

## EUGENE O'NEILL & THE EMPEROR JONES

**Eugene O'Neill** was born in a hotel in New York City to Irish immigrants. Both of his parents toured with a theatre company and as such, O'Neill attended a Catholic boarding school. His father was an alcoholic and his mother was addicted to morphine, a family situation that influenced his later theatrical works. As a young man, he began working on ships and became involved with unions and labor movements in the US. He became ill with tuberculosis in his early twenties, after which he decided to dedicate himself to writing full-time. His first play, *Beyond the Horizon*, opened in 1920, and *The Emperor Jones* premiered later that year. *Jones* was his first big hit and it expressed commentary on O'Neill's thoughts on the United States' occupation of Haiti. O'Neill was married three times and had three children. In 1943, after suffering for most of his life from depression and alcoholism, O'Neill's hands began to tremble and he was mostly unable to write for the last ten years of his life. He died in a hotel room in Boston. Though he asked his third wife to wait 25 years to publish *Long Day's Journey into Night* [ as a remembrance of his brother] (which O'Neill wrote in 1941-42), she published the play in 1956 and it won a Tony Award for Best Play. Other major works are *Anna Christie* (1922), *Strange Interlude* (1928), *Ah! Wilderness* (1933) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1946).

Using influences from the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Eugene O'Neill demonstrated how he used the era he was living in to help compose his works. The 1910s was an era of labor unions, World War I, the assembly line and much more. In 1912, the historic sinking of the Titanic took place. Nobel Prize in Literature 1936 was awarded to Eugene Gladstone O'Neill "for the power, honesty and deep-felt emotions of his dramatic works, which embody an original concept of tragedy." Eugene O'Neill received his Nobel Prize one year later, in 1937. The playwright won over Pulitzer jurors four times. In his works family life, Greek mythology, and being masked are all common themes, aspects of which are included in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Desire Under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

***The Emperor Jones*** is a 1920 play by American dramatist Eugene O'Neill that tells the tale of Brutus Jones, a resourceful, self-assured African American and a former Pullman porter, who kills another black man in a dice game, is jailed, and later escapes to a small, backward Caribbean island where he sets himself up as emperor. The play recounts his story in flashbacks as Brutus makes his way through the jungle in an attempt to escape former subjects who have rebelled against him.

Originally called ***The Silver Bullet***, the play is one of O'Neill's major experimental works, mixing expressionism and realism, and the use of an unreliable narrator and multiple points of view. It was also an oblique commentary on the U.S. occupation of Haiti after bloody rebellions there, an act of imperialism that was much condemned in O'Neill's radical political circles in New York. *The Emperor Jones* draws on O'Neill's own hallucinatory experience hacking through the jungle while prospecting for gold in Honduras in 1909 and the brutal presidency of Haiti's Vilbrun Guillaume Sam. *The Emperor Jones* was O'Neill's first big box-office hit. It established him as a successful playwright, after he won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his first play, the much less well-known *Beyond the Horizon* (1920). *The Emperor Jones* was included in Burns Mantle's *The Best Plays of 1920–1921*.

The play's first production took place at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village. Charles Sidney Gilpin starred in the leading role. Gilpin came from the all-black Lafayette Players in Harlem, and while he was met with acclaim in the production, ran into some disagreements with O'Neill, particularly over O'Neill's use of the n-word in the script. After touring with the production for a number of years, Gilpin left the production over the dispute. Paul Robeson took over the role on tour, and then performed in the 1925 revival, and in a production in London. The play was turned into a film in 1933, starring Paul Robeson. The play has been revived and adapted many times. The Wooster Group staged a production in 2007 with Kate Valk, a white female actress, playing the title role in blackface, a theatrical device that O'Neill had not desired. In 1933, the play was turned into an opera, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera, starring Lawrence Tibbett, who wore blackface.

### Synopsis

The Emperor Jones is about Brutus Jones, a Black American Pullman porter who killed a man named Jeff over a dispute during a game of craps. escapes to an island in the West Indies. In two years, Jones makes himself "Emperor" of the place. A native tried to shoot Jones, but the gun misfired; thereupon Jones announced that he was protected by a charm and that only silver bullets could harm him. When the play begins, he has been Emperor long enough to amass a fortune by imposing heavy taxes on the islanders and carrying on all sorts of large-scale graft. Rebellion is brewing. The islanders are whipping up their courage to the fighting point by calling on the local gods and demons of the forest. From the deep of the jungle, the steady beat of a big drum sounded by them is heard, increasing its tempo towards the end of the play and showing the rebels' presence dreaded by the Emperor. It is the equivalent of the heart-beat which assumes a higher and higher pitch; while coming closer it denotes the premonition of approaching punishment and the climactic recoil of internal guilt of the hero; he wanders and falters in the jungle, present throughout the play with its primeval terror and blackness.

