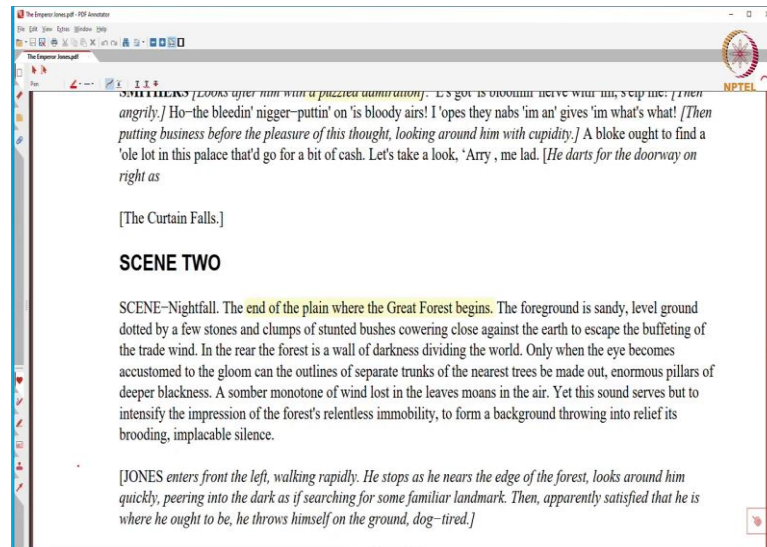


**Twentieth Century American Drama**  
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**Lecture - 04**  
**Eugene O'Neil's The Emperor Jones - Part 3**

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Hello, and welcome to today's session. So, we are continuing to discuss the play *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neil. In the last session, we stopped with the end of scene one, and today we are beginning with scene two. We hope to be able to cover a significant section of the play.

Scene two is very short. This is one of those instances in the play where we realize how Eugene O'Neil uses his craftsmanship to showcase how even the descriptions of the terrain, the stage directions, and descriptions of a particular scene can become a character by itself.

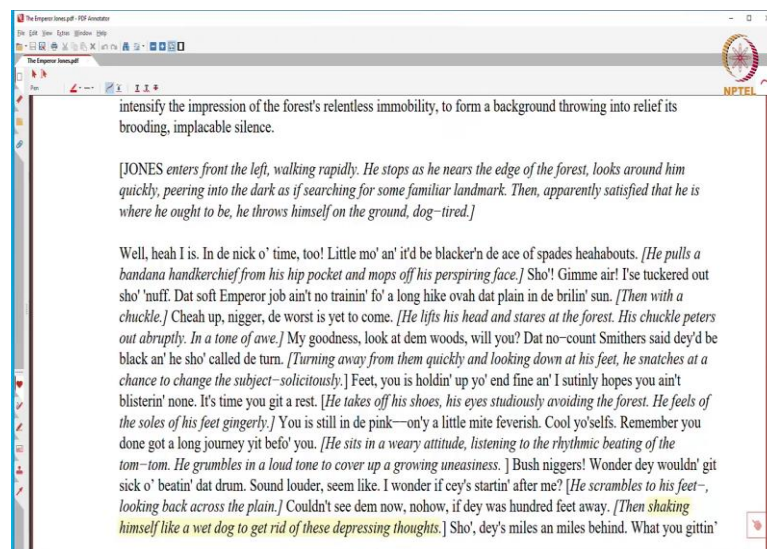
scene two opens when it is almost nightfall. At the end of scene one, we see Brutus Jones leaving the palace with a lot of white symbols, symbolizing power. We find that at the end of the conversation with Smithers that Jones is preparing to leave. He leaves without any baggage. We find him at "the end of the plane where the great forest begins".

There is a very detailed description of the terrain given here. We find about what happens psychologically to Brutus Jones, the interior journey into his psychological self that gets replicated in the form of the forest and the many things that are happening there are also presented in the play. Towards the end of that paragraph, O’Neil draws attention to the sound, the monotone of the wind, which “serves but to intensify the impression of the forest’s relentless immobility, to form a background throwing into relief its brooding, implacable silence”.

As mentioned in one of the earlier segments, this play has a very sinister undertone. It repeatedly draws attention to the dark ironies beneath the surface. Various things such as the memory of and the reality of race, continue to serve as common threads connecting different scenes.

In scene two, Jones enters, walking rapidly. We see that he is very tired. He is not the Emperor Jones we witnessed at the beginning of scene one, who had just woken up from his afternoon nap. In scene one, he was feeling fresh and ready to take on his responsibilities, and he was his usual arrogant, confident self, but we find that physically he is worn out in the next scene.

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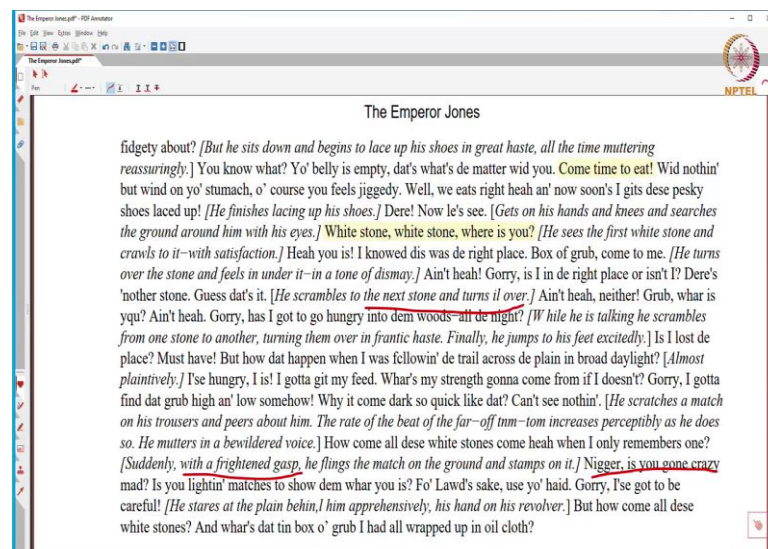
He has to endure a lot of fears and difficult thoughts, and physically he is being overpowered by tiredness. We find that he continues to remain very strong and confident, but one of the descriptions says, “then shaking himself like a wet dog to get

