

# Brutus Jones as a Victim in Cultural Dilemma

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**Abstract:** The paper depicts Emperor Jones as a black personality who is tortured by cultural dilemma. He is first proud of making a fortune by trying to integrating himself into white culture. After realizing the inhospitality of other-culture, he finds himself also rejected by self-culture, which makes him end up a tragedy.

**Key words:** cultural dilemma; self-culture; other-culture; identity

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## Introduction

*Emperor Jones*, though a minor play by Eugene O'Neill, fascinates readers from the beginning to the end. This play successfully portrays a personality tortured by inner panic and psychological conflict. It can be defined as a play of quest for identity. The protagonist, in the process of pursuing and establishing his own identity, is unfortunately caught in a trap, which is ironically devised by himself. What is learnt from the white culture is employed by him to oppress and exploit his fellow natives. The rebellion at the beginning of the play explicitly proclaims that this half-civilized black man is not accepted by his own culture. However, when he is determined to return to his true self, memory rejects him a second time, making him realize that the black are forever excluded from the white culture. In other words, neither culture accommodates him. He is doomed to fall into the wide gap between these two irreconcilable cultures.

### 1. Brutus Jones' clinging to other-culture

Brutus Jones is an American Negro who escapes from America, where he has committed two murders, to West Indies. He is by no means an average Negro to resign himself to fate. Jones not only consciously realizes the distinction between the white culture and the black culture. Moreover, he also recognizes the predominating force of the white culture. In order to free himself from being oppressed and even to get into power, he has to 'civilize'

and 'mask' himself with the white culture. Although the play does not elaborate on how he has come into power or how he has managed to gain fortune, readers can still trace back to the past through the scene description and characters' dialogues.

In the first scene, a typical emperor's palace is already presented to readers. 'The audience chamber' in the palace is 'a spacious, highly-ceilinged room with bare, white-washed walls. The floor is of white tiles. In the rear, to the left of center, a wide archway giving out on a portico with white pillars.' (O'Neill, 1972:1) Within six lines, 'white' appears four times. It concisely and symbolically tells how Jones takes advantage of learned skills from the white culture to gain power and wealth. Whiteness is a general foil in the palace, indicating that in his mind clinging to this other-culture is the only secure way to maintain his authority. Jones recognizes the superiority of the white culture, and regards whiteness as an emblem of dominance. His dialogue with Smithers can further elucidates this point. When Smithers admonishes that Jones has squeezed the natives dry and accuses that Jones is breaking the law made by himself, Jones judicially refutes him by saying 'Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' as I does. 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, 1972: 12) Here it is explicitly indicated that he learns useful skills from the white culture, paving a smoother road to his emperorship. After achieving the triumph, he even secures his 'box of grub' (O'Neill, 1972: 27) under the 'white stone' (O'Neill, 1972: 27). For he is convinced more firmly that the white culture whereby he is civilized really can bless him powerful and wealthy. Thenceforward, the God he worships has changed from black to white.

While clinging and worshipping this other-culture, it is impossible for him to respect his own culture simultaneously. Instead, he takes an overt attitude of contempt towards the black culture and the natives nurtured by it. He calls the black natives 'niggers' (O'Neill, 1972: 7, 32), 'dem fools' (O'Neill, 1972: 13, 26, 39), 'low-flung, woods' niggers' (O'Neill, 1972: 17), 'dem niggers' (O'Neill, 1972: 22), 'common nigger' (O'Neill, 1972: 23), 'bush niggers' (O'Neill, 1972: 26), 'ign'rent black niggers' (O'Neill, 1972: 34), etc. The similar discriminating appellations appear and reappear for more than ten times. 'Negro' or 'the Black' can be a neutral appellation. But 'nigger' employed in this case is indeed much insulting and disrespectful, not to mention the derogatory adjectives before 'nigger'. In Brutus Jones' eyes, those 'common niggers' are surely much more ignorant and much less civilized than himself. Their stupidity and dullness deserve being ruled and oppressed by a more intelligent black emperor. His empire is consequently founded on the exploitation of those primitive beings. The opening scene leads readers to visualize, upon the general foil of whiteness, another very striking colour: scarlet. 'The room is bare of furniture with the exception of one huge chair made of uncut wood which stands at center, its back to rear. This is very apparently the Emperor's throne. It is painted a dazzling, eye-smiting scarlet ... Strips of matting, dyed scarlet, lead from the foot of the throne to the two entrances.' (O'Neill, 1972: 1) From the literal description, a careful reader can draw a very vivid picture of the chamber: upon the white foil, there is a 'eye-smiting scarlet' throne; the floor is covered