The play is virtually a monologue for its leading character, Jones, in a Shakespearean range from regal power to the depths of terror and insanity, comparable to Lear or Macbeth. Scenes 2 to 7 are from the point of view of Jones, and no other character speaks. The first and last scenes are essentially a framing device with a character named Smithers, a white trader who appears to be part of illegal activities. In the first scene, Smithers is told about the rebellion by an old woman, and then has a lengthy conversation with Jones. In the last scene, Smithers converses with Lem, the leader of the rebellion. Smithers has mixed feelings about Jones, though he generally has more respect for Jones than for the rebels. During the final scene, Jones is killed by a silver bullet, which was the only way that the rebels believed Jones could be killed, and the way in which Jones planned to kill himself if he was captured.

## SUMMARY

### Scene 1

The play begins in the throne room of the emperor Brutus Jones of an unidentified island in the West Indies. It is late afternoon, and Henry Smithers, a white Cockney (person from London's East End) trader, catches an old native woman sneaking around the room. On being enquired, the woman informs Smithers that the natives are planning an uprising. After she runs off, Brutus Jones, the emperor, enters the room. Smithers informs Jones of the uprising, but Jones does not seem all too worried. Jones scoffs at the idea that his illiterate, uneducated, and superstitious subjects are capable of outsmarting him. He confesses that he knew this day would arrive when he took the throne, since he has been stealing from the island and hiding a fortune in a foreign bank account. He tells Smithers that the natives believe that only a silver bullet can kill him. Jones states that he has saved money and can escape the island. He has a gun, loaded with lead bullets and one silver one, in case he has to commit suicide.

As Jones sets off to escape from the revolutionaries, his mental state gradually collapses in the darkness of the forest. Jones is overconfident due in part to the fact that he has convinced the islanders that he possesses magical powers. After an earlier attempted assassination, Jones successfully constructed the myth that he can only be killed with silver bullets.

A drumbeat starts, sounding like a heartbeat. Smithers warns Jones of ha'n'ts, meaning evil spirits, he may encounter. The drum continues to beat as Jones travels through the forest throughout the next six scenes.

### Scene 2

Jones has entered the forest. He cannot find his way and is hungry. He cannot find the food he had hidden, and he crawls around overturning the many white stones looking for his food. Suddenly, the Little Formless Fears (insect larvae with sparkling eyes) materialize. Jones shoots at them, using the first of his lead bullets.

### Scene 3

At moonrise, Jones is in the forest. He sees a vision of Jeff, the black man he killed years before. He panics and shoots at him, using a second bullet.

#### Scene 4

The moon is high when the audience next sees Jones. He sees an apparition of a chain gang on which he once worked and the white prison guard he killed. The prison guard motions for Jones to take his place on the chain gang, and he obeys. He tries to kill the guard, using the third bullet.

#### Scene 5

It is later, during the early morning hours of darkness. Jones appears in a clearing. He is in a panic. He sees apparitions of slaves, planters, and an auctioneer. The auctioneer tells Jones to stand on the tree stump, the auction block. Then he sells Jones to a Southern planter. Jones, terrified and enraged, shoots both men, using two more bullets. He begins seeing hallucinations of his innermost fears, in spite of being alone. As he encounters each hallucination, he fires a bullet from his gun that has the rather counterintuitive effect of alerting his pursuers to his whereabouts.

#### Scene 6

When Jones next appears, only his silver bullet remains in his gun. He sees apparitions of two rows of black men, similarly dressed, on a ship at sea. The men on the ship wail, and Jones joins them. He runs into the forest, wailing too.

Scene 7 Immediately after, Jones runs onstage to the foot of a gigantic tree by a river. It is almost dawn. There is a rough stone altar, and Jones kneels by it, very frightened. A witch doctor appears and begins to dance. He points to the river, and Jones senses that he is being offered for sacrifice. Jones begs for mercy as a huge crocodile head materializes. Jones shoots the Crocodile God with his last bullet, the silver bullet. The drumbeat increases as Jones lies on the ground.

\*\*\*Through hallucinatory imagery and Jones' monologue we learn that Jones came to the island as a stowaway on a boat after killing a man over a game of craps and then killing a prison guard to escape from jail. He has visions of the man he killed as well as the prison guard. His next hallucinations are a slave auction, a slave ship, and a Witch-Doctor in the Congo, who tries to kill him with the help of a hungry crocodile. He shoots at the crocodile with the last remaining silver bullet.\*\*\*

#### Scene 8

Back where the forest meets the plain, Smithers and Lem, a native man, are looking for Jones. Smithers tells Lem that the natives wasted their time, beating their drums and casting spells. Lem insists that his soldiers caught Jones, but Smithers does not believe him. Lem says they shot him with silver bullets, which they made by melting down money. Soldiers come in, bearing Jones's body.