rid of these depressing thoughts”. This indicates that he is beginning to get very real depressing human thoughts. This is as mentioned at the outset of the play, a journey into his humanity.

When the play opens in scene one, we find that he is not his real self anymore. He is in denial about his past and what happened in his life. He is almost unwilling to accept the trajectory that his life is about to take; he is unwilling to accept that he could be killed, and he does not want to acknowledge even the sound of the drums, which signal the impending revolution. But from scene two onwards, we find that this is a journey into his self, and he is also, in some form, descending into his humanity.

This is promising and depressing at the same time because this descent is also a path towards his own destruction, because once his human self begins to overtake, once he is conscious, and once reality begins to overtake his almost surreal existence in the island as the emperor, he will be getting closer to his destruction. He is hungry, and his fatigue is really catching up to him.

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There is a very important scene right in the middle of this. He begins to search for a white stone. “White stone, white stone, where is you? Heah you is. I knowed dis was de right place”.

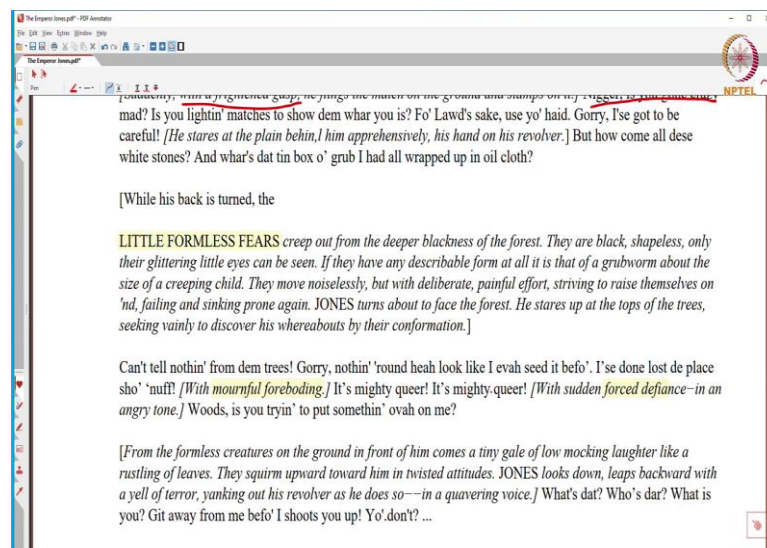
After some time, he realizes that it is not the right stone. “dere’s ’nother stone. Guess dat’s it. [He scrambles to the next stone and turns it over.] Ain’t heah, neither!”. This search for the white stone and the inability to find it also signifies his loss of power.

At the beginning of scene one, when we were reading through the descriptions, we realized that whiteness was showcased as a symbol of power. Here, this inability to locate the white stone begins to symbolize the erosion of Jones’ power because, throughout the play, whiteness comes across as a symbol of power in various forms.

Towards the end of this, it is almost like a soliloquy. We also find that there is a combination of realist and expressionist techniques used here, particularly in scene two. Certain terms which we do not find attributed to Brutus Jones are used from scene two onwards. Jones then lets out a frightened gasp.

He also asks himself, “nigger, is you gone crazy mad? Is you lightin’ matches to show dem whar you is? Fo’ Lawd’s sake, use yo’ haid”. He also realizes that he is undergoing some sort of a descent into ordinariness, almost a state of madness itself.

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Interestingly, this is when we find him encountering the little formless fears who are like characters in this play. The beauty in O’Neil’s play, especially due to the overt use of expressionist techniques, the background and the abstractions have also become characters. The formless fears are creeping out from the deep blackness of the forest.

We find that now the overt whiteness of scene one is being replaced by blackness. There are formless, shapeless black images all around. So, this is in contrast to the well-formed and well-finished image presented at the beginning, where there was a throne at the center, placed in contrast to the whiteness around.

Here in the forest, while Brutus Jones is approaching his humanity and descending into a certain kind of ordinariness, we find that the experiences are that of a predominant blackness. We may also pause briefly and ask some very pertinent questions which have been raised by a number of critical scholars about the stereotypical depiction of race here, questioning Eugene O’Neil’s portrayal of race and many others in the twentieth century.

