

ANALYSIS

The Emperor Jones (1920)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

“Distortion, for purposes of heightening reality and rendering dream experience, is a method introduced into the modern drama by Strindberg, whose work left a strong impression on O'Neill and who was the father of the expressionism in O'Neill's work. After 1918, moreover, the vogue of expressionistic theatre in Central Europe attracted the American theatrical vanguard, to which O'Neill belonged. Both *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *The Hairy Ape* (1922) contain expressionistic features; they are the best serious American plays written partly or wholly in that style.

In both plays, O'Neill placed much reliance on pantomime and on a pattern of delirious fantastication. Once the Negro her, 'Emperor' Jones, escapes into the jungle, he becomes the victim of one nightmare after another. *The Emperor Jones* is a drama of atavism and it is told chiefly by visual means. The greater part of the play is little more than a monologue by Jones interrupted by vignettes of fantasy. The effect is one of sheer theatre. But *The Hairy Ape* is the story of a quest, and it is drama as well as theatre. It contains much more text than *The Emperor Jones* because it is more than a mere procession of fear images.”

John Gassner

A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 817

“One may almost say that the American drama of the 1920s was O'Neill's drama... Expressionist effects were first made noticeably a part of his drama in *The Emperor Jones* (1920), a remarkably skillful projection of its hero's inner consciousness. From that point O'Neill moved to bolder and more varied experiments.... Occasionally, as in *The Emperor Jones*, the experiment and the theme are almost perfectly integrated. The hero does not become an amateur philosopher but remains a man victimized by his fears and struggling vainly to escape his danger; he grows in terms of, and as a result of, the skillful and controlled use of dramatic experiment. That balance O'Neill rarely achieved.”

Frederick J. Hoffman

The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 255, 257

“*The Emperor Jones* (1920) centers around the character of Brutus Jones, an ex-Pullman porter who has become absolute dictator of a small Caribbean island. He rules ruthlessly and becomes constantly more obsessed with his own power. As the play opens the natives, driven to recklessness by his arrogance, rebel and take to the jungle; their voodoo war-drums boom with increasing tempo throughout the play. Jones, suddenly terrified, seeks to escape on foot from his castle. But the entire island seems to conspire to bring him to destruction: Bushes seem to become animate, forms appear in the shadows, and the circle of drums closes in. Little by little Jones loses the rationality of the civilized man; he feels himself *helplessly* slipping back toward his primitive beginnings. At last losing his head, he runs wildly in a circle and wastes his ammunition firing at wraiths; at the end of the play even the silver bullet he has saved for himself has been fired. *The Emperor Jones* demonstrates the narrow line which separates the rational and civilized from the primitive and superstitious, even in civilized man.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 343

“O'Neill lays the scene of the play 'on an island in the West Indies [presumably Haiti] as yet un-self-determined by white marines.' On this island a former Pullman car porter, Brutus Jones, has made himself emperor. He is wanted in the States on two murder charges. But on the island he is a contemptuous monarch, looting the blacks and secure in his confidence that he can be killed only by a silver bullet. At last

the natives rebel and Jones is obliged to flee to the jungle. He encounters phantoms from the past, circles the jungle, and is finally killed by his subjects—with silver bullets as he had predicted. In this, perhaps his finest artistic creation, O'Neill found himself and began to create new techniques or to revive old ones he found useful. The chief character is a twisted, warped, and lost soul; the movement of the play is a cunning and subtle interweaving of the physical and the psychological. The steady beat of tom-toms throughout the jungle scenes has a powerful effect on the audience as it has on Emperor Jones.

According to an interview in the *New York World* (Nov. 9, 1924), O'Neill got the idea for the play from an old circus man who told him a story about a former president of Haiti who predicted no one would ever kill him with a lead bullet—he'd get himself first with a silver one. A year later he read something about a religious dance in the Congo, and the play was born. O'Neill was also influenced by Henri Christophe, the slave-born general who helped free Haiti from the French in 1811 and who called himself King Henry I. The play took New York by storm, and had to be moved from a small theater on Macdougall Street (the Provincetown Theatre) to an uptown theater.

Louis Gassner says of the play that this 'simple expressionist study of a man's atavistic fears' once rocked the theater, but is 'now curiously regarded by liberal practitioners of social criticism as reactionary because it revealed a Negro retrogressing to his "aboriginal fears"—as if regression were a stigma applicable to no other race.' The play was made into an opera (1933) by Louis Gruenberg (the libretto by Kathleen de Jaffa) and produced a sensation at the Metropolitan with Lawrence Tibbett as Jones. It became a movie in the same year, the title role played by Paul Robeson."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)