### CHARACTERS

**Brutus Jones:** The titular emperor of an unidentified West Indies island spent ten years working as a train porter in the United States before a game of dice spiraled wildly out of control. He killed a man named Jeff over a dispute during a game of craps. After getting thrown in jail, Brutus then killed a prison guard and escaped America as a stowaway on a ship bound for the Indies. Once on the island, he recognized how impressive he was to the natives and exploited their gullibility to become ruler. The play picks up at the exact moment that Jones' subjects begin to grow tired of him and start staging a revolt. Jones is depicted as greedy and prideful, without thinking of the ethical implications of his misdeeds. His misdeeds begin to catch up with him, however, when he enters the dark forest, and is attended by haunting hallucinations about his sordid past. He ends up becoming his own worst enemy, panicking in the face of his own conscience and making his way back to the very place where he entered the forest, where the revolutionaries are waiting to kill him.

**Smithers:** Ostensibly a friend of Jones, but a profoundly racist white Cockney trader who looks upon Jones with thinly veiled malice. Smithers is the one to warn Jones of the revolution, and can hardly believe it when the

natives manage to make silver bullets with which to kill their emperor. Smithers is a crooked and evil character, who seems to always side with whoever has power.

**Lem:** Lem was the leader before Jones' arrival, and is the leader of the insurrection which finally kills the ill-fated emperor. Lem already tried to assassinate Jones by shooting him, but failed. In the wake of the accident, Jones convinces his subjects that he possesses magical powers and can be brought down only by a silver bullet. Following this logic, Lem stages a revolution and melts down a bunch of coins in order to make the silver bullets that end up killing Jones.

**Old Native Woman:** The old woman is in and out of the story by the end of the first scene, but plays a significant role in the narrative. The play opens with Smithers arriving to an empty palace. When he finds the old woman, she tells him that a rebellion is underway and Jones is in danger.

**The Witch-Doctor:** The witch-doctor is merely a figment of the emperor's fevered imagination, appearing in a weird hallucinatory sequence near the end of the story. He is an image of Africa, a spiritual shaman who wants to make Jones into a human sacrifice to a god-like crocodile lying in wait in a nearby river.

**Jeff:** an apparition created by the natives, is a ghost of sorts of the black man that Jones murdered back in the United States. Prior to the start of the play, Jones killed the human version of Jeff because Jeff cheated him in a game of dice.

## **THEMES**

**Conscience, Trauma, and the Past:** Brutus Jones is confident that he will be able to navigate the forests of the island without a hitch, but once he enters the forest, he is visited by hallucinations and manifestations of his own compromised conscience. At first, he hears the laughter of his "Formless Fears," an emotional state that has taken on a physical form in the forest. As he progresses further into the darkness, he encounters visions of his traumatic past, of the men he killed, and then of the American slave trade. A major theme in the play is the ways that the past visits us in our solitude, and the forms that manifestations of trauma and the past can take.

**Slavery:** At first, Jones' hallucinations seem to have to do only with his personal sins, but as he gets deeper and deeper into the forest, he encounters a broader historical memory that extends beyond simply his personal experience. After witnessing his own traumatic misdeeds in the form of hallucinations—his murder of two men—Jones hallucinates that he is getting auctioned off into slavery, that he is trapped on a slave ship, and then that he is back in the Congo. His hallucinatory journey is a journey backward in the more collectively held history of slavery, exposing its horrors and subjecting him to its dehumanizing effects. The legacy of American slavery and its horrors is thus a central theme in the play, shown as a kind of original sin from which no one can escape.

**Autocracy:** When we first meet Brutus Jones, he has assumed the role of emperor on a small unnamed island in the West Indies. He sits on a scarlet throne and has ultimate authority over his subjects, whom he looks down upon and regularly calls the n word. In the wake of his mistreatment in America, Jones becomes a hegemonic monster himself, an autocrat who extracts what he needs from a vulnerable community without remorse and claims power for himself avariciously.

**Gullibility and Spirituality:** One of the main ways that Jones is able to ascend the throne and achieve power on the island is by exploiting the gullibility and spiritual beliefs of the islanders. An American, Jones is irreverent towards their customs and beliefs, seeing them as backward and inferior to modern logic. When an assassin is unable to kill him with a gun, Jones tells the subjects that he can only be killed by silver bullets, a lie that exploits their belief in magic and in his invincibility. Jones' irreverence towards the islanders' gullibility ultimately ends up hurting him, however, as he succumbs to some kind of magical and self-defeating forces in the jungle, and is killed by a number of silver bullets that the islanders have made from melting down coins.