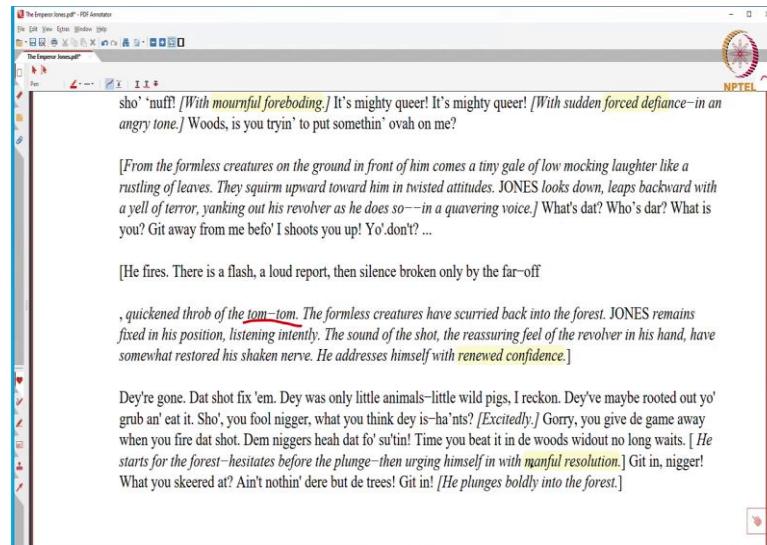
O’Neil conveniently uses blackness as a metaphor, as a predominant trope to capture some of the psychological turmoils, hallucinations and the irrational behavior of the black man.

Moving on, we will quickly read through the part where the little formless fears are described. “Little formless fears creep out from the deeper blackness of the forest. They are black, shapeless, only their glittering little eyes can be seen. If they have any describable form at all it is that of a grubworm about the size of a creeping child”.

the tone of the language is very dark and depressing. “They move noiselessly, but with deliberate, painful effort, striving to raise themselves on ’nd, failing and sinking prone again. Jones turns about to face the forest. He stares up at the tops of the trees seeking vainly to discover his whereabouts by their confirmation”.

Jones is unable to sense the source, and he is descending into a world of irrational and formless fears. In the stage directions and the described expressions of the protagonist, we will find the rapid succession of emotions and it shifts from “mournful foreboding” to a sense of “forced defiance”. So, he knows that he needs to pick himself up and move on from that place.

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Jones is in the background and is hearing the quickening sound of the tom-tom; the drumming is also getting closer, which signifies the impending revolution. The native inhabitants are preparing for a battle to bring this regime to an end.

So, with renewed confidence, Brutus Jones is helping himself up. Look at the kind of words which are used here when he urges himself with manful resolution. “Git in nigger! What you skeered at? Ain't nothin' dere but de trees. Git in!” For a brief moment he starts hallucinating, but a half part of his brain also knows that he needs to move on, that this is just a set of emotions, a set of images that he needs to push out of his memory.

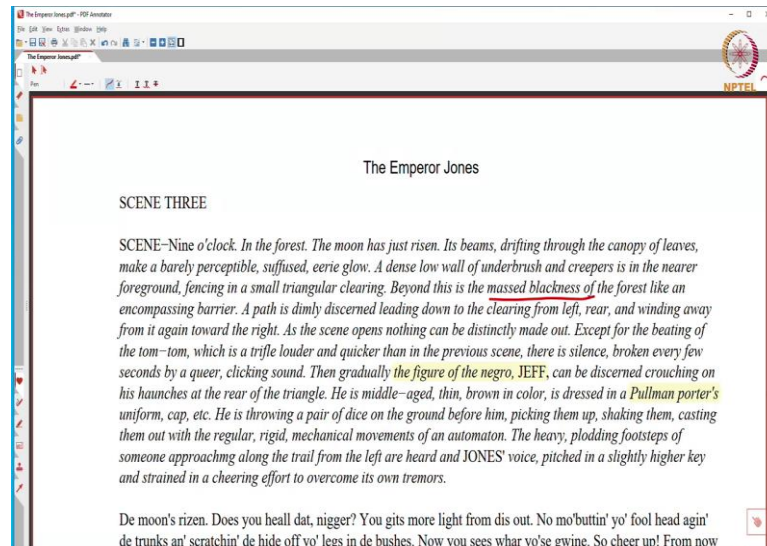
Scene two is the transition scene, where we are made aware of the fact that no matter how far he escapes, no matter how far he runs away from the certain physical realities of whatever happened to him in America, he cannot escape those fears, images, and memories which he has already internalized.

The racial memory, the oppression, and the trauma which he is reliving, almost in a very intense form does not come from any external trigger; it is there inside him and the notion that these fears have been internalized and have become part of his collective memory is foregrounded here.

It is difficult for him to escape from that, regardless of the efforts that he has been taking, whether when he was the prisoner who broke out of prison in America or the emperor

who formed a range of subjects under him on the island. We find in both places that he cannot escape from the internalized emotions and memories.

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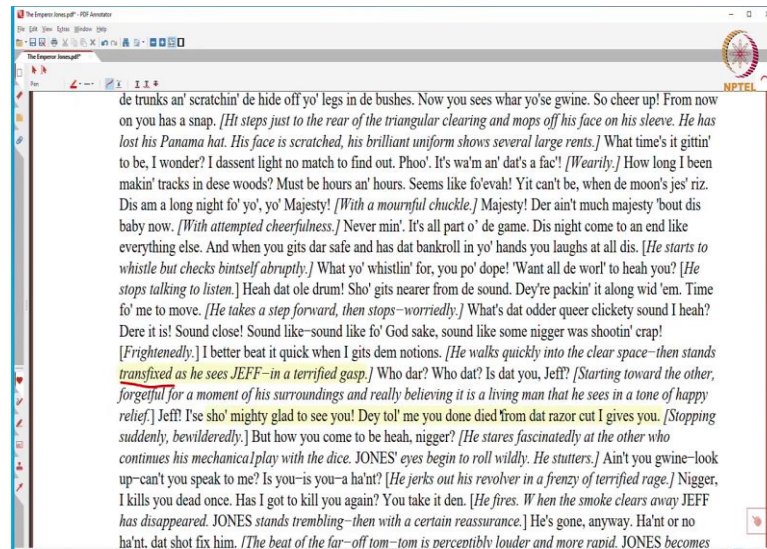


With this, we enter scene three, where he continues to have very intense hallucinating experiences. This is where we can corroborate some of the events and the exchanges that Brutus Jones and Smithers had in scene one, because Jones is no longer in denial.

