Disillusionment in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and in O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones

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This paper attempts to compare Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones. This comparison is far from being fortuitous since O’Neill himself acknowledges his indebtedness to Conrad; he declared that he had been an enthusiastic reader of Conrad’s work since high school and for the rest of his life (Estin, Mark 1990: 41). Considering O’Neill’s avowal, we find it of crucial relevance to rely on Harold Bloom’s theory developed in his The Anxiety of Influence (1974) to show the grounds on which O’Neill has borrowed Conrad’s “master code” (Frye) as developed in Heart of Darkness and how he has re-fashioned them to express concerns peculiar to the America of the 1920’s. Our hypothesis is that if O’Neill in The Emperor Jones circulates the Conradian “codes” in American forms, it is because it is “timely” (cf. Nietzsche). In other words, the “conditions of possibility” for the emergence of a Conradian discourse in American fiction are met. O’Neill is less hesitating in tapping Heart of Darkness, and transferring Conrad’s themes and techniques to The Emperor Jones. He “swerves” (Bloom) from Conrad by giving special twists to all the aspects that are borrowed from Conrad.

According to Harold Bloom, poets struggle against one another in order to get a literary recognition from their literary masters. The belated poet makes a revision of his precursor’s work. This revision is to be reached through some distortive processes which Bloom ranges from one to six and calls “revisionary ratios”. It is obvious that Bloom’s theory concerns poets and poems, but one can equally apply it to drama and see its relevance to O’Neill’s work. Heart of Darkness is not a play, and yet its influence on O’Neill is remarkable. The reason is that Conrad’s novel is dramatic. In his The Rhetoric of Fiction (1983), Wayne C. Booth distinguishes between “telling” and “showing” in fiction. The former relates to narration in prose whereas “showing” relates to drama. In the case of Heart of Darkness, the “telling” comes out as a “showing” because of the dramatization of events in the narrative. Thus even though Heart of Darkness is a novel, Conrad has managed to bring it close to spatial arts to which drama belongs. He writes in the preface to his novel that he wants “to make us see things”. This notion is well expressed in the preface of The Nigger of the “Narcissus” (1897), in which he says: “the task I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel. It is, before all, to make you see” (p.xiii). For O’Neill too, the best way to show the truth is to do it through emotions. He affirms, “Our emotions are a better guide than our thoughts.” (1990:48).

The betrayal of the civilizing mission of western Europeans in Joseph Conrad’s work echoes the betrayal of the American dream in O’Neill’s mind. As he himself says it, “we’ve the same selfish, greedy path as every other country in the word. We talk about the American dream, and we want to tell the world about
American dream, but what is that dream, in most cases, but the dream of Material thing?” (1990:230) Thus, The Emperor Jones expresses O’Neill’s pessimistic vision about America as being a materialistic society. It stained the ideal dream and transformed it into greed and acquisition. This play was written at a time when the ‘American Dream’ had already lost most of its moral components. For the American society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the value of land had a peculiar importance, but by the turn of the twentieth century, the process of industrialization of the American economy reduced the importance of land. Consequently, land cultivation as the primary source of American prosperity was replaced by big business and goods acquisition - the new interest of the American man. This longing of the American society towards materialism transformed it from a society of values to a society of consumption.

At the time when Heart of Darkness was published imperialism was considered essential to the well being of Britain. In other words, the colonies were first of all markets and places for the growth of commerce, or the investment of capital for money making and the benefit for it. To succeed in its enterprise, it adopted the imperialistic policy. Accordingly, Conrad, in his fictional work Heart of Darkness, questions imperialism and its real motives. He even expresses his scepticism in regard to the European civilization mission both through Marlow’s disillusionment and Kurtz’s degeneration.

The Black American population adhered to the American dream after the Civil War. In this perspective, it is worth mentioning that the character of Brutus Jones, whose ‘features are typically Negroid’ (p.175), is the archetype of the black American people. In the play, Jones has acquired a white man’s name and occupation. Evolving from the primitive, he has become something other than his anonymous native essence and has superimposed a new self on his truth. Aside from his shrewdness and superiority, Jones is an extreme realist. He realizes that his role as emperor is only temporary; thus he has made all the necessary provision for escaping.

