

African-American Stereotype Threat in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920)

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Abstract: Our paper has tackled the issue of African American stereotype threat as it is developed in Eugene O'Neill's play, *The Emperor Jones* (1920). The play explores a situation in which the protagonist's belongingness to the African-American group is more a liability than an asset to his social achievement. This results from the negative stereotypes that his group is associated with and which have a disruptive psychological impact on Jones. In the early twentieth century nativist America, opportunities for the blacks' social and economic elevation were scarce, and when they achieved some status, they had to undergo the whites' oppressive stigmatisation as they suffered from the demeaning effect of their blackness and the negative stereotypes they were associated with. By making his black protagonist emperor, O'Neill advances him in society. This allows him explore the effects of Jones's blackness and the resulting negative stereotypes on this social achievement. Ignorance, superstition and irrationality are the most important stereotypes that have a disrupting effect on Brutus Jones in the forest. In sum, the paper has borrowed the concept of stereotype threat as social psychologists Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson have coined it in 1995 and applied it to O'Neill's play.

Keywords: O'Neill, African-American, Stereotype, stereotype threat, psychological predicament.

1. Introduction

The relations between individuals of the same group or inter-group relations are characterised by a specific psychology wherewith some individuals are attributed some fixed features. This involves the notion of stereotype, which aims at maintaining the target group or the individual within positions of inferiority. For instance, the African-Americans have long been associated with a full range of stereotypes that put them in an inferiority status in relation to the white Americans and featured the relations between the two ethnic groups. In literature, this took a very important place, especially in the early twentieth century with the rise of nativism and the re-enactment of the Jim Crow laws, based on negative stereotypes about the African Americans. Writers of the period have drawn on the notion of stereotype in order to give a picture of the tormented racial relations in the American society. Eugene O'Neill's drama is among the most important works which encompass a social and psychological study of the racial relations of the early twentieth century America, detailing the relations between the hyphenated immigrants with the WASPs. Among others, one of his favourite subjects is the Afro-American / WASPs relations, hence his focus on the black stereotype.

When negative, the stereotypes have a detrimental effect on the members of the target group. In the last two decades, two American scholars have examined the notion of negative stereotype and its impact on the life of the stereotyped groups. Steele and Aronson came to the theory of stereotype threat which is "being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (1995, p. 797). It refers to the behavioural condition of a member of a stereotyped group who feels an external and internal threat of

displaying signs of the negative stereotype with which his or her group is associated, hence confirm the stereotype. In such situations, the individual in question experiences a pressure that inhibits his or her social achievement, thought or action. Such situations have a more poignant effect on the members of a group in a context where nativism and the feeling of belongingness are predominant like the Roaring Twenties in America. As Eugene O'Neill's drama was situation-based and was largely produced in this context of nativism in the United States, his plays depict not only the impact of this nativism on the different ethnic groups in the United States but also the kind of racial relations it gave rise to. It is in this context of nativism that O'Neill wrote *The Emperor Jones*, the story of a black man who became emperor in a Caribbean island. The black Americans were charged with a bulk of negative stereotypes in American culture, and O'Neill models his play on them. Roger Bechtel (2007) argues that "Jones is a stereotype of a particular American kind" (p. 147) which was popularised in the minstrelsy shows of the nineteenth century, which mocked at the blacks. How far this stereotype impacts on Jones's status as emperor remains to be studied. Louise Sheaffer, on her part, considers O'Neill as the "empathizing artist who stripped Brutus Jones of his veneer of civilization to reveal the primitive soul, fearful and superstitious, that lurks in all us" (qtd in Cuenca, 1999, p. 34; emphasis added). Sheaffer seems to say that the play has the role of propounding a Universalist message as it deals with the human predicament. Yet the fact remains that he does this by using the personality of a black man who copes with his African roots and all the negative images his race is associated with throughout the history of the United States and in Western culture, in general.

