



Representation of Trauma in *The Emperor Jones*

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Received 21 March 2014; accepted 22 May 2014

Published online 26 June 2014

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the trauma theme and dig out the underlying causes of the traumatized character in *The Emperor Jones* in the light of social and historical dimensions. The study investigates the symptoms of trauma manifested by the Afro-American who struggles to resist oppression while denying his identity and parodying his exploiter which ultimately pave way for his own doom as an outcast of both the black and the white community.

Key words: Trauma; *The Emperor Jones*; Eugene O’Neill; African-American

Zhang, W. Q. (2014). Representation of Trauma in *The Emperor Jones*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 8(3), 116-121. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/4935>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4935>

INTRODUCTION

Accomplished in 1920 by American dramatist and Nobel laureate Eugene O’Neill, *The Emperor Jones* is a play of eight scenes which gives a vivid account of the tale of Brutus Jones, an African-American man who accidentally kills a coworker due to a dispute occurred in gambling, goes behind the bars, escapes to a Caribbean island after beating his white prison guard to death, and edges herself into the position of an emperor. The play recounts his story in flashbacks as Brutus flees desperately through the forest so as to escape from the rebellious African-Americans over whom he imposes brutal reign and from whom he greedily plunders. Illusion and hallucination

penetrate through his mind when he melts down with fragmented language and uncontrollable behaviors on account of traumatized mentality. Personal pessimism and tragedy reflected from this play is not unique among the galaxy of Eugene O’Neill’s works characterized by realism which involve characters on the fringes of society where they endeavor to seize hope but ultimately slide into the abyss of despair and disillusionment. As a marginalized African-American, Brutus Jones is a victim of trauma inflicted by social context and personal flaws.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In western academia, critic attention to Eugene O’Neill has risen since a long time ago and now has covered almost all his works. Critics are captured by his illuminating themes and ingeniously innovated dramatic devices. Studies mainly center on its expressionistic features, comparative studies, and ethnic-oriented researches.

Expressionism and external influence of his plays are widely investigated, as exemplified by Clara Blackburn’s paper (1941) which studies the continental influences on O’Neill’s expressionistic dramas particularly the impact from Strindberg who is considered to be the father of expressionism in drama because “he dared to project his own soul, his inner self, on the stage” (Blackburn, 1941, p.111). In terms of basic expressionistic factors, Manuel (2005) manifests the artistic representation of African-Americans in *The Emperor Jones* which marks a new step in the treatment of the depiction fad. Additionally, Corery (1969) illustrates that his expressionistic play *The Emperor Jones* turned for details about witch doctors to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Historical and cultural elements involving race and identity are extensively studied. Steen (2000) intends to embody the psychic and social alienation of the writer whose depiction of characters constitutes to racial

subjectivity of spectators. In “Genuine Negroes and Real Bloodhounds”, Monks (2005) illustrates the production of the avant-garde playwright Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* which utilizes blackface to represent African American identity, in which case it is viewed as a representation of race discrimination on stage. A comparative research conducted by Canton (2007) explores O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones* and George and Ira Gershwin’s opera *Porgy and Bess* as inspirations for the creation of Langston Hughes and William Grant Still’s *Troubled Island*, indicating that they both are the manifestation of the rise and fall of a black emperor in the West Indies. Smith (2009) interprets this play as a Benjaminian allegory, a traumatic drama implying America’s racial history which creates a traumatic confrontation between the scenes and the audiences. The circum-Caribbean imaginary in *The Emperor Jones* is explored by Lowe (2011) whose essay concentrates on the film as a telling juxtaposition of the U.S. South and the Caribbean, something that was not so saliently featured in the original drama.

2. TRAUMA THEORY AND TRAUMA NARRATIVE

The term “trauma”, which is initially adopted in medical science, derives from Greek, defining physical damage caused by external forces. In 1970s, a French psychiatrist refers to it as symptoms of hysteria. Generally, Trauma refers to “an individual’s emotional response to an experience that disrupts previously held perception of one’s self and others” (Balaev, 2012, p.4). The process of defining is fraught with complexity, involving constant evolvments and shifting of focus. Moreover, instead of maintaining a solitary paradigm of pathology to interpret trauma discourses, the research orientation of literary trauma also extends to a broader sense.

