

## ANALYSING EXPRESSIONISM IN EUGENE O' NEILL'S THE EMPEROR JONES

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### *Abstract*

*The movement of Expressionism seems to have arisen as a kind of revolt against the mutual exclusiveness of romanticism and realism. It is a revolt, on the one hand, against the tendency of realism and naturalism and, on the other, against the tendency of realism or naturalism to satisfy itself with a scrupulous representation of the surfaces of life, the speech, manners, emotions and ideas of one or another class in society. The expressionists cry for a "real" reality. This reality indicates the inner world of thought and vision. They are profoundly interested in psychology and they celebrate the supremacy of spirit over matter. They deal with the subjective, with 'inner' realities of human mind.*

**Keywords:** Expressionism, Eugene, O'Neill, Romanticism, realism

### INTRODUCTION

It is quite relevant to say something regarding Expressionism before going to browse the expressionistic vision prevailing in O'Neill's dramas. The movement of Expressionism seems to have arisen as a kind of revolt against the mutual exclusiveness of romanticism and realism. It is a revolt, on the one hand, against the tendency of realism and naturalism and, on the other, against the tendency of realism or naturalism to satisfy itself with a scrupulous representation of the surfaces of life, the speech, manners, emotions and ideas of one or another class in society. The expressionists cry for a "real" reality. This reality indicates the inner world of thought and vision. They are profoundly interested in psychology and they celebrate the supremacy of spirit over matter. They deal with the subjective, with 'inner' realities of human mind. Man becomes a key figure in their works. The expressionists undertake the study of human passion in lieu of the history of persons and their achievements. In the words of N. S. Wilson: "it attempts, in a word, to dramatize the inner life of a man, to represent what is passing in his soul."

### EXPRESSIONISM AND O' NEILL'S UNDERSTANDING OF EXPRESSIONISM

Expressionism forms a major element in O'Neill's dramas. It has freed him from the rather hampering limitations of pure romanticism or pure realism. O'Neill revolted against the tyranny of romantic dogmatism. He did not believe in the necessity of conforming to the popular taste to which his father had created all his life with old-fashioned romantic theatricality. O'Neill tells us:

"The old 'naturalism' -or 'realism' if you prefer (would to God some genius were gigantic enough to define clearly the separateness of these terms once and for all!)- no longer applies. It represents our Father's daring aspirations toward self recognition by holding the family Kodak upto ill-nature. But to us their old audacity is blague; we have taken too much snap-shots of each other in every graceful position; we have endured too much from the banality of the surfaces."

O' Neill makes no effort to keep up pretences of realism, for he believes that such realism is very superficial. Like Strindberg, he believes that drama has suffered too much from the banality of surfaces, and the cure lay in adopting the non-realistic techniques of expressionism. O'Neill feels that a recording of the externals of existence only prevents man from seeing the real reality which lay embedded in the human soul.

Since Expressionists are profoundly interested in psychology, the substantial element in O'Neill's Expressionism is also psychological. He takes expressionism as a major ingredient to reveal the hidden and most unpredictable emotions which are the products of the unconscious mind. He dramatizes the ideas and conflicts within the minds of the characters with much penetration. The inner struggle is evident in his repeated efforts to dramatize the subconscious. O'Neill's preoccupation with the inevitable tension between unconscious and conscious forces underlies the entire corpus of his work. In many of O'Neill's early plays as well as his most profound later plays, the protagonist cannot reconcile with the violent tension that grips his psyche. However, in the fountain, *Strange Interlude*, *Welded*, *Days without End*, the protagonists are able to achieve psychic balance in which the conscious and unconscious processes complement each other, forming a whole or an integrated personality.

### Elements of Expressionism

Expressionists make frequent use of soliloquies, asides, and interior monologues, to reveal the innermost working of the character's mind for the purpose of giving outward expression to thoughts and emotions which are normally unexpressed. They are also used by O'Neill to create depth and complexity of his dramatic techniques. He invariably employs soliloquy to unveil the self-communing's of the characters in their most critical moments. He has also used the technique of thought-asides is a decisive break with realism. The asides are often said to represent the characters' subconscious minds. But they actually represent the characters' more or less conscious thoughts and their less unconscious urges. The use of expressionism may also be seen in O'Neill's employment of interior monologue. In a word, to reveal the inner psychology of the characters, O'Neill has experimentally used so many techniques. And the dramas such as *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Strange Interlude*, *Dynomo*, *Days Without End* bear the proof of O'Neill's experimentation.