1.1. Issue and Working Hypothesis

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to study the situation where a character experiences stereotype threat and its negative impact on social achievement and action in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill's play displays this kind of stereotype threat with the protagonist, Brutus Jones, facing circumstances in which his belongingness to the African-American group is more a liability than an asset to his achievement. This kind of situation emerges out of the racial circumstances wherein the blacks as an ethnic group are stigmatised by the white community. Historically, America in the early twentieth century, when the play was published, witnessed the break out of a very tormenting racial situation and the division of the American nation into petty ethnic communities. The blacks were among the most significantly stigmatised by the white community, especially by the WASPs. They were being considered inferior to them. Therefore, opportunities to social and economic elevation for the blacks were not offered as there was segregation, and when they achieved some status, they were even more suffering from the whites' oppressive stigmatisation. They were not only suffering from the whites' behaviour towards them but also from their blackness and its psychological significance to them, the result of the negative stereotypes they were associated with. Among these stereotypes, it is important to single out the most disruptive ones namely, ignorance, superstition and primitivism. By making his protagonist emperor, O'Neill advances him in society. Yet his despotism makes his native subjects rise against him. This has the aim of exploring the effects of the negative stereotypes on Jones. O'Neill creates this dramatic situation where his protagonist is between success or failure to escape from the natives and take profit from the money he has been squeezing them off for years.

1.2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

To study stereotype threat in *The Emperor Jones*, reference will be made to Steele and Aronson's theory of stereotype threat. This is related to the demeaning effect negative stereotypes have on social achievement, thought or action. For them, stereotype threat is "experienced essentially as a self-evaluative threat" (1995, p. 797) to reveal the validity of the negative stereotypes held about the targeted group. This threat is directed mainly on the group's intellectual ability and competence which are subject to negative stereotypes. Members of groups on whom negative stereotypes about their intellectual abilities are held are stereotype *vulnerable*. According to Steele (1997), stereotype threat involves a certain number of features three of which are fundamental to deal with the particular experience Brutus Jones faces. First, it "affects the members of any group about whom there exists some generally known negative stereotypes" (p. 617). Second, stereotype threat involves a setting where there are "*stereotyped* and *nonstereotyped* people"; in such *setting*, the negative "stereotype [becomes] a dimension of difference, more salient and thus more strongly felt" (Steele, p. 618; emphasis added). Third, "the effort to overcome the stereotype threat by disproving the stereotype [...] can be daunting" (Steele, p. 618); this reveals a significant obstacle to achievement as the intellectual faculties of the individual under the threat are thwarted. The effect of the stereotype is strongly felt when it is experienced in the midst of "performance", and "the emotional reaction it causes could directly interfere with performance" (Steele, p. 614). The analysis of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* in the light of these three features would reveal that Jones's predicament in the forest is the result of the disruptive effects of the stereotype threat upon his intellectual identity as African-American and his dis/ability to cope with the situation. Two main sections will provide the headings for the discussion of African American stereotype threat in O'Neill's play.

2. The Racial Setting and the Presence of the Negative Stereotype in *The Emperor Jones*

Stereotype threat takes place in a setting where there is the presence of the *stereotyped* and *non-stereotyped* individuals and the disruptive effects of the negative stereotypes held by the latter on the former. In O'Neill's play, this concerns the stereotyped African-Americans and the non-stereotyped white Americans as it was prevailing in the early twentieth century. The former are primarily represented by Brutus Jones and secondarily by the other black characters of the play. Smithers represent the white Americans, and through his voice O'Neill expresses the stereotypes held by the members of his group on the black ones. Throughout Scene I, O'Neill introduces the audience to the atmosphere of racial America by putting stress on the notion of African-American stereotype so as to prepare the ground for Jones's predicament later in the play as a result of this setting. Given the bulk of stereotypes held on the African Americans, their situation was much deteriorated. They were segregated and discriminated, living in their corners without any social and economic opportunities. For instance, to kill a white American even for self-defence was very perilous and unhealthy (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1038) for any African-American. O'Neill makes Brutus Jones build an empire in a Caribbean island on the argument that he once killed "white men in the States" (O'Neill, p. 1038.). This is a lie according to Smithers, for doing so has always meant being lynched for the black man. Smithers explains Jones's lie by referring to the context of the early twentieth century when the blacks had an inferior status. Considering Jones's lie is also in conformity with the negative stereotypes held on the blacks. Smithers is first and foremost the one white American who voices the racial stereotypes his group holds about the African Americans. He reproduces the stereotyped views about the so-called inferior group like "you blacks are up to some devilment" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1032). Like any other white American, Smithers believes that the blacks are superstitious and are likely to be tempted by the devil. Therefore,

