

Disclosure of Inner Reality through Expressionism in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*

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Abstract

Expressionism emerged as a novel technique in the twentieth century. It rejected materialism, urbanization and rapid mechanization in the European society before the First World War. This dramatic technique helps the playwright to convey the inner reality to the audience. Expressionist plays widened the psychological scope of dramas by projecting various levels of human consciousness. August Strindberg and Frank Wedekind were the forerunners of Expressionist dramatic technique. *The Emperor Jones* is a notable play authored by Eugene O'Neill, one of the renowned American playwrights. The play was first produced in 1920. It was first of various experiments with Expressionism for O'Neill. It tells the story of an American Negro who escapes to an island in the West Indies. Brutus Jones is the protagonist of *The Emperor Jones*. This paper aims to show the expressionistic techniques employed by the playwright in this play. It focuses on how Expressionism helps to externalize the inner reality.

Key Words: *Expressionism, inner reality, consciousness, externalize.*

Eugene O'Neill revolutionized the American theatre by introducing expressionistic techniques. August Strindberg was the major exponent of expressionistic techniques in dramas. Expressionism was a reaction against realism which failed to dramatize the inward anxiety-

ridden, fear- obsessed abnormal psychological states of mind, the processes of the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. Expressionism succeeded in portraying the above-said inner realities in non- realistic symbolic terms. Expressionism seeks new symbolic techniques and new idioms to go beyond realistic and romantic art to represent the inscrutable secrets of the ego, the sub- conscious and the unconscious. Expressionistic plays have widened the psychological scope of dramas by brilliant delineations of different levels of consciousness. To that extent, expressionistic plays are brilliant illustrations of Freudian psychological analysis and Jung's theories of the collective unconscious. Shakespeare admitted the difficulty when he said in *Macbeth* that no art is there to understand the mind's construction in the face. Again Shakespeare referred to this difficulty in *Hamlet*. O'Neill succeeded through existentialist techniques to lay bare the personal sub- conscious and the unconscious.

Expressionist dramas do not go by the conventional elements of drama like the exposition, development, crisis, catastrophe or denouement. The question is the development of plot or character does not arise. The usual elements of stage effect and stock- theatrical devices are abandoned. The expressionists made use of a dramatic style of distortion of action, speech and sequence of events and scenes. They also dislocated time sequences. They used soliloquies and monologues instead of realistic dialogues. In *Emperor Jones*, the middle expressionistic scenes are monologues, the kind of interior monologues used by James Joyce. These monologues project the different states of the consciousness of the protagonist, Jones. The monologues depict the fear- stricken guilty personal unconsciousness and the nervousness and fear-complex arising out of the racial memories in the collective unconsciousness. The expressionists also made use of the special effects in sound and lighting to depict the heat- beats and tremors of the soul. They also introduced old dramatic art such as pantomime, dancing etc. characters are depersonalized

and transformed into symbols and allegorical personages. In brief, the stage itself is changed into a symbol of the mind itself. The expressionists sacrificed action for psychic processes. *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones* are O'Neill's most impressive expressionistic plays that have impressed the American theatre with their brilliant technical innovations and theatrical effects. He also made use of modern symbols of Freudian psychoanalysis to demonstrate the working of the sub-conscious and the unconscious. The monologues in the middle scenes show the breaking down of Jones's conscious ego. This break down is seen from a series of hallucinating visions to this gradual surrender to his atavistic memories, that is, the memories of remote Negro ancestors, the primordial darkness of the jungle. The play is a re-enactment of the Negro's story in expressionistic terms.

The psychoanalysis process begins from scene two onwards. In the second scene, Jones finds himself in the great forest which is a refuge from the American experience of financial capitalism. The symbolic meaning is this. Being de-spiritualized by the capitalistic struggle for material success, heredity overtakes him. As he enters the great forest, he is leaving the false marks of civilized capitalistic society and he returns to his cultural roots. Jones is in the outskirts of the great forest in the second scene. Jones comes to the forest and searches for food which is hidden under a stone. He turns over the stone, but finds no food. Hunger and darkness bewilder him. The rhythmic beating of the tom-tom is heard. He could not see the enemies behind the tom-tom. The beat of the tom-tom increases. In fear he takes his revolver. As he turns, Little Formless Fears creep out of the darkness. These shapeless fears are the externalizations of Jones's inner terror. Those creatures laugh at him. Then he fires his revolver. The formless creatures disappear. He has restored his shaken nerves. Then he goes into the darkness of the Great Forest.

The forest is the suppressed primitive forces of the African slave. The emperor is now reduced to the African slave. The primitive forces of the Negro emperor come out. This racial atavism has remained suppressed. The forest is Jone's de-generated self as an African slave. Though Jones is moving forward, his mind is moving backward to the dark depths of the unconscious, where he is the Negro slave. The personal sub-conscious and the racial unconscious of the Negro slave lead him to fear-complex. The drama is an expressionistic study of Jone's atavistic fears. The Little Formless Fears are the guilty conscience which gives rise to hallucinating visions like the sound of the tom-tom. The tom-tom is the memory of the racial past. The memory of the murder of Jeff and the prison guard and the guilty feelings in the personal sub-conscious appear in the form of fears.

