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**Eugene O'Neill's Play 'The Emperor Jones': A New Historicist Reading**Ahmed Kaid Thabet Alshokhada <sup>\*</sup> [adkdtt@tu.edu.ye](mailto:adkdtt@tu.edu.ye)**Abstract**

This study delves into a critical analysis of Eugene O'Neill's tragic play, "The Emperor Jones," employing perspective of the New Historicist Reading as the major methodology of this current study. This study highlights the cultural aspects, the social circumstances and historical events which affected Eugene O'Neill's entire life and career. In fact, Eugene O'Neill wrote the famous "The Emperor Jones" play with the goal of illuminating the shocking behaviors of cannibalism and primitivism which are most often associated with the early twentieth century conception of primitive black Africa. This study seeks to examine the play's historical context, revealing its temporal setting, significant events and contemporaneous social concerns in which it was produced. 'The Emperor Jones' play is considered a cultural, social, political commentary on the racism, slavery, injustice, and discrimination which were common in the United States community in 1920. Proudly, Eugene O'Neill is a pioneer of modern American drama in the early 20th century. He was a critic of the whole structure of his contemporary community in 1920. In spite of the playwright's artistry O'Neill in writing his famous tragedy "The Emperor Jones," was influenced by the political, economic and social factors, including particular historical events in the era in which it was written (1920), namely imperialism, colonization, the U.S. occupation of Haiti, the economic boom, spread of capitalism and the civil war of such a period. The main idea of "The Emperor Jones" play, will lead our attention to the American policy towards the Caribbean islands and the racial discrimination history between the whites and the blacks in American society, and also the internal conflicts among the dissent groups and the dominant authority in America. From this perspective, this study seeks to provide an in-depth interpretation of the play from the standpoint of the New Historicism Reading, with special attention to the events, themes, characters which are both inside and outside of contexts of the tragedy.

**Keywords:** Violence, Society & Environment, Culture, Power, Domination, Slavery.

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## مسرحية يوجين أونيل الإمبراطور جونز: قراءة من منظور النظرية التاريخية الجديدة

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ملخص:

تعمق هذه الدراسة في التحليل النقدي لمسرحية يوجين أونيل المأساوية "الإمبراطور جونز"، وذلك باستخدام منظور القراءة التاريخية الجديدة كمنهجية رئيسية لهذه الدراسة الحالية. تسلط هذه الدراسة الضوء على الجوانب الثقافية والظروف الاجتماعية والأحداث التاريخية التي أثرت في حياة يوجين أونيل ومسيرته المهنية في كتابة مأساة "الإمبراطور جونز". في الواقع، كتب أونيل مسرحيته الشهيرة "الإمبراطور جونز" بهدف تسليط الضوء على السلوكيات الصادمة لأكل لحوم البشر والبدائية التي غالباً ما ترتبط بمفهوم أوائل القرن العشرين لأفريقيا السوداء البدائية. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى مناقشة فترة المسرحية ومكانتها، وأحداثها التاريخية والظروف الاجتماعية التي كتبت فيها المسرحية. تعتبر مأساة مسرحية الإمبراطور جونز تعليقاً ثقافياً واجتماعياً وسياسياً على العنصرية والعبودية والظلم والتمييز التي كانت شائعة في مجتمع الولايات المتحدة في عام 1920. وكان يوجين أونيل رائداً في مجال الفكر الحديث. الدراما الأمريكية، كان ناقداً للبنية الكاملة لمجتمعه المعاصر في عام 1920، وعلى الرغم من براعة الكاتب المسرحي أونيل في كتابة مسرحياته الشهيرة، إلا أن أونيل تأثر بالعوامل السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية في كتابة مأساة الإمبراطور جونز، بما في ذلك أحداث تاريخية معينة في العصر الذي كتبت فيه المسرحية في (1920)، وهي الإمبريالية والاستعمار والاحتلال الأمريكي لهابيتي والإزدهار الاقتصادي وانتشار الرأسمالية وال الحرب الأهلية في تلك الفترة. الفكرة الرئيسية في مسرحية الإمبراطور جونز ستوجه انتباها إلى السياسة الأمريكية تجاه جزر الكاريبي وتاريخ التمييز العنصري بين البيض والسود في المجتمع الأمريكي، وأيضاً الصراعات الداخلية بين الجماعات المنشقة والسلطة المهيمنة في المجتمع الأمريكي. أمريكا. ومن هنا المنطلق تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تقديم تفسير متعمق لمسرحية الإمبراطور جونز من وجهة نظر القراءة التاريخية الجديدة، مع إيلاء اهتمام خاص للأحداث والمواضيع والشخصيات التي تقع داخل سياق المأساة وخارجها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإمبراطور جونز، التاريخية الجديدة، المجتمع والبيئة، الثقافة، السلطة، اليمنة.

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© نشر هذا البحث وفقاً لشروط الرخصة (CC BY 4.0 Attribution 4.0 International)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو الإضافة إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أجريت عليه.