they are associated with dishonesty and even criminality. Eugene O'Neill associates the stereotype of criminality with Jones who premised his empire on the idea that he used to be a criminal in the States as he killed a white man and was put in jail for that. Paraphrasing Drummond (1990) and Russell (2002), Kelly Welch writes, "[t]hroughout American history, Blacks have been consistently stereotyped as criminals" (2007, p. 276). In O'Neill's play, Smithers consider one of the black women of Jones's court as a "bloody liar" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1032) He believes that because she is black she is corrupt. As soon as he encounters, he asks her question that is full of prejudice: "Been stealin' a bit?" (1988, p. 1032). From Smithers's attitude towards the black woman, one can deduce two important stereotypes held by the whites on the blacks: (01) superstition and irrationality and (02) immorality and incivility. Cuenca considers that the first two are concerned with the "stereotypical mould of the primitive [which] became paramount during the so-called Jazz Age" (1999, p. 25). What is important to keep in mind is that Jones blindly believes that he is exonerated from these stereotypes. When he speaks about his black subjects, he adopts the language of the white Americans treating them as ignorant, superstitious, irrational and inferior, as if he is a white man. For him, his black servants are ignorant and "fool bush niggers" who are "kneelin' down and bumpin' deir heads on the ground like I was a miracle out o' de Bible" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1036). Yet, he is superior to them, for he "got brains and use them quick" (O'Neill, p. 1036). He tells Smithers, "I done de dirty work for you—and most o' de brain work" (O'Neill, p. 1034). This denotes the idea that Jones, unlike the other blacks, is capable of intellectual effort. This allows him elude reality, which would catch him in the end when confronted to himself in the forest. Claude Steele states that the experience of stereotype threat is not necessarily dependent on the belief in the negative stereotype, being applicable to oneself (1997, p. 618). The historical setting of the play divides multi-ethnic America into the non-stereotyped white Americans and the stereotyped African Americans, among others. Despite Jones's blackness, he excludes himself from the stereotyped group believing in his "underlying strength of will, [and the] self-reliant confidence in himself" (O'Neill, 1988, p. 1033), white American features that are distinguishable from his "negroid" (O'Neill, p. 1033) ones. Jones's white features and his "negroid" ones are embodied in the physical setting of the play, namely the palace and the forest. Lima (2005, p. 139) argues that the palace is "both locale and symbol of his power and safety as well as 'civilised state'". He prevailed as a civilised emperor in it, but as soon as he leaves it for the forest his regress starts to be felt. The journey from the palace to the forest and Jones's upheavals through it shows the regression from the civilised state to the primitive one. This regression is symbolically developed through the state of Jones's clothes and his revolver, both of which stand for civilisation. Clothes signify the development from the primitive state to the civilised one. The revolver stands for the civilised race's predominance over nature through inventiveness and ingenuity. However, as Jones advances further into the heart of the forest, the revolver and the bullets become unimportant. The state of his clothes all the same worsens, revealing the savage inside Jones. The bulk of stereotypes associated with the black Americans along with Jones's blind belief that they are not applicable to him prepare the ground for the dramatic situation that follows the play's first scene. Its six following scenes, in fact, are devoted to Jones's confrontation with himself and the disrupting effect of the stereotype threat. O'Neill's genius lies in making his protagonist confront his black identity in the forest to experience what Steele (1997) calls a "situational pressure" (p. 614) which causes his psychological predicament. The pressure lies in the fact that Jones is forced to prove his intellectual abilities, and the presence of the stereotypes would be an obstacle to that. To allow fuller analysis of Jones's predicament, O'Neill appropriates the modernist techniques of internal monologue, flashback and expressionism through which he explores the inner life of the protagonist; he dives into Jones's mind to reveal his frustrating thoughts about his belongingness to the African American stereotyped group. According to Cuenca, Jones "undergoes a process of

retrospective agonizing triggered by the successive retrieval of his racial past” (1999, p. 42). His racial past would confirm his belongingness to the African-American ethnic group and disrupt his social achievement and project of escaping from the natives.

