

Ethical Identities and Ethical Teaching Implication in "Emperor Jones"

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ABSTRACT

One of Eugene O'Neill's representative works is "Emperor Jones", and the core event in this play is black Jones's flight at night. Through the use of play expressionism techniques such as the stage, sound, costumes, masks, and chorus, this play represents Jones' ethical conflict and ethical dilemmas between his black race identity and white ethical awareness. This paper, from the perspective of literary ethical criticism, shows the formation of Jones' black ethnic identity and his white ethical awareness by returning to the historical ethical context in which Jones lives, and reveals the tragic inevitability that Jones lost himself in the inevitable ethical conflict and went to split personality. The "Emperor Jones" not only reflects O'Neill's unique aesthetic view of tragedy, but also realizes the function of tragedy as a literary form of ethical instruction.

Keywords: "Emperor Jones", Eugene O'Neill, literary ethical criticism, ethical context, moral ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

Famous American dramatist Eugene O'Neill, as the winner of The Nobel Prize in literature and Pulitzer prize winner for four times, published his work "Emperor Jones" in 1920, which is recognized as one of the classic American dramas of the 20th century. This play's clue is the flee of middle-aged "Emperor Jones" at the dark night after being revolted by his tribesmen. During this process, Jones recounts his life experience by telling the story of the black and the white which reveals racial tension and ethical context background. Therefore, there are a contrast between the image of a middle-aged black Jones and the image of a treacherous tyrannical "Emperor Jones" who has already internalized the white ethical identity which shows the ethical conflict in this play. Since the publication of this works, scholars have studied it from the perspectives of drama aesthetics, Freudian psychoanalysis, Jung's collective unconsciousness and black religious culture to explore the great value of this play. In this play, O'Neill takes psychological time and space as the main line, and uses psychological processes such as association, memory and hallucination to show the conflict between Jones' survival and the mysterious power that enmeshes him. He rises and falls in the vortex of grief and fear until he is drowned. With a wealth of expressionist art, "the author vividly recreates Jones's life and the tragic fate of his ancestors" (Zeng 2012:6). Most academic researchers at home and

abroad agree that it is one of O'Neill's best expressionist drama works, and it is also O'Neill's transformation from realistic drama to modernist drama, but few people interpret Jones' tragic inevitability from the perspective of literary ethical criticism. This article tries to restore the history of black men's authentic living condition in the United States during the period of the creation of this script and the survival environment of Jones in this play showing the changes of multiple ethical identity of Jones by comparing ethical historical context, then to explore that O'Neill's writing intention of reflecting the nature of society and human beings by creating a tragedy. Meanwhile, the unique tragic aesthetic tendency of O'Neill highlights the value of the ethical teachings of tragedy and expands the horizons for the research of this work.

II. AN EMPEROR BECAME A SLAVE: JONES' MULTIPLE ETHICAL IDENTITIES WITHIN DIFFERENT ETHICAL CONTEXT

In the first scene, Jones's identity as emperor is revealed in a conversation between the old black woman and the white man Smith before Jones himself appears. Next, Jones appeared as a tall, strong, vigorous, middle-aged black man. "Human identity is the mark of a person's existence in society, and people need to assume the responsibilities and obligations given by their identity" (Nie 2014: 262). According to Nie's theory, identity can be divided into two kinds, one is born with some, such as consanguinity determines the identity of blood relatives. One is acquired, such as the identity of husband and wife. There are many

*Fund: Cultural Memory and Home Construction in African American Women Novels (QN2018039), sponsored by Social Science Fund of Yunnan Province.

categories of ethical identity, such as the identity based on blood relatives, the identity based on ethical relations, the identity based on moral norms, the identity based on the occupation. At this point, Jones has both the black racial ethical identity and the social ethical identity of the emperor. The problem is that at the beginning of the play, Jones's dual ethical identity seems to show a confrontational conflict. Between the old woman and Jones, they were consistent in the racial identity, but they have difference in the social identity. Due to this difference, it led to the old woman's sense of identity to the black racial and ethical identity of Jones dispelled, which showed the panic and extreme fear of the rulers. Between Smith and Jones, on the one hand, they share the same identity as the ruling social ethics class, but their racial ethical identity is in black and white binary opposition, which lead to the subordinate Smith is lack of respect and loyalty to Jones, and the white Smith even cursed black Jones as "smelly nigger", and he gleefully want to see the death of the black Jones when he was dragged out. According to the content of Smith and Jones' conversation, the ethical identity relationship between them is further complicated. Smith is also an accomplice of the murderer and jail breaker Jones, and one of the operators behind the scenes to push Jones to the throne, but also an accomplice of Jones's fraud on the island kingdom. From the first scene of the play, Jones's multiple ethical identities are always in a state of tension of confrontation, which has become an ethical knot that Jones cannot do anything about but has to face.

