A Psychoanalytic Study of Tragic Fall in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*: Jones and His Defence Mechanisms

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Abstract
This paper analyses Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones (1920) as a drama in which the fall of Brutus Jones unfolds inside the mind rather than on the stage of political events. The analysis is rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, especially the functioning of repression, denial, and projection, and follows a close reading of Jones's behaviour, speech, and hallucinations. The study traces how the image of the emperor becomes a shield he builds for himself—one that hides his guilt, fear, and memory of his violent past. As the play progresses, this carefully constructed identity begins to crack, and the forest hallucinations appear as pieces of the unconscious mind rising to the surface.
The findings show that every vision Jones encounters marks the weakening of his ego and the return of what he once pushed away. Instead of fate or divine punishment, O'Neill presents a tragedy shaped by the mind itself—a collapse triggered by fear and the failure of the very mechanisms that are meant to protect him. In this sense, The Emperor Jones mirrors Arthur Miller's idea of modern tragedy, where the downfall grows from within the protagonist. Jones's journey reveals that the real tragedy lies not in losing power but in losing the inner balance that once held his identity.
Keywords: Repression; Denial; Projection; Psychological Tragedy; Modern Tragic Hero; Defence Mechanisms; Self-Deception; Unconscious Conflict

Introduction

Modern tragedy has increasingly shifted its focus from external forces to the internal conflicts that shape human behaviour. Unlike classical tragedy, which foregrounds fate, divine will, or inherited guilt, modern drama turns to the psychological pressures that fracture identity and unsettle the self. In this transformation, the tragic experience becomes a study of the mind's attempt to manage fear, guilt, and desire—forces that operate beneath conscious awareness but powerfully determine human actions.

It is within this modern psychological framework that Eugene O'Neill's dramatic vision can be fully understood. O'Neill was one of the first American playwrights to explore tragedy as an inward collapse rather than an outwards catastrophe. His characters frequently confront the buried impulses and unresolved memories that lie beneath their constructed identities. Their downfall emerges gradually, not through the intervention of external destiny but through the failure of the psychological mechanisms that once protected them.

This inward turn is especially prominent in *The Emperor Jones* (1920), where the protagonist's journey into the forest becomes a symbolic descent into unconsciousness.

Therefore, The Emperor Jones is best read as a psychological tragedy. Although the play depicts a political revolt, the actual drama unfolds in the mind of Brutus Jones. His hallucinations—ranging from personal memories to ancestral visions— externalise the repressed material he has long refused to confront. The forest operates as a metaphorical landscape of the unconscious, exposing the fragility of the identity that Jones has built for himself. The breakdown he experiences is not caused by external enemies but by the resurgence of psychological forces he has denied or displaced.

Despite extensive criticism of O'Neill's use of expressionism, racial symbolism, and themes of power, the structured psychological pattern behind Jones's fall has received comparatively limited attention. Scholars often examine repression or fear in isolation, but seldom explore how Freud's defence mechanisms function together to shape the play's tragic arc. The absence of a comprehensive psychoanalytic interpretation linking repression, denial, and projection to the stages of Jones's disintegration marks a gap in the existing scholarship.

This study seeks to address this gap by offering an integrated psychoanalytic reading of *The Emperor Jones*. It examines how Jones's reliance on defence mechanisms initially enables his rise to power, but ultimately facilitates his collapse. By tracing the dissolution of these mechanisms, this paper argues that the tragedy of Jones is fundamentally psychological. His downfall reflects not the overthrow of a ruler but the collapse of an inner structure that could no longer contain the conflicts it was built to suppress.

Applying Freud's theory of defence mechanisms provides a suitable lens for this analysis because the play's structure mirrors the logic of the psychological breakdown. O'Neill stages repression, denial, and projection through expressionistic scenes that dramatise the hidden dimensions of Jones's mind. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of how O'Neill reshapes the tragic form into a study of internal conflict, revealing the psyche as both the creator and destroyer of the self.

Freud's Concept of Defence Mechanisms

Freud's theory of defence mechanisms offers a foundational vocabulary for understanding how the mind manages the inner conflict. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud argues that the ego does not merely mediate between instinct and social order; it must also "ward off experiences that would produce unmanageable anxiety" by developing unconscious protective strategies of protection (Freud 25). These mechanisms are neither arbitrary nor purely pathological in nature. As Anna Freud later explained, they represent "systematic modes of adjustment" through which the individual attempts to maintain psychic equilibrium in the face of internal tension (A. Freud 45). However, their function is double-edged: while they temporarily stabilise the ego, they often distort the individual's relationship with reality, producing deeper long-term conflict.

Repression is the cornerstone of this system. Freud describes it as a process by which the ego pushes disturbing impulses or memories out of conscious awareness, thereby creating a "return of the repressed" when these buried contents re-emerge in a disguised form (Freud 33). Scholars have consistently emphasized the centrality of repression in modern literature. Stephen A. Black notes that repression in O'Neill's drama often manifests as "the façade behind which the character hides the very truth that will later destroy him" (Black 57). This aligns directly with Brutus Jones's inability to confront the guilt, fear, and racial memory that he attempts to bury.

