friends for almost twenty years (p. x v iii). Louis Sheaffer (1968) describes Joe Smith as "a quiet good-natured Negro gambler" (p.424) who was also "an authority on the Negro community of Greenwich Village" (p.425). O'Neill believed Smith's experiences reflected black life in America and relied on Smith's stories for his plays and black characters. This exposure to black life made the dramatist "particularly aware of and sympathetic to the problems of blacks. As a result of his own experiences and those of his friends, he became a champion of victims of discrimination, the outcasts of society" (Floyd, 1981, p. 521).

There is no doubt that Eugene O'Neill was genuinely concerned about the fate of the black American. While his black representations began with minor West Indian characters, as in *Thirst* (1913) and *The Moon of the Carabbees* (1917), his later plays focused more directly on African-Americans, their fates, and interactions with white society. His last one-act with black characters, *The Dreamy Kid* (1918) was indeed an all-black play bringing to life O'Neill's first black American characters. His most controversial "black play" (and his most complex one) remains *The Emperor Jones* (1920) with its atavistic black protagonist, Brutus Jones. Eugene O'Neill was drawn throughout his career to investigating the fate and psyche of blacks. How successful was O'Neill in his depiction of blackness? The question should, in part, be considered in terms of the obstacles the dramatist had to contend with. First, O'Neill, as a white American, had to transcend the "barrier" of his own skin color and to identify with a group of people he was not too familiar with. Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer (1991), direct our attention to the same complication: "As a northerner with no experience in the mixed society of the South, O'Neill had small acquaintance with the black psyche and the deeper conflicts of racial antagonism and southern segregation" (p. 252). O'Neill succeeded in seeing through and surpassing these racial myths.

Euro-American critics have not hesitated to speak highly of O'Neill's efforts and achievement. On the other hand, although African--American criticism, too, commend O'Neill for being one of the first white American playwrights to

treat black characters with seriousness and sympathy, he is criticized by many for being unable to avoid black stereotypes in his plays. Sterling Brown (1993) may be among the very few black critics to praise O'Neill for transcending these stereotypes and introducing "a tragic Negro to Broadway" (p. 201). More representative of current black critical attitudes is Deborah Wood Holton (1995) who criticizes the "blind spot" of O'Neill regarding black culture (p. 33) and his "inadequacy at interpreting black life" (p. 38). The racial debate surrounding O'Neill's plays continues today. In the next part "The Emperor Jones", I will respond to these evaluations of O'Neill's black characters. Were they stereotypical, yet well-intentioned, responses to blackness or did O'Neill surpass his predecessors and contemporaries in his understanding and portrayal of the black experience?

II. *THE EMPEROR JONES*

The obvious shift in Eugene O'Neill's black portraiture occurred in 1918 with *The Dreamy Kid* as he began to focus on black characters who had lives and voices separate from those of his white characters. These African-Americans began to dictate the plot and the content of the play, thereby signifying a crucial modification in the dramatist's attitude. Building upon the foundation of *the Dreamy Kid*, *The Emperor Jones* (1920) presented American audiences with a strong, unconventional, and controversial black character, which also resulted in the fame of Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson as dazzling actors. Although the play has introduced a new phase on the American stage, *The Emperor Jones* has met, since its debut, both open hostility (usually from African-American scholars) and lavish praise (usually from Euro-American critics) for the depiction of its protagonist, Brutus Jones. One explanation for the dispute lies in O'Neill's complex vision in this work; the main character and the play itself are so multi-layered that clashing interpretations can comfortably coexist.

Brutus Jones, a black American from Harlem, is a self-proclaimed Emperor on a small island in the West Indies where the play is set. In American, he has first killed a black man, Jeff, for cheating at craps and later in prison, he has killed the white guard, broken out of prison and fled the United States. On this West Indian island, he works for a white Cockney trader, Smithers, and later promotes himself to the position of Emperor by deceiving the natives into believing that he is more or less beatable and can only be destroyed with a silver bullet, a metal the West Indians do not possess. "And dere all dem fool bush niggers was kneelin 'down and bumpin' their heads on de ground like I was a miracle out o'de Bible. Oh Lawd, from dat time on I has them all eatin's out of my hand. I cracks de whip and dey jumps through" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1036). Meanwhile, Jones knows that his reign as Emperor is limited and is soon coming to an end.