Psychology-based trauma conceptualization echoed Freudianism, suggesting that traumatic experience can produce a sometimes indelible effect on the human psyche that can change the nature of individual’s memory, self-recognition, and relational system, and can alter people’s psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present. The psychological premise of traditional model, which relies upon a relatively monocular view of memory, concentrates on the origin of trauma, traumatic responses, its belatedness, and the defenses it initiated and so on. The primary response to trauma is the abnormal division of consciousness, presenting “speechless void, unrepresentable, inherently pathologic, timeless, and repetitious” (Balaev, 2012, p.4). It is “a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis” and “is fundamental to making an experience traumatic: the

person was unable to take any action that could affect the outcome of events” (Van der Kolk & Van der Hart, 1991, p.446). Caruth holds that traumatic memories appear in the repetitive, intrusive forms of visualization of trauma scene, nightmares, or associated affects. Herman illustrates that it is not uncommon for victims to separate or dissociate themselves from physical and emotional self-awareness to avoid pain; “splitting off from one’s body or awareness can reduce the victim’s immediate sense of violation and help them to endure and survive the situation” (Vickroy, 2002, p.13). Representation of trauma inevitably contains the explorations of self-construction and the shaping of relational and situational properties of identity. Traumatic experiences commonly involve a radical sense of isolation and disconnection that challenges people’s self-control, bringing about a sense of helplessness and a diminished or shattered sense of self. Traumatized characters who struggle to formulate cohesive narratives are inclined to display fragmentation which is a reaction of a profoundly disturbing sense of self.

Social and cultural dimensions of trauma extend to investigate diverse forms of trauma with multiple responses in psychological, humanistic, cultural, and sociohistorical notions. Michelle Balaev proposes that one’s personality, family history, cultural background, location and other factors determine the consciousness and memory of traumatized characters. Social and cultural dimensions of trauma touch upon the collective trauma with destructive consequences and the power of breaking the attachment of social life. Laura S. Brown studies the constant stress and unavoidable humiliation linked with being a member of low socioeconomic statues which triggers traumatization of marginalized groups such as colored race, females and homosexuals. Frantz Fanon explores trauma concerning racism in the post-colonial context from the perspectives of body, society, culture and history. In addition, the development of posttraumatic stress disorder “as a diagnosis has created an organized framework for understanding how people’s biology, conceptions of the world and personalities are inextricably intertwined and shaped by experience” (Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996, p.4).

3. THE TRAUMATIZED CHARACTER AS AN OPPRESSED AFRO-AMERICAN

With several typical traumatic symptoms, Jones’s personal trauma has its source in the collective trauma of slavery. His memory of enslaved and oppressed past is indebted to his subsequent mentality and behaviors.

Jones’s incapability of distinguishing between one object from his traumatic past and another which is scarcely related is a manifestation of his trauma symptom. He is a pure African-American with characteristics that are

“typically negroid” (Zhu, 2012, p.105). When he flees in tremendous fear and flurry through the pitch-dark forest, the big dead stump surrounded by ranks of gigantic trunks turns into an auction block in his hallucination, reflecting his inability to differentiate and separate the external reality and personal psychic reality which is regarded as a symptom of traumatic events and experiences. The capacity for metaphor, which is the separation of signifier and signified, should be based on the ego integrity and boundaries that can be smashed by traumatic circumstances (Grubrich-Simitis, 1984, pp.305-307). With this syndrome, a random exposure to something remotely linked to the trauma may lead the victim to reenter the experience. In this play, the delirious Afro-American who can hardly distinguish between the stump and an auction block suffers from post-trauma effects which disturb his cognitive function in recognition. In consequence, he is driven to miserable moan and groan as he goes back to the fifties of the last century when well-to-do and superior planters trade slaves wantonly and unscrupulously, when African-Americans are treated as cattle. It is self-evident that the humiliating and intolerable history leaves indelible trace in Jones’s distorted and dissociated mentality.

During Jones’ desperate escape, repetition of traumatic events or experience is displayed which is a common symptom concerning psychological analysis of trauma. In the queer and rotten forest, the traumatized reminiscence as a slave creeps into his mind. As an African-American with industrious and intelligent nature, Jones endures lashes of ruthless whips and intangible mental torments imposed by white superiority. The strong man used to be a useful tool for white planters who make the lively and appealing bidding possible and who strive to bid in front of the auctioneer. In his illusions, the memory of being a Pullman on a train also infiltrates into his consciousness, a memory filled with toil and poverty, and a memory imbued with bullying and contempt from white passengers. Likewise, with the emergence of a small gang of Negroes in striped convict suits followed by a white prison guard in the uniform with a rifle slung across his shoulders and a heavy whip in his hands, he is thoroughly overwhelmed by enormous terror. “Persons who experience degradation and humiliation at the hands of their tormenters or who are swept along helplessly by the capriciousness of fate often describe a profound identification with the terror of helplessness . . .” (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, p.71). The image of the white guard is so authentic that Jones is almost hypnotized and gets to his feet in a stupor under the stern command of the white guard who points to him with a whip and place him in his due position. Then, after the obedient prisoner wearily grabs a shovel to dig up the dirt, “suddenly the guard approaches him angrily, threateningly. He raises his whip and lashes Jones viciously across the shoulders with it. Jones winces with pain and cowers abjectly. The guard turns his back on him and walks away contemptuously”

