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Role of Deterministic Forces in Eugene O'Neill's the Emperor Jones

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Abstract— O'Neill's basic concern as a playwright had been to find the meaning of human existence in spite of man's skepticism, his feeling of alienation and his struggle against various negative forces. *The Emperor Jones* portrays man's struggle against something greater than himself, a struggle against the inexorable forces of his innermost 'self', i.e., his 'real' self. O'Neill presents a bleak world where a baffled Negro, turned into an Emperor, struggles towards 'self-realization' in the jungle of his own psyche. Unable to establish any harmony with the outer world, he comes back to himself. Ultimately, he has to face his real self, the knowledge of his guilt and self-hatred. O'Neill's characters often seek refuge in their dream world; their preference is for richness and beauty to existing mediocrity of life. The present paper examines the Role of deterministic forces in the formation of a man's identity with special reference to Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*.

Keywords: Determinism, Identity, Disintegration, Self-image etc.

In *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill ponders over the causes of man's disorientation in a world of bewildering contradictions and his search for identity to determine his adjustment to himself and his environment. He analyses the sickness of today as he feels it – the loneliness and insecurity of man and the failure of modern white civilization to help him to achieve a sense of identity and fulfillment. He restates here his favourite theme, namely, the distortion of human relationships resulting from man's greed and his exploitation of his fellowmen. He also exhibits the futility of man's endeavor to free himself from the inescapable deterministic influences of the past which lie buried in the labyrinth of his consciousness. *The Emperor Jones* portrays man's struggle against something greater than himself, a struggle against the inexorable forces of his innermost 'self', i.e., his 'real' self. O'Neill presents a bleak world where a baffled Negro, turned into an Emperor, struggles towards 'self-realization' in the jungle of his own psyche. Unable to establish any harmony with the outer world, man comes back to himself. Ultimately, he has to face his real self, the knowledge of his guilt and self-hatred. In *The Emperor Jones* the cause of the tragedy of the Negro protagonist is his desire for power. While overcoming the memories of his tyrannized, oppressive and slavish past by fighting for the liberation of his people from man-made bondage, he establishes his own tyrannical rule over them in the manner of the white imperialists. The story dramatizes the downfall of Brutus Jones, an ex-pullman porter from Harlem, who has set him over the natives through luck and guile. The natives believe he possesses supernatural powers. As the play begins, Brutus Jones, a pullman porter, is arrested for killing another negro in a

"Crap" game, who breaks jail by killing the white foreman of a chain gang, and escapes as a stowaway to a small island of the West Indies where, applying the tricks of the white man, he soon makes himself 'Emperor' of the superstitious natives. When he finally realizes that the natives have revolted against him he runs into the forest.

It is then that the deterministic forces of his unconscious self begin to thrust upon him. It is a bold, self-reliant adventurer who strikes out into the jungle at sunset. It is a confused, broken, naked, half-crazed creature who, at dawn, stumbles blindly back to his starting point, only to find the natives calmly waiting there to shoot him down with bullets they have been piously moulding according to his own prescription. The forest has broken him. He throws away the trappings of the Emperor to walk more easily, but he has thrown away the armour of civilization as well. He becomes an abject creature, reverting to his ancestral past. Full of strange sounds and shadows, the forest conjures up visions of his personal life and his ancestral past. These haunt him, and at each crisis of fear he fires wildly into the darkness and goes crashing on through the underbrush, losing his way, wasting all his defence, signalling his path, and working a thousand sinister echoes to work still more upon his terrible fear. Karen Horney makes a subtle difference between the three aspects of the 'self':

The actual or 'empirical self' of a given character is that composite which is readily perceived by the audience, i.e., his observable identity (name, trade, physical appearance, the dramatic situation in which he is found). The 'Ideal self' is the character's

projected image of what he should be, which he often confuses with what he is – this confusion, of course resulting ultimately in conflict and disintegration. The third and most vital of the selves is the 'Real self' – that which is not conceptualized as an image, but felt. It is alive, unique, personal center of ourselves; the only part that can and wants to grow. (122)

This is the complex motivation of Brutus Jones which he could never really comprehend till the end. Though the play advances in physical action, but it regresses in psychological action, until it ends symbolically in an illumination of the heart of darkness within the soul of man. The primitive 'Emperor' never fully comprehends his own tragedy, and therefore, can never transcend it. He dies as he has lived, the confused victim of his own past, lost within 'the Great Forest.