What Jones sees as gullibility and foolishness ends up mobilizing the islanders and even the island itself, leading to Jones' ruin.

**Racism:** A major theme in the play is racism. Jones is a black American man who has come to the West Indies only to turn the racism he has faced in a white community against the black islanders over whom he rules. He uses the n word, thinks of his subjects as inferior, and employs other strategies typical to racist belief systems, in spite of being of the same race as the people over whom he rules. Additionally, the character of Smithers represents the racist white man, a manipulative and slippery character. The theme of racist attitudes and beliefs toward others runs throughout *The Emperor Jones*. The play is the story of a black man who occupies an island in the West Indies and oppresses the natives in much the same way that white British and American people have. First, the character of Henry Smithers, the only white character in the play, represents the white man's attitude toward black people. Smithers is ostensibly Jones's friend, preferring him over other black people. This is likely because Jones, having learned from white men, acts more like a white person than the natives around him. However, even though they are friends, Smithers refers to Jones as "the stinkin' nigger" and says it serves him right when the natives rebel. Before coming to the island, Jones was a Pullman porter, working on Pullman trains and serving white people. In this way, he was able to observe white men and their ways. He learned that "big stealin'" earns a person success. Jones puts this advice into practice, oppressing the black natives of the island. The natives speak in an accent and don't wear the type of clothes that white men do. In this way Jones represents the white oppressor, while the natives are the oppressed blacks. Jones thinks of himself as above them, more like a white man. He refers to the natives as "bush niggers." Jones's attitude toward the black people on the island shows self-loathing. He would rather identify with the white oppressors than identify with black people, whom he considers to be beneath him. Both Jones and Smithers underestimate the island people to their peril. In Scene 1, Smithers assumes the natives are lazy or thieves when, in fact, they are coming up with a detailed plan to overthrow Jones. Jones assumes he will easily be able to escape the island, not realizing that the natives are smart and know the forest. He gloats about having fooled the natives with the silver bullet story. However, this has just made Lem angry enough to have a personal vendetta against him. The visions Jones sees in the forest reflect the treatment based on race that black men have suffered in the United States. Jones sees himself sold at a slave auction and a captive on a slave ship, horrors that his ancestors faced. In this way, O'Neill shows that slavery is part of the collective unconscious of people, especially black Americans. Future generations may suffer from slavery because it is part of their ancestral memory.

**Occupation and Oppression:** Eugene O'Neill stated that his influences for writing *The Emperor Jones* included the United States's occupation of Haiti. O'Neill states that the setting of the play is an island in the West Indies "as yet not self-determined by White Marines." By this he means that the setting is an unoccupied island similar to Haiti. Brutus Jones, while black, occupies the island in the same way the white Marines occupied Haiti. Jones is there, similar to the U.S. occupiers, to grab as much money as he can. In Scene 1, he tells Smithers, "You didn't s'pose I was holdin' down dis Emperor job for de glory in it?" He goes on to say that he had allowed his friends, including Smithers, to steal from the natives and break laws. "Ain't I pertected you and winked at all de crooked tradin' you been doin'?" he asks Smithers. Then he chuckles, saying he has made laws against it at the same time. However, the laws he has set do not apply to Jones or his friends. Additionally, Jones overtaxes the natives, much as occupiers overtax the natives of the countries they occupied. Jones squirrels money away in foreign banks and plans to escape when the natives realize he is conning them. Occupying, overtaxing, and stealing from the natives is one form of oppression portrayed in *The Emperor Jones*. The other is slavery. Jones's visions in the forest are portrayals of slavery. In one illusion, Jones sees himself sold in a slave auction. In another, he is in a slave ship, crossing the ocean. Before he became the oppressor, Jones himself experienced oppression as a black man in the United States. Although his age at the time of the play makes it unlikely that he was a slave, he was oppressed just the same. He worked as a Pullman porter, a position that required subservient conduct. Pullman porter was one of the few jobs available to black men in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, periods during Jones's lifetime. Later, in prison, Jones worked on a chain gang, a form of pseudo-slavery in which men were sentenced to hard labor. Thus Jones, the occupier and oppressor, was also once the oppressed. Through the visions he sees in the forest, Jones becomes the oppressed again and, with the audience, fully experiences what oppression is like whether in Haiti or the United States.