3. Brutus Jones’s Predicament in the Face of Stereotype Threat

Stereotype threat happens to the members of the groups on whom negative stereotypes are held. These have a disruptive effect on their social achievement and action. O’Neill creates a situation where achievement is important to the protagonist to explore the effects of the negative stereotypes on this same achievement. Jones managed to become an emperor in the Caribbean island on the ground that he had achieved some kind of ‘power’ that the other blacks could not reach. When the latter decide to remove him from power because of his corruption and despotic rule, Jones believes that his powers would save him. Yet he is not unaware of the menace within *himself*, which makes him doubt about the continuity of his privileged position. In order to explore Jones’s predicament in the face stereotype threat, O’Neill takes him to the forest where the African American stereotypes play their role as disruptive factors to cause his failure. Lima (1995) claims that Jones’s failure comes “through a series of experiences to which he reacts with growing fear” (p. 139). To show that Jones is likely to be exposed to the stereotypes, O’Neill ironically makes his power depend on his own superstition and irrationality, two negative stereotypes about the blacks that are widespread in American culture. These are related to his blind belief that he would never be killed by the natives; either he would escape from them or he would kill himself with the “silver bullet”. The moral is that the negative stereotypes of superstition, ignorance, instinctive behaviour and criminality are the ones that bring about Jones’s failure to escape from the natives. In Scene II, Jones’s doubts over his capacities as “a nigger” make him see “the little formless creatures”, and he fires – minus one bullet. This scene inaugurates the *internal* struggle between the ‘nigger’ and the ‘rational man’ in Jones’s *self*. He is persecuted by thoughts of his imminent disaster, especially soon after he discovers that he lost the place where he concealed his food. He is caught between the belief in his tragic fate as a ‘nigger’ and his American mind, thanks to which he explains things rationally. Yet, the irrational and superstitious prevail over the rational. It is his lack of rationality that makes him see the Little Formless Fears, on which he fires to spoil one of his six salutary bullets and give his pursuers an idea of his position in the forest. O’Neill ends the scene with Jones’s “renewed confidence” (O’Neill, 1988, p. 1046) in himself to show that the worst is yet to happen to him. Scene III continues the disruptive effects of stereotype on Brutus Jones by associating the irrationality and superstition of the African American as stereotypes with that of criminality. He makes him see the ghost of Jeff, a nigger he once killed in the States. It is out of superstition and irrationality that he sees the ghost; unless he believes in ghosts he will not see it. Thus, as if to say that niggers are naturally born criminals, O’Neill makes him fire on the ghost. By firing at the ghost, Jones not only spoils the bullets but he also shows the natives the place where he is, making his tragedy more prominent. The rational man inside him is aware of this: “Dey’s gittin’ near! Dey’s comin’ fast! And hearh I is shootin’ shts to let ‘em know jes’ whar I is! Oh, Gorry, I’s got to run” (Ibid. 1048). Lima (2005) considers that the apparition of Jeff unnerves Jones as it implies “a manifestation of his brutal past” (p. 141) as a ‘nigger’. It also reinforces his predicament as an African American undergoing his “own test before he can [or cannot] merit freedom” (Lima, p. 141). As a follow-up to the sequence of events that put Jones in an internal predicament in the preceding scenes, in Scene IV, O’Neill makes him interrogate his identit(ies) as American and black.

Divided between the white American's civilisation and rationality and the ignorance and superstition of the blacks, attributed to them by the whites, he addresses to himself:

Ha'nts! You fool nigger, dey ain't so such things! Dont' de Baptist parson tell you dat many time?
Is you civilized, or is you like dese ign'rent black niggers heah? Sho'! Dat was all in yo' own head.
Wasn't nothin' dere. Wasn't no Jeff! Know what? You jus' get seein' dem things 'cause yo' belly's
empty and you's hunger inside. Hunger 'fects yo' head and yo' eyes. (O'Neill, 1988, pp. 1049-1050)

This *introspective* scene evinces a certain will on Jones's part to explain things rationally rather irrationally by considering that he has not seen the ghost of Jeff because he is African American and hence ignorant and superstitious but because of something more rational, namely the fact that he is hungry. Despite Jones's efforts to stand as a rational person, the following quote evinces the claim that the black man inside him always prevails over the American as he soon fires at another ghost, namely the prison guard:

"I kills you, you white debil; if it's de last thing I evah does! Ghost or debil, I kill you agin!"