with a scarlet matting from the entrance to the foot of the throne. It tells readers a lot through this simple, but highly symbolic picture. 'Scarlet' is naturally associated with the color of fresh blood. It implies that the matting from the entrance to the throne, or the road to his emperorship, is paved with the blood of his fellow natives. His royal empire is founded upon the merciless exploitation and cruel oppression of his native fellows. This is just what Emperor Jones learns from the white culture.

## 2. Brutus Jones' returning to self-culture

Once the native blacks realize that they are being 'squeezed dry', they, in all conscience, must rebel so as to survive, lest the last drop of blood be squeezed out of the skinny body. The rebellion under way rings an alarm bell for Jones. Due to his own false pursuit, Brutus Jones is already excluded from his own culture. Although he tries to remain confidently calm and composed, he begins the prepared retreat through the tropical forest. Once in forest, panic gradually shrouds him over. From the very beginning of his entering the forest, the drum sound 'tom-tom starts at a rate exactly corresponding to the normal pulse beat-72 to the minute uninterruptedly to the very end of the play.' (O'Neill, 1972: 20) It plays an important role, symbolizing the inner palpitation and fright of Emperor Jones. He once attempts to regain his most casual manner out of panic, only to prove futile. Then with the inner fear growing more and more intense, he begins to introspect what he has done in the past. He frequently mutters, 'Oh, I'se sorry I evah went in for dis. Dat Emepror's job is sho' hard to shake.' (O'Neill, 1972: 34) 'I steals all I could grab. Lawd, I done wrong! I know it! I'se sorry! Forgive me, Lawd! Forgive dis po' sinner!' (O'Neill, 1972: 39) At last, when he comes to the stone altar, 'as if in obedience to some obscure impulse, he sinks into a kneeling, devotional posture before the altar', pleading, 'Oh Lawd! Mercy! Mercy on dis po' sinner.' (O'Neill, 1972: 45-46)

This is a turning point on Jones's way to establish his identity. He begins to realize that what he learns from other-culture cannot secure him stable on the throne. The terrible fear in Jones' heart as he flees through the forest is visualized by the appearance of the ghosts in his racial past. The humiliating history of the oppressed niggers

requests him to throw off the whiteness. It is not justifiable or pardonable for him (also a black in nature) to treat his own brethren in the same detestable way. He must return to his true self and cling to the black culture to save himself in time from the poison of other-culture. This process is symbolically presented through the gradual stripping of his clothes. First, he loses his Panama hat or the crown—then his uniform, the royal gown, becoming ragged and torn. He tears off his coat and flings it away or he tears the mask off, revealing himself stripped to the waist so that half of the true self is exposed. His pants are in tatters, his shoes cut and misshapen, flapping about his feet. He unlaces shoes and pulls them off until at last his pants are torn away so that what is left is no better than a breech cloth, almost the naked self. Here forms a great contrast with the beginning of the play when he is clad in a burlesque uniform of exploitation. Now he is almost reduced to primitive nakedness. He is actually subconsciously pursuing his true self on the way to return to his own culture. The forest progress is, to a great extent, the striking off of the mask of self, layer by layer, just as his emperor's uniform ripped from the back, bit by bit. The recognition of his guilt pushes him to return to innocence and in the end, he must cast himself upon the black's primordial God and return home.