Both Kurtz and Jones express an important theme: the corruption of individuals by materialistic greed. As Jones exclaims ‘de long green, date’s me every time!’ (p.177). He reveals that he is even ready to deny Jesus in order to be free to worship money: ‘I’ be after de coin, an’ I lays may Jesus on the shelf for de time bein’, (p.185). In the first scene of the play O’Neill establishes the basic nature of Jones. He is portrayed as ‘shrewd, suspicious, and evasive’ (p.175) and this gives him the possibility to gain control over the natives in a very short time. He has utilized his superior knowledge, for his ethics are those of the white American, ‘in white civilization, he has become a new entity, an individual, not one of a horde, howling in communal self-abandonment’ (1972:141). Jones is proud to reveal that his success is due to the whites. Jones, like Kurtz, starts his political career with an ideal, which consists in the creation of an empire where the black man will be given full citizenship. Yet because of his lust and greed, Brutus Jones prefers his possession to his subjects. Like Conrad, O’Neill tries to provide us with the truth as he sees it. He shows us human beings degenerating while living in an environment that is absolutely strange.
The analysis of the theme of the American Dream in *The Emperor Jones* reveals that O’Neill was inspired by Conrad in its writing. In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad speaks of the ‘idea’ that is behind the colonial conquest as follows: “what redeems it [colonial conquest] is the idea only: and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to.” (p.10)

In Africa, Marlow is a witness of the perversion that occurs to the idea on the part of those who preach it at home: pilgrims, philanthropists, and traders of all sorts. The idea, or the dream of civilizing Africa, has become a nightmare, an ‘horror’. In fact, the white man has yielded to the major cardinal scenes like greed, and covetousness in Africa. Kurtz has imposed himself as a liberator of Africa using superstition, ritual practices, and slavery. He has established his career by celebrating demonic rites, involving the impalement of African heads on stakes in celebration of the power he has acquired over the Africans. The saintly bestowal of light has proved to be a devil.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow says that Africa is no longer the “blank space” on the map that he one day dreamed over. “It had got filled since my boyhood with rivers and lakes and names... It had become a place of Darkness.”(p.182) Conrad’s treatment of the idea and its perversion could not have failed to appeal to O’Neill since the American dream had witnessed the same perversion since the end of the nineteenth century when the democracy of land was replaced by a democracy of goods and their consumption. This perversion reached its peak in the “roaring twenties”.

*The Emperor Jones* can be considered as a minstrel play where the black man, Jones, behaves as a white man. Yet, this play is not shaped in classical minstrelsy. Minstrel plays were performed by white men, painted in black imitating the Blacks’ manners, songs and dances, to entertain the white bourgeois audience. The Minstrels adopted the Blacks’ dialects which were ungrammatical and without syntactic rules. These shows portrayed the Negroes as totally inferior. *The Emperor Jones* as a minstrel play mocks the failure of the American dream. The decline and the failure of the American man are shown through the struggle of Jones’s personality between his white conception of money, which can be compared to Kurtz, the ‘emperor’ of the ‘savages’ and ‘the primitives’, and his black genetic belonging. Just like Kurtz, Jones is described as ‘a tall, powerful built’ person with a ‘self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect’. So, the play is a means of dealing with social failure expressing the mood of the 1920s rather than simply a means of entertainment.

The minstrel features of the play make us think of Marcus Garvey, a Black Nationalist leader. His concern for the problems of blacks led him to found the Universal Negro Improvement Association. In 1916, he moved to New York City and opened a branch in Harlem. The UNIA was an organization designed “to promote the spirit of race pride”. Its goals were to foster worldwide unity among all blacks and to establish the greatness of the African heritage. Garvey addressed himself to the lowest classes of the black community and rejected any notion of integration. Garvey’s attack against “social equality” took the form of an assertion that “America is [a] white Man’s Country”. Convinced that blacks could not secure their rights in countries where they were a minority race, he urged a “back-to-
Africa” movement. Garvey made it plain that his whole outlook was based upon “the White Man’s Civilization [as] a splendid example to Negroes.”

However, Garvey could neither unite the blacks nor accumulate enough power to significantly alter the societies the UNIA functioned in. His importance declined when the Justice Department indicted him for mail fraud. He was convicted, and he entered jail in 1925. Two years later, he was deported to Jamaica. From this time on, his influence decreased, and he died in London in relative anonymity.

The first name of the central character Jones in O’Neill’s play is associated to that of Brutus. This association is deliberately made by O’Neill to point out his treachery. “Brutus” alludes to the character and the historical Roman figure who assassinated Julius Caesar in Shakespeare’s play of the same name. In O’Neill’s play the Emperor Jones is qualified as a Brutus in order to allude to the treachery of Marcus Garvey and his betrayal of the ideal of founding a Black Republic by running away with the money of his black compatriots. The name is also used to point out the betrayal of the same ideal by O’Neill’s white fellow Americans. As a minstrel figure, Brutus - also called Emperor Jones - can be made a representative of both races since he is supposed be a white man in a black mask. O’Neill’s use of minstrelsy is to show the weaknesses of the American society. He dramatizes the human search for identity and for faith that life has a purpose and shows this search to be both sustaining and tormenting.