Jones becomes a vulnerable a human being . He is completely overtaken and overwhelmed by the experiences and the trauma that he is facing from inside. So, he begins to see the figure of Jeff – another Negro man in this scene. The audience do not know who Jeff is, but he emerges from this massed blackness which continues to remain as the background in this scene as well.

We find the figure of Jeff emerging, and this is how he is described: “He is middle-aged, thin, brown in color, dressed in a Pullman porter’s uniform, cap, etcetera”. Perhaps, this could be someone who Jones knew from his Pullman porter life in America, which he also briefly recalls during his exchanges with Smithers.

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The setting, the stage directions and the descriptions are interesting, because the audience can see Jeff emerging, but Jones is yet to see him. So, Jones continues to talk to himself, and he is not in a great shape. He is trying to deal with the massive blackness growing in the woods.

Suddenly, “he walks into the clear space – then stands transfixed” - this term is important – “as he sees Jeff – in a terrified gasp”. He is already frightened of the shapeless, formless fears which were growing inside him and they started taking an external form in scene two.

Even in scene three, we find the formless fears taking real shape, the shape of a human being. It is through Jeff that we are able to start looking into this troubled man’s past.

“Who dar? Who dat? Is that you Jeff?” - Jones is startled - “[starting toward the other forgetful for a moment about his surroundings and really believing it is a living man that he sees in a tone of happy relief]. Jeff, I’se sho’ mighty glad to see you! Dey tol’ me you done died from dat razor cut I gives you”.

We see Brutus Jones admitting to himself that he had actually killed Jeff. He is the same man from scene one who was in denial of the fact that he had killed another man.

Now, the puzzle pieces are beginning to fall into place. The descriptions enclosed within brackets continue to be interesting. “[Stopping suddenly, bewilderedly]”. So, we find that

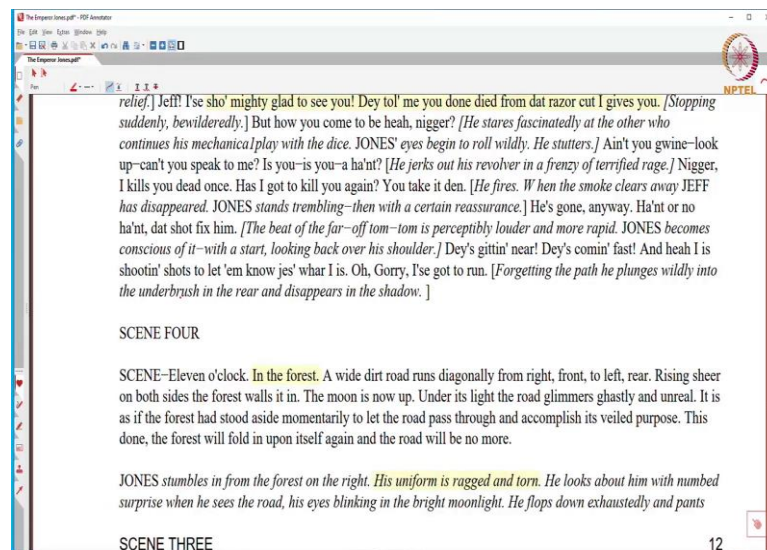


the terms used to describe Jones' physical and mental state are very different from that used in scene one.

He is very surprised and wonders what Jeff doing there, while Jeff continues to play mechanically with the dice. It is interesting to note that from this point onwards, whomsoever Brutus Jones meets, are will be in some mechanical motion. Jones seems to be the only human figure in all the hallucinations.

The others come across as quite composed, and they make mechanical movements. Nothing that Jones does or any external factor seems to affect the figures which emerge in his hallucinations; it is only Brutus Jones who is descending into madness, into some kind of a depressing mode, as and when the hallucinatory meetings progress.

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We can notice a sudden change of emotion in Jones. Initially, he is happy to see that Jeff had not died, but he is also disappointed, because in the sudden frenzy “[he jerks out his revolver in a frenzy of terrified rage.] Nigger, I kills you dead once. Has I got to kill you again? You take it den”.

This is the moment we realize the kind of dichotomy which is at play when we are examining the internal psychology, and emotions of Jones. The play is staged in such fascinating ways that we see both sides of his humanity. Jones is a very vulnerable character.

Jones is unable to accept his descent in status from being an emperor. We almost begin to feel sorry for him when we see him in this condition, but we also realize that he does not regret his actions and the crimes he had committed.

For a brief moment, he is happy to see that Jeff is alive, but in less than a moment, we see him pulling out his revolver and ensure that Jeff is dead. This is of course a hallucination, but it tells us a lot about the kind of person Brutus Jones is.

