

## A ZIZEKIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF O'NEILL'S *THE EMPEROR JONES* AND *HAIRY APE*

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### Abstract

*Subjectivity has always been the main concern of a subject who strives to achieve it by losing his initial status. The subject as theorized by Žižek is an individual whose identity is constantly constructed through language itself, which both ensures the individual's socialization, but simultaneously splits the subject by cutting him/her off from the real order of experience. In view of the psychoanalytic implication of the characters in the plays *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*, this research is demystifying the theory of processual subjectivity on the main characters of these two plays by O'Neill. It reveals that real self-actualization of the character can be gained through three processes though the entire actualization doesn't happen and the heroes' choices terminate in death, as their last resort to reach their subjectivity. This leaves the plays in tragedy. This paper concludes that major issues bother the main characters: confrontation with their past and lack of determination so they choose death to actualize their wishes and to end up their dilemma.*

**KEYWORDS:** Eugene O'Neill, Subjectivity, Psychoanalysis, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, Slavoj Žižek,

## INTRODUCTION

Slavoj Žižek was described as the “most formidably brilliant” recent theorist to have emerged from Continental Europe ( Terry Eagleton). This article explains Žižek’s philosophy as a systematic, and it clarifies the technical language Žižek uses, which he takes from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Žižek rejects the notion of a substantial individual subject, the usual understanding of the “I” he conceives of the subject as something purely negative, avoid or an emptiness of being (which Lacan refers to as the incomplete, divided, or “barred” subject of the unconscious). Accordingly, transformations of the subject in psychoanalysis constitute a kind of creative refusal to accept taken-for-granted psychic, in his opposition to the notion of underlying or hidden meaning. In this research, his theory of processual subjectivity is applied thorough out two plays: *The Empire Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. *The Emperor Jones* is a long, tightly constructed, one-act play with eight scenes where the first and last scenes form a realistic frame. It begins with Smithers informing Jones that the natives are preparing to hunt him down to finish his two-year reign as emperor, and ending with the native leader, Lem, and Smithers discussing the death of Jones. The middle scenes portray a journey into the jungle that is both physical and psychological, for when Jones fearfully plunges into the dark tangle of trees, he is also entering the troubled recesses of his mind. In *The Hairy Ape*, some attempts were made by the hero in searching the real self to get subjectivity. Yank the hero is like an alien caught between two worlds. *The Hairy Ape*, is a long one-act play containing eight scenes, and draws a stark contrast between that idyllic past and the alienated present.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To elaborate on the issue of subject and its inherent status, Žižek states that “the subject has no substantial actuality, it comes second, it emerges only through the process of separation, of overcoming its presuppositions” (232).

"When subjects wish to speak about themselves, the subject of enunciation is always either anticipated- at the beginning of the speech-act; or else missed- at the end of the speech-act, whence it has come to be falsely identified with the ego. In line with his prioritization of the future anterior, he comments that the subject always will have been. In philosophical terms, we can say that the Lacanian subject is a presupposition of any speech-act (someone will always be speaking), yet impossible to fill out with any substantial content" (Matthew Sharpe). This paper aims is to show that protagonists Jones and Yank also are going through the very same process to gain a kind of subjectivity. Peter Brooks fails to draw more attention to characters as subjects when he says:

I believe that we constitute ourselves as human subjects in part through our fictions and therefore that the study of human fiction-making and the study of psychic process are convergent activities and super impossible forms of analysis" (334).

The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape portray psychological quests in which the protagonists were seen through the Žižekian process of separation: “as soon as we renounce fiction and illusion, we lose reality itself; the moment we subtract fictions from reality, reality itself loses its discursive-logical consistency” (Žižek) .Taking this quote from Žižek, this research analyzes how the characters go through three processes to achieve their self-realization.

