

Machines, Masks, and the Crisis of Belonging in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*

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Abstract: This paper examines the crisis of belonging in Eugene O'Neill's early expressionist plays *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. Brutus Jones and Yank initially construct powerful identities through their apparent mastery of the worlds they inhabit: Jones becomes an emperor by imitating colonial authority, while Yank imagines himself as the living force behind modern industry. Their confidence, however, depends upon unstable masks. Jones's imperial costume conceals racial alienation, criminal memory, and fear; Yank's identification with steel conceals his reduction to labouring muscle within a capitalist machine. Once these identities are challenged, both men undertake journeys that become theatrical descents into the divided self. O'Neill uses recurring drumbeats, distorted spaces, episodic scenes, mechanical rhythms, and animal imagery to replace external realism with psychological reality. The paper argues that the two plays expose different but related forms of modern domination: colonial power alienates Jones from racial history, while industrial power alienates Yank from his labour, society, and humanity. Neither protagonist finds a community capable of recognising him as a complete person. Their deaths demonstrate that material power and physical strength cannot create genuine belonging when the self has been shaped by structures of exploitation.

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill, expressionism, alienation, industrialisation, race, class, identity, belonging.

INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill's importance to modern American drama lies partly in his refusal to separate personal suffering from the social structures that produce it. His protagonists struggle with guilt, desire, memory, race, class, labour, and the need to belong. Even when their conflicts appear intensely private, the world around them has already entered their language and imagination. O'Neill's theatre therefore moves between the social and the psychological: it shows individuals confronting hostile environments while also revealing how those environments have become internal forces.

The Emperor Jones and *The Hairy Ape*, written at the beginning of O'Neill's major dramatic career, are especially useful for understanding this method. Brutus Jones and Yank seem powerful when they first appear. Jones is a self-created ruler who believes he has deceived an entire island; Yank is a muscular stoker who believes that he makes the modern world move. Yet both men possess identities built upon domination. Jones copies the logic of colonial power, and Yank equates human worth with mechanical productivity. Their apparent strength cannot survive once the worlds supporting these identities turn against them.

This paper asks three related questions: How do Jones and Yank manufacture identities through power, costume, labour, and language? How does expressionist theatre expose the fears concealed by

those identities? And how do colonialism and industrial capitalism transform the search for belonging into self-destruction? The central argument is that both plays dramatise a movement from confident self-assertion to radical dispossession. O'Neill's protagonists do not merely lose social status; they discover that the selves they defended were produced by systems that never truly allowed them to belong.

Brutus Jones and the Mask of Imperial Power

At the beginning of *The Emperor Jones*, Brutus Jones appears to have converted marginality into sovereignty. A former Pullman porter, gambler, prisoner, and fugitive, he has reached a Caribbean island and made himself its emperor. His rule is founded not on communal loyalty but on manipulation. He taxes the islanders, hides his wealth abroad, and spreads the story that only a silver bullet can kill him. The myth gives him symbolic authority while also revealing the insecurity beneath it. A ruler confident of genuine political belonging would not need to manufacture supernatural protection.

Jones's imperial identity is therefore a performance. His uniform, commanding speech, and contempt for the islanders enable him to imitate the structure of colonial rule. He has learned what the source text describes as the white world's philosophy of self-interest, efficiency, and "big stealing." Instead of rejecting oppression, he

appropriates its methods. His rise demonstrates the dangerous attraction of power to a person previously denied it, but it also isolates him from the Black community over which he rules. He repeatedly uses the language of racist contempt against the islanders and insists that he will not flee like an “ordinary” Black man (O’Neill, *Emperor Jones*, sc. 1). The emperor’s mask depends upon disowning the identity that connects him to those he exploits.

The forest strips this performance away. Once the rebellion begins, Jones expects to cross the island easily, recover his hidden provisions, and escape with his money. Instead, he becomes disoriented and repeatedly returns toward his starting point. His circular movement dramatises the failure of self-invention without self-knowledge. He can change his title and clothing, but he cannot remove the histories of imprisonment, racial violence, and exploitation from which his imperial persona emerged.

O’Neill’s expressionist method converts memory into visible action. Jones encounters apparitions of the man he killed, the prison guard, a slave auction, a slave ship, a Congo witch doctor, and the crocodile god. These figures are not presented as ordinary realistic events. They externalise layers of fear and historical memory. Doris Falk observes that Jones’s journey through the forest is ultimately an attempt to escape himself and that its circular form reflects a movement toward self-recognition (67). The forest becomes the interior of his divided consciousness.

The steadily accelerating drumbeat intensifies this psychological exposure. At first it belongs to the rebels, but its rhythm increasingly resembles Jones’s pulse. Public revolt and private panic become inseparable. Travis Bogard notes the play’s striking use of music, monologue, and rapidly changing settings to compress Jones’s flight into a powerful theatrical action (134). The drum is more than atmospheric sound: it breaks the emperor’s control over time and makes fear audible to the audience.

As Jones loses his bullets, clothing, direction, and command of language, the hierarchy he created collapses. His imperial uniform becomes a “straitjacket,” and discarding it allows him to breathe but cannot free him from the role’s consequences (O’Neill, *Emperor Jones*, sc. 3). When he finally uses the silver bullet against the crocodile apparition, he destroys the object on

which his own myth of invulnerability depends. The islanders then kill him with a silver bullet because they have accepted the superstition he invented. His fiction returns as material force. Jones is destroyed by the power narrative through which he once ruled others.