Another way to look at this scene is through the point of view of the authorial figure. As mentioned before, there have been a lot of critiques about how racial memory is constructed in this play.

Here, we find a black man who is not allowed to come out of the stereotypical compartments into which he is forced to live. The association of blackness, trauma and violence with the intense desire for committing crimes has almost left him on a loop and unable to get out of it in any way.

This is a very telling scene, because in scene one we are not entirely sure whether this man was framed or whether he had actually committed murder. So, here is a man who has no affinity to his brother and kills Jeff without showing any sense of remorse. This is enacted before the audience, just so there is no ambiguity about the kind of crime that Brutus Jones had committed.

There are a lot of blurred lines here, but still, we find that it is a very useful complication, a productive problematization here. The aspects of the past, memory, history are all brought together here, almost in a collage.

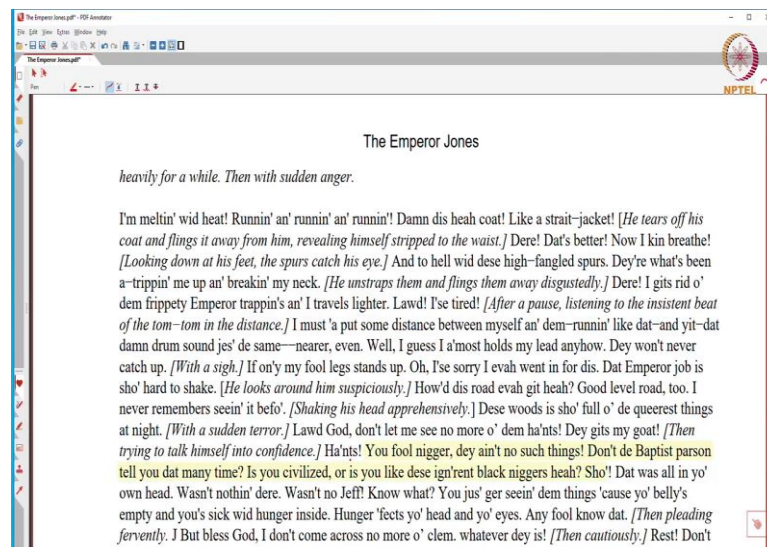
The way Brutus Jones is made to respond to Jeff's image here is deeply implicated in the way he was leading his life as a porter. It is also deeply implicated in the way he was historically, socially treated as a black man in America. So, this is in some form an inevitable result of the twin forces of his personal experience, and personal animosity with Jeff, and also the kind of inescapable rut into which he has fallen into.

With this, we quickly move on to scene four, where he continues to be in the forest itself. So, here we find him visibly deteriorated. "His uniform is ragged and torn. He looks

about him with numbed surprise when he sees the road... He flops down exhaustedly and pants heavily for a while. Then with sudden anger”.

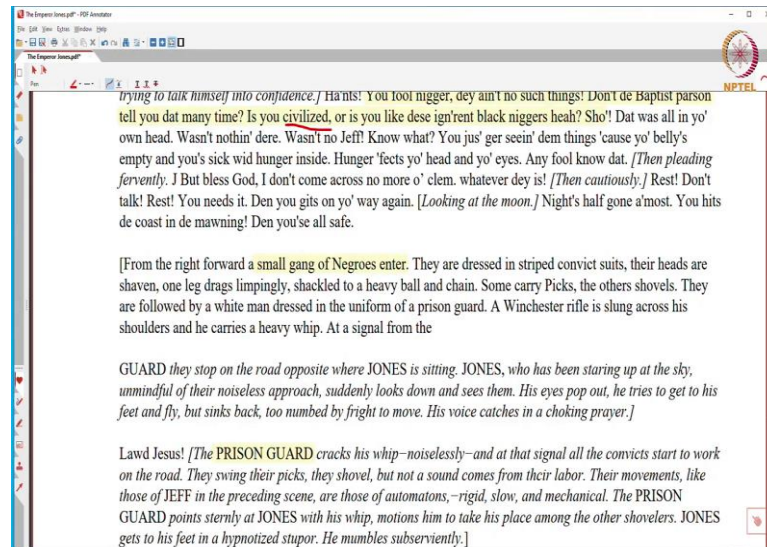
He has become quite a pathetic figure; physically, he has almost entirely deteriorated. His looks have changed completely and compare the the grandeur with which he was introduced in scene one with his current status. He is entirely in tatters.

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He is also running away from the same subjects over whom he was ruling as an emperor. On the one hand, he is still looking at himself as an emperor and that is where he draws his energy from; but, on the other hand, he realized that realizes it is all coming to an end, though he cannot entirely admit to that.

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For a brief period, he tries to build his confidence by talking to himself. “You fool Nigger, dey ain’t no such things. Don’t de Baptist parson tell you dat many time? Is you civilized or is you like dese ign’rent black niggers heah? His abject position is being foregrounded in a very interesting way here.

Jones is tormented by the hallucinatory images and formless fears, and everything is starting to take a shape. He talks to himself and draws energy and confidence from his self. Just as he did in scene one, he establishes his affinity towards Christianity, the kind of bringing that he had, and the way he was a member of good standing within the Baptist church, as he proclaims.

This is very interesting and problematic at the same time, and the use of the term ‘civilized’ is placed in a rather ironical way here. Brutus Jones identifies civilization with whiteness, which is very evident in the play. This is also one of the biases found in this play, exposed by a number of critics as well.