Emperor Jones is as hollow as Kurtz in Heart of Darkness. He reveals that ‘if dey’s on thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca’s listenin’ to de white quality talk, it’s dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years’ (p. 178). Kurtz’s ideals are disclosed in his report of the International Society for the Suppression of savage customs: He began with the argument that we white, from the point of development we had arrived at, “must necessarily appear to them [savages] in the nature of supernatural beings-we approach them with the might as of a deity”... “By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded”... ‘Exterminate all the brutes” (p.200). It is perhaps in this report that Jones has found “de white quality talk” which permits him to be an Emperor and consider the natives as “dese ign’rent bush niggers dat ain’t got brains enuff to know deir own names’ (p. 183). Jones is sufficiently bold, ingenious and unscrupulous to be a ruler within two years. He makes people believe that he is a supernatural being by virtue of a legend of his invention and that only a silver bullet can harm him. O’Neill here intends to show us that as Kurtz has been created by the European, Jones has succeeded to be an emperor thanks to the American business philosophy.

In Heart of Darkness the graphic depiction of man’s capitulation to the primordial darkness of the jungle may also have helped to create the picture of Jones, clad in the burlesque uniform of exploitation, but reduced in the end to primitive nakedness, to rags that in Conrad’s words ‘would fly off at the first good shake’. In this sense, Jones stands as Kurtz who has made himself the natives’ god and who has decorated the posts of his hut with human skulls.
The first title of *The Emperor Jones* is *The Silver Bullet*, an indication of the importance of the bullet in the play’s design. Jones Bullet is his emperor-hood epitomized in a single destructive symbol; it is his talisman, his rabbit’s foot, his fate, as Jones says: “Silver bullet bring me luck” (p. 184). When it is gone, he must go to his death. In *Heart of Darkness*, the bullet is paralleled by ivory. Kurtz is an ivory procurer and a chief agent of the ivory company’s Inner Station at Stanley Falls. Both ivory and the silver bullet symbolize the essence of the self of the protagonists, and in both, that self is called an “Emperor”. Kurtz is the emperor of the jungle, “he had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land” (p. 206). Both Emperor-hoods are founded on fear, greed and lust, and these emperors control kingdoms of lies and cheating illusions. The Emperor of self is an Emperor of self-deception.

O’Neill relies on Conrad to create Jones whose journey is not only one in space and time but also into the darkest recess of the soul. He is hounded by his enemies - through the tom-toms - and by nightmarish images conjured up by his own mind. From the beginning we learn about Jones’s murder of Jeff in a crap game and about his killing the prison guard and then escaping. Both Jeff and the prison guard will appear in later scenes. These episodes from his criminal past return to haunt him. O’Neill’s description of Jones’s voice in Scene Six is “as if under some uncanny compulsion... reaches the highest pitch of sorrow, of desolation.” He adds, “Jones can be heard scrambling to his feet and running off, his voice sinking down the scale and receding as he moves farther and farther away in the forest”. He goes further, “Jones’s voice is heard from the left rising and falling in the long, despairing wail of the chained slaves” (pp. 199-200). Jones’ cry strangely – or rather understandably - echoes Kurtz’s cry ‘The Horror! The Horror!’

In *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz presents himself as a voice. Marlow speaks of him as follows: “The point was in his being a gifted creature and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words - the gift of most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, the most exalted and the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (pp.203-4). Talking is Kurtz’s greatest ‘gift’, and despite the fact that he is a man “without a substance” his voice guarantees him “a real presence”.

Even though Emperor Jones presents many features that could remind us of Kurtz, he differs from him because he progressively assumes the features of a Minstrel. He loses the features of a tragic figure to assume those of a comic figure. His uniform is altered. His physical appearance represents the descent back to primitiveness. In Scene Five, his clothes have completely disappeared and he is only in breechcloth, a type of a dress worn by the Negro slaves. O’Neill follows this regression in Scene Seven where Jones appears as a sleep walker and moving as in a trance. The strange forces of terror put Jones back to his aboriginal origins, and make him lose self-control.