**Godlike versus Human:** Brutus Jones became emperor of the island by convincing the natives that he was godlike and only a silver bullet could kill him. He is so committed to this falsehood that he even had a silver bullet made so that if he ever needed to kill himself, he could use it. Jones, however, does not believe his time will come. He has convinced himself that he is invincible and almost as godlike as the natives see him. Having squirreled away funds in a foreign bank, earned through his oppression of the natives, he plans to make his escape, use the supplies he has hidden in the forest, and easily beat a path off the island where he can enjoy retirement. However, Jones is far less godly than he believes. In Greek tragedies, many heroes are defeated because of their hubris, which the gods deem offensive. Because Greek heroes believe their abilities were equal to those of the gods, the gods punish them for their presumption. Jones casts himself in the role of a god by claiming that only a silver bullet can kill him. He also wears regalia—a colorful uniform with brass and gold accents, patent leather boots, and brass spurs—that puts him above the people of the island. Throughout the play, the audience witnesses Jones being brought back down to earth. First, his uniform rips. Then he loses his hat. Eventually his shoes become worn out and uncomfortable. Finally, he is wearing merely a loincloth, the dress of the native men, to face the island's Crocodile God. Many of the discomforts he experiences are because of the humility Jones does not wish to own. He must discard his shoes because they have become uncomfortable. Plus, his shoes are likely not made for long treks in the woods. His clothing, which consists of a decorated coat, is not the type of dress that keeps a person cool in the heat. He is generally unable to carry out his plan due to hunger and thirst. Moreover, he discards his defenses. Jones starts his journey with six bullets, one silver, in his pistol. However, in the course of six scenes of the play, Jones uses all five lead bullets, as very human fears plague him. The reader also learns that Jones abandoned his Christian religion, Baptist, when he came to the island. However, he expects God's protection when he needs saving from the ghosts in the forest, apparitions that manifest likely because of charms cast by the natives. However, since he has abandoned his Baptist beliefs, his religion is not there for him when he needs it. Thus, the theme of godliness versus humanity is portrayed here, as Jones is brought down to human level by his conduct. Eventually, with no god to help him and no godlike trappings, Jones is vulnerable so that the natives can kill him.

**Fall from Power:** The play's plot follows the trajectory of a ruler falling from power when his subjects turn against him. Jones starts the play on the brink of a revolution against him. He has assumed power without any credentials and now his subjects are revolting against him. As he tries to escape through the forest, he becomes more and more disoriented, his royal clothes become ragged, and he loses his mind, until the final scene when he gets shot by Lem's soldiers.

### **Godliness, Humanity and Power**

When Brutus Jones crowns himself emperor of the Caribbean island, he elevates himself to the level of a god. His subjects are forced to worship and serve him without question, and he conceptualizes himself as far superior to them in every way. As a final touch, Jones plays into the natives' superstitions by telling them that he can only be killed by a silver bullet. However, after the natives revolt against him and Jones journeys through the forest to escape the uprising, he slowly sheds the things that mark him as a powerful, godlike figure and must then accept his own humanity. Ultimately he must face his death, as all humans must. When we first meet Jones, he's storming through his white palace and is dressed in an ostentatious military uniform. Both the colour of the palace and his uniform are intended to convey the fact that he's a powerful figure who is above being treated like any other man. The myth surrounding his ability to be killed only by a silver bullet supports this façade, as it implies that he's not truly a human man and is instead something above and beyond humanity. Further, Jones sees the fact that he was able to convince the natives that this is true as proof that he is truly superior, suggesting in turn that his godliness comes in part from his ability to hoodwink his subjects by using their beliefs to his advantage. Though Jones believes that an eventual native uprising is inevitable, he's entirely confident in his escape plan, which will allow him to escape unscathed, rich, and able to move on and continue living in luxury elsewhere. With fear, or the lack of it, established as the one thing that separates Jones from his subjects, the apparitions that the natives send to torment Jones through his night in the forest can be seen as an attempt, first and foremost, to reintroduce fear into his understanding and consequently to reconnect him with his humanity.