(Zhu, 2012, p.117). The white guard’s inhumanity and the black prisoner’s uncontrollable fear reappear in Jones’s traumatic memory despite the elapse of time. According to Sigmund Freud, traumatic mental illness is a result of psychiatric disorders occurred in the time of resistance, because when people are unprepared psychologically for the damage, the sudden emotional impact is likely to induce the traumatized person to repeat the event. The flashback of the experiences when he is subjected to the whips of the white can be deemed as repetition which allows Jones to go through the physical and psychological trauma with extreme pain and sorrow. Furthermore, the trauma functions as a determinant factor in shaping Jones’s characteristic and identity, opening a gateway towards his sinful deeds and eventual self-destruction.

The individualized trauma of oppression and exploitation represented in *The Emperor Jones* is believed to be a stirring melody of collective trauma. “Major traumatic events . . . transcend the realms of individual suffering and enter the universal and collective sphere... There can be no complete healing for anyone as long as the collective sources of trauma remain unaddressed” (Kellerman, 2007, p.9). In his vivid illusions, he cannot help meeting other slaves who “are sitting in crumpled, despairing attitudes, hunched, facing one another with their backs touching the forest walls as if they were shackled to them” when “a low, melancholy murmur rises among them” (Zhu, 2012, p.119). This group of slaves are depicted as fettered prisoners who wear depressing and despairing countenance. Singing woeful songs, they represent the trauma of the race as a whole. It is noted that collective trauma is a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community (Erikson, 2005, p.153). For African-Americans, they are all the witnesses and victims of their slavery past, hence their shared trauma endows them with a sense of belonging and a specific identity. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it (Erikson, 2005, p.154). It is the reason why the arrogant and confident emperor uncannily joins their chorus to utter plaintive voices with tremulous wails of despair that reaches a certain pitch which is unbearably acute. At that time, his voice reached “the highest pitch of sorrow, of desolation” (Zhu, 2012, p.119). It stems from the fact that they share the traumatic history with their forefathers of being “taken from the great Continent of Africa and brought here for the purpose of using them as slaves . . . without mercy, without any sympathy” (Garvey & Garvey, 1986, p.79). Jones’s sub-consciousness drags him into a state where he returns to his original self—an African-American whose mere existence is built upon oppression and repression. At that fleeting moment, he retrieves his long-lost self of being black and unveils the universal trauma inflicted upon every individual in

this community which can barely be relieved unless the collective trauma is addressed.

The history of slavery “formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent collective memory, one that signified and distinguished a race, a people, or a community” (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004, p.60). Jones’s traumatic experience is shared by the community who endures enslavement physically and culturally.

4. THE TRAUMATIZED CHARACTER AS AN IMITATOR OF THE WHITES

The psychological internalization of oppressor’s identity is a marked feature of the traumatized protagonist. Overwhelmed by his craving for wealth, Jones strives to make a white emperor out of his black identity by consciously emulating the whites and the rules governing their community which gives rise to his traumatic ending. It is embodied through the blind acceptance and worship of white men’s values and identity which results in his shattered self.

The Afro-American identity is devalued in Jones’s consciousness due to the domination of the white people and the subordination of the blacks. Jones refers to his compatriots as “fool, woods’ niggers” and “de heads o’ de low-flung, bush niggers”, terms laced with scorn and insult. In addition, after detecting local Afro-Americans’ painstakingly planned rebel, the arrogant black emperor scornfully and fiercely states that

That fool no-count nigger! Does you think I is scared f him? I stands him on his thick head more than once before dis, and I does it again if he come in my way—And this time I leave him a dead nigger for sure! (Zhu, 2012, p.110)