So, here he is identifying civilization with whiteness, and he identifies himself with blackness and ignorance, which is again a stereotypical way to look at it. Jones assures himself there was no Jeff, and none of the figures were actually there.

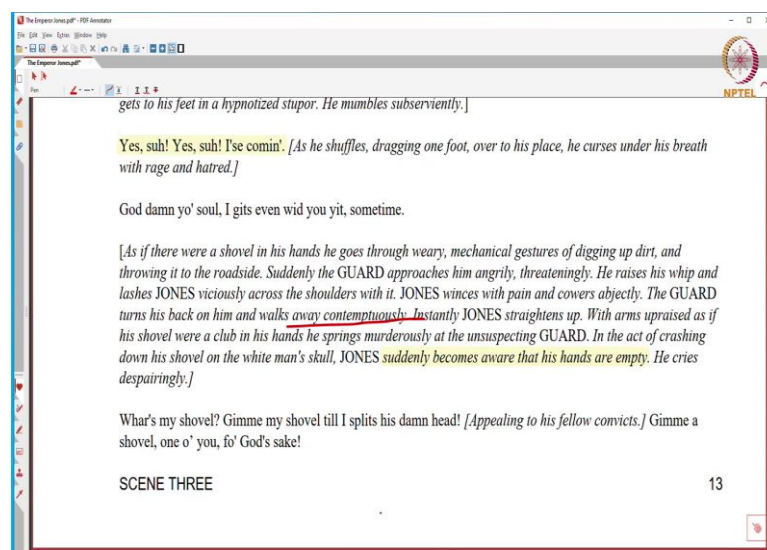
He convinces himself that he is imagining it and he draws validation from the Baptist parson. The repeated mentions of the Baptist church also show the kind of influence the

church had on him. Despite that, we find that Christianity had failed to redeem, and save him from the unfortunate circumstances in which he is trapped.

Now he finds another set of apparitions coming at him again, continuously. We find that these images are all very primitive in nature and it is a very stereotypical representation. It is a replication of the images which Brutus Jones is ideally trying to get away from. A small gang of Negroes emerge and “some carry picks, the others shovels. They are followed by a white man dressed in the uniform of a prison guard”. Let us try to make sense of what happened in the prison.

We need to recall Jones’ exchanges with Smithers in scene one when he talked about killing a white man. Through this experience described here, we find that perhaps it could be true too. Jones killed a white man, perhaps the prison guard whose apparition is now haunting him, about whom he is now hallucinating.

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We also find that there is a sense of authority here. So, very briefly, we will see him praying too. ”The prison guard cracks his whip – noiselessly.” Brutus Jones tries to appeal to God to save him, and on and off, we find him saying: “Yes, suh! Yes, suh! I’s e comin’”.

So, we find that there is a sense of authority that Brutus Jones has internalized. He spent the last two years according to the details we can cull out from scene one. He had spent

the previous two years as an emperor, but that not essentially changed what he has internalized, in terms of racial memory, racial hierarchy, and sense of authority..

Even though it is a hallucination and it is in all likelihood his truest self, which is getting exposed here, he is continuing to refer to the prison guard without using any swear words. And we find that throughout scene one and even in scene two when he is encountering the formless fears, there is no usage of swear words. Here, he addresses the prison guard with reverence..

In this process, we find that “the guard turns his back on him and walks away contemptuously. Instantly Jones straightens up. With arms appraised as if his shovel were a club in his hands he springs murderously at the unsuspecting guard”.

So, this is the second instance where a certain set of events which were referred to in very unreliable terms in the first scene that the readers are able to witness, particularly when Jones tried to kill Jeff. Jeff gets killed twice, once in real life and when he sees him again as an apparition, Jones kills him again. We find Jones springing murderously at the unsuspecting prison guard, who presumably is a white man.

Just when he is about to commit the act of crashing down his shovel on the white man's skull, Jones suddenly becomes aware that his hands are empty. He cries despairingly. So, the absence of the shovel is significant in this scene. Jones always needs an external tool in order to assert himself. In the absence of such external tools or weapons, he cannot assert himself at all.

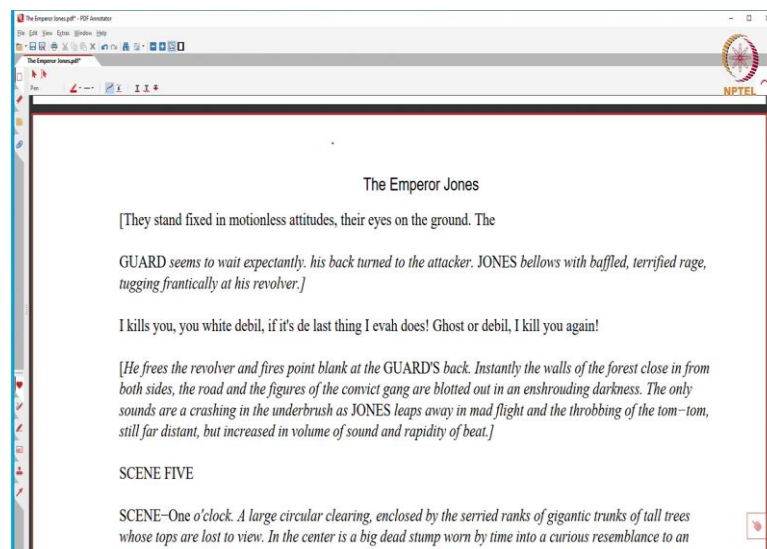
Jones is already inferior in terms of race and even administrative, official capacities, and the prison guard has authority over Jones. Hence, the shovel, the tool of violence, helps him dominate the prison guard. So, the awareness that his hands are empty leads him to utter despair.