When Jones first sets off, he's jaunty, cocky, and confident in his escape. He's prepared with sturdy boots, his pistol loaded with five lead bullets and one silver bullet (in case he needs to commit suicide to keep up the charade with the natives), and enough food stashed at the edge of the forest to last him through the night. He believes both that his plan is too airtight to fail, and that the natives are too dumb to be able to successfully give chase. The natives, however, are prepared to return Jones to a human state by reintroducing fear into his emotional vocabulary. At the same time, they've also found a way to reduce Jones from his godlike state by treating it in a pragmatic way: since Jones has convinced the natives that he can only be killed by a silver bullet, they spend the night fabricating silver bullets to kill him. As Jones travels through the woods, he becomes progressively more dishevelled and sheds his uniform, ending the play wearing little more than a loincloth. This is a physical representation of his loss of his sense of his own godliness and a return to his own humanity—in the end, his body is all he has. Similarly, as Jones encounters the natives' apparitions, he becomes increasingly more fearful. He uses his lead bullets to destroy each apparition, and finally, uses his silver bullet to destroy the crocodile god summoned by the witch doctor—a symbolic representation of the death of Jones's own sense of godliness. By the time Jones completes his circular journey and returns to the edge of the woods where he began, mostly naked and without bullets, Jones is truly human, terrified of what he's created in the natives and scared for his own life. The natives promptly take his life, using their own silver bullets. Though Smithers mocks the natives' use of silver bullets as ridiculous (he is fully aware that Jones can absolutely be killed with lead bullets), there is a symbolic power to it. In using silver bullets to kill Jones, the natives simultaneously kill Jones the man and the idea of Jones the god. Jones's death, then, truly brings Jones down to earth by asserting his humanity and mortality as inarguable facts. The fact of his death exemplifies the cost of believing oneself to be above death and other worldly consequences, and exposes his initial belief in his own godliness—or, more broadly, the thought that anyone is superior to others in such a way as to act as a god over them—as the foolish and dangerous thought that it always was.

**Greed & Pride:** In many ways, Jones is a tragic hero, even if he is not particularly heroic. He is a man who is able to escape an unpleasant home country and acquire power abroad. However, his tragic flaw is his extreme greed and sense of pride, which ends up undermining him in the end. He sees nothing wrong with his actions and feels remorseless about having assumed the role of emperor and stolen large sums of money from the islanders, which he keeps in a foreign bank account. As he escapes, he begins to doubt himself, but never fully confronts his own sense of remorse, opting instead to muster a sense of pridefulness. It is his greed and his pride that cause him to lose his mind and fall prey to his pursuers. He never truly repents for his misdeeds, which ends up costing him his life.

## **SYMBOLS**

### **Symbolism:**

Jones's night in the forest is a symbolic journey that represents not only his process of personal self-destruction but also a confrontation with his racial past. Once he gets to the island, Jones tries to deny what he has been in order to imitate the successful white men he once served on the train in America. Like his former white oppressors, Jones wants to dominate and be all-powerful, treating other people like inferior "trash" and exploiting them for personal gain. In overcompensating excess, however, Jones tries to set himself apart from all other human beings, only to discover during his nightmare journey that he cannot escape his connection with other people or even with his repressed inner life.

The first scenes in the forest show Jones confronting his personal past—his killing of Jeff, his time in prison, and his lethal attack on the prison guard. After reliving these personal experiences, Jones begins to confront the history of his race. He re-enacts the experience of his ancestors coming to America in slave ships and being sold at auction like property. Then he goes even deeper into his racial past and confronts the primitive witch doctor who claims him as a sacrifice for the crocodile god. Jones's trip through the forest, then, becomes a trip back through time, perhaps even expiation for his attempted denial of self as a member of the black race.

And the symbolism culminates in the strange figure of the crocodile god, which is the most evocative and puzzling symbol in the play. As the climax of Jones's journey, the crocodile might be seen as a symbol of



Jones's primitive self or as a symbol of evil—either the evil of Jones or of humanity in general; perhaps it represents the pagan, non-Christian response to the world; perhaps it is a symbol of Jones's inner being, which he can't accept. Any number of interpretations can be made of this figure whose presence brings Jones to his final destruction.

**The Uniform:** The first time Jones appears on stage he is attired with a grandeur “not altogether ridiculous.” His uniform displays medals, sports brass buttons, and is adorned with gold chevrons and braids. Throughout the course of the play, as he tries to make his escape through the forest, he gradually loses bits and pieces of the uniform until there is nothing left, making the uniform a symbol of his fall from power.

**The Silver Bullet :** The silver bullet which Jones carries in his revolver is symbolic of his power over the native islanders. The power is a lie, and based on the fact that, after he survived a shooting, he convinced his subjects that he could not be killed by a lead bullet. He exploits the islanders by suggesting that he is impervious to their lead bullets, and now carries a silver bullet to show that if he is ever to die, it will be at his own hand, with a silver bullet. The silver bullet represents his false sense of importance, his exploitation of the people of the island, and foreshadows his sorry fate—the price of his hubris.

**The Forest :** The forest is the central symbol of the play, defined by its darkness and its mystery. It is the physical manifestation of Brutus Jones' unconscious mind, filled with memories of important events in his life as well as the collective memory of black American history, a memory that is tragically and inexorably linked to the slave trade. The forest becomes an extension of Jones' deteriorating mind, his recurring and haunting memories, the guilt and trauma of his past, and as he makes his way through its thickets and underbrush, it begins to close in on him, representing his inability to escape, the fact that he is getting betrayed by his own mind.