### ● Introduction

Like his ancestors, Tennessee Williams and Henrik Ibsen and other contemporary dramatists, O'Neill was interested in depicting the social life in his American society. O'Neill wrote "The Emperor Jones" to portray the unsightly portrait of the dominant authority system in America and the immoral qualities of his contemporary society at end of the First World War. The Emperor Jones' tragedy is indeed a cultural and social comment, which reflects the complexities and challenges faced by the American society, its social circumstances and the historical events that occurred in America in the early 20th century. This study applies a New Historicist perspective to "The Emperor Jones," probing the complex interplay of power structures that underpin American society, as subtly yet potently revealed in the play. Eugene O'Neill's 'The Emperor Jones' is one of his best works of the early twentieth century. O'Neill was the greatest contemporary playwright of modern American drama in the 20th century and is considered the first American playwright to receive the Nobel Prize in American literature (1936). Moreover, the study investigates the reciprocal relationship between historical context and literary production, applying New Historicism principles inspired by Foucault and Greenblatt. The study also uses Althusser, Fanon, Memmi, Said, Camus, Baraka, and Arendt, to mention but a few. The study pays more attention to interpreting and analyzing the tragedy "The Emperor Jones" in the light of New Historicism perspective. Simply stated, for Muller (2013), when he said that "New Historicism as literary texts are bound up with other discourses and rhetorical structures; they are part of a history that is still being written" (p. 2). From the researcher's perspective, a New Historicist reading of "The Emperor Jones" emphasizes the significance of the play's historical context, all cultural aspects and social circumstances surrounding an author's work or the playwright, revealing the themes and ideas in the era in which it was produced. However, the primary role of the critics is to contextualize authors' works and playwrights through their historical backgrounds, analyzing the interplay between literary texts and contemporary events. As Pietruszynski (2006) said, "New Historicism is a way to explore how literature can bring some understanding to current social problems. The context of a text interprets the meaning of that text and the society in which it is written" (p. 20). Hence, in this study the literary works must be seen as a reflexion of the events, the problems, social circumstances, and the time in which the writer lived. Guerin (2005) asserted that "literary text chiefly, if not exclusively, as a reflection of its author's life and times" (p.18). In addition to New Historicist' thinkers, Stephen Greenblatt who is one of the greatest founders of Historicism theory, assumes that it "deals with extrinsic methods of interpretation of literary texts. The work is understood through its historical and cultural context. It is a theory that is based on the paradigm that literature should be analyzed within the context of the writer's historical and cultural background. In reaction to the text only approach advocated by the new critics, the new historicists acknowledge the relevance of the



literary text and equally analyze the work with an eye to history. The New historicists have an eye to history while analyzing the work; their attention is partly on literatures' historical content as they base their thoughts on the link between the art and the historical situations. The work is less the product of the writer's imagination than the social circumstances of its creation" (p. 21).

Actually, according To the best knowledge of the researcher, there has been no work which has fully studied "The Emperor Jones" from the new historicist perspective. As a result, the researcher selected "The Emperor Jones" as the focus of my research investigation. The study will pay more attention to analyze the play of The Emperor Jones from prospective of New historicism Reading. The main purpose of the present study is to show that Eugene O'Neill was notably influenced by the cultural aspects and the economic, social, political factors that inspired him in writing his famous tragedy 'The Emperor Jones'. This study seeks to explore the historical events that influenced O'Neill in writing his play. The Emperor Jones' tragedy is the most well-known play in modern American drama in 1920. However, this study has suggested that O'Neill relied on his social and historical expertise in writing all the details of the tragedy "The Emperor Jones." This study examines the intrinsic and extrinsic contexts influencing the development of themes, characters and motivations in 'The Emperor Jones'. The study also has been selected to use a novel way of analysis, i.e. New Historicism, how the text is shaped in its era, and how relevant is the play to Arab countries and other countries today. Moreover, this study suggests further studies that could analyze more of O'Neill's literary works in light of the New Historicism Reading.

### 1.1 Statement of Problem

The present study investigates how Eugene O'Neill's life, marked by significant cultural and historical influences, inspired him to write his seminal play, "The Emperor Jones" tragedy. This study provides an in-depth analysis of specific aspects of Eugene O'Neill's tragedy "The Emperor Jones", employing a New Historicist Reading to uncover the play's social, cultural and historical nuances.

### 1.4 Study Significance

Eugene O'Neill's play "The Emperor Jones" addresses a significant lacuna in modern American drama, offering a nuanced exploration of racial representations that warrants closer examination and fills a critical gap in existing research. Secondly, as T.S. Eliot posits in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," all writers are informed by literary tradition. This study explores this notion, presuming that Eugene O'Neill, a Nobel laureate, is no exception. Specifically, it investigates whether O'Neill reinforces stereotypes in his portrayal of non-white characters. Thirdly, this study also seeks to apply New Historicist analysis to "The Emperor Jones" tragedy, examining how the play reflects and critiques the power structures and societal norms of its time and how the text is shaped by its era. Furthermore, it explores the play's ongoing relevance,



particularly in Arab countries and other nations today, highlighting its enduring themes and universal significance.

### 1.5 Theoretical Framework

This study employs a New Historicist framework to examine 'The Emperor Jones', with a specific focus on the power dynamics that shape American society, as reflected in the play. The current study framework will analyze and interpret Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones" within its historical and cultural context, examining the tragedy's thematic relevance to the era in which it was written. 'The Emperor Jones' will be analyzed from a New Historicism perspective as a analytical framework of this study. For the purpose of the study, the focus on the importance of the New Historicists in studying literary works, "they examine such things as how the work was composed, what the author's intentions were, what events and ideas the work refers to, how readers have responded to the work, and what the work means for people today" (Veeser, 1989, p.16; Al-Solel, & Al-Yarimi, 2020). In keeping with discussion of the fundamental ideas of O'Neill's tragedy "The Emperor Jones" in this current study.