In both works, the forest suggests darkness and wilderness, and both Kurtz and Jones are transformed by it. The forest in O’Neill is seen as a wall of darkness: “The walls of the forest fold in. Only blackness remains” (p.198). O’Neill’s description - “enormous pillars of deeper blackness. A somber monotone of wind
lost in the leaves moans in the air. Yet this sound serves but to intensify the impression of the forest’s relentless immobility, to form a background throwing into relief its brooding, implacable silence” (p.187) - strongly recalls Conrad’s African forest in *Heart of Darkness*, which is described as an impenetrable jungle because of its “enormous wilderness.”

In the second scene, the forest is seen as a wall of darkness in contrast to the brightness which dominates the opening scene, the time now is the beginning of the night. Symbolically, Jones’ descent to primitive existence begins with the first darkness. Thus, the beginning of darkness is equated with the beginning of his reversion to the aboriginal state. Later, the forest will have important emphasis on Jones’ mind, which will become more and more primitive all along the journey.

This voyage in time reminds us of Conrad’s primeval past, “in the night of the first ages”. The numerous actions rendered- “you lost your way”, “as we struggled round the bend there would be a glimpse of rush walls’- are conveyed in a past tense, which mirrors a sense of time suspended. Marlow says that the journey took some two months. But the trip seems like a trip of immense return, a trip into prehistory. “Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginning of the world… we were wanderers on prehistoric earth” (p.182). For Conrad, wilderness reveals the dark side of the human heart and soul. It is wilderness that reveals to Kurtz his instincts towards greed, it “whispered him things about himself” (p.206).

What Marlow perceives as the ‘inscrutability’ of his surrounding is the way it threatens him. Despite its ‘strangeness’ or ‘otherness’, Marlow feels a ‘kinship’ with the jungle; it is monstrous… and yet it is attractive to him’ even if he cannot comprehend, and therefore cannot control or contain it, he is aware that it is a source of power and force. This shows an inversion of power between the white man and the colonized land. The relationship of the colonizer to the colonized is one of dominant possession. The colonizer assumes that he owns and controls the colonized space and can use its indigenous inhabitants as he wishes. But for Conrad the land is a space not controlled by but controlling Marlow, and it is later shown to control Kurtz. Therefore, the equation of the white man’s act of possessing the ‘strange land’ is just inverted. Similarly, O’Neill locates Jones in a forest and shows his regression towards the aboriginal state. In scene five, for example, Jones is reduced to a piece of property to be auctioned off. He is dressed in a fashion similar to that of a slave just brought over from Conrad’s African jungle. Here the acting space, i.e. the forest, becomes smaller and smaller. Symbolically, this represents the restriction and closing in of life around Jones’, and his confined and primitive view of the world.

*The Emperor Jones* can also be considered as a play about the racial heritage of the American Negro. Jones becomes a crude personification of black history, and episodes concerning the Negro race are treated through certain events in his life. Scene four, for its part, represents the original conflict opposes the slaves to their masters. The scene emphasizes the position of the Negro in relationship with the white man, and the irony is that Jones has rapidly descended from ruling emperor to subordinate convict under the domination of the white guard. He tries to kill the guard, but he has no shovel. Thus, he takes out a pistol and kills the guard again. In
declaring that he must kill again, Jones reveals that he has now abandoned all thoughts about ghosts being unreal. The mind has now regressed to a point where he completely accepts the reality of the ghost.

As enslavement is the prominent characteristic of the history of the Negro race, Scene Five is devoted to Jones being sold as a slave in an auction to a plantation owner. Jones has risen for a brief instant above his race and his destiny, but because of the savagery in his heart he is destroyed by his own superstitions. Episodes from his criminal past return to haunt him. Each ghostly encounter in the jungle ends with his fighting in panic, until all his bullets are gone. Throughout the night, as the tom-toms accelerate, he has been running in a great circle and he finally returns to his starting point, where his enemies greet him with a silver bullet gun.

At first sight, the reader would see the ‘heart of darkness’ as having primarily some geographical reference. The work should be an account of a journey up the Congo into ‘darkest’ Africa. But after the first few pages, an alert reader will quickly come to realize that Marlow’s story is an instrument for Conrad to conduct a critique of European colonialism with its imperialistic impulses towards profit, exploitation, and destruction. The idea of the ‘savagery’ of this place is reinforced by the nineteenth century anthropological debates on ‘the savage’ and ‘the civilized’, and on evolution and the origins of civilization. Accordingly, Marlow’s comments on the barbarity and brutal instincts he discovers in Africa suggest a critique over Victorian ideas of progress.