Though Expressionism, for the fulfillment of its purpose, has been mingled with a number of techniques, it always denies the value of characterization. The figures or personages in the expressionistic plays are devoid of individuality. O'Neill's personal note can be quoted in this regard:

I personally do not believe that an idea can be readily put over to an audience except through characters. When it sees 'A Man' and 'A Woman' .....just abstractions it loses the human contact by which it identifies itself with the protagonist of the play.

Now let me wander the realms (dramas) of O'Neill, which are featured by Expressionism. The play that by contemporary standards ushered in modern American drama was Eugene O'Neill's expressionist phenomenon, *The Hairy Ape*. In many ways, early enthusiasts for *The Hairy Ape* were correct. Following the success of the play, the American theatre enjoyed a "vogue of

Expressionism” that lasted until the Depression and which still resurfaces today (Wainscott 1997: 91). Furthermore, scholars continue to invoke *The Hairy Ape* as the exemplar of American expressionism, the country’s first modern drama. However, the long-held belief that the American expressionism of Eugene O’Neill heralded the arrival of a modern American drama has also perpetuated the notion that all “new art” drama of the 1910s was mere rehearsal for the real modernism of the 1920s. This critical construct is based on the model of O’Neill’s own dramaturgy but it is not consistent with the work of other experimental writers during the 1910s. O’Neill’s writing in the 1910s shows how the playwright worked through techniques and themes that will emerge in his mature plays, both expressionistic and realistic. But the 1910s also witnessed an independent brand of experimentalism whose style would be eclipsed by both American expressionism and Eugene O’Neill. As O’Neill aims at unraveling the inner life of a man with its bewildering complexity, he seeks to create the characters that are living human-beings. In *The Hairy Ape*, Yank remains a man and everyone can recognize him as such. To O’Neill, every name is a symbol as expressive of the character’s inner nature as his outward appearance. Almost every protagonist in the work of O’Neill remains a man, and in the human attributes of his characters can be found the essential difference between the allegorical plays of O’Neill and those of the other expressionists. For a reason, perhaps, O’Neill considered himself a contemporary and not a disciple of the expressionists. Few expressionists pay attention to form. Their plays are marked by looseness of construction and stylistic grotesqueness. They are also chaotic, hysterical and apparently meaningless. Most of the expressionists failed to impart unity to their plays. Lack of form caused pure expressionism to lose ground to the same degree as extreme naturalism against which it was a reaction. But Eugene O’Neill has yielded to neither the formlessness nor the incoherence of the more extreme expressionists. Each of his plays is well-knit and sharp in outline, solidly constructed from beginning to end. In his non-realistic and realistic plays, O’Neill demonstrates the acute sense of organic form which makes him a leader of American Expressionism. The structure of the play, the pattern of the action, even the shaping of the dialogue always follow a strict design, usually devised for that particular play.

### **The Emperor Jones as an expressionist play**

‘The Emperor Jones’ is the first American drama that uses the realistic technique of expressionism. Eugene O’Neill has used almost all the expressionistic devices in this play. He has used the same technique in his other plays such as *The Hairy Ape* and *AH God's Chillun Got Wings*. He was influenced by Strindberg, Wedekind and Elmer Rice. Though Jones was not much interested in political affairs but the years after the World War I changed his attitudes to the society. But he wanted to dramatize a man in a society. He tried to use the non-realistic method used by the expressionist playwrights such as August Strindberg and Wedekind. Jones' was also influenced by the American anarchist movement known as the Industrial Workers of the World. Though this play is expressionistic in form and spirit, some of the techniques of expressionism do not suit this play. Hence this is not a completely expressionistic play as *The Hairy Ape*.

The main aim of the expressionistic playwright is to give expression to personal, private or subjective emotional. It is quite opposed to the direct expression of the impressions from the external world. This kind of a play is a psychological study of the inner life of man. It attempts to represent the inner thoughts of the character. This technique by the psychoanalytical theories of

Dr. Sigmund Freud and Carl G Jung. Hence there is an attempt to explore the psyche of the protagonist.