#### 1.5.1 New Historicism

From this perspective, this study provides a New Historicist Reading of "The Emperor Jones", examining the tragedy's internal dynamics (themes, characters and events) in relation to their broader historical and cultural contexts, shedding light on the tragedy's complex nuances. From the researcher's perspective, analysis of literary text requires considering the author's cultural and historical context. Here in this point, with reference to "New Historicists, texts are examined with an eye for how they reveal the economic and social realities, especially as they produce ideology and represent power or subversion" (Veeser, 1989, p.17). From this perspective, when we read and analyze any literary text and the literary text should be inherently tied to its social, cultural and historical context, requiring interpretation within the era and environment in which it was written. According to Colebrook (1997) when he suggests that "fewer employs the term in the new historicism way of analyzing a particular social event which has meaning for the people involved and discovering the patterns of conversations, codes and modes of thinking that attribute those meanings to the cultural event: Rather than seeking the meaning of a text in the intention or mental content of either the author or the work. We could focus on the effect of the text in a network of practices. We could see the text as an effective symbol: a social fact which makes action meaningful and is a part of a culture's way of performing its actions in an ordered and understandable way. Description of texts would be thick if they referred to the social and cultural forms in which the text operated" (p. 75). As Brannigan (1989) explains "how New Historicism understands the stories of the past as society's way of constructing a narrative which unconsciously fits its own interests. Such power dynamics feature



prominently in the work of Marxist thinkers, including Louis Althusser, who see history as the procession of stories favourable to the victor and literature as one of the institutions which participate in making state power and ideology familiar and acceptable to the state's subjects" (p. 36).

Some thinkers of New Historicism theory asserted that "New Historicism builds on these approaches but scholars such as Greenblatt emphasizes the use of the past as an impetus for political struggle in the present, and make it clear that the discipline of literary studies is not removed from the sphere of politics" (Brannigan, 1989). Concerning the new historicism, Ukkani (2004) perceived that "New Historicism involves a parallel reading or juxtaposition of the literary and the non-literary text of the same historical period. Both are given equal importance and allowed to work as sources of information and interrogation with each other" (p. 33). Also, Murry (1999) asserted that "New Historicists are influenced by the work of the French theorist Michel Foucault who focused upon the intricately structured power relations in a given culture at a given time to demonstrate, how that society controls its member through constructing and defining what appears to be universal. It implies that New Historicists aspired to a politics of culture which is covertly manifested in a text because power structure is administered by the state" (p. 809). Furthermore, the New Historicists' subjects and ideas and the authors are produced by culture.

Here, the researcher tends to focus more on Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones" which offers a scathing critique of colonialism, particularly through the protagonist's exploitative reign in the West Indies was a repetition of Western stances towards African countries as Fanon (1968) explains in his book "The Wretched of the Earth: For colonialism, this vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals" (p. 211). Eugene O'Neill's Brutus Jones, a black African American protagonist from Harlem who makes himself Emperor and ruler of the West Indies, similarly, The Emperor Jones wholeheartedly believed in a particularly legend that indigenous people were inferior to him and hence, they worth be treated badly. Memmi (1965) in his book "The Colonizer and the Colonized", explains very well why the colonizer who accepts his role has to construct and rely on such myths: With all his power he must disown the colonized while their existence is indispensable to his own. Having become aware to the unjust relationship which ties him to the colonized, he must continually attempt to absolve himself. He never forgets to make a public show of his own virtues, and will argue with vehemence to appear heroic and great. At the same time, his privileges arise just as much from his glory as from degrading the colonized. He will persist in degrading them, using the darkest colors to depict them" (p. 54). Therefore, O'Neill's drama is examined as a scathing indictment of colonialism, highlighting the intersecting dynamics of oppression in African and Caribbean contexts.



### ● Literature Review

There is a vast body of work on The Emperor Jones' tragedy. Yet, very few studies interpreted the play from a new historicist perspective. As Iranpour & Basirizadeh (2017) in their article "Study of Power and Dissidence in O'Neill's 'The Emperor Jones,'" they argue that "O'Neill was highly under the influence and inspiration of his contemporary events and the traces of those events are reflected in his works" (p.1). They add that "the main character in 'The Emperor Jones'" plays under the tyranny of dominant power turn into dissidents and resist against the authority or control of the dominant system. The play struggles to subvert the dominant order, and since it would be a threat to absolute power it is consequently condemned to harsh punishment. The authors further note that O'Neill represents the conflict between the marginalized group and the central one sympathetically, which indicates his intention in supporting the dissidence in social and political activities. In 'The Emperor Jones' O'Neill scrutinizes the situations of the Afro-Americans and challenge the concept of power and authority in the White American ideology" (Iranpour & Basirizadeh, 2017). Also Bogard (1972) asserted that "taken as an ethnic study displaying the racial characteristics of the American Negro, the part by present-day perspectives is an unacceptable stereotype of the Negro in terms of a crap shooting, razor-cutting Pullman porter" (p.139), he went on by comparing "Joseph Conrad's The 'Heart of Darkness' (1899) to 'The Emperor Jones': O'Neill makes no generalization such as Conrad does, that there is savagery in the hearts of all men. Instead, it is the Negro who is essentially uncivilized wearing the contemporary sophistication as a loosely fitting mask over an incorrigibly savage countenance. In its own time, the point of view was possible, and when disguised by theatrical excitements, acceptable, but today, the ethnic and social implications of the play can no longer command respectful attention" (Bogard, 1972). He simply stated his opinion as that "O'Neill perpetuated the stereotype of the incurably savage black. This perspective presented a decidedly racist perspective of African American portraiture. During the opening season black critics of the same era challenged the premise and the language, particularly the repeated use of the word 'nigger'" (p.139). With respect to The Emperor Jones' play, Gagnon (2011) points out that "O'Neill employed the epithet as a linguistic device that allowed the tyrant Brutus Jones to demonstrate his superiority over other blacks referenced in the play" (p.125), he also suggests that "Jones regresses, he begins identifying with his own race as a victim, dropping the term in the latter scenes as he assumes the victim's role" (Gagnon, 2011). Manheim (1998) shows in his book "The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill" that "the main themes of The Emperor Jones are racism in the American society and the concept of Empire in O'Neill's ideology (p.183), also he means when argues that "O'Neill challenges the white authority and brings the concept of the Empire under question: The play calls attention to the racial oppression that actually existed in America in 1920" (Manheim, 1998), he insists that "O'Neill has based the fall of Jones on



that of Haitian Emperor Henri I (Henry Christopher Sam), except that he committed suicide with a silver bullet when he was about to be captured by the rebellious" (Manheim, 1998).

