

## Unit -IV

### Emperor Jones- Eugene O'Neill

#### Story

The play opens in the late afternoon inside the throne room of Brutus Jones, the self-declared emperor of a remote Caribbean island. Henry Smithers, a white Cockney trader, discovers an old native woman sneaking around the room. She reveals that the islanders are preparing to revolt. After she leaves, Jones enters confidently. Smithers warns him of the uprising, but Jones remains unfazed and mocks the message. He admits he always knew rebellion was inevitable and reveals he has been stealing from the island and hiding his fortune in a foreign bank. Jones believes he is protected by superstition, having spread the myth that he can only be killed by a silver bullet. Armed with a revolver loaded with five lead bullets and one silver one, he prepares to flee through the jungle to reach the coast and escape.

A rhythmic drumbeat begins to follow him. Smithers has already warned Jones about ghosts and evil spirits in the forest, but Jones confidently sets off, unaware that the forest journey will be both physical and psychological.

Deep in the forest, Jones becomes disoriented and hungry. He searches for food he had stored earlier but cannot find it. As he becomes increasingly paranoid, eerie glowing-eyed creatures called the Little Formless Fears appear. Terrified, he fires at them, wasting his first lead bullet. The hallucinations mark the beginning of his downfall.

As the moon rises, Jones comes across a ghostly vision of Jeff, the man he murdered years ago in a dice game. Overcome with guilt and fear, he shoots at Jeff with his second bullet. The vision disappears, but Jones's panic increases.

Under the high moon, Jones sees a spectral chain gang, including the white prison guard he killed during his escape. The guard silently orders him to rejoin the labor line. Jones reluctantly obeys but then tries to resist and fires his third bullet at the guard. The drumbeat grows louder, and Jones's sanity continues to deteriorate.

In the early hours before dawn, Jones stumbles into a clearing and finds himself in the middle of a slave auction. An auctioneer sells him to a Southern planter. Enraged and horrified, Jones shoots at the auctioneer and the planter, using his fourth and fifth bullets. Despite being completely alone, Jones continues to react to the hallucinations as if they were real, giving away his position to the pursuing rebels with every shot.

Now down to only the silver bullet, Jones finds himself on the deck of a slave ship. He sees rows of Black men in chains, crying out in agony. As their wails rise, Jones joins in instinctively, overwhelmed by ancestral memory and collective trauma. He flees again into the forest, screaming.

At the edge of a river near a massive tree and stone altar, just before dawn, Jones collapses in fear. A witch doctor appears, chanting and dancing. Jones realizes he is being ritually prepared for sacrifice. When a monstrous crocodile head emerges, symbolizing an ancient African deity, Jones uses his last silver bullet to shoot it. The moment is climactic, as he

has finally confronted the full weight of his personal guilt and racial history. As the drumbeat intensifies, he falls to the ground, drained and defeated.

Back at the forest's edge, Smithers waits with Lem, a native leader. Smithers mocks the idea that Jones could be killed by drums and magic. Lem insists Jones has been captured and killed with a silver bullet forged by melting down money. Soldiers then arrive, carrying Jones's lifeless body, confirming that the myth he created was also the key to his downfall.

## **Critical Analysis**

Eugene Gladstone O'Neill was a famous American playwright known for introducing realistic drama techniques to the United States. His plays were heavily influenced by European dramatists like Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg. One of his greatest achievements was Long Day's Journey into Night, which is considered one of the finest American plays of the 20th century, along with Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. O'Neill won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936 and remains the only playwright to have received four Pulitzer Prizes for Drama.

One of his most notable early works is The Emperor Jones, written in 1920. It tells the story of Brutus Jones, a clever and confident African American man who was once a Pullman porter. After killing another man in a dice game and escaping from jail, he flees to a remote Caribbean island. There, he declares himself emperor by tricking the native people into believing he is protected by a magical charm and can only be harmed by a silver bullet.

The Emperor Jones was O'Neill's first major success and remains a powerful example of how theatre can explore human emotion, guilt, and downfall using creative storytelling and dramatic techniques. The play explores how the same myth that helped Jones rise to power ultimately leads to his downfall. When the natives rebel, he is forced to flee into the jungle. As he journeys through it, the play uses a series of flashbacks and hallucinations to show his past crimes, regrets, and deep fears. The jungle becomes a symbol of his mind, filled with guilt and terror.

The Emperor Jones is known for its experimental style. It blends realism and expressionism, focusing more on the emotions and inner experiences of the main character than on physical action. Monologues and symbolic sound effects help show Brutus Jones's fear, agony, and regret. These techniques make the play a strong example of expressionist theatre, where the inner world of the character takes center stage.

At the heart of the play lies expressionism, a style that focuses more on emotions and the inner life of the character than on realistic action. This is seen especially when Jones flees into the jungle. The jungle scenes are filled with haunting sounds, hallucinations, and flashbacks to Jones's past, including a painful scene involving the slave trade. These scenes are emotionally intense and show how guilt, fear, and regret are eating away at Jones. The slave auction scene, in particular, touches the heart and helps

us understand why Jones committed some of his crimes. It also shows the lasting impact of slavery on the minds of Black people.

O'Neill also uses a mix of standard and non-standard English to reflect how people really speak. Words like “po” for “poor,” “yo” for “your,” and “ole” for “old” help bring authenticity to the character’s voice.

The play’s timeline moves back and forth between past and present. This structure helps the audience follow Jones’s emotional journey and understand how his past decisions led to his tragic end. While the play highlights Jones’s crimes and mistakes, it also shows him as a deeply human character haunted by his past.