### Analysis

The protagonist Jones was the emperor of an unnamed island in the West Indies. He was for ten years a Pullman porter in the United States. He killed his friend Jeff in a fight over a game of dice and knocked out a guard to escape from prison. He fled as a stowaway and went to the island, where he used his urban ways and vague hints about his violent past to establish himself as emperor of the island. Jones convinced the natives that he had a powerful magic. Jones knows that he would not be able to maintain his position for long, but he did not care, he lived well in a rich and gaudy palace, he had stolen a fortune from the natives and put it safely in a foreign bank. Even when the revolt came sooner than he expected, he shrugged and simply began his plan. Jones was unnerved by the sound of the native drums, which beat insistently throughout the night. As fear overtook him, he stumbled through the forest, encountering Little Formless Fears, the ghost of Jeff, his comrades on the prison chain gang, a slave auction, an African witch doctor, and the Crocodile God, all represent the stripping away of his layers of intelligence and “civilization.” He learns nothing from these encounters, but becomes instead a more primitive man, driven only by his fear.

In *The Hairy Ape* which opens in the overheated stokehold of a steamer, ocean-bound from New York, the hero feels as if he belongs in his life and this life suits him. In the first scene, he is revealed to be a person of strong feelings that are not based on reason or on real knowledge of how society works. In the stokehold, he is removed from society, insulated from ideas that might challenge his own self, if there is any conflict in his life, it is over whether beer or whiskey is the preferable drink. Scene two takes place on the deck of the ship, the following scene is back in the stokehold, where Yank has a few more substantial speeches that show his contempt for society and his resentment of other self's, Yank feels he does not belong to this place.

During their journey, they must face hunger and heat, repressed violent incidents from their own past, they encounter with dangerous situations. In these two plays, Jones's and Yank's psychological quests are vividly observable. In *The Emperor Jones* when Jones leaves his palace and enters the jungle, he finds himself in an area of shadows and increasing darkness, and three stages of self-knowing occurs. In the *Hairy Ape*, fateful moment is when he encounters with Mildred and Mildred puts his world on edge. He is a man beside himself when the look of horror and revulsion emblazons itself on his psyche. In *The Emperor Jones*, his worldview is shattered as he realizes he is not the king of anything and he sets out roaring like a wounded beast, in *The Hairy Ape* his only connections are with steel—he has in fact called himself steel: "I'm steel—steel—steel! I'm de muscles in steel, de punch behind it!"—with the fire of the furnace, and with the animals in the zoo (the other hairy apes). He is forced to admit his lack of connection with other humans; he is alienated from society of other subjects, The steel, whether it's the clanging door of the furnace, the shovel that is an extension of Yank's arm, or the bars of the prison and the gorilla cage at the zoo, is hard and ultimately isolating and it reinforces the idea of self-separation. Jones and Yank go through these phases to gain a kind of subjectivity.

### Seeking Subjectivity

The first separation happens When Jones first appears in Scene I and reports his past, “from stowaway to Emperor in two years!” he says. He is proud of his separation which brings him to throne and appears to be confident in its durability. When Smithers challenges him, Jones menaces the white trader and defends himself against the charge that his transformation has been

the result of luck. He wants to be seen as a man in complete control, one whose transformation has put a former and inferior self far behind him but actually this self-actualization is really quite shallow and fragile. When Jones shows Smithers his silver bullet, Jones holds it in his hand and looks at it, strangely fascinated as if he can't quite believe in its power himself.

In *The Hairy Ape*, Robert Smith, known as Yank, below decks on an ocean liner where he commands workers, sees himself as the strongest and most respected of the group. Searching his self-realization, he detaches himself from other workers. Yet in addressing his colleagues, in comparing himself with an aging worker, he says he belongs to this place and he is part of the engine while others are not.