However, whether Brutus Jones can really save himself and eventually cast himself upon his true God and return home has always been a suspense. The climatic moment in Scene Seven suggests Jones' homecoming is a form of salvation. Since his subconscious behaviour of stripping off the clothes shows his will and determination to return to his true self, and since he has been praying and seeking help from God all the way, the messenger of God appears first. He dances and sways with a weird monotonous croon. 'Gradually his dance becomes ... a narrative in pantomime, his croon is an incantation, a charm to allay the fierceness of some impalpable deity demanding sacrifice.' (O'Neill, 1972: 47) Jones becomes completely hypnotized in this fatal spell. When the Witch Doctor points to the sacred tree, to the river beyond, to the altar and finally to Jones with a ferocious command, he seems to sense the meaning of the Doctor—'it's he who

must offer himself sacrifice.' (O'Neill, 1972: 48) Then the Doctor welcomes the advent of the Crocodile God. The Crocodile's eyes glisten greenly, fastened upon Jones. Once the Witch Doctor prances up to him, demanding him toward the waiting monster, Jones at first obeys and does crawl to the monster, moaning continually, 'Mercy, Lawd! Mercy!' (O'Neill, 1972: 48) Simultaneously the Crocodile is also moving onto the land. Just before the last moment when the God and sinner meet each other, the Witch Doctor shrills out in furious exultation, for hope of the sacrifice. But Jones draws back suddenly, crying in spasm 'Lawd, save me! Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer!' (O'Neill, 1972: 48) Then he shoots out the last silver bullet at the Crocodile. This scene is indeed highly symbolic. Jones is welcome by the primordial God of the black for his intention of repentance. And the messenger guides him to pay service and sacrifice. It is really high time for him to return to innocence and to find his true identity. As for a sinner, in whose vessels flows the blood of the other people, the only way to get salvation and regain innocence is to sacrifice his own blood to God. So, the Witch Doctor, the messenger of God, shrills out in ecstasy when he expects the sacrifice to be committed and a soul to be saved.

### **3. Brutus Jones' being ruined in cultural dilemma**

But unfortunately, Jones refuses this salvation at the critical moment. The reason of his final hesitation to return to the true identity is worth readers' thinking. Although he is stripping off his mask subconsciously and is eager to seek help from his own culture, the racial past in the vision discourages him. The humiliating racial past, on one hand, insults and enrages him. But on the other hand, it also frightens and terrifies him, pushing him back from the road of pursuing his true identity. The image of the Prison Guard, who cracks the whip and lashes Jones across shoulders viciously, reminds him how he has been tortured by the white devil when he remains an 'uncivilized' black man. The white Auctioneer, who sells the black in the slave market, and the white planters, who look them over as if they were cattle, convulse him with hatred and fear. He also sees a slave ship on the voyage to America.

The Negroes on board are in a long tremulous wail of despair and agony. Suppose he returns to that pure black man without any skill or mask of the dominating culture, what would happen? The answer can not be clearer than that he is bound to resume his previous fate of being discriminated, oppressed, and tortured for ever. In other words, as a black man, Jones's returning to the self-culture only leads to being excluded from other-culture.

In order to keep his transient authority and so-called dignity, Jones consciously and reasonably is extremely reluctant to give up the blessing skills he learns from other-culture and is extremely reluctant to tear off the mask of the false identity. Therefore, when he faces the primordial God and hesitates to sacrifice, he cries, 'Mercy, Lawd! Mercy!' But who is this 'Lawd'? Then he explicitly calls out, 'Lawd, save me! Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer!' (O'Neill, 1972: 48) His God at that moment still remains Jesus Christ—God of the white. His shooting out the silver bullet at the Crocodile is also symbolic. The silver bullet, whose colour symbolizes material things, is a production of the white culture. So he is trying to save himself with the arm of other-culture. But his final death tells that the white culture is not able to save his soul. Then his clinging to the other-culture proves a failure a second time.

#### 4. Conclusion

Before the gunshot at Brutus Jones fades away completely, readers may look back at his life again. In order to free himself from being oppressed and tortured by the white culture, Jones comes into power by imitating the white men's way. When the rebellion is under way, he realizes that he, as a half-civilized man by other-culture,

is not accepted by his fellow natives and self-culture. He has been pursuing a false identity, which brings him much trouble. However, once Jones is determined to sacrifice himself to pursue his true self and return to his own culture, the miserable racial memory also discourages him. For the black are forever prejudiced by the white. He is excluded from other-culture again. Therefore, the protagonist is rejected and excluded by the self-culture and other-culture simultaneously. Unfortunately caught in such a cultural dilemma, this Emperor Jones is doomed to a tragedy.

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