Although related, denial operates differently. Rather than relocating unwanted material to the unconscious, denial involves rejecting the perception of external or internal realities that contradicts one's preferred self-understanding. Freud describes denial as the refusal "to accept what the senses report" when the truth threatens the integrity of the ego (Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents* 48). Literary scholars argue that denial is frequently visible in characters who maintain an inflated self-image despite crumbling circumstances. Virginia Floyd observes that O'Neill's protagonists often rely on denial "as a means of preserving dignity, even when the surrounding world contradicts their claims" (Floyd 102). Jones's repeated assertions

of invincibility— symbolised by the silver bullet myth—reflect this precise psychological mechanism.

Projection constitutes yet another significant form of defence. Here, the ego attributes its own unwanted feelings, impulses, or fears to external agents to relieve internal pressure. Freud defines this mechanism as a means of "displacing inner conflict onto the outside world", thus transforming psychic anxiety into a perceived external threat (Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 31). Critics have noted that projection is central to expressionist literature. Travis Bogard argues that in O'Neill's plays, the stage often becomes "a visible extension of the character's inner landscape," where fear and guilt appear as external forces (Bogard 118). Jones's forest visions, populated by spectral figures from his past, exemplify the outwards dramatisation of psychological material through projection.

Taken together, these mechanisms provide a coherent framework for interpreting *The Emperor Jones*. O'Neill structures the play in a manner that mirrors the sequential weakening of repression, denial, and projections. Jones's psychological defences, initially sources of empowerment, gradually fail under the pressure of returning memories and escalating fears. This psychoanalytic lens allows for a deeper understanding of how O'Neill reshapes tragedy: the collapse of the protagonist is not caused by political revolt alone but by dismantling the internal structures that once preserved his sense of identity.

Analysis of the Defence Mechanism of Emperor Jones

Repression: The Return of the Repressed

Repression is the deepest psychological force shaping Brutus Jones's breakdown in *The Emperor Jones*. Freud defines repression as the ego's attempt to force disturbing thoughts and memories out of consciousness while allowing them to "continue their influence from the unconscious" (*The Ego and the Id* 27). O'Neill structures Jones's journey through the forest as a descent into these buried layers—crime, racial memory, punishment, and primal fear—each returning with intensified force as the repression weakens. As Stephen A. Black observes, O'Neill's characters often build "elaborate façades to keep at bay the memories that threaten to destroy them," yet those façades inevitably collapse (Black 57).

The first major rupture appears in the Jeff hallucination, where Jones confronts the man he murdered. Here, the past returns not symbolically but in a vivid externalised form.

Brutus Jones: *Who dar? Who dat? Is dat yo', Jeff?* Brutus Jones: *Jeff! I'se sho' mighty glad to see yo'! Dey tol' me yo' done died from dat razor cut I gives you.* Brutus Jones: *Ain't you gwine—look up— cannot you speak to me? Is you—is you—a ha'nt?* Brutus Jones: *Nigger, I kills yo' dead once. Do I have to kill you' again? You take it, den.* (O'Neill 41–42)

Jones's rapid shift from relief to panic reveals a psyche destabilised by memories he can no longer suppress. His insistence afterwards that "dat shot fix him" (O'Neill 43) shows repression's defensive attempt to re-contain trauma. As Louis Sheaffer notes, O'Neill "stages the unconscious as visible theatre", allowing guilt to appear literally (Sheaffer 203).

This process deepens in the "Little Formless Fears", where anxiety surfaces before it takes a coherent symbolic shape:

Brutus Jones: *What's that? Who's dar? What's you? Git away from me befo' I shoots yo' up!* (O'Neill 39)

These shapeless and unnamed fears mark the earliest stage of repressed affect pushing toward consciousness. A more defined layer appears in the slave-auction hallucination, where Jones confronts a racial past he has tried to outdistance through the role of emperor:

Brutus Jones: *Is this an auction? Is yo' sellin' me like dey uster befo' de war?* (O'Neill 50–51)

Here, O'Neill reveals an ancestral repression that Jones's constructed authority cannot contain. The chain-gang scene extends this process, returning Jones to the memory of the punishment associated with his crime. His contradictory responses—submission and aggression—expose the fragmenting effects of repression:

Brutus Jones: *Yes, suh! Yes, suh! I'se comin'!* (O'Neill 46) Brutus Jones: *I kills you, you white debil… I kill you agin!* (O'Neill 47)

By the final ritual scenes, the cumulative force of the repressed completely overtakes Jones. The

tom-tom's accelerating beat reflects the collapse of the psychic structures that once held his identity together, reducing him to a state of primal terror.

Across these episodes, O'Neill shows that Jones's downfall is not primarily the result of external pursuits but of the internal pressures he has long refused to confront. Repression, which is intended to preserve the self, becomes the mechanism of its undoing. The forest exposes what Jones has buried—crime, racial trauma, guilt, fear—and the return of this material leaves him defenceless before the truth he can no longer keep unconscious.

Denial: The Fabrication of Power

Denial operates at the surface of Brutus Jones's personality, shaping the confident façade he adopts as he enters the forest. Freud characterizes denial as the ego's refusal to acknowledge an external reality that threatens its stability (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 48). Jones repeatedly rejects evidence of danger, relying on exaggerated assertions of authority to maintain a sense of control. As Virginia Floyd notes, O'Neill's protagonists "cling to self-created myths of mastery when reality no longer supports them" (Floyd 102). Jones embodies this pattern from the moment he flees the palace.

His first act of denial appears when Smithers warns him of the islanders' uprising and the ominous tom-tom