The symbolic meaning of the word “darkness” in a mythical category where Marlow’s journey may then be seen as a mythological descent into the underworld, or an ethical struggle of moral good and evil may show Kurtz as a ‘shadow’, a ‘wandering and tormented thing’. Kurtz’s presence as a ghost figure recalls Jones’s phantoms born of his memories and atavistic fears. Both the playwright’s and the novelist’s jungle pulls out the main characters’ veils and shows their nakedness and their primitive instincts. O’Neill shows an American black being superstitious, only half-civilized, and prone to violence whereas Conrad shows a white man assaulted by the powers of darkness, who has ‘made a bargain for his soul with the devil’ (p.207) since he has acted for the voice of the wilderness. Conrad depicts the primitive life of the jungle not as being charming but as being sordid, and it is to this devilish baseness that Kurtz has yielded himself. In this sense, Kurtz represents a man whose heart could be ‘savage’ and ‘dark’ because dark places reveal the ‘evil’ that hides in any human.

The setting in The Emperor Jones can be considered as a means of communication, an unspoken form of dialogue. In this play, the setting is designed to allow the direct symbolic revelation of psychological truth. It is allotted to the central figure, Jones, whose subconscious - fears and memories - are revealed. He feels alone and isolated and expressing his deepest emotions directly to the audience. The forest has broken him. It is full of strange sounds and shadows that conjure up visions of his ancestral past. These haunt him, and at each crisis of fear, he fires wildly into the darkness and goes crashing on through the under bush, losing his way, wasting all of his defense, signaling his path, and awakening a thousand sinister echoes to work still more upon his terrible fear. It is a race
memory of old Congo fears, which drives him back through the forest where his death waits him.

In both works the setting is a means used by the writers to mount a universal critique over human lust. The forest in *Heart of Darkness* reveals Kurtz’s primitive instincts whereas in *The Emperor Jones* it puts back Jones to his aboriginal origins. Besides, both Conrad and O’Neill use the jungle to treat important issues of their age. For Conrad, it allows him to mount a critique of European colonialism and its corollary, imperialism. As for O’Neill, his concern lies in the failure of the American dream.

Conrad’s point is that meanings are suggested rather than stated. Antonymous images of light/dark, past/present, civilized/savage are numerous in *Heart of Darkness*. These binary oppositions reveal a mode of thinking central to modern western culture and referred to as positivism. This mode of thinking is a part of everyday life - good/bad, old/young, etc. - that it becomes a natural structure of thought. Then, as an everyday mode of perceiving and organizing people and the space, and objects around the people, this opposition carries with it the conviction of the substantial. Things are in or out, standing or sitting, left or right. Applying them to his *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad finds in these binary images a powerful tool which, when re-evaluated, can provide the means for a radical and disturbing critique of the westerner’s too-easily assumed cultural norms. In fact, his aim is to shows the ‘civilized’ Kurtz to be as savage as the ‘uncivilized’ natives. He even wonders: “Is darkness to be found in dark places or in any place?”

In Scene One of *The Emperor Jones*, a series of contrasts are artfully handled by the author. The white washed walls, the afternoon sun and the general brightness of the palace suggest the emperor’s glory. The brightness of this setting will contrast effectively with the forest at night with all its darkness and superstition. In the case of O’Neill, the black/white images are used as an important stage device to control the effects on the audience. So, the concentration of light in surrounding darkness is to suggest the spiritual isolation of Jones. Through him, O’Neill wants to show the alienation of the black American who escapes from his own background looking for a better future. Unfortunately, it is a familiar pattern in which this results in a complete loss of his freedom.

In the chain-gang episode, Marlow provides the reader with details of what he witnesses. He gives us images of appalling decay and futile suffering, waste and physical atrocity, and this is clearly revealed in the following extract: “A slight clinking behind me made me turn my head, six black men advanced in a file, toiling up the path […] I could see every rib […] each had an iron collar on his neck, and all were clinking” (p.154). The accumulation of particular concrete sense impressions (aural and visual), such as clinking, advancing blacks, iron collars, etc., slowly consolidate into meaning. Marlow hears a clinking and gradually attributes significance to it: it is the chain of a chain gang. Later, the tone becomes harsher, when it comes to the description of the ‘shapes’ in the grove of death. The phrases, such as ‘the face, the black bones, the eyelids, the orbs, the bundles of acute angle, dying laborers’, give us a demonic and repugnant image: the barbarous reduction of a whole human body to dislocated parts. This may be interpreted as a
Bibliography