In *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill made thoughts more important than deeds by minimizing the external and maximizing the internal action. It was Jung's theory of the racial unconscious which influenced O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. The hallucinations that appear to Brutus Jones during his wild night in the forest are at first personal memories, and then become racial memories as he regresses deeper and deeper into his primitive past under the pressure of fear. The personal memories are of the pullman porter whom he killed in a crap game, the chain gang from which he escaped, and 'Little Formless Fears.' The racial memories are of a Southern slave auction in which he is for sale, a slave ship in which Negroes are being brought from Africa, and finally of a Congo witch-doctor who demands Jones' sacrifice. In a hypnotized state he crawls on his belly toward the crocodile at the command of the witch-doctor and finally uses his silver bullet to shoot the crocodile. The Jungian psychoanalyst, C.P. Oberndorf, endorsed O'Neill's application of Jung's concepts:

The archaic unconscious of Jung postulates a very far distant heritage which nevertheless persists in every person as a vital influence – the racial unconscious. Eugene O'Neill has relied upon this theory for the fears which grip a pursued Negro in his drama The Emperor Jones. Here, the threats to which his successive ancestors were subjected from the primitive jungle in Africa to slave days in America rise up before the terrified Negro as he gropes his way through the darkness of a tropical jungle night. (106)

Thus, Jones' belief that he can break all ties with the past, without, in any way, affecting the present, remains a big illusion. This illusion is shattered when he is haunted in the dark forest by the reality of his past and is unable to recover his mental equilibrium. The ghosts of his past are meant to serve as living reminders that no man can escape from his past. The beats of the tom-tom starting at the rate of human

pulse and rising bit by bit as a fevered pulse would rise and blended with the visual images created in the jungle by a fevered brain are used to express an emotional climax of rare intensity. But the intensity of spiritual struggle is even greater. So terrible is the impact of the drum beats that the conscious resistance of the protagonist goes to pieces making it possible for the images of his mind to surface themselves. The beating of the tom-tom in the forest is symbolic of the growing fear in the heart of a half terrified negro; the witch doctor's grotesque contortions are the projections of protagonist's own proud and violent nature; the crocodile is an embodiment of the forces of evil within Jones' own perverted mind.

Doris V. Falk has given a psychological interpretation of O'Neill's plays. Commenting on Jones' quest as a flight from self and finally as a journey towards self-understanding, she says:

The significance of the play lies not in the superficial narrative, which consists largely in a pursuit of Jones through the forest by the rebellious natives, but in the character of Jones, conveyed through a gradual breaking down of his conscious ego and the revelation of his personal and collective unconscious. 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 to its own. This is the primary symbolism of his movement through 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. (69)

In *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill also projects the deterministic influence of the existence and power of the collective unconscious. The mind of a given man contains ideas from the 'collective unconscious' which comes to him simply by virtue of his membership in the human race, as well as ideas inherited from his own specific race, tribe and family. His mind contains, in addition, unconscious ideas and symbols arising from his unique personal situation to make up the structure of his personal unconscious. Finally, from this personal unconscious emerges his own consciousness, his ego—his true-self. In the play, Emperor Jones, the sophisticated black man, no matter how superior he considers himself to the natives, cannot escape his inheritance of primitive instinct and belief, which ultimately destroys him. At the end of his life he realizes that he is a vacuous person to reveal nothing at the centre.

Pointing to the deterministic philosophy of *The Emperor Jones* S.K. Winther says:

It is a deterministic philosophy that makes The Emperor Jones convincing. With relentless imagination O'Neill has followed through the life history of his strange Emperor. As long as Jones held sway from his throne, no power could touch him. His past, for all that appearances might reveal, could have been that of genuine nobility. He acts the part, and the social environment is in perfect harmony. Gradually a sinister note of rebellion trembles faintly through his realm. His work is over, and with his gain secured he plans to leave. It is only when he enters the dark forest that his past, the irrevocable past which he has so long concealed, begins to assert itself. No iron law enforced by physical power could have been more relentless than was Emperor Jones' past. His social heritage of slave tradition, the debasing work of the Negro as the white man's servant, his crimes, his childhood superstitions, including his biological heritage—all these forces which he thought were forgotten reasserted their power over him. They were transmuted into the beatings of his heart by the native tom-tom as it echoed in the depth of the forest. With perfect regularity, these forces of heredity and environment crowd in upon the consciousness of the Emperor until he loses his regal nature and tears away the trappings of his assumed grandeur. One by one they disappear, and as he becomes more and more naked, he becomes more and more a Negro criminal tortured by primitive fears of the dark. In the end he loses the battle, conquered, but not by the physical strength of the natives, for they did not even change their position. All they did while Jones circled wildly through the forest was to beat their drums. He was destroyed by the forces of his past. It

was not the natives that barred his way to freedom; it was the strong medicine of his Negro heritage. (171)

In his fit of passion and possession Jones remains oblivious of his real identity. He hates his own race and associates himself with the white man's pragmatic philosophy of self-interest. Thus, his class consciousness supersedes his concern for his own race. His sense of belonging to the white class is a sin since it is grounded on his fake pride and lust for power to dominate others, which ultimately leads to his downfall. The journey of Jones is the gradual revelation to him of what lies behind the mask, the hollow evil, in which his true self has long been lost. Although, his journey in the forest at night ends at its starting point, there is progress in that journey and the progress of Jones is the progress of self-understanding. Despite his circular movement in the darkness of a tropical jungle, his journey towards self-realization proves to be a linear one. Though, he has not found a permanent solution to his problem of identity crisis, he has come to realize the nature of his ignorance. His journey not only takes place in time and space, but also into the darkest recesses of his soul, in a hope to have a vision of his true self.

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