Jones firmly believes that unlike those foolish and ignorant African-Americans, he is certain to accomplish his blueprint on account of his resourceful and far-sighted nature. This sense of superiority parallels that of the whites. Moreover, Jones deposits all his illicit money and filthy lucre in a foreign bank and determines to sail on a French boat to the west with the purpose of leading a cozy and luxuriant life. It represents Jones’s desire for the western world and even a whites’ identity which stems from the policies of the dominant group which isolate them from the opportunities of playing significant roles in the social and political realms. Within the African-American community the unhealed racial divisions are imbued with “political crimes, carried out as part of a systematic pattern of racial oppression” (Herman, 1997, p.243). The African-American’s social involvement is denied by the oppressors’ unfair rules and severe applications of laws. His personal trauma and collective trauma induce a feeling of powerlessness, thus his identity of the oppressed is devalued both culturally and racially in which case his self is split or shattered. As a result,

the oppressed are inclined to accept the definition of the African-Americans and absorb the oppressor’s identity (Fanon, 2007, pp.143-144). It can be evidenced by Jones’s negative attitudes toward the blacks and harsh treatments on his own race which give expression to his destructive self-definition and self-perception.

As a matter of fact, Jones who spares no efforts to crown himself as a ruler seeks identification with a powerful other. At the beginning of the first Scene, the audience chamber in the palace of the Emperor is portrayed as “a spacious, high-ceilinged room with bare, whitewashed walls, and “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” (Zhu, 2012, p.104). The color *white* is foregrounded to give prominence to the black man’s irresistible desire of becoming white. A sharp contrast is created when a man with black skin sits in this room with white walls, white pillars and white tiles. The decoration is an indication of his potential longing for the social status of the whites. He intends to act as a white emperor rather than a black one by creating “an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (Bhabha, 1989, p.117). It lies in the fact that the trauma inflicted upon the oppressed generates self-division in the process of self-identification.

Forming a duality within the psyche wherein the powerful other’s values are inserted into his ego, Jones conducts his deeds as self-generated but are actually coerced by others. The original unity or wholeness may “be ruined, polluted or contaminated” which makes the traumatized person lose and exposes “sinful other in oneself” (LaCapra, 2001, p.58). Jones is brainwashed by the white’s values and thoughts, and strongly believes that a petty thief is bound to end up in jail while a man who steals and robs on a large scale is likely to be put on a throne and be respected even after demise. Harboring this misleading conviction, the black man who was not born evil goes astray into a dead end. White man’s quality talk he overheard on the train is cherished by the black Pullman as a doctrine, as a piece of truth, and as guidance in his life. Foucault’s view on the trauma figuring in subjectivation resonates with the notion of trauma in what Mark Seltzer has addressed “wound culture” in which “the self’s relations to itself as well as to society are increasingly determined by infinitely rehearsed and strongly cathected experience of woundedness” (Buelens, Durrant, & Eaqlestone, 2013, p.152) The internalization of the whites’ forms of exploitation makes it possible for Emperor Jones to grab a large amount of fortune from his poverty-stricken compatriots. By means of brag and bluff, this stowaway builds himself a strong and miracle image among the unsophisticated local Afro-Americans.

And there all them fool, bush niggers was kneeling down and bumping their heads on de ground like I was a miracle out o’ de Bible Oh Lord, from that time on I has them all eating out of my hand. (Zhu, 2012, p.107)

By internalizing the colonizer's identity, the absorption of social directions and reinforcement of domination are realized (Vickroy, 2002, p.39). In his view, the African-Americans, who were born ignoble and snotty, are obliged to be treated with obscurantism. Therefore, he deifies himself as a sacred or powerful person who is not likely to be killed by a bullet made of lead. He breaks the laws which he himself made and grabs the local people's money through various means which squeezed them dry. Precious treasures turn into his personal property since local people are forced to pay tribute to the voracious and deprived emperor for fear of his tyranny. The norms and principles governing his acts are based upon the acceptance of the directions of the oppressors.

Disturbance in identity formation is diagnosed as a persistent issue in victims who are subjected to chronic recurrent trauma, and who "display identity diffusion, splitting of the good and bad" (McCann & Pearlman, 1990, p.115). With distorted self-perception and blind reverence for the oppressors' identity, Jones is enslaved both physically and mentally by the dominant group. His reaction to trauma may be universal among the oppressed or colonized.

5. THE TRAUMATIZED CHARACTER AS AN OUTCAST OF BOTH BLACK AND WHITE COMMUNITIES

Being listed as wanted by the whites and being hunted down by the blacks, Jones, who returns to his true self after all those years' scheming and cheating, digs his own grave by his laborious hands and extraordinary wits. His personal trauma roots in his betrayal on his race and refusal to embrace their culture.