“Whar's my shovel? Gimme my shovel till I splits his damn head!” We can find a pattern here. There is absolutely no sense of remorse in this man's heart. He has been given a chance to redeem himself when he encounters Jeff alive, but still, he chooses to kill him.

He again encounters the prison guard alive. Look at the way in which the guard is described as the “unsuspecting guard.” Jones tries to attack the unsuspecting guard and realizes that his hands are empty. So, he appeals to his fellow convicts for a shovel just so he could split the guard’s head.

There is a brief moment in all of these scenes, where his humanity, whatever capacity he has for some compassion, gets foregrounded but very soon, he descends into a dark place, the blackness which is also becomes the background of the play from scene two onwards.

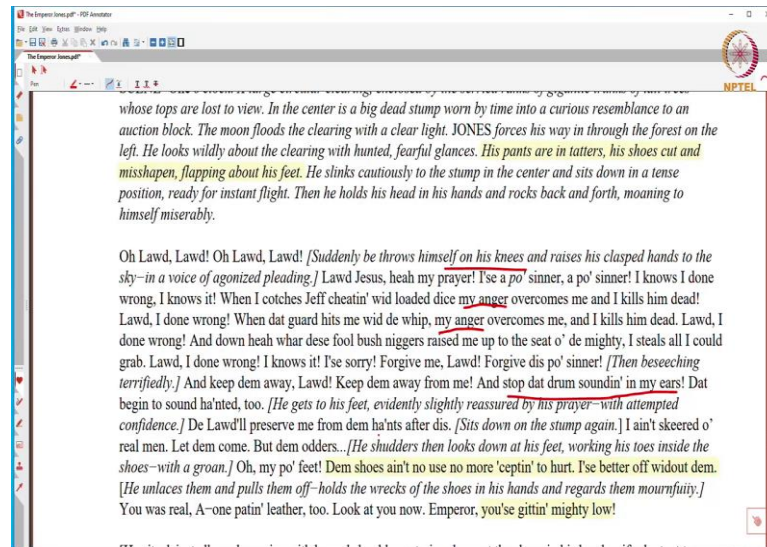
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Jones pulls out his revolver, and he frantically fires at the apparition of the prison guard and thereby, kills him again. “I kills you, you white debil, it’s de last thing I evah does!” Even if it means that this would be the last thing that he gets to do as a human being, Jones is determined to kill the prison guard.

It is important to notice in scene one, he had the revolver and he showed the bullets including the last silver bullet. Now, he is using up all his bullets; he has been firing the bullets. We will see him continue to use the bullet even in the upcoming scenes. He is basically just firing in the dark, but in his mind, he is also attacking or re-killing the people whom he had murdered before.

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In Scene five, Jones is completely in tatters, “his pants are in tatters, his shoes cut and misshapen, flapping about his feet”. Very soon, he realizes that his shoes are not being helpful, and on the contrary, they are hurting him more. So, he realizes that he is better off without his shoes.

Jones looks at himself and notices what a pathetic figure he has become. “Look at you now. Emperor, you’s e gettin' mighty low!” Gradually, but very systematically, he is stripped of all these external ornamental things which were holding him together.

Jones has had quite a fall from what he was in Scene one; there is no grandeur, there is nothing pompous about the way he dresses or the way he carries himself. He is losing things one after the other, his weapons, the exterior ornaments which decorated his looks and office. Particularly in this scene, there is a brief moment where he gets into a mode of confession. “Lawd, I done wrong!”. We will quickly read through this section. “Suddenly, he throws himself on his knees” - he gets into this position of confession of prayer - “raises his clasped hands to the sky - in a voice of agonized pleading”.

The influence of Christianity seems to have been quite strong on his mind; he has internalized it. So, during this phase, from scene two onwards, whatever he articulates is the result of his internalization of his experience with race, authority, and Christianity. “Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer! I’s e a po’ sinner, a po’ sinner. He also confesses: “when I cotches Jeff cheatin’ wid loaded dice my anger overcomes me...”.



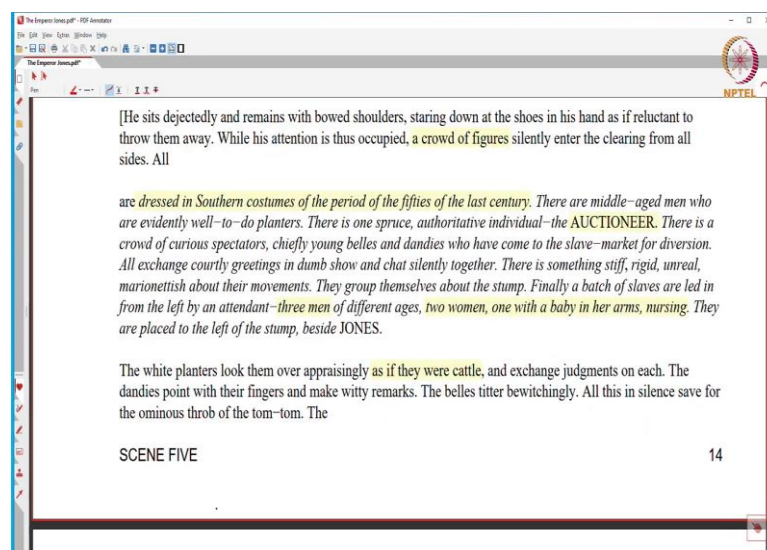
This is partially a confession, and partially an act of justification. He is trying to justify the source of his anger. “Lawd, I done wrong! When dat guard hits me wid de whip, my anger overcomes me”. Here, he is exposing his vulnerabilities, and claims how his anger gets the better of him. This anger is not directed at specific people, this is also directed at the circumstances, and the historical forces which have placed him in that position.