Falk (1985) in the discussion of his famous book "O'Neill and Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays," considers "Jones as dominant and the West Indies Islanders as dissidents who aim to put an end to Jones' dictatorship. The idea of rebellion against the tyrannical status quo is intensified by the use of the theatrical devices" (p. 240). As the researcher looks forward to the playwright's creativity in using the style of the normal pulse rate in 'The Emperor Jones' play, which is gradually increasing like the sound of beating drums against the installation of dominant power and injustice and corruption resulting from the hegemony. As Falk also asserts that "O'Neill's use of the tom-tom beating first at the rate of normal pulse, and then gradually faster until it stops at the moment of Jones' death implies the process of resistance against the dominant structure, as we see in Scene six that he describes the drum beat: louder, quicker, with a more insistent, triumphant pulsation that implies the final victory of the native drum beaters in arresting Brutus Jones" (p. 240).

### 3. O'Neill's Historical Contexts: A Critical Examination of "The Emperor Jones" Tragedy

#### 3.1 O'Neill's Historical Influences

In fact, Eugene O'Neill is considered one of the greatest playwrights in modern American drama in the 20th century. O'Neill wrote several of his famous plays: 'Thirst' (1913), 'The Moon of the Carabees' (1917), 'The Dreamy Kid' (1918) and 'The Emperor Jones' (1920). Eugene O'Neill wrote the famous play 'The Emperor Jones' at the end of the First World War. Therefore, O'Neill was influenced by the cultural aspects and the economic, political and social factors in writing the play, including particular historical events such as the First World War, the American occupation of Haiti, the spread of capitalism, and the Civil War of such a period. Indeed, there is no analytical work on 'The Emperor Jones' play from a new historicist perspective. Also, it is important to note that when O'Neill employed the first play in Broadway Society in America to project the black African man to represent a main and tragic character of Emperor Jones' play. Many blacks suffered oppression and misery for a long time under a stain of slavery, and injustice until the mid-twentieth century in America. According to Smethurst (2011) in his work "The African American Roots of Modernism," notes that "in both the North and in the formerly rebellious Southern states, blacks suffered under the stain of slavery and were marginalized culturally and economically by custom and law. Both the North and the South marginalized African American cultural and intellectual expression" (p.17). Therefore, African American blacks started migrating from the South into the Northern cities because of injustice, slavery and racial discrimination against them. Locke (1983) looked to "African American artists to depict blacks in the best light, discrediting the Jim Crow and minstrel representations that flourished in the early



twentieth century. During World War I, blacks began migrating from the South into the large Northern cities in hopes of escaping Jim Crow and poverty, a diaspora known in African American history as the Great Migration" (p. 207). Hence, with reference to the principles of New Historicism, as it seems in this context that "New Historicism is thus concerned with the historicity of texts and textuality of history and the text has historicity as it is embedded in the social and cultural context, and history has a claim to textuality as we have no access to the full lived authentic past as only traces of it are preserved. It treats a work of literature not as a story worthy of analysis but as a representation of historical forces" (Veeser, 1989, p.20). More recently, O'Neill was a critic of the imported American culture of his contemporary society. This study also shows how O'Neill employed the cultural diversity between blacks and whites in his plays. simply stated, for Ranald (1998) indicates that "the play O'Neill develops mood, also sees Moon of The Caribees as his first experiment with the impact of black culture upon whites, and this, his first truly multicultural play, and foreshadows also his interest in total theatre. Character, theme, and mood become interdependent. The clash of cultures leads to a bacchanal and consequent violence, reinforced by music and dance" (p. 52). Here, it can be observed in the discussion of Gagnon (2011) when he suggested that "because of O'Neill's personal experiences in New London, he understood the marginalization and degradation caused by prejudice and ostracized cultures"(p. 73). According to Baraka (1991) contemporary American writer, said that "the more genuine American theater that O'Neill helped create during the same period that saw black characters on the stage in something approaching realism for the first time, as well as an American working class" (p. 152). As it is quite clear in Engel's opinion (1953) about (Jones' tragedy), said that "Jones is the embodiment of white American Materialism" (p. 50), he also asserted that "Jones is Negroid only in physical appearance and in speech. He further adds, Jones, is, rather, the American 'success story' in black- face" (p. 49). In this case, there are many important issues underlying O'Neill's critique in The Emperor Jones' play, including racial discrimination, slavery, and also American occupation of Haiti, which occurred in the twentieth century, as it should be noted that "O'Neill gained inspiration from the material that ended up as The Emperor Jones from the armory of textual imagery comprising both the United States encounter with the Caribbean island and the legacy of slavery in the Americas, including a biography of the Haitian leader, Christophe" (Cohn, 1971, p. 47).

As Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb (2007) note "O'Neill modeled Brutus Jones on four black men: Haitian dictators Emperor Henri Christophe and President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, plus African American bartender Adam Scott and O'Neill's drinking companion Joe Smith" (p. 439), they also assert that "O'Neill used his African American friends for language and personality and the Haitian dictators for historical context. Though almost a century apart, the two Haitian dictators each ruled their island nation as corrupt tyrants; both men eventually met untimely deaths. Henri Christophe, an early nineteenth century Haitian



dictator, rose from slavery and declared himself king. He ruled until he became ill and committed suicide. Haitian President Sam, an O'Neill contemporary, boasted only a silver bullet could kill him until a voodoo-maddened mob hacked him to pieces" (Gelb & Gelb, 2007, p. 439). O'Neill is mainly concerned with black Americans, perhaps because of his cultural identity as an Irish-American. According to Floyd (1981) in her book "Eugene O'Neill at Work," the playwright motivated by the discrimination against his Irish-American family by 'Wealthy Yankee New Londoners,' determined to explore and expose injustice against nonwhites" (p.3). While O'Neill's black representations began with minor West Indian characters, as in his play *Thirst* (1913) and *The Moon of the Carabbees* (1917), his later plays concentrated more directly on African Americans, their fates, and interactions with white society. O'Neill's last one-act with black characters, *The Dreamy Kid* (1918) was indeed an all-black play bringing to life O'Neill's first black American characters. O'Neill's most controversial black play and his most complicated one stays *The Emperor Jones* (1920) with its atavistic black protagonist, Brutus Jones.

Some critics believe that O'Neill, as a white American, had to override the barricade of his own skin color and identify with a group of people he was not too familiar with. According to Miller & Winifred (1991), who guide our interest to the same complication "as a northerner with no experience in the mixed society of the South, O'Neill had small acquaintance with the black psyche and the deeper conflicts of racial antagonism and southern segregation" (p. 252). Eugene O'Neill perhaps achieved in vision through and transcending these racism legends. O'Neill tried to present the new styles against the old rules in American theater, therefore "O'Neill rebelled against Broadway customs, writing savage and moody dramas that upset traditional rules. But he displayed such force and poetry that his plays such as *Emperor Jones*, *Anna Christie*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, brought him a million dollars in royalties, three Pulitzer Prizes, a Noble Prize and the distinction of being the most widely read playwright of the English language after Shakespeare and Shaw. O'Neill continued to seek new ways to break the old rules, so doing he changed the American theater more than any other man. O'Neill died in 1953 from pneumonia" (Encyclopedia Americana, 1951, p.689).

*The Emperor Jones* (1920) presents American audiences or society with a strong, conventional, and uncontroversial black character. Brutus Jones is a black American from Harlem, and he is a self-announced Emperor on a small island in the West Indies where the play is set in this small island. In America, Brutus Jones first killed a black man, called Jeff, for cheating at craps and later in prison. He killed the white guard, broken out of prison and fled the United States. On this small island in the West Indies, he worked for a white Cockney trader called Smithers, the only white man on the West Indian island and in the play, who resents Brutus Jones' contravention of his social status as a black man by seizing power. Jones later makes



himself to the position of Emperor by deceiving the natives into believing that he is more or less beatable and can only be destroyed with a silver bullet, a metal the West Indians do not possess. Then the natives planned a revolution to depose the Emperor. Because of its intricacy and controversial nature, The Emperor Jones has been branded nothing short of a racist play. Fundamentally, The Emperor Jones' play is considered seldom, in which is today represented because the stereotype of the black character (Negro) is inadmissible. According to Cooley (1982) in his book "Savages and Naturals," when he differentiates between these two directions in "primitivistic black portraiture, he claims that "The Emperor Jones" belongs in the second category, the savage portrayals" (p. 71), he also maintains, for instance, that "the name of the protagonist 'Brutus' implies the brute nature of the hero" (Cooley, 1982). In many cases, one of the reasons for "the war was the rise of imperialism and the European and American colonization of many overseas territories. The end of the First World War in 1918 deprived the rebels of their main ally in the guerrilla struggle. Germany's defeat meant its end as a menace to the US in the Caribbean, as it lost control of Tortuga. Nevertheless, the United States of America continued its occupation of Haiti after the war, despite the embarrassment that it caused President Woodrow Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, when he supported self-determination among other peoples. In addition, the Congress held hearings in 1922 to investigate the occupation" (Encyclopedia Americana, 1951, p. 688). The Emperor Jones' play is a critical component in American drama history and O'Neill's canon. O'Neill's play The Emperor Jones was pioneering for African Americans in the American theater. The play was the first play that had a black man play a leading role for a white American theater company. The play of The Emperor Jones was written by Eugene O'Neill, a white American playwright, who still used lots of racial stereotypes, however, the play was praised by the African American society. Brown (1993) may be "among the very few black critics to praise O'Neill for transcending these stereotypes and introducing a tragic Negro to Broadway" (p. 201). In the context of the interaction of mutual correlation between history and literary work through the lens of New Historicism, and literary text analysis, it seems that "new historicists analyse text with an eye to history. With this in mind, new historicism is not new. Many of the critiques that existed between the 1920s and the 1950s also focused on literature's historical content. These critics based their assumptions of literature on the connection between texts and their historical contexts" (Murfin & Supriya, 1998). To study a literary text, making special references to the historical influences of the author means that this text is dealt with from a New Historicist perspective.