At the outset of *The Emperor Jones*, it is this image, one of an invincible ruler that we receive of Brutus Jones. His maid, the old native woman, begs Smithers in "frantic terror", "No tell him! No tell him, Mister!" the big secret that Jones's subjects have deserted him (O'Neill, 1988, p.1032). The woman is clearly both terrified of the Emperor and is in awe of the "Great Father", as she calls him (p. 1032). However, her assumed respect for the Emperor clashes with Smithers's irreverence for Jones when Smithers discovers the natives are planning a revolution to depose the Emperor: "Serve' im right! Puttin' on airs, the stinkin' nigger! 'Is Majesty! Gawd blimey!" (p. 1033). Smithers, the only white man on the West Indian island and in the play, resents Brutus Jones's transgression of his social status as a black man by seizing power. O'Neill thus begins his fascinating analysis of the oppressed black psyche in relation to whiteness.

Before I offer a close reading of the protagonist, another character deserves some attention. Smithers, the embodiment of whiteness in this play, is the very first character to appear on stage, and the playwright describes his expression as being "one of unscrupulous meanness, cowardly and dangerous" (p. 1031). He possesses no admirable traits and remains throughout the play a mean character. While O'Neill's lack of regard for his character may in part be understood as the result of O'Neill's cultural bias as an Irish-American towards the English, it marks an unusual authorial decision by a white writer to represent his own racial group. His arrogance towards Jones derives from a racist outlook on life, which carries through to his dealings with the natives. For example, he readily accuses the fearful old woman of having stolen something, and when she denies the charge, calls her "Bloody Liar!" (p. 1032). Yet another one of his accusations, "You blacks are up to some devilment," reveals how he has intellectually distanced himself from the black population of the island (p. 1032). "You blacks" signals the arbitrary distinction between "us white" and "you blacks," a superb example of the Othering mechanism. In his blatant racism, he dismisses the old woman as "yer black cow," a colonialist humiliating expression for dehumanized black subjects. It is mainly on these elements of racial loathing that Smithers's disgust with Brutus Jones is built, whereas he also fears him because of the latter's physical strength and authority.

Opposed to this mean emblem of whiteness, Emperor Jones provides a welcome relief despite his many flaws. In his often-detailed stage directions, O'Neill emphasizes that Jones has "an underlying strength of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect," and respect he inspires because of his grandeur on stage (p. 1033). The most innovative and puzzling element in O'Neill's depiction of this black character is the dual role Jones occupies: the colonized in America and the imperialist on the West Indian island. O'Neill successfully and slowly reveals, decades prior to Frantz Fanon's theories on the effects of colonization on the colonizer and the colonized, how Jones's identity has been forged by this binary existence: "From stowaway to Emperor in two years! Dat's goin' some!" (p. 1035). Having suffered at the hands of his white oppressors in the United States, Jones excels by learning the art of government from them. From the site of the colonized, Jones has proceeded to that of the colonizer as he masters the power game of whites. Jones owes his superiority over his black subjects to the white man's strategies. The black man

whose ancestors were the slaves of white men now takes advantage of his own kind, “savages” living on this island in the West Indies.

Both Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi have convincingly shown in their work that the colonized group, constantly undermined by their oppressor with an ill-supported assertion of their inferiority, seek self-esteem by identifying themselves with their “superiors,” those guilty of instilling in them this inferiority complex in the first place.

Because no other solution is left it, the racialized social group tires to imitate the oppressor and thereby to deracialize itself. The “inferior race” denies itself as different race. It shares with the “superior race” the convictions, doctrines, and other attitudes concerning it.

Having witnessed the liquidation of its systems of reference, the collapse of its cultural patterns, the native can only recognize with the occupant that “God is not on his side.” The processor, through the inclusive and frightening character of his authority, manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular a pejorative judgment with respect to his original forms of existing.