The apparitions like Jiff and the warden whom Jones meets in the forest are the victims of Jones past enemies. The situation reminds us of Macbeth who is frightened by the ghost of Banquo and then by a series of apparitions. Jones was sentenced to twenty years of imprisonment for killing Jeff but he escaped from prison by killing the white warden. In the forest, his fears are deepened by the beat of the tom-tom. His tortured soul tries to escape the inner fears by firing the second shot at the apparitions. Again the forest symbolizes the primitiveness of the Negro slave. Jones, in the forest is the Negro in isolation. Again he plunges into the forest. Moonlight and darkness on the stage provide much for the nightmarish play. Jones makes himself lighter by throwing away the emperor's trappings. He is stripped to the waist. This is symbolic of his regression. The sound of the tom-tom is heard louder and nearer. He has another hallucinatory vision. He sees the ghost of the tailor whom he has killed. Like a Christian, he prays to God not to let him see apparitions. But the memory of the tailor cannot be shaken away. The re-enactment of the murder of the prison-guard like the vision of Jeff is the expressionistic. He fires the third shot at

the jailor. Jones jumps away in mad flight and the throbbing of the tom- tom grows louder. The regression to Negro and the spiritual deterioration of Jones continues.

In the fifth scene, Jones finds himself in a clearing in the middle of the forest. The moon light floods the clearing. He throws off further trappings of the emperor and becomes a poor hunted, half- dressed Negro. Then he begins with prayers and confessions. He calls himself a sinner. He confesses all his wrong doings. He has killed Jeff for cheating him and the guard for he used to strike him with his whip. Then he has stolen the riches of the foolish Negroes who had made him rich. Then his morbid imagination is carried back to those infamous and dark days of American history when the slave trade was rampant. We have an auction scene which is another hallucinating vision in which a slave trading auctioneer is selling him for slavery. Jones finds himself among the slaves to be auctioned. The auction scene is the expressionistic device of projecting the unconscious. It is the first Jungian touch. When the purchaser is in the act of paying, Jones fires at the auctioneer and the white planter. Jones rushes of crying with fear.

Jone's hallucinatory vision is near to the original and primitive fear of the Negro slave. Here the dramatic monologue merges into the interior monologue of the stream- of- consciousness type of novels. Here Jone's identification with the Negro slave becomes complete. He is half naked like other Negroes. The process of the emperor's regression and disintegration is complete. It is another touch of Jungian unconscious. His trousers are so torn off leaving him in only a loin cloth, thus identifying totally with a Negro slave. He feels that he has been sold as a galley- slave and he feels sitting inside an ancient ship surrounded by galley- slaves. He joins in the mournful cry of the tortured slaves. His voice blends with the cry of his race. We find a combination of dramatic monologue and pantomime or a dumb show. The symbolic and psychic representation

of a physically and spiritually broken man is brilliant. Jones is in a deep pit of despair. He lost hopes of being saved. Jones moves farther and farther away in the forest. The tom- tom beats.

In the last expressionistic scene, Jones finds himself lying at a stone altar near a gigantic tree by the edge of a great river. Jones sheds the last layer of his civilized life. His return to the primitive self is complete. Now he is totally in the primitive world of the unconscious or the bottoms of the unconscious. The symbols of the altar, the tree and the stones are associated with the beginnings of the race and civilization. The fatal tree is the tribal memory of the Christians. The river symbolizes the Congo river and to the Negro, the river is the ancient tribal memory. Stone was the altar in the pagan civilizations. Jones is back to the ancestral home, the darkest jungles of Africa where crocodiles and human beings are sacrificed to appease evil Gods. Jones is commanded by the Congo witch- doctor to sacrifice himself to the crocodile God. The crocodile deity demanding his sacrifice is symbolically the inward evil that demands his life. In killing the crocodile with his silver bullet, he has killed his ugly capitalistic self. The silver bullet symbolizes all the evils of financial capitalism. By firing the silver bullet into the eyes of the crocodile, he has abandoned his evil self. Jones is spiritually purged. This dram is the spiritual odyssey of the American Negro. We return to realism with which the play started. Lem, the leader of the Niggers orders the death of Jones. The tom- tom abruptly stops. But Jones can be killed only by a silver bullet. Jones is killed with a silver bullet. This again is a superstition of the Negroes and Smithers laugh at it. Jones really dies of his psychic fears. So Smithers dismisses the Negroes as stupid dogs.

The play is a psychological study of Jone's consciousness, his fears, visions and dreams. The stream of his consciousness is laid bare through various devices such as soliloquies, asides, broken dialogues and stage effects such as lighting, costumes and so on. The play is not divided

into acts but into scenes. The dramatic sequences of events are abandoned for a stream- of- consciousness in terms of symbols, dreams and stage devices. Scenes alternate between reality and fantasy. The delineation of the sub conscious world, avoidance of time sequence and unity , employment of symbols and stream- of- consciousness technique are some of the expressionistic devices. Through the technique of interior monologues, the inner reality of Jones is laid bare. The play was written under the impact of theories of modern psychologists like Freud, Jung etc. the attempt is to register the collective consciousness of Jones. The play is the gradual breaking down of Jone's conscious ego and the revelation of his sub- conscious and the unconscious. The first two visions of Jeff and the prison guard proceed from his racial memory or unconscious which contains the frightening memories of the slave trade and the consequent sufferings of the Negro.

Works Cited

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