Haunted by the ghosts from traumatic past, Jones accounts his unfinished story as a sinner and a victim. He sees the scene of slave trades and auctions, and he hears the slaves' chorus of elegy. The visions are so authentic that it seems to be a time travel. As a typical response of trauma, distorted time sequence exposes both the character and the readers to the unhealed collective trauma. According to Freud's observation, the shell-shocked soldiers may reenter the trauma experience in the form of nightmares which operates similarly as illusions. The men he killed are visible to him as ghosts of whom he declared never to be afraid when Smithers warns him. In reality, what he meets in the forest is what he fears most. Jacques Derrida remarks that "the ghost, by forcibly introducing in the present recognition of our debt to the past, wounds that every present, causing a state in which time is disarticulated and dislodged" (Ferrán, 2007, p.172). A ghost "that look at us, that concerns us", which may "implicate us directly into its unfinished story" (Ferrán, 2007, p.219). The ghosts bear witness to his sinful yet traumatic and pathetic past which he himself is unable to

confront and resolve. The lingering effect of trauma serves as an insidious burden for the African-American's soul and suggests the impossibility of his recovery and mental freedom.

A fierce pang of horror and pain penetrates through Jones, producing symptoms of hysteria with fragmented utterance. "As a special form of memory, traumatic events produce emotions such as terror, shock, fear and "disruption of the normal feeling of comfort" (Kaplan, 2005, p.34). In Scene Seven, he is completely driven into a hysterical state of mind. He knees down in front of the altar in great horror. And then he crawls away with his face hidden while his shoulders are shaken by hysterical sobs and moans. As the horror corrodes his mind, his croon, which is punctuated by shrill screams, rises to intensity. One's certain experiences which operate traumatically plant seed of symptom of hysteria which functions as memory-symbols in psychic realm. "Hysteria could often be traced back to a shock to the nervous system that disrupted subsequent memory. . . The trauma accumulates power through autosuggestion and association as it becomes the root of the hysterical symptoms" which is "the dissociation—the breaking apart into isolated fragments—of the personality" (Abraham & Torok, 1994, p.106). During his desperate escape in the seemingly perilous forest, Jones is apt to give implications to himself that after being exiled from the whites' world, the black community can never set him free owing to his unforgivable deeds. Out of dread, Jones mumbles tremblingly that

What—what is I doing? What is—this place? Seems like—seems like I know that tree—and them stones—and the river. I remember—seems like I been here before. Oh, Gorry, I is scared in dis place! I am scared! Oh, Lord, protect this sinner! (Zhu, 2012, p.120)

Repetition is a marked feature in these particularly short and simple sentences, revealing his incapability of clear thinking. Besides, on the verge of self-destruction, he prays for forgiveness in an attempt to escape from the severe punishment. In a state of trance, he cannot make out the routes and even forget about some previous matters under which circumstance his utterance is characterized by fragmentation and incoherence. "The dissociated elements that give rise to patients' symptom or behavior had their origin in past traumatic experiences" (Cotsell, 2005, p.7). Jones's utmost terror for the imminent doom is the reification of his distorted mentality and dissociated personality induced by his inability to get rid of the shackles and fetters of colorization and dominant culture.

The failure to reconstruct the black identity leads to the abandonment by Jones's community. In his illusions, a witch-doctor shows up and summons a crocodile god with glittering green eyes. The appearance of these traditional elements in African-American's culture is a reflection of Jones's unconscious awareness of his identity. The play

reaches its climax when the insane man pulls the trigger targeted at the green eyes of the crocodile after being informed of his impending sacrifice on the altar. In spite of his struggles and strivings in returning to his true self, his sins are far from being pardoned. Being inculcated the inferiority of the blacks by cultural colonization, this traumatic figure is pushed into a position of self-abasement and self-destruction. So he is indulged in the fantasies of being the colonizer, of being the powerful other who is superior to his colonized compatriots. However, regardless of his strenuous imitation and strong desire, Jones is perceived as an "other" by the whites.

Traumatic symptoms and responses gain full possession of Jones at the end of his tragic life, epitomizing this Afro-American's failed attempt to internalize the white's identity and the reconstruction of Black Nationalism. The traumatized figure's mentality is split in the process of conflict and struggle.

CONCLUSION

Eugene O'Neill condenses Jones's traumatized experience in eight short scenes, reifying the personal and collective trauma inflicted by distorted self-perception and identity in the context of political oppression and cultural colonization. By means of externalizing psychological trauma symptoms in reconstructing the black identity and Black Nationalism, O'Neill allows readers to symbolically participate in the perception of originating trauma and perpetual menace of psycho-social trauma, thus rendering everlasting artistic value and universal significance.

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