The Emperor Jones is an experimental play written in the expressionistic mode. Like his other plays, Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones uses the expressionistic technique and makes use of symbols. Emperor Jones himself is a double symbol. First, he is a symbol of a Negro asking for freedom. He is slave seeking release from 'the burden of a white man. Moreover he is an everyman's soul aspiring for self- understanding. He is dark. Which becomes light enough and having become light becomes dark once again. His journey through the forest is symbolic of soul's quest towards self-realization and self-understanding. The silver bullet is the symbol of the light that will provide salvation to soul. Roughly speaking, the silver bullet is the symbol of that superstition by which the dishonest rich exploit the world and say that their very wealth could save them from the revenge of their victims, just as Jones had made the native 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 or release from bondage, the fetish of his particular pride. The Great Forest symbolizes the glory and horror of man's freedom; it also symbolizes his patience and sensuous isolation. The beating tom-tom symbolizes the pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive. The torn-torn beats in the camp of the 'bush niggers' to which Jones is helplessly drawn and it beats in Jones's body, represents the primitive blood which passes through his veins.

The expressionist dramatists are not concerned with individuals at all. They write about capitalism, industrialism and so forth, but they make no attempt to personify any one of these in a realistic form. They do not blame individuals but only systems. The Leftists say that The Emperor Jones is an expressionistic play. The Emperor Jones is the tragedy of the outcast whom capitalistic civilization has excluded from of the outcast whom capitalistic civilization has excluded from society. Edwin Engel in his book *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* says that The Emperor Jones is a criticism of the capitalistic civilization of the white man, including his utilitarian attitude towards religion. He says, "It is in Jones himself that we are to observe, sharp criticism of the civilization of modern white man, for Jones is Negroid only in physical appearance and in speech in this scene. He is rather the American 'success story' in black face. During the ten years in which he had served as Pullman car porter he had listened to the white quality - to George Babbitt - perhaps, as he travelled by Pullman to the Maine woods from Zenith - and adopted their ways. He learned in those years the white man's cynicism, shrewdness, efficiently philosophy of self-interest. Expressionistic plays are generally loose in structure. There is hardly any form to an expressionistic piece. There are a series of short scenes with a symbolic setting intended to reveal the inner significance of the play. As far the plot of The Emperor Jones is concerned, this expressionistic technique does not apply to it, because the plot of The Emperor Jones has a number of unifying effects.

Edwin Engel writes, after the first scene, the action occurs between dusk of one afternoon and dawn of the following day in, or on the edge of, the Great Forest. The successive episodes are synchronized with Jones' revolver, the chamber of which contains approximately as many cartridges as there are scenes; as the gun is discharged, the scene changes, approaching the point where the sixth bullet, the silver one, coincides with the completed reversion to savagery. The beating tom-tom also serves an important unifying factor, symbolizing. The pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive. Together with the revolver, it governs the inexorable

movement towards the primeval, spatially and temporally. For the tom-tom beats in the camp of the 'bush niggers to which Jones' is helplessly drawn, and it beats in Jones' 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 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. In this play symbolic types are substitutes for human beings. It has caused a change in dialogue. The expressionist does not present realistic conversation. In an expressionistic play dialogue is used to reveal the pre-speech level and disjointed inner thoughts of the character, just as we find in the modern novels the use of stream of consciousness technique. In *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill has used realistic dialogue only in the first and the last scenes. In the remaining six scenes there is no realistic dialogue. The dependence is on monologue, and what happens inside the mind of Jones. Because of the use of this expressionistic technique of dialogue, throughout the six middle scenes' the play becomes a mono drama. The action takes place within the infated mind of the single character. The tone of this expressionistic play is pessimistic. It ends on a tragic note. The play is a tragedy and ends with the death of the hero. The final scene is important for the portrayal of Jones as a tragic hero who dies as she lived, with a kind of grandeur, false though it was.

## CONCLUSION

It is well acknowledged that Eugene O' Neill is the first American dramatist who successfully dealt with the techniques of expressionism. Before his exploration in this field, the other contemporary dramatists of him did not celebrate the dark regions and somber mood of human mind. *The Emperor Jones* clearly proves the celebration of Neill as an expressionist dramatist. This paper, in brief, through the drama, *The Emperor Jones* tried to disseminate the ideas prevailing in expressionism. And through this analysis, it has been fore grounded that by applying the expressionist techniques, Eugene O' Neill, without any distortion, externalized the inner world of his characters-his modern men.

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