He directly begs for forgiveness by saying, “forgive me, Lawd! forgive dis po’ sinner... and stop that drum soundin’ my ears!” This instance is a combination of hallucinations and reality, because the drumming sound is real as we know it from Scene one. The drumming sound is merged in the background with the growing blackness.

The sound of the drums is painfully haunting for him. He wants to be forgiven for the murders that he committed before. He also wants some respite from his impending doom. Now, he is almost certain that he is getting closer and closer towards destruction.

He tries to beg for forgiveness so that he could be rescued, and so, he is looking up to Christianity through the prayers he had learned as one last hope and gets into the mode of confession. Clearly, it does not help much, because at the end of this, we realize how he is losing everything including his shoes. Thus, he looks at himself and realizes how he is becoming “mighty low”.

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Now, another crowd emerges here, a crowd of figures silently enter the clearing from all sides. It is getting very dramatic over here. This is where the realist and the expressionist techniques come together in interesting ways.

This is particularly important because there is a very in depth examination of both individual and collective memory here. The memory of this individual, the individual and collective experiences which he and others in his community were forced to experience becomes very important in defining these moments and his actions in a certain way.

We never get into the details of how he had led his life as a Pullman porter except that there was always this growing sense of resentment, a growing sense of anger and that he really lost it when he caught one of his people cheating in a game. A similar situation arose in the prison guard instance too. It may not be the first time the guard had hit him, but maybe it was due to the growing resentment and anger that he could not contain anymore.

So, we do not get much insight into what had happened. What we know is what would become more evident in the next scene in this description and what would become really evident from the historical background. The details are quite graphic , and that helps us recall the history of slavery and the dark history of racism.

So, “all are dressed in Southern costumes of the period of the fifties of the last century”. It is that specific in terms of its historical location. There is a crowd of figures and this is something which has emerged from his collective memory, from the historical memory of the experience of race of the African-Americans. “There are middle-aged men who are evidently well-to do planters”. They are the people are on the other side. “There is one spruce, authoritative individual – the auctioneer. There is a crowd of curious spectators...”.

All of them have a certain role to play. The African slaves are about to be auctioned, the ones powerful enough to buy them, and a set of spectators equally important in this history are gathered there, because this is a spectacle aided by not just the o ones who are powerful enough and wealthy enough to buy, but also the ones who are enjoying this as a spectacle.

This is an instance where we find a complete dehumanization of young men and women who are being sold. When this is played and replayed in Jones' mind, it takes a very different dimension all together.

After Jones' recollection of the slave trade, we still do not know whether he was sold as a slave himself or whether he was part of the auctioneering process at any point or whether this is something that he has internalized or has been forced to internalized by virtue of belonging to that community.

But this instance presents itself as a foil to the other two instances, because this is a historical rut in which Brutus Jones is trapped. Thus, there should be a different way to read the other two murders because it springs from a historical reality.

“There is a crowd of curious spectators, chiefly young belles and dandies who have come to the slave-market for diversion.” We can see that the slave trade activity was considered entertainment which is quite a problematic and complicated image. It tells us about a very dark history where a lot of people, even though they were not directly participating in the trade per say, were responsible for this historical practice.

The violence and trauma is not just in this act of slavery, in this act of selling and buying, but also in converting this into a spectacle. “All exchange courtly greetings in dumb show and chat silently together.” There is something stiff, rigid, unreal, marionettish about their movements”.

As I mentioned before, all the other characters who appear as apparitions in the hallucinations have very mechanized movements . They are not entirely human and they come across as very unreal, but they are from the real historical past.

“They group themselves about the stump. Finally a batch of slaves are led in from the left by an attendant – three men of different ages, two women, one with the baby in her arms, nursing. They are placed to the left of the stump, beside Jones”. According to the graphic description, three men and two women one of whom is nursing are about to be sold in the auction. This also tells us how invested Brutus Jones is in this historical reality. This is a reality from which he cannot escape at all. This was caused by a number of external forces, which cannot be zeroed in on or attributed to one prison guard or a

cheating friend. Multiple things such as economic, social, and political factors need to be taken into account.

In very curious terms, this play asks pertinent questions to which unfortunately you know there are no direct answers, but the important thing is at the turn of the century, in the early twentieth century itself that these questions had began to be asked. By dramatizing this, Eugene O’Niel also is passing this question on to the audience.

“The white planters look them over appraisingly as if they were cattle” - The graphic nature of this scene is very depressing – “and exchange judgments on each. The dandies point with their fingers and make witty remarks.” They are just there for a diversion - “the belles titter bewitchingly. All this in silence save for the ominous throb of the tom-tom”. Jones is back to the reality as the drumming gets closer and closer.

With this, we will wrap up today’s session, and we will continue to discuss the play in the next class as well. Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting you in the next session.