### 3.2 The Relevance of the Play to Arab and Other Countries Today

New Historicism is one of the methodologies used to study literary texts, especially those which have links to their outside contexts. New Historicism is a theory suggested by Stephen Greenblatt in the 20th



century and its major principle is the explanation of literary works in terms of the milieu or social setting from which it appeared. Greenblatt (1982) outlines "the following four tenets of New Historicism: First, literature is history-oriented which means that all literary works are the products of many social and cultural circumstances and forces. Second, literature constitutes another vision of history. Third, literature cannot transcend history and is continually shaped by social and political forces. Literary texts are the products of the ideology of the age in which they are written. Fourth, literature should be interpreted in terms of its historicity because history shapes all literature" (p. 6). Historicism is defined by Muller (2013) as "literary works can help us to understand the time in which they are set realist texts, in particular, provide imaginative representations of specific historical moments, events or periods; however, fictional texts are subordinate to historical records" (p.2). Furthermore, Collette (2012) defines new historicism as "a modern literary theory that concentrates on how events, places, and culture within a society affect a written work. New historicists often look at allusions to characteristics of the time period a literary work was written in" (p. 3). As this study deals with Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones from new historicist angles, or from its historical, cultural, social contexts, the current study concentrates on the contexts of the play linking them to the New Historicist Reading and probes into the outside contexts behind the development of the characters, themes, events and other elements of Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones.

When the researcher picked up the play The Emperor Jones for the 2011 season (Arab Spring Revolution) and on May 29/ 2020, the primary interested was in the essential emotional content and the dramatic ideas of the play The Emperor Jones. The study reveled in the chance to play with O'Neill again, his rich language and colorful imagery, and work on a piece that straddled expressionistic style and realism. The researcher has always loved the play The Emperor Jones and felt I finally had actors who could pull it off. Certainly, The researcher was aware of the anti-colonial, anti-authoritarian streak in the play and its journey into African American history, but even though those are issues dear to us, they were not the thing that drove us to the script. Johnson (1998), stated that "making a revolution is to accept violence for the purpose of causing the system to change; more exactly, it is the purposive implementation of a strategy of violence in order to effect a change in social structure" (p. 32). Now, as Arab Spring Revolution, it is revolution springs up across the globe, specifically in North Africa and the Middle East, the play's relevance is palpable. The consequences of dictatorship and colonial rule become impossible to underplay. The adventures of our Emperor and his empire have moved to the forefront. In every rehearsal, the researcher thinks that something that connects to the mystical gibberish of Libya's leader and the embezzling arrogance of Mubarak in Egypt.



As for the historical and cultural context of studying The Emperor Jones' play in this study, one of the main principles is that it is concerned with the meaning and practices of everyday life. In terms of new historicism, when "the literary text can only be evaluated in its social, historical, and political contexts. Therefore, new historicism renounces the formalist conception of literature as an autonomous aesthetic order that transcends the needs and interests of a society. A literary text cannot be considered apart from the society that produced it. A literary text is another form of social significance which is produced by the society and return is active in reshaping the culture of that society" (Montrose, 1989, p. 24). The play recites his story in flashbacks as Brutus makes his way through the forest in an attempt to escape former subjects who have rebelled against him. The play is filled with the sound of beating drums. O'Neill proposes that these drums beat begin at the pace of the human heartbeat and then gradually increase throughout the play. The acceleration energy is an expressionistic parallel to the passionate state of the protagonist, Brutus Jones. The drum beats come from the hands of the rebelling subjects or natives under the command of their chief, Lem. The sound of the beating drum tom-tom symbolizes the inescapable presence of the primitive. Drum beating means civil war or a war between the emperor and his natives. The drum beating is a direct revolt against Jones' authority. These sounds like the Twitter feed posts, WhatsApp and Facebook connection used by the people of Tunis, Syria, Egypt, Bahrain, Sudan, the 2016 Turkish coup attempt against President Erdogan was also sparked by military factions linked to the Gulen movement, but social media played a key role in mobilizing resistance and ultimately defeating the coup and more, are a rallying cry to action and a cover for their plan. The drum beats of revolution in the Middle East and Africa have signaled the domino of rebellion communicating ideas and an energy driving the people to freedom. The drums are a tool though and not the rebellion, like the Facebook posts, they are ever-present. The social media has summoned the ghosts and spirits of revolution. As in Libya events, the study finds that these uprisings are driven by exploitation and economic struggle. Our interests are the same echoing across the Middle East. The robbery of food, freedom, shelter, safety by the dictators of those countries is also a crime committed by Jones. The nations that put their respect for human dignity second to trade are like Jones, putting his Jesus on the self for a while so he can build his credit or bankroll on his people's back. Jones is like Zain Al-Abedin Abin Ali, the ex-president of Tunisia, Muammar Al-Gaddafi, the ex-leader of Libya, Omar Al-Bashir, the ex-president of Sudan, Bashar Al-Assad, the president of Syria, and Mohammed Hosni Mubarak, the ex-president in Egypt, living the life of luxury, while the people are starving. Like Jones, many of these leaders are asleep, unprepared for their people's grab for power. Those actions, the contempt for the value of their people, the pride and extravagance of the dictators are always present in Brutus Jones. The play strips those things away in many ways as the reels are trying to do today.



According to Camus (1962) in his book "The Rebel," states that "the rebellion starts immediately after the oppressed had realized injustice that he or she must have endured to this point and after he or she had realized that common good, could also apply to him/ her. When the rebel protests against the oppressor as such but also against the whole institution that allowed to oppress him or her: The very moment the slave refuses to obey the humiliating orders of his master, he simultaneously rejects the condition of slavery" (p. 12). Particularly, the rebellions have brought another thought into our minds. This is again inspired by the play's actions. One of the most complex issues of The Emperor Jones is his fate. The question of what the rebellion should do with the ousted dictator is not a new one. Jones feels the cold breath of death on his neck throughout the play. Jones is haunted and hunted. The rebellion is about removing his authoritarian and exploitative regime but also about removing him personally. In this context, there is the most important principle of new historicism which it is known as a relationship between the historical event and literary text, on the other hand between the literary text and the society.