This event, which is commonly designated as alienation, is naturally very important. It is found in the official texts under the name of assimilation. (Fanon, 1967, *African Revolution* p. 38)

Fanon’s theory of assimilation applies to Brutus Jones to a considerable extent. Jones is deracialized in the colonial values and strategies he has grasped and the colonial role he has appropriated. He is also alienated from his own racial group in that he has chosen to exploit them. However, Jones’s alienation is not so devastating because he does not go so far as to deny his blackness. Therefore, the white mask Brutus Jones wears is not a perfect fit.

The Emperor Jones also sheds light on colonial strategies. Jones’s conversation with Smithers in Scene 1 is revealing in many respects, because the two men, knowing each other’s schemes, can be open and honest with each other in a way they can’t be with the natives. In this scene, Jones explains to the Cockney trader, for instance, that he has put on a show of royalty for the natives only to pull the wool over their eyes in order to attain his own goals: “De fuss and glory part of it, dat’s only to turn de heads o’de lowflung, bush niggers dat’s here. Dey wants de big circus show for deir money, I gives it to ‘em an’ I gits de money” (O’Neill, 1988, p. 1035). Usually, colonizers take advantage of natives also by burdening them with taxes, something Jones has already done, according to Smithers: “Look at the taxes you’ve put on ‘em! Blimey! You’ve squeezed ‘em dry!” (p. 1035). Brutus Jones has also studied the natives’ language so as to be able to exploit them even better. “And ain’t I got to learn deir lingo and teach some of dem English befo’ I kin talk to ‘em? Ain’t dat wuk?” (p. 1036). Linguistic knowledge for Jones is merely an implement for power, and he uses it to further his colonial interests. Finally, O’Neill comments on the role religion plays in colonialism. When Smithers blames Jones for adopting the natives’ religion and forsaking Christianity, Jones explains that is part of his game:

SMITHERS—Ho! You’ aven’t give much ‘eed to your Baptist Church since you been down ‘ere! I’ve ‘eard myself you ‘ad turned yer coat an’ was takin’ up with their blarsted witchdoctors, or whatever the ‘ell yer call the swine.

JONES—(vehemently) I pretends to! Sho’ I pretends! Dat’s part o’ my game from de fust. If I finds out dem niggers believes dat black is white, den I yells it out louder’n deir loudest. It don’t git me nothin’ to do missionary work for de Baptist Church. I’s e after de coin, an’ I lays my Jesus on de shelf for de time bein’. (p.1042)

O’Neill thus exposes not only Jones’s scheme but also the colonial scheme in general. Jones’s success is built on these tactics, but it does not come without a certain loss, either. As Peter Saiz (1993) points out, Jones’s “tragedy lies in his succumbing to recreating the oppression of the Whites on his own people. Jones, who has the potential to be a liberator, is, after all, just another enslaver” (p. 36). Jones has sold his soul for money, and rather than decolonizing himself or others, he colonizes an innocent group of people and is himself locked into a cruel role.

In order to function truly and successfully as a colonizer, Jones has to ingest the Manichean thinking colonization dictates. Jones’s contact with the white culture has taught him to despise blackness. Consequently, the Emperor has no respect for the natives of the island over which he rules. His self-satisfaction with having taken advantage of the “stupidity” of the “bush niggers,” whom he also describes as “low-flung” and “trash,” discloses his own ingestion of Euro-American values. Indeed, Jones’s approach to the West Indies, unfortunately, replicated the Western attitude to Africa Fanon (1968) discusses in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals”(p. 211). Jones, likewise, wholeheartedly believes in his own myth that the natives are his inferiors and, therefore, deserve to be poorly treated. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi (1965) explains very well why the colonizer who accepts his role has to construct and rely on such myths:

With all his power he must disown the colonized while their existence is indispensable to his own...Having become aware to the unjust relationship which ties him to the colonized, he must continually attempt to absolve himself. He never forgets to make a public show of his own virtues, and will argue with vehemence to appear heroic and great. At the same time his privileges arise just as much from his glory as from degrading the colonized. He will persist in degrading them, using the darkest colors to depict them. (p.54)

As a colonizer, in order to survive and succeed in this capacity, Brutus Jones has to separate himself from his subjects. It is no wonder that Jones downplays a possible racial identification with the natives and instead highlights his difference from them. He tells Smithers, “Think dese ign’rent bush niggers dat ain’t got brains enuff to know deir own names even can catch Brutus Jones?” (O’Neill, 1988, p. 1040). Jones sees his civilized nature and his intellect as the basis of his superiority to the natives: “Is you civilized, or is you like dese ign’rent black niggers heah?” (p. 1049).

Brutus Jones believes he has the right to reign over the natives because he himself has learned to improve on his blackness by identifying himself with whiteness and the civilization it signifies. O'Neill's comprehension about colonialism differ markedly from other similar literary accounts since his protagonist is black rather than the more common one of the white colonizer. O'Neill thus also shows at work the mind of a racist black man who despises the "blackness" of his colonial subjects: hence unwittingly himself.

Jones personifies Eugene O'Neill's critique of both colonization and capitalism. More Specifically, Edwin Engel (1953) states that "Jones is the embodiment of white American materialism" (p. 50).

Ain't I de Emperor? De laws don't go for him... Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I dose. For de 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 croaks. (reminiscently) If dey's one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca's listenin' to de white quality talk, it's dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years. (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1035)

In his cynical advice to Smithers, Jones reveals how his role models have been the "white quality" he met during his days as a Pullman porter in the United States. He has learned the rules of the game from those higher on the social ladder of America: white businessmen. While Jones willingly submits to the authority of these "quality" white men, he scorns Smithers: "Talk polite, white man! Talk polite, you heah me! I'm boss heah now, is you fergettin'?" (p. 1034). Thomas Pawley (1992) explains Jones's contempt for Smithers as a direct result of his assimilation of white American middle-class values by whose standards Smithers is "trash" (p. 144).

Of course, Jones has successfully ingested white values and practices because of his smartness and cunning, two traits Eugene O'Neill emphasized in his protagonist from the start: "His eyes are alive with a keen, cunning intelligence. In manner he is shrewd, suspicious, evasive" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1033). Jones's cunning intelligence is proven, first and foremost, by his self-generated myth of the silver bullet, the only means, he insists to kill him. Jones owes his empire to this myth which has frightened the natives into complying with his wishes. When Smithers argues it was luck that secured Jones's conquest, the Emperor responds, "I got brains and I uses 'em quick. Dat ain't luck" (p. 1036). His alertness in anticipating the natives' revolution also proves that he can usually predict human behavior and prepares himself for the consequences well in advance:

Look-a-heah, 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? I'se gone out in dat big forest, pretendin' to hunt, so many times dat I knows it high an' low like a book. (p. 1040)

When he realized, though, that he has not foreseen the forthcoming revolution, he admits, "I overplays my hand dis once!" (p. 1039)

At the end of Scene 1, Brutus Jones leaves his palace to escape to safety. However, the journey he undertakes, while appearing on the surface to be to the other side of the island, is psychological as well as literal: unknowingly, Jones goes in pursuit of his racial self and his identity. While not denying his blackness, by adopting the white way of social success and material gain, he has forsaken his black identity and assumed instead a white mask, representative of the immoral, exploitative, sly side of whiteness. Jones's appropriation of the colonizer role, a role usually associated with whiteness, requires him to abandon his racial identity and assumed to be something he is not. One of the prominent symbols in the play, the overt color contrast of Jones's white palace and the darkness of the forest, corresponds to the tension between these two identities: his white mask and his black skin underneath. Brutus Jones, hoping for social accomplishment, has rejected his blackness in favor of whiteness, but his journey now demands of him to face up to his betrayal. Another symbol for Brutus's transformation is his dressing down and out of his white clothes of colonizers in the dark forest, as the play progresses: "Look at you now. Emperor, you'se gittin' mighty low!" (p. 1052). From the very start, Jones resists and consequently fails at this psychic journey towards the Self. The black Little Formless Fears in Scene 2 are, for example, his own fears, and when he dispels them with a gunshot, he thinks they were only "little wild pigs" (p. 1046). Jones's self-ignorance is highlighted several other times in the play. In fact, in the following scenes Jones confronts, unsuccessfully people and events from his own past and that of his black ancestors: his gambling partner Jeff, the chain gang, the auction block, the Middle Passage, and the Congo witch-doctor and the Crocodile God. *The Emperor Jones*, beginning with Scene 3, is the story of Jones' hounding not by the natives but by his private and racial Self. I agree with Doris Falk (1982) who says, "Jones's hopeless fight through the forest is not from the natives at all, but from himself..." (p. 67)