In reality, the black "Emperor Jones" started his own escape after learning the news of the native people's rebellion, and the escape course naturally became the ethical line of the story. From Scene 2 to 6, emperor mask inside Jones and external ornaments of an emperor is faded gradually, Jones's fear in the dark and his hallucinations formed hidden clues of this play which realized the recall of Jones' personal history and collective racial history, Jones multidimensional complex ethical identity and context also gradually emerged in the form of flashbacks. Jones's ancestors were trafficked through the middle passage of the sea in the frenzied slave trade to become lifelong slaves of whites in North America. In the slave trade, the racial trauma of the black race being auctioned and shipped to the United States as a commodity is clearly presented as a collective unconscious in Jones's hallucination, which means that the reader has to return to the ethical context of the expanding demand for labor in the development of the capitalist economy in the 18th century. In order to meet the needs of production and profit maximization, the bourgeoisie turned its eyes to Africa for the grab of labor force and original resources, and began the comprehensive control of the black people in various economic, political and cultural aspects. Jones

himself was born in the American slave owner's plantation, grew up hard in the owner's whip and curse, and formed the owner-slave ethical identity relationship with the plantation owner. Similarly, only by returning to the ethical context of the slavery social system in the United States before the civil war can the ethical relationship between black slaves and plantation owners be more objectively interpreted. Slave owners regarded slaves as personal private property to manage, slaves' basic rights as "people" such as learning, free love and the establishment of a family were mercilessly deprived, when slaves could not realize their value of unpaid work, they were bound to be physically and spiritually punished by slave owners, and even be regarded as a materialized commodity to be sold at a low price. Jones, a black slave, was lucky to get out of the southern plantation, and luckily got into the train as a handyman, becoming the attendant of white passengers. Jones and white people had the ethical identity relationship of master and servant on the basis of the black and white opposing racial ethical identity. This work greatly expand the Jones's field of vision, which serves for the white work changed after Jones's attitude toward the white roll with the punches, he internalized white philosophy, accept white "the thief, the thief make-or-break" deformed worldview, Jones at the same time there have been great desire for material wealth in virtually, material benefit maximization become his important maxim. In the gambling activity, black Jeff was killed by Jones because of cheating, the two formed a new ethical identity relationship between the murderer and the victim, which is beyond the relationship between colleagues. Jones, who broke the human ethical taboo, was sentenced to prison, during which he killed the white jailer and chose to escape. In the end, Jones with the help of the white Smith successfully smuggled to the west Indies, he successfully become the white people in the island in two years as a puppet emperor by the use of cunning strategy, then he began to squeeze his black compatriots on the island bully.

In the course of Jones's life, he constantly updates and enriches his ethical identity consciously or unconsciously. The multi-dimensional ethical identity makes Jones form a complex and interlaced network of ethical identity relations with others and the society. When the irreconcilable conflict occurs between the conflicting ethical identities, Jones will inevitably fall into the ethical dilemma brought by the multidimensional ethical identities. At different stages of his life, Jones has to make the necessary ethical choices according to the specific ethical environment and take responsibility for the results of the choices.

III. O'NEILL'S AESTHETIC TENDENCY OF TRAGEDY

In his poetics, Aristotle described tragedy as: "the description of an act worthy of serious attention, the act itself has integrity and certain significance; In the language, through various appropriate art forms, behavior is strengthened and becomes a part of the play; The way of description is to express through the action of the characters, rather than using the narrative method; Purify the emotion by causing compassion and fear" (Aristotle 2009: 16). Shakespeare, the great master of drama during the Renaissance, also followed the tradition of Aristotle, believing that drama is a mirror of life, insisting on the reflection of good and evil and emphasizing the role of drama in aesthetic education. In the 20th century, when modernism was rampant, many people claimed that tragedy was dead, but O'Neill used his whole life to create more than 50 drama works to demonstrate the immortal vitality of tragedy. Like other tragedies, O'Neill's tragedy is not only pessimistic, but also characterized by the struggle of the characters in the tragedy. However, it must be admitted that O'Neill's view of tragedy is different from that of his predecessors. Both Oedipus king the ancient Greek tragic figure and Shakespeare's tragic character Hamlet challenge the fate, but they face the fate without choice, no matter how heroic and great the action of the heroes, finally can not change the tragic fate. However, O'Neill firmly opposes the binary opposition between good and evil. There are neither traditional heroes nor natural villains in his works, and the characters are selected as small, weak, influenced by the environment and dominated by fate in daily life. These little people have had a choice or hope, even the opportunity to change their own fate. As He Huibin said: "O'Neill's tragic characters can be content to be ordinary, do not challenge, or do not push the challenge to the impasse, can enjoy the so-called" happiness, but his tragic characters disdain when ordinary people, so heroic to "failure" (He 2014: 161). Moreover, O'Neill had a different view of tragedy from that of other dramatists of his time. If most modern playwrights of the early 20th century conveyed a concern for human relations, O'Neill pushed that concern deeper, to the struggle between man and man, man and his own destiny. "The struggle used to be between man and god, and now it's between man and himself, and his past, and his search for a place to belong" (O'Neill 2007: 161). Take his tragic character as an example, Jones fought not against others, but against himself. It is O'Neill's ultimate pursuit of the relationship between man and self that gives his plays their depth.