When the literary text is produced as a result of influential factors of historical events and certain social conditions. In keeping with the theme of this study to prove the relation between The Emperor Jones, and American history through the play's nature, which is a reflection of the history of American's racial discrimination between blacks and whites, also the American domination power, and slavery. The imperialism, colonization, the civil war, and the spread of capitalism are considered as the historical events of the play's essence. Particularly, New Historicism is known as a literary school, which is defined by Gallagher (1989), means when said that "new historicism is reading literary and non-literary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts. The practitioners of new historicism generally posit no hierarchy of cause and effect as they trace the connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of a subjectivity" (p. 37). As observed in the Arab Spring Revolution which has essentially changed the Middle East, as is happened in the Arabic countries and Northeast Africa, which spread across the Arab world in the use of violence and protests against its Arab rulers, such as the people of Egypt, Libya, Tunis, Syria, Sudan and others all were assaulting exploitative regimes. However, the current question reminds us, of what occurred to the fallen presidents or the Arab systems. In effect, for my purpose here it will suffice to limit my discussion on the character of The Emperor Jones, The Emperor Jones does not show a fully successful revolution. The people chase their leader out of town but do they remove the exploitation? The regime change in "The Emperor Jones" does not seem to have significant economic implications. Smithers is one of the play's characters, and he is a white American trader, who was continuing his cheating trade. He survives the coup and remains the colonial dictator, as he has done so many times before. Let us go to this question, Will Europe or America, the West in general, be a part of the transformation of these cultures into



more egalitarian systems or will we continue to work on the side of exploitation to keep our oil prices down? In the background of *The Emperor Jones* is the knowledge that the overlords and the economic imperialists, Smithers for O'Neill, do not go away. They retain power; they, with disdain for the very dictators, prop up their financial security, survive to see the cycle of revolution and oppression again and again.

Historically, New Historicism has recently played a prominent role in essentially dealing with the significance of domestic, social and political contexts to understand literary texts, as in the play "The Emperor Jones" may transform on his journey in the dark forest, but the society around him sustains it by political system. The play of *The Emperor Jones*, written almost 80 years ago is as resonant and relevant today as it was then, the players may be changing, but the spirit of man remains. The great works of the past are pertinent to our understanding of our lives and world today. Moreover, the principles of new historicism confirmed that the social and political conditions affect literary text production, and during organizing this production in the current time, the man or one must remain faithful to the expressionistic model, which permits us to believe to be a part of the memory of *Emperor Jones*. Some critics like Dollimore & Sinfield (1994) argue that "the resistance or subversion may indeed be appropriated by authority for its own purpose, but it can be used against authority as well as used by it. Thus, the demonized elements in modernist culture, the subordinate, the marginalized and the dissidents are identified as the forces to be self-identified. In Cultural Materialism, the process of resistance is the outcome of the struggle between marginality and power" (p. 90). At any rate, the history and race which is offered through the visions of *Brutus Jones* should not be neglected. Today, '*The Emperor Jones*' has become close to the American unrest which appeared through 2024 and the events that happened in the Arab World (Arab Spring) and also the United States of America on 28/5/2020. In addition to New Historicism, as Baldick (2005) asserts "New historicism is a fascinating new critical practice which shows a resurgence of interest in history. It is a reconstruction of the past from a present perspective and highlights the role of the present in remarking the past and making it more usable to the present. It refers to a general reaction against unhistorical approaches and a fresh interest in the specific social and political contexts of literary works" (p.187). "*The Emperor Jones*" reminds us today of the events which happened in the United States against the American President Trump and his authority regime due to the killing of George Floyd on 28/5/2020. The killing of George Floyd's has caused more global criticism and anger and protests in the United States and also on social media platforms. The disorders and protests have happened in the United States against the authority of the dominant system because of the racial discrimination against blacks African-Americans.

Here is one of the important points of historicism principles, which indicates that any production of literary works or any literary text is a reflection of the social, cultural, political and material factors in which it



was written the text. It should also be noted that some critics when asserted that "Cultural Materialism in studying of historical contexts of the literary works has objective method and belongs to Historicism. The delicate neglected point in this claim is the special viewpoint of Cultural Materialism towards the concept of history" (Iranpour & Basirizadeh, 2017). The researcher also hopes to show that Brannigan's discussion about "Cultural Materialism announces that not only literature is shaped by history but also shapes it as well. There is an organic and inseparable relation between history and literature. The most famous concept of the historicity of text and the textually of history" (p. 195). Ultimately, here are the most important historicism principles and their relationship to literary works. In this point the researcher agrees with Pietruszynski's former opinion when he said that "New Historicism is a way to explore how literature can bring some understanding to current social problems," as the researcher suggests how literature gets some critics who are speaking about division of classes, politics and strength during speaking about literary text. Particularly, O'Neill's great plays were affected by the economic, political, social factors and cultural aspects of his contemporary American society. Pietruszynski (2006) declares that "new historical theories maintain that it is not the text itself, but the social and historical context in which the work is created that determine the importance and meaning of a literary work" (p. 20).

#### 4. Conclusion: The Findings and the Suggestions of the Study

##### 5. 4.1 The Findings of the Study

The study deals with 'The Emperor Jones' from a new historicist reading. The Emperor Jones, despite its widespread examination during its time, it remains as a play that demands further scrutiny and analysis since the tragedy is the greatest O'Neill's plays in modern American literature. From this perspective, new historicism has focused on the literary text through its place, its time, historical events and social circumstances in which it was written. The study has paid more attention to explore the complicated interaction between the literary work and historical events and its surrounding. The study shows the methods in which the tragedy reflects and faces the ideologies of the American domination in which the tragedy was written. Substantially, the New Historicism theory is applicable to The Emperor Jones' play due to the critical truth which O'Neill is considered one of the greatest playwrights, who was influenced by the social conditions, the political, economic factors and the historical events in his career life. In conclusion, the aim of this study was to interpret The Emperor Jones' tragedy through lens of New Historicism principles. The study also sought to contribute to a deeper grasp of the tragedy's importance in the context of historical events and social factors of early the twentieth century of American society. After the analytical discussion of particular issues in The Emperor Jones' play, the study will provided some notes, conclusion and the findings of the study.