**The Crocodile :** In the penultimate scene, Jones hallucinates an African witch doctor, who wants to sacrifice him to a crocodile god that emerges from a nearby river. Driven to the point of madness, Jones uses his silver bullet—which he has saved as a symbol of his own luck and immunity to harm—against the crocodile. By using the bullet that he has meant to use on himself, Jones turns the crocodile into a symbol of his own compromised power, a false god that can be taken down by a single bullet. The destruction of the crocodile symbolizes the destruction of Jones, the fact that he is not exempt from violence or death.

**The Color White:** Given the racial tensions at work in the play, the color white—describing both people and objects—is a symbol of power. The white people that Jones encounters, including both the living (Smithers) and the unreal (the auctioneer and the prison guard), have very real power in the play because of the color of their skin, while Jones is considered less powerful because he's black. In this way, Jones's decoration of the throne room in his palace is a very conscious choice. By painting the walls stark white, Jones attempts to take on some of the power that the play suggests is inherent to whiteness, and he loses his power once he vacates his palace. Unlike white people, whose power is embedded in their skin, Jones's power came from outside sources that he couldn't take with him in his flight.

**Drum:** The tom-tom drum begins to beat in Scene 1. Its beat is described in this scene as "exactly corresponding to normal pulse beat" and insistent. Also, it sounds distant. In later scenes, the beat of the drum becomes faster and louder, at least to Jones. This makes them more ominous as Jones is overpowered by his own guilt. The drums symbolize the presence of punishment for Jones's past and more recent acts closing in on him. They also symbolize Jones's inability to escape his own primitive instincts and those of the natives he has tricked.

**Brutus:** Although Jones is generally referred to by his surname, his first name is Brutus. In Latin, Brutus means "dull, stupid, coarse, insensitive, and brutish." Therefore, even though Brutus Jones sees himself as sophisticated, with his fancy clothes and his stash of money, his name belies this. Moreover, Brutus (based on the Roman politician and conspirator Marcus Junius Brutus [c. 85–42 BCE]) was the name of a character in another tragedy, *Julius Caesar* (1599), by playwright William Shakespeare. In the play, Brutus kills Roman dictator Julius Caesar (c. 100–44 BCE). However, unlike others who planned to murder Caesar for selfish reasons, Brutus did so because Caesar was a leader who believed himself to be a deity, similar to the character



in *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill's naming the protagonist in his play for the historical or Shakespearian Brutus is appropriate. Whereas Shakespeare's Brutus participates in the assassination of Caesar, Brutus Jones causes his own downfall in much the same final way.

### More Notes:

**Expressionism:** It is an artistic style in which the artist does not depict objective reality. Rather, through fantasy and distortion, the artist portrays the emotions and responses that events arouse within people. This style, as it relates to the theatre, was introduced by Swedish playwright August Strindberg (1849–1912), who combined psychology and naturalism (philosophy asserting that all beings and events are natural and therefore knowable through science) to create expressionist drama. Writers of this style of drama aim to reveal the inner reality of characters by deeply probing into the subconscious, internalizing their actions, and revealing what goes on in their psyche. This effect is often achieved through the use of soliloquy and interior monologue. O'Neill employs monologue in the scenes in which Jones is in the jungle to show the confused state of Jones's mind.

O'Neill's use of symbols is pervasive in *The Emperor Jones*. He uses tom-toms (drums) to depict Jones's emotion and to convey the character's mental state; the distortion of the sound of the tom-toms and the instruments' increasing volume represent Jones's increasing heartbeat and fear. Additionally, the scenes get darker and darker in their portrayal of Jones's confusion. Jones himself is symbolic of a black man asking for his freedom. His first name, Brutus, represents the brutality Jones has faced and inflicts on others. The silver bullet is a dominant symbol in the play—itsself originally called the *The Silver Bullet*—that represents Jones's pride and the lie he tells the natives to gain power, similar to the lies white men tell to capture and then enslave Africans. Other elements taken from Strindberg are the apparitions of Jones's guilty past that surround him in the forest, as Jones confronts both literal and figurative demons, and the use of elaborate scenes with costumes and masks.

**U.S. Occupation of Haiti:** *The Emperor Jones* takes place "on an island in the West Indies as not yet self-determined by White Marines." Eugene O'Neill never names the island in the play; however, O'Neill revealed that the United States' occupation of Haiti had a significant influence on his writing of the play.