The Emperor Jones also reveals deep racial issues and uses expressionist techniques to explore the psychological struggles of its main character. From the very first line, racism is clearly present. The play opens with a white man accusing an elderly Black woman of stealing and ends with a cruel racial slur: “Stupid as ’ogs, the lot of ’em! Blarsted niggers!” These lines frame the play with intense examples of racial prejudice.

Throughout the play, racism is shown in many ways. Brutus Jones, the main character, is a Black man who once worked as a Pullman porter in America. It also shows the rare moment of a Black man holding power over a white man—a reversal of the usual racial roles of the time. Yet, the power seems to bring out harshness in Jones as well.

Smithers, the white character, represents the typical racist mindset of the time. He is sneaky, greedy, and full of hate toward Black people. His words show the racism that was common in American society: “From what I’ve ’eard, it ain’t ’ealthy for a black to kill a white man in the States. They burn ’em in oil, don’t they?” This line highlights how the law protected white people and punished Black people harshly, no matter the situation. It also acts as a warning to Black audiences about the dangers they face in a racist society.

Overall, The Emperor Jones acts as a mirror of the society in which it was written—a time when Black people were treated unfairly and stripped of their humanity. It is both a product of its time and a warning to the future. It exposes the horrors of racism and the dangers of power while using expressionism to take us deep into the mind of a troubled man. The play challenges us to think about justice, identity, and how deeply prejudice can affect both individuals and entire societies.

### **Brutus Jones**

Brutus Jones, the central character in Eugene O'Neill’s The Emperor Jones, is a tragic and multifaceted character whose rise and fall form the heart of the play. He is a Black American man who once worked as a Pullman porter. He seizes power on a remote Caribbean island and declares himself the emperor. His character undergoes a deeply complex journey that touches on themes of ambition, race, identity, guilt, power, and mental collapse, all vividly portrayed through O'Neill’s masterful use of expressionist techniques in drama.

Before the play begins, Brutus Jones worked for ten years as a porter on Pullman sleeper trains. During this time, he observed how white men operated, learning that “big stealin’” was more profitable than “little stealin’.” This lesson becomes a key part of his philosophy and justifies his manipulation of the islanders once he gains control.

Jones’s life takes a dark turn when he kills a fellow Black man named Jeff during a dice game and later murders a white prison guard while in captivity. After escaping from prison, he flees to a small island in the West Indies, where he uses lies, fear, and superstition to elevate himself to the position of emperor.

Jones tricks the islanders into believing he is invincible and can only be killed by a silver bullet, a symbol of his supposed divine protection. He even has a silver bullet made, not only to maintain the illusion but also as a final tool for suicide if ever needed. He is a symbol of the self-made man, shaped by American racism and systemic injustice. His rise is not one of virtue, but of sheer wit, manipulation, and brutal power. At the beginning of the play, Jones is confident, commanding, and proud.

Jones speaks in an authoritative tone, acts quickly in the face of danger, and believes himself smarter than everyone around him, including Smithers, the Cockney trader. When Smithers warns him of the native rebellion, Jones immediately adapts, showing that he is a quick thinker and capable of strategic decision-making. However, this arrogance and exaggerated ego become the seeds of his downfall. He overrates his strength and underestimates the psychological toll of his past actions.

Jones’s belief in his own power, mixed with internalized racism and the trauma of his life experiences, makes him deeply flawed yet tragically human. As the play progresses, Jones flees into the jungle, which becomes a symbolic landscape representing his mind and soul. The hallucinations and apparitions force Jones to relive the darkest parts of his past: the murder of Jeff, the prison guard, and the collective trauma of slavery.

The appearance of these visions causes Jones to become increasingly terrified and unhinged. He speaks to the apparitions, prays, shouts, and ultimately fires at them. Jones uses up his five lead bullets in attempts to fight off the ghosts of his past, each shot symbolizing an attempt to destroy memory, guilt, and history. But he cannot escape.

Finally, he encounters a witch doctor and a crocodile god; symbolic of his own fake divinity and self-made myth. When he kills the crocodile with his silver bullet, it represents the death of the illusion; he is no longer a god, but a mere mortal man. Once Jones’s charade of godhood is destroyed, he becomes vulnerable and defenceless.

Jones’s internal conflict reflects a deeper issue of self-identity and internalized racism. Although he is Black, he often distances himself from the native islanders, referring to them with derogatory terms like “low-flung bush niggers” and “black trash.” This self-alienation shows how power has corrupted his sense of identity. He begins to see himself not as one of the oppressed but as superior to them. His imitation of white colonial rulers demonstrates how deeply he has internalized the same oppressive

structures he once suffered under. His downfall is not just due to rebellion, but to losing touch with his roots, humanity, and conscience.

Through Jones, O'Neill critiques the racism of American society, the psychological scars of slavery, and the illusory nature of power. Jones embodies the tragic consequences of systemic oppression and how a man raised in an unjust society may replicate those injustices when given power. From the opening scene, where a white man accuses a Black woman of theft, to the final racial slur shouted by Smithers, racism frames the entire narrative.

Jones, despite his power, is ultimately portrayed as a victim of both external and internalized oppression. His end is both inevitable and symbolic. His death shows the price of denial, guilt, and ego. The play suggests that true power comes not from control or deception, but from understanding one's past and embracing humanity.

Brutus Jones is a modern tragic character, a man with great potential who is destroyed by the very traits that made him powerful. Through Jones, Eugene O'Neill explores the psychological consequences of racism, the illusions of power, and the fragility of identity. His journey through the jungle is not just physical but emotional and symbolic; a descent into his own soul. By the time he uses the silver bullet, he is no longer Emperor Jones, just Brutus Jones, a flawed man trying to escape himself.