Starting with the main factors which pertain to the historical and cultural aspects in 'The Emperor Jones' tragedy. The study indicated that the racial discrimination between the blacks and the whites in American society in 1920 had an impact on all categories of the United States society. In effect, O'Neill is an American playwright of modern drama and a critic of significant social structure of his contemporary society in the 1920s. The cultural context of the tragedy of The Emperor Jones is reflected in numerous cultural aspects of American society culture in which it was written the play. This study can conclude that the cultural aspect of the tragedy is a reflexion of the cultural context of the American occupation of Haiti, American foreign policy, the economic and political crises of American society in which the tragedy was written. The history is full of events and conflicts, and 'The Emperor Jones' play is full of the powerful historical events and social factors that emerged from the culture of America, which grew and expanded during the updates of the 1920s. There are many important corruption issues and oppression in American society such as racism, slavery and injustice which fills the play with the heavy burden of tragedy. In addition to a discussion of historical events that occurred in O'Neill's contemporary society. The first historical event in O'Neill's society during his life as a playwright was imperialism and colonization, in particular. Imperialism and colonization are depicted in 'The Emperor Jones' which had an impact on the story arch of the play. Here, it is important to highlight O'Neill's emphasis in 'The Emperor Jones' is that a major impact on 'The Emperor Jones' play came from the American occupation of Haiti. When America occupied Haiti in July 1915, during the period of the president's authority Woodrow Wilson. The occupation also ended in 1934. In the play, there is the most important historical event in O'Neill's era as a playwright is the First World War, in which the play was written at the end of the First World War in 1920. The main cause of the First World War was the rise of imperialism and the United States' colonialism to some regions and expand its influence in those colonies. The United States has become one of the greatest countries which the world has ever known after the First World war. Hence, the United States reacted by facing the communist system, which exercised capitalistic rules more. The American markets saw a boom, especially in the post-war period when America turned the country into a market for its own property.

Fundamentally, Eugene O'Neill is the most attentive playwright to his contemporary American society to portray the unsightly policy in his plays for the American occupation of Haiti and also the dominant American authority system towards other countries and the racial discrimination between the blacks and whites in America. In addition, the discussion of the political context in 'The Emperor Jones' focused on criticizing imperialism and capitalism, which was caused by the outbreak of the First World War. Moreover, there is another important point in the political context of 'The Emperor Jones' play which is the Cold War that influenced O'Neill in writing the play. The First World War was known not as a combat war but rather as



a tension war, and thus the war enforced ideological power in the world. Hence, the United States was compelled to fulfill financial gains to ensure its supremacy in democracy and freedom.

Here, O'Neill purposely used the term rebellion and the dissidents in the play 'The Emperor Jones', which indicated against imperialism and capitalism in the American community. In this study, the most important point in the discussion of 'The Emperor Jones' is the economic context, the scenery of American society immensely was changed by industrialization, and modernization which emerged in the early of the twentieth century. 'The Emperor Jones' is considered the first play to lead or represent the role of the black African man in a white American theater. It should also be noted to the social context in 'The Emperor Jones' play. O'Neill's playwright had paid more attention to the social problems that occurred in America during the twentieth century such as the racial discrimination, injustice and exploitation of black slaves in American society. Another point in the discussion of the social context of 'The Emperor Jones' play indicates that the play is a reflection of the United States' stances and the immoral qualities depicted in American society. The study indicated that the social, economic and political conditions during the Cold War in America resulted in the spread of corruption, rebellion, dissidence and violence in the American society more and more. The study paid more attention to highlighting O'Neill's representation of the opposition between the dominant authority and the social and political dissidents in his plays.

In this regard, the original title of 'The Emperor Jones' play is known as "The Silver Bullet." "Silver Bullet" refers to the social drama, which represents the struggles between the black and white groups in America. Here, it should also be noted that the most significant point in the discussion of this study is that, 'To what range are the main theories of new historicism applicable to 'The Emperor Jones'? The findings of this study indicated that 'The Emperor Jones' tragedy is a product of certain social conditions and also the historical events which influenced O'Neill's life, including imperialism, colonization, racial discrimination and the First World War in America. Finally, the researcher has more to say about the features of the play, and its main themes, including racial discrimination, slavery, crime and injustice are the same as the events which were prevalent in the American community in 1920. In concluding this study, the researcher tried to clarify, focusing on 'The Emperor Jones', the principles of new historicism, as it asserts that understanding 'The Emperor Jones' play is the correct method to know the dominant authority, the marginalized groups and the power and policy of the country in which the events emerged. Finally, this study urges all the readers of the play and the researchers to enrich their knowledge about the whole structure of American society through the cultural aspects, the social, economic, and political factors and the historical events in the early 20th century.

#### 4.2 Suggestions of the Study

This study offered a fresh perspective on "The Emperor Jones" through a new historicist lens. Despite being a widely studied masterpiece since its inception, this iconic tragedy remains open to further

interpretation and analysis, underscoring its enduring significance in literature. Furthermore, the researcher suggests that future research investigations can explore the themes of racism and racial cleansing in O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones" through the critical framework of new historicism, shedding new light on the play's historical and cultural contexts.

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