The United States occupied Haiti and ordered the U.S. military to seize and take control of Haiti after the assassination of the Haitian president, purportedly to maintain economic and military stability, in accordance with the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which prevented European governments from controlling nations in the Western Hemisphere. Much of Europe was already involved in World War I (1914–18), a conflict resulting from factors including the rise of imperialism (the formation of empires) and the colonization of islands and other territories, issues that are depicted in *The Emperor Jones*. The United States's stated concern was that Germany might succeed in taking over Haiti during the war. Plus, for many years the United States had an interest in the island nation as a potential military base because of its proximity to Florida. Haitians, on the other hand, believed that the United States chose to occupy Haiti to protect the U.S. government's financial interests.

In 1917, the U.S. Marine Corps, a military service within but separate from the U.S. Navy, supervised an election intended to force the adoption of new legislation permitting foreigners to buy land in Haiti. Haitians rejected the new constitution, and the country attempted to draft a new, anti-American constitution. However, the United States forced the president at the time to dissolve the legislature. It was not until 1934, under President Roosevelt, that the United States withdrew from Haiti. O'Neill became interested in Haitian history just before the United States's occupation. In 1919 he heard a story about a Haitian president who claimed that a lead bullet could not kill him; only a silver bullet could cause his death. The story provided the spark for O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill read the history of Haiti and researched the uses of the long, narrow drums called tom-toms that the natives played with their hands, which O'Neill asserts form the core of the play. He claims that the idea of the jungle setting and the distorted drum sound came from his own experiences visiting the jungles of Honduras in 1909. There he contracted malaria, an often fatal infection that is transmitted to humans by mosquitoes. During his bout with the disease, he claimed to hear drumming as the blood pumped in his ears. O'Neill's first performance of *The Emperor Jones* came together in 1920, just as the news of the occupation of Haiti by U.S. Marines made headlines.

**African Americans in the Early 20th Century:** *The Emperor Jones* is the tragic story of Brutus Jones, a former Pullman (railroad passenger car) porter who becomes emperor of an island in the West Indies. Through visions, O'Neill traces Jones's journey from slavery to his position with the Pullman Company, his arrest for murder, and his work on a chain gang. Many of these experiences were common to black men of Brutus Jones's time. Following the American Civil War (1861–65), the freed African Americans were often forced to work in conditions now understood as neo-slavery, a form characterized by work for below-living wages, tenant farming or sharecropping, or convict leasing. In the latter instance, black men were convicted of charges from vagrancy to selling crops after dark. While Brutus Jones was convicted of a real charge, murder, many of his cohorts on the chain gang would likely have been there on false charges. African Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries faced many obstacles that made it difficult to succeed. African American educators, writers, and orators urged blacks not to gain equal rights but, instead, to try to improve their economic conditions. However, certain stringent and biased laws carried on with discrimination and made it difficult for black people to find jobs. Additionally, African Americans in the South were terrorized by the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organization that formed in the late 1860s and saw a resurgence in the 1960s in response to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which formally ended all legal discrimination based on a person's skin color, race, and religious beliefs.

Apart from stringent Jim Crow laws and fear of white supremacists, many early 20th-century businesses did not want to hire African Americans. The majority of African American men living in the South worked as farmers, performed unskilled labour, or worked in service jobs. One service job that was available to African American males, particularly those who were previously enslaved, was as a Pullman porter, Jones's job before the time of the play. For that reason, Pullman was the largest employer of black men. After slavery was abolished in 1865, George Pullman (1831–97) sought to hire former enslaved black males to work as porters on his luxury overnight train cars. Pullman specifically wanted to hire African American men, preferably those who had previously worked as servants, because they would be subservient toward the middle- and upper-class passengers and work long hours for very low pay. Additionally, Pullman believed that having "darker" black males on the trains would make white passengers feel more comfortable because the porters would go easily unseen.

The first Pullman porter began to work for the company around 1867, two years after slavery ended. The job of the porter was to haul luggage, clean the sleeping berths, and generally serve the passengers. Thus, Jones had a steady job but not one where he was empowered. An African American male who worked as a Pullman porter earned a higher status within their community because they were considered well traveled and got to serve many important white men. Physically, the work was easier than field labor, and the perks included the possibility of advancing to porter jobs in fine hotels. Still, the work was degrading. Porters were called boy or George (after their employer) by passengers, a throwback to slavery when slave owners would not call their workers by their given names.

O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* is significant to the history of American theater in that it was the first play performed by a white theater company that employed an African American actor, Charles S. Gilpin (1878–1930), in a leading role. Traditionally, black characters were played on stage by white actors who wore dark paint on their faces. These plays were called minstrel shows and relied heavily on racist stereotypes for entertainment. Even though O'Neill was a white playwright and included many black stereotypes in his production, some in the African American community gave high praise to the performance of *The Emperor Jones*, while during the 1930s, the play and its film version had been condemned as a racist production.

\*\* References and Acknowledgement: Various open access internet sources