One of the main attractions and pioneering qualities of *The Emperor Jones* lies in its expressionistic format; Jordan Miller and Winifred Frazer (1991), for example, have labeled it "the first important American expressionistic play" (p. 55). Brutus Jones's journey through the forest has often been read by critics as a psychological journey occurring in the protagonist's mind. Expressionism, born in Europe, was a nonrealistic movement concerned with arriving at new and better means of representing the inner life of humans. It emphasized emotions and thoughts and sought alternative ways of bringing to life such experiences on stage by manipulating the actor's movement, lighting, props, etc. Given that *The Emperor Jones* is one of the ultimate American examples of dramatic expressionism, the scenes portraying Jones in the forest are not realistic, but symbolic of the events and persons from his past that he remembers and has to confront. The West Indian jungle he steps into is the jungle of his mind and of his memories. As a result, Jones's attempt to deal with the "ha'nts" from his past with real bullets becomes an ironic act doomed to failure.

Gabriele Poole (1994) contends in her article “‘Blarsted Niggers!’: *The Emperor Jones* and Modernism’s Encounter with Africa” that the white world of the play is “governed by rationality, individualism and the ability to exert physical violence,” and the black one by “‘superstitions,’ irrationality, dreaming and the unconscious” (p. 26). If we maintain this traditional dichotomy of white rationality and black superstition Jones, faced with the “ha’nts” in the forest, clearly approaches his experiences with white rationality, thus further demonstrating the extent of his assimilation. For instance, he explains the visions he sees as the effect of his hunger. Consequently, Gabriele Poole (1994) argues that Jones fails at his journey because he is no longer equipped to contend with his blackness: “the black world of the forest cannot be mapped out and fixed on a page since it is not ordered according to the rational rules that Jones is familiar with” (p. 26). The Emperor has been so removed from his racial identity that he cannot comprehend, let alone deal with his emerging black unconscious.

Jones’s retrogression into his racial past scene after scene has raised heated debates among O’Neill scholars, many of whom interpret these scenes as atavistic and, therefore, derogatory. It is undeniable that O’Neill associate blackness, at least on some level, with the jungle and witch-doctor and imposes on his protagonist the racial journey Jones would rather to carry out. Jones appears trapped in the blackness of the jungle, a space he enters on his own initiative but with different expectations. O’Neill, on the other hand, asks of him that he faces his own truth. Jones is thus required to undergo a transforming experience (recognize and maybe return to his so-called “black” and primitive roots represented in the end by the witch-doctor and the African Crocodile God rather than “whiteness”) and fails at it.

However, these scenes are also noteworthy in underlining the oppression African-Americans have suffered at the hands of Euro-Americans, thus, rendering the colonizer Brutus Jones a more sympathetic character. Especially the scenes at the auction block and the slave ship reveal, as Barrett Clark (1929) calls it, a kind of unfolding, in reverse order, of the tragic epic of the American negro” (p. 104). To the auctioneer Jones cries, “And you sells me? And you buys me? I shows you I se a free nigger, damn yo’ souls!” (O’Neill, 1988, p. 1054). In the slave ship, Jones joins in with the other slaves, and “His voice reaches the highest pitch of sorrow, of desolation” (p. 1056). John Orr (1981) maintains the same opinion:

The murder of his gambling partner, his escape from a chain gang, the auction of slaves, and finally the witch-doctor and the crocodile-God, represent a backward chronological descent into the horror of suffering and of origin. It is a mimed wordless history which, specific to the descendants of black slaves, has a remarkable universality. The nightmares actually redeem Jones as he moves inexorably towards his tragic doom, for they remind us what, in his wish for absolute power, he has tried to escape from. (p. 172)

What scholars and critics of O’Neill refuse to see is that most of these “nightmares” hint at the crimes of whites. O’Neill seems more intent in this play on bringing to his audience’s attention how whites have abused and exploited blacks rather than criticizing Jones for becoming like one of his oppressors. In short, O’Neill condemns whiteness, not blackness.

I have been emphasizing from the start that Jones fails at his psychological quest. Ruby Cohn’s argument that “The play is a chronicle of Brutus Jones’ progress from a false white surface to his authentic black roots is invalid due to the lack of progress in the end (Cohn, 1971, p. 13). By the time he is killed by the natives, Jones has attained neither self-understanding nor a different identity. For instance, he cannot recognize his fears shaping up in front of him as the “Little Formless Fears” in Scene 2 and calls out to them “What’s dat? Who’s dar? What is you?” and finally shoots at them while trying to reassure himself that “Dey was only little animals—little wild pigs, I reckon” (O’Neill, 1988, p. 1046). When in Scene 3, he sees Jeff, his gambling partner whom he has killed, he shoots at him again, determined to get rid of his “ha’nt.” His second victim in the United States, the white prison guard, appears in Scene 4, and Jones takes aim at him, too, saying, “I kills you, you white debil, if it’s de last thing I even does! Ghost or debil kill you again!” (p. 1051). In the next scene, Jones is forced to stand at the auction block while white Southerners bid on him in mime:

Jones has been seized by the courage of desperation. He dares to look down and around him. Over his face abject terror gives way to mystification, to gradual realization—stutteringly) What you all doin’, white folks? What’s all dis? What you all lookin’ at me fo’? what you doin’wid me, anyhow? (p. 1053)

As he finally recognizes the auction block, he uses his last bullet but one and ends the fearful scene and recollection. Regressing further in time, the following scene places Brutus Jones at the Middle Passage with other African slaves. “*Jones starts, looks up, sees the figures, and throws himself down again to shut out the sight*” (p. 1055). But he soon joins his fellowmen in a wail of sorrow; when the images disappear on their own (the first time Jones does not have to seek refuge in his gun), he runs off once more (1056). The last scene where he is seen alive implies an African space and ritual. Jones looks around him and

Passes his hand over his head with a vague gesture of puzzled bewilderment. Then, as if in obedience to some obscure impulse, he sinks into a kneeling, devotional posture before the altar. Then he seems to come to himself partly, to have an uncertain realization of what he is doing, for he straightens up and stares about him horrifiedly. (p. 1057)

Although calling upon Christ, Jones yields to the witch-doctor and participates in his ritualistic dance, but the threat of being sacrificed to the Crocodile God sparks the survival instinct in Jones again, and he fires at the African God with his silver bullet. For the most part, then, Jones can either not recognize, at least easily, these representative scenes from his personal and collective past, or when he does, he usually dissociates himself from them by means of his gun, the

symbol of the West's violent physical intervention. But by the end, he is a lost man (both physically and mentally) since he cannot successfully deal with his past and can attain neither self-knowledge nor enlightenment.

This ending to the play with Jones's inability to return to his "racial roots" should undermine any criticism regarding his atavism. O'Neill does place his protagonist in these atavistic scenes, but if atavism requires that Jones, as a member of his race, has to "revert to the features and life styles of their [his] ancestors," in the words of John Cooley (1982), the fact that he does not should prevent us from judging him as primitive or atavistic ("Harlem Renaissance" p. 78). Brutus Jones's response to being situated in primitivistic scenes is one of confusion and defiance as he aims to put an end to them with the bullets of the white civilization he has adopted.