### **Jones and Yank Reality Detachment**

The second separation is detachment from the brutal reality he witnesses which is exactly a "retroactive effect of the same process of their overcoming" (ibid). It happens in the scene when he comes to an altar-like structure of rock by a river and kneels before it. A witch doctor, body dyed red, with horns upon his headdress, prances from the trees and begins a chant of sacrifice. All of these features recount the features of tribes in Indian which Jones belongs to. Then he goes even deeper into his past and confronts the primitive witch doctor who claims him as a sacrifice for the crocodile god. In this critical process of separation as Žižek states, Jones aspires his primitive life, but at the same time the experience of his ancestors coming to America in slave ships and being sold at auction like property makes the status of self-disappear. 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. He attempts to find a way to escape from this self which excruciated him. This happens at the culmination of the dance. The Witch Doctor indicates that Jones must be sacrificed to the sacred Crocodile River god he in attempting self-denial fires his remaining silver bullet into the crocodile apparition.

In *The Hairy Ape*, the second separation occurs when fake self-realization shatters down in the time that Mildred, the spoiled daughter of the steel-company president visits the ship's stokehold and meets Yank. After seeing his appearance, he cries out and faints. At the when Paddy, one of the workers remarks to Yank that the young woman looked as though she had seen a hairy ape.

This separation doesn't lead to self-actualization. Jones and Yank are indeed men in conflict with their past and their selves. The exalted position he claims for himself in order to obliterate that past has no real roots, and his inner self can't match the postured self that he aspires to. (Žižek13) considering subjectivity assumes that subject has no substantial actuality, it comes second, it only emerges through the process of separation, of overcoming of its presuppositions, and these presuppositions are also just a retroactive effect of the same process of their overcoming. The result is the extremes of the process, a failure-negativity inscribed into the very heart of the entity. If the status of the subject is thoroughly "processual," it means that it emerges through the very failure to fully actualize self.

### **Protagonists Self-realization**

The subject is trying to gain subjectivity by losing his initial status and reaching his real self and fleeing from his previous self to make a product of himself as Žižek declares "It is of the very

nature of the spirit to be this absolute liveliness, this process, to proceed forth from neutrality, immediacy, to absolute, to quit its neutrality, and to come to itself, and to free itself, it being itself only as it comes to itself as such a product of itself; its actuality being merely that it has made itself into what it is" .

The third separation happens in the last scene, when Lem, leader of the natives, a former chieftain on the island convinced the rest of the natives to forge their own silver bullet to kill Jones. Actually this figure is Jones himself who is now more equipped than before seeking actualization of self. He wants to kill shaky self to free himself from status quo to gain real self-actualization. This is why in his speeches addressing natives, he says that he could only be killed by a silver bullet. The emperor of self is an emperor of self-deception, whose life-like forms the trumpery substance of his existence. At the end of his life, he realizes that he is empty, an onion stripped of exterior covering to reveal nothing at the center. Then killing, making self-free from imitated values of the white man is the only temporary defense against the unbearable reprisals of human freedom.

In the play *Hairy Ape* the last separation happens in searching self-realization, in the last scene at the Monkey's cage when Yank desperately is achieving real self-actualization „he chooses death as the last resort to get-self –realization when he finally accepts himself as a hairy ape entering the cage and being killed by another hairy ape.

## Conclusion

This paper discusses the process of subjectivity of Jones and Yank as the main characters based on the psychoanalytic theories of Žižek. The aim is to see how the Žižekian processual subjectivity is applicable to these characters. This subjectivity is gained through three phases. In O'Neil plays, the protagonists are obliged to overcome the reality and gain self-actualization It concludes that the protagonists reclaim their authentic selves as they go down deeper into the journey. The subject is not in its own origin shape. It is secondary and dependent upon its substantial presuppositions.

The subjectivity which characters earn through their adventurous quest and throughout the whole plays is important. They could finally gain what they were seeking, but in tragic way. At first, they desperately attempt to be seen as men in complete control. Their transformation puts the former and inferior selves far behind them. However, their inner selves can't match the postured self that they aspire to. Through the course of the plays, they go through the processes of subjectivity and come to terms with the revelation of substantial actuality. Jones kill himself as a self-deception: to kill shaky self to free himself from status quo and gain real self-actualization, Yank enters the cage and the hairy ape kills him.

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