(O'Neill, 1988, p.1051)

Once again, there is a mixture of irrationality and criminality in Jones's act through which he not only spoils another bullet but also gives the natives more clues as to the right place where he is. In Scenes Five, Six and Seven, O'Neill confronts Jones with his African roots through reminding him of his blackness and its implication. In Scene Five, he makes him experience a slave auction, all in his mind. The result is that he fires at the auctioneer and the planter, simultaneously spoiling two other bullets. In this scene, O'Neill makes Jones face one of the most humiliating experiences for the "nigger race", namely the slave trade. O'Neill's aim in this scene is to make him face an historical reality that he always endeavours to escape from, namely his African origins as a black American. According to Lima (2005), the "pre-Civil War slave auction", Jones experiences in the forest, "elicits racial fears" (pp. 141-142). When Jones realises that he is in fact a black man, he becomes more anxious about the stereotypes the blacks are associated with so much so that he fires and adds more fuel to the fire. He spoils two further bullets and more clearly shows the natives the place where he is. As a matter of fact, in Scene Six, Jones becomes *apprehensive* about his life as he realises that he has none of the bullets left, only the silver one. His superstition makes him keep believing that this one is likely to save him and unless he keeps it, he will pass away.

"Ain't got no bullet left on'y de silver one. If mo' o' dem ha'nts come after me, how I gwine skeer dem away? Oh, Lawd, on'l de silver one left"

(O'Neill, 1988, p. 1055).

Finally, in Scene Seven and as result of Jones's superstitious background, O'Neill makes him see an African witch doctor that performs a voodoo ritual that dreads him to death. This scene brings about Jones in confrontation with one of the most important stereotypes that are attributed to the blacks, namely superstition and the savage rituals. Through the witch doctor, Jones sees his African origins, and the ritual performed frightens him to death.

When Jones is confronted with the witch doctor, he moans:

“Mercy, Oh Lawd! Mercy on dis po’ sinner”

(O’Neill, 1988, p. 1058).

His Biblical words, namely ‘Lord’ or God and ‘sinner’, show that he still believes in his Christian religious origins rather than his pagan African ones; he rejects his blackness and does not believe that the black stereotypes apply to him. However, his confront of such a condition all in his *mind* shows that he is African to the core. This experience involves an appeal to his own African origins that are deep inside his *unconscious* self and which are brought to the surface introspectively. Lima (2005) asserts that the Congo witch doctor and the slave auction involve “elements [that] have been dredged up from his cultural memory elements stemming from the subconscious abyss of his being — the African ancestry he had buried by taking on the ways of American life, that is, of the white world” (p. 142). As a result of Jones’s predicament in the face of his African roots, he commits a series of errors that lead to his tragic end. In Scene VIII, O’Neill makes the protagonist caught by the natives, and he dies away at midnight. This demonstrates that Jones’s belief that only the silver bullet could save him was nothing more than superstition and ignorance, two main stereotypes that were associated with the black race.

4. Conclusion

As a conclusion, it is important to say that O’Neill explores Jones’s quest for the self throughout the play’s scenes and confronts him to his self-enforced Americanness and repressed black identity. While he keeps thought that he is a self-made American, he is threatened by the natives who plot against him. His predicament in the forest and his failure as he is caught and killed by the natives is the result of the African American stereotypes as they trouble his attempts to flee from the natives. In this specific setting, Jones is confronted to his own inner life. His fears and doubts about his belongingness to the African American ethnic group come to the fore. For the psychological exploration of Jones’s inner life, O’Neill uses the modernist techniques of internal monologue and expressionism. Both allow the writer reveal Jones’s states of incertitude and fear in the forest. Every appearance Jones sees in the forest is but the product of his inner fears and doubts. Jeff, the auctioneer, the planter and the witch doctor are products of his unconscious and what he repealed for years namely his belongingness to the African race. All of them vehicle his own African roots, which he repressed through considering himself as a self-made American man. Yet this repression leads him to an identity crisis in the forest as he is confronted with the stereotypes which the members of his race are associated with and which, he is forced to accept, apply to him. This crisis brings about his failure as he never manages to escape from the natives and was killed the sooner he was caught. Considered in this sense, Eugene O’Neill confirms to the modernist identity crises and the shift of narrative attention to the minorities. In terms of race, the minorities had to cope with the revival of nativism in the United States of the 1920s. O’Neill’s play, therefore, is the cultural product of both its historical and literary contexts. The modernist authors sought to explore the inner life of the characters and their crises of identity as Brutus Jones experiences in the forest. Jones’s crisis is the result of the predominance of the racial feeling in the Roaring Twenties.

5. References

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