Yank and the Machinery of False Belonging

If Jones builds identity through imperial performance, Yank builds it through labour. In the opening scenes of *The Hairy Ape*, the stokehole is brutal, hot, noisy, and dehumanising, yet Yank experiences it as home. He believes that his strength drives the ship and, by extension, modern civilisation. He calls himself steel, steam, smoke, and the force that makes everything move (O’Neill, *Hairy Ape*, sc. 1). The language appears triumphant, but its grammar absorbs the worker into the machine. Yank does not say that he uses steel; he says that he is steel.

This identification supplies a powerful feeling of belonging. It distinguishes Yank from Paddy, who remembers an older maritime world in which sailors experienced wind, sea, skill, and communal life. Yank dismisses memory and reflection because speed alone seems meaningful to him. His confidence depends upon the industrial present: to move is to exist, and to produce is to belong. Yet this idea mistakes participation in production for ownership of its power. The ship belongs economically to people such as Mildred Douglas’s father, even though workers like Yank make it operate.

Mildred’s visit to the stokehole shatters Yank’s illusion. She encounters him not as the human source of industrial motion but as a frightening animal and calls him a “filthy beast.” The insult is devastating because it replaces Yank’s self-image with the class gaze of the owners. His muscular body, previously a source of pride, becomes evidence of inferiority. The encounter also reveals that industrial society has dehumanised both sides of the class division. Yank has been reduced to physical energy, while Mildred appears pale, artificial, and unable to face the labour on which her privilege depends.

Yank’s search after this encounter moves through a series of social spaces: Fifth Avenue, prison, a labour organisation, and finally the zoo. Each scene offers a possible community and then rejects him. On Fifth Avenue, wealthy pedestrians scarcely register his presence. In prison, the steel he celebrated reappears as bars, bolts, and cages.

At the labour organisation, he is suspected of being an agent provocateur because he can imagine resistance only as immediate physical destruction. His painful recognition is exact: he once thought he belonged to steel, but now steel belongs to the world that owns and confines him (O'Neill, *Hairy Ape*, sc. 7).

Expressionist design makes this social alienation visible. The workers' bodies and speech are stylised; machinery dominates the soundscape; Fifth Avenue becomes a procession of near-mechanical figures; the prison resembles a row of cages. Realistic locations are distorted until they reveal their psychological meaning. The result is not a documentary account of labour but a theatrical anatomy of dehumanisation. O'Neill shows a worker whose capacity to think about himself awakens only after humiliation, when the social order has given him no language adequate to interpret his condition.

The final encounter with the gorilla completes Yank's tragic search. He approaches the animal as a possible brother because human institutions have refused him. Yet even this attempt fails: the gorilla crushes him and throws his body into the cage. The ending suggests that modern man has lost the natural belonging once possessed as part of the animal world without achieving a spiritual form of belonging to replace it. Yank cannot return to nature, and industrial civilisation will not recognise his humanity. His death occurs between these inaccessible worlds.

Expressionism and the Divided Modern Self

The two plays use different histories but follow a comparable dramatic movement. Jones begins as emperor and ends as hunted body; Yank begins as the imagined engine of the world and ends as an exhibit in a cage. Both initially speak with absolute certainty. Both then enter episodic journeys in which confidence fragments, language changes, and the environment assumes psychological power. The forest and the modern city appear different, but each becomes a labyrinth that returns the protagonist to what he has denied.

Expressionism enables O'Neill to represent this breakdown without limiting himself to external probability. The apparitions in *The Emperor Jones* materialise racial and personal memory. The mechanical crowds, cages, and animal imagery in *The Hairy Ape* materialise class alienation. Sound is especially important: the tom-tom gives rhythm to Jones's panic, while furnaces, whistles, steel,

and shouted work chants shape Yank's consciousness. The stage does not merely surround the characters; it speaks the forces that have entered them.

The comparison also exposes the moral ambiguity of power. Jones has unquestionably exploited the islanders and repeats colonial violence. Yank's desire for revenge similarly becomes destructive. O'Neill does not make either man an innocent victim. Nevertheless, their responsibility exists within structures that have narrowed the identities available to them. Jones learns power through racial capitalism and colonial rule. Yank learns value through a system that recognises him only as productive strength. Their destructive choices are personal, but the vocabularies through which they understand themselves are social.

Belonging in these plays therefore requires more than occupying a place within a hierarchy or machine. Jones possesses a throne but no community. Yank has a crucial job but no share in the world his labour creates. One dominates, and the other produces; neither is recognised in full human relation. The plays challenge the American promise that ambition, strength, and work automatically create identity. Material success and productivity become counterfeit forms of belonging when they depend upon exploitation and self-estrangement.

CONCLUSION

The Emperor Jones and *The Hairy Ape* portray modern identity as a structure that can appear powerful while remaining internally fragile. Brutus Jones protects himself with imperial costume, money, manipulation, and a myth of invulnerability. Yank protects himself with physical strength and the belief that he is identical with industrial progress. When rebellion and class humiliation disrupt these beliefs, both men discover that they have mistaken power for belonging.

O'Neill's expressionist theatre makes that discovery visible and audible. The forest releases Jones's buried histories; the city converts Yank's industrial faith into prisons and cages. Drumbeats, machinery, episodic movement, distorted crowds, changing costume, and animal imagery carry the audience beyond surface realism into the protagonists' fractured consciousness. The technique reveals that social domination is most effective when it becomes part of the victim's idea of himself.

The tragedy of Jones and Yank is thus neither purely individual nor purely social. Each contributes to his own downfall, yet each has been formed by systems that offer only damaged identities. Jones can become powerful by reproducing colonial oppression; Yank can belong only by imagining himself as a machine. Their deaths expose the failure of a civilisation that celebrates mastery and productivity while denying mutual recognition. In O'Neill's early drama, the deepest human need is not simply freedom or success but a form of belonging that does not

demand the surrender of history, consciousness, or humanity.

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