O'Neill once said of the creation of tragedy like this: "I was born with a sense of ecstasy over tragedy. Human tragedy is perhaps the only meaningful thing. What I was after was to make the audience leave the theatre in ecstasy" (qtd Gelb 1973: 336). This feeling

comes from someone on the stage in the face of life, in the permanent disadvantage of the situation of struggle, struggle may not win. On the contrary, it may be inevitable to be defeated. It is this struggle that makes personal life meaningful. Man's struggle for control of his life, his struggle to prove and insist on the futility of living outside him, often brings him into conflict with life, so much so that he tries to adapt it to his own needs. But it always backfires. All this is what I mean by a man being a hero. Jones is one of O'Neill's characters fighting for control of life. In the south plantation, the black slave Jones finally gets out of the agricultural economic circle by struggling. As the train gang, Jones improves his material conditions, but always backfires, he has committed murder and prison break felony. Fighting for control of his life, Jones finally became "Emperor Jones", but he fled in the conflict with the native black people and finally ended his struggle with personal death. As for the writing of the "Emperor Jones", O'Neill once mentioned it in a letter, he said: "The beauty inherent in rhythm is introduced in the seemingly non-existent beauty of "Emperor Jones" (Carlill 1970: 125). It was clear that Jones, the plantation Negro slave, the murderer, and the puppet emperor of the native kingdom under the supervision of the white army of the west Indies, had lived the most humble and depraved lives. However, in the event of black rebellion, Jones first lost the protection of white people, and the ethical choice dilemma of black and white opposition in the journey of escape finally split Jones, and Jones ended his escape with death. Jones' tragedy is rooted in people's strong possessiveness of materials, the loss of Jones' soul and the loss of traditional values. Jones' tragedy has achieved the purification function for the mind of modern people. Jones' tragic ending is obviously from O'Neill's aesthetic thought of this tragic creation.

IV. ETHICAL TEACHING FUNCTION OF THE TRAGEDY "EMPEROR JONES"

The ethical didactic value and social critical significance of drama have been the common concerns of western playwrights and theorists since ancient times. Ethical literary criticism as a methodology, emphasis on literature and its criticism of social responsibility, emphasizes the teaching function of literature, emphasis on returning to the scene of the history of ethics, standing at the time of the ethical stance on interpretation and interpretation of literary works, analysis work lead to social events and the factors affecting the ethical fate of the characters. "with ethical view of interpretation and evaluation of various kinds of characters to choose the route, process and results, to make ethical choice in history and reality for our today's meaning" (Nie 2014: 1).

Tragedy is closely related to ethics. In "Emperor Jones", O'Neill, on the one hand, observed the American social history of primitive accumulation of capitalism in the late 19th and early 20th century and the values of individualism, during which people's desire for survival, interest and possession was greatly stimulated. People's crazy pursuit of material wealth and other desires generated with the satisfaction of this desire have a strong impact on traditional religion, morality and ethics, resulting in a variety of life tragedies. Man is drowned in matter and loses his soul. And the soul, which has always been a recurring theme in O'Neill's plays, is that people need spiritual support, they need to have true faith, they need to have beautiful aspirations. All his life the author has questioned the meaning of life and the depth of the human soul. The interweaving of material desire and lust, and the opposition between material and spirit are sublimated in the works. On the other hand, O'Neill also focuses on the analysis of black racial issues in the United States. Although the American society in the early 20th century changed the slave status of black people from the perspective of law, the long history of oppression led to the reality of low education and poor economic conditions of black people. Some blacks also entered the stage of abundant material life through personal struggle, but their spiritual civilization has problems, showing a situation of deviation from the traditional black ethics and morality, while still unable to integrate into the white life circle, resulting in the "neither white nor black" ethical identity dislocation. In the 20th century, the black people, epitomized by the literary image of Jones, were confronted with the temptation of the material desire of the American industrial society and various conflicts within the society. How to achieve harmony between the white race and the black race becomes the question that O'Neill leaves for all readers, which is still of great significance in dealing with the racial issues of today.

V. CONCLUSION

"Tragedy has the meaning that the ancient Greeks gave it" (O'Neill 2006: 229). For the ancient Greeks, tragedy inspired the sublime, the urge to live, to seek a fuller life. Tragedy gives them a deeper spiritual understanding and frees them from the petty greed of everyday life. When they saw the tragedy on the stage, they rejoiced that their hopeless hope had been exalted in art. Through the black image of Jones, O'Neill on the one hand shows the introspection of personal fate, and at the same time conveys the reflection on the racial problems in the American society, and more importantly, the concern for human nature in the whole process of human development, thus realizing the literary teaching function of tragedy.

Through the tragic figure of black Jones, O'Neill expressed his own aesthetic view of tragedy, that is,

"human tragedy may be the only meaningful thing. There are people on the stage who are fighting in the face of life, against a background of permanent disadvantage. Struggle may not win, but may be defeated" (O'Neill 2006: 198). He also realized the ethical teaching function of tragedy as a literary form, that is, black Jones' behavior of losing his soul in material desire and abandoning racial identity will lead him into personal tragedy, and this work completes the noble mission of tragedy to purify people's minds, and achieves the ethical warning function of tragedy to modern people.

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