Because of its complexity and controversial nature, *The Emperor Jones* has been branded nothing short of a racist play. J·L·Styan (1981), for example, asserts, "the play is rarely played [today] because its stereotype of the Negro is unacceptable." (p. 103). In his book *Savages and Naturals*, when John Cooley distinguishes between these two trends in primitivistic black portraiture, he claims that *The Emperor Jones* belongs in the second category, the "savage" portrayals. Cooley maintains, for instance, that the name of the protagonist—Brutus—implies the brute nature of the hero. Richard Long (1987) reminds us as well that the writers writing about blacks during the Harlem Renaissance were aiming at a white audience (p. 48). Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (1997) remark that even though their intentions might not have been objectionable, the Harlem Renaissance artist "perpetuated views of African-Americans as the exotic other" (p. 172). Rather than an exotic Other, Jones is all too human in his ambition, in his desire to transcend the menial status allowed him by the American society.

The natives, on the other hand, since they remain in the background, cannot hold up to any in-depth study for the most part. The natives don't make an appearance until the final scene of the play, with the one exception of Jones's maid who stands primarily for the fearful colonized subject. It is true that in Lem, the leader of the revolution, and his followers, we discover the primitive African: "*Lem is a heavy-set, ape-faced old savage of the extreme African type, dressed only in a loin cloth...His soldiers are in different degrees of rag-concealed nakedness*" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1066). These characters' single connection to the "civilized" world is the guns they are carrying, and their primitiveness is also made more deliberate by their pidgin English. Regrettably, O'Neill has not made much progress in his understanding of West Indians, who are as stereotypical as they were in his earlier plays. The same is equally true of Africans; O'Neill's witch-doctor, whose body is painted, adorned with antelope horns, an animal fur, glass beads, and much more, is as unreal and exotic as an African Other might be. In comparison, O'Neill's African-American characters are more realistic.

One major accomplishment of the Irish-American writer in these portraits, despite these shortcomings, is his depiction of the West Indians as less-than-happy colonized natives who finally determine to oust their emperor. Of course, such representation plays an integral role in O'Neill overt criticism of Western imperialism in this play. John Cooley (1982) argues, however, that the criticism is not focused on either capitalism or colonialism but on aspiring blacks (*Savages* p. 71-72).

Even though O'Neill establishes Jones as an individual with a particular past and a distinct personality, the tone of his portrait is pejorative. The Emperor Jones is more clown than hero, ultimately a laughable pretender to be pitied and dismissed. O'Neill's bias reveals itself as the play progresses, presenting the defeat not of white colonialism and free enterprise, as some critics would have it, but of an "uppity" black man who presumed to model himself after successful white exploiters. The revenge of the play is complete as Jones reverts to a savage and is defeated, then killed by his own people. (Cooley, 1974, "Harlem Renaissance" p. 77)

Cooley (1974) bases his theory in part on O'Neill's initial description of Jones: "*Yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off*" (p. 1033). This passage commenting on Jones's outfit is not racially coded; O'Neill never makes any connection between Jones's "ridiculousness" and his skin color. More than likely, he would have commented in similar terms on a white character dressed alike since his target is imperialism and whoever exercises it, not aspiring blacks. Moreover, O'Neill states that Jones inspires awe and respect among the other characters and manages to carry off the "ridiculousness" of imperialism's manifestation and goals. Last but not least, the view that Jones is an "uppity black man" is only voiced in the play by Smithers, a clearly repulsive character, and therefore, has little validity. Jones is no clown even if he is no hero either. He is, most of all, a tragic character. He contends with the forces in his life in the only way he knows, and the white way, because it is wrong, brings about his fall.

In addition to the essential questions it raises about racial relations and colonialism, *The Emperor Jones* is also significant in black theatre history. As John Cooley (1974) himself admits, *The Emperor Jones* was a "'breakthrough' play in American theater" because it was "the first American play to employ black actors and develop a major black portrait" ("Harlem Renaissance" p. 73). The presence of a black protagonist offered the first major role to be played by an African-American actor and consequently furthered the dramatic careers of both Charles Gilpin and Paul Roberson. Richard Long (1987) underlines the importance of the role for African-American actors at the time and for American drama in general:

The role is virtually a monologue. The performance requires a *tour de force* of the actor, serving to indicate the high caliber of black dramatic talent. Secondly Brutus Jones is a highly complex character capable of considerable introspection, and this seemed to be an improvement on the black-as-buffoon. (p. 44)

Roger Oliver points to the positive aspects of O'Neill's black protagonist by noting how until the end "Brutus Jones maintains his dignity and strength as the first great black American dramatic character." (p. 58).

Even nine decades after its premiere, *The Emperor Jones* remains, in some ways, the most controversial and complicated play about blackness by O'Neill. Because of these qualities, it has troubled scholars who endeavor to create coherent interpretations of its disparate elements. Essentially, we need to remember that the play is a landmark in the playwright's slow but steady maturation toward understanding blackness or rather African-Americans. His depiction of the African-American psyche, experience, and fate evolved over time, leaving a legacy of more realistic, sympathetic, and tragic black figures to American theatre. *The Emperor Jones* is a milestone American play in its harsh condemnations of whiteness and of the abuse whites impose on non-whites for materialistic gain: empires, gold, land, and money. Jones is a tragic character not only because he has been personally persecuted by whites as a black man, or because he dies having failed at self-knowledge, but also because he has chosen to become a puppet in the hands of the white socioeconomic structure, which has exploited him and his own people in the past. Hoping to change his tragic destiny, he assimilates and imposes it on others like him, the West Indians. Because he has been harmed by whiteness, he adopts a white mask and strives to "pass" among other blacks, but thus trapped in a vicious circle, he ends up promoting, rather than terminating, the very white heritage which has destroyed him.

III. CONCLUSION: O'NEILL AND HIS RACIAL OTHER

O'Neill's black characters present a bewildering heterogeneity to scholars. Especially his earliest attempts at depicting blackness promote some of the contemporary racial stereotypes; hence, the association of blackness with the jungle, cannibalism, and primitivism. While *The Emperor Jones* made a striking break in Eugene O'Neill's approach toward his Racial Other as he shifted his focus from the exotic West Indians to the burdensome fates of black Americans. From this point on, while he might have occasionally reverted to stereotypes, in general his writings began not only to dispute but also to debunk politically-motivated racial myths.

How did O'Neill manage to disown the privileged white perspective? I am not sure one can provide a definitive answer to that question. Nevertheless, it is obvious that O'Neill the man as well as O'Neill the dramatist befriended the downtrodden: sailors and prostitutes, for example. Maybe because of his sympathy for the underdog, Eugene O'Neill was able to see, more often than not, African-Americans as human beings, not as people with a skin color darker than his. His work draws attention to the economic, social, and political injustices affecting them while highlighting their following psychological and mental anguish.

Eugene O'Neill grew up in the theatre world of his father reigned over by melodrama, which emphasized stereotypical plots and characters repeated from one play to the next with minor alterations. Normand Berlin (1982) explains in his "Eugene O'Neill": "The son distanced himself from the father's legacy early on as it was in contention with his own world view. O'Neill appears to have found the stylistic correspondence of his tragic vision in realism and naturalism, both of which, targeting a faithful representation of reality, accentuate individual characters and the specific forces that shape their lives" (p. 6).

Eugene O'Neill occupies a central place in this study because he was the first major Anglo-American playwright to consistently investigate racial problems, consequently discovering in the Negro a tragic character rather than an entertainer. His use of occasional stereotypes may be explained by his insufficient exposure to black people. Yet O'Neill's shortcomings are balanced by his fearlessness in probing into socially threatening issues, like racial antagonism. Maybe Jim Harris best sums up O'Neill's essential view of humanity: "We're all the same—equally just—under the sky—under the sun—sailing over the sea—to the other side of the world—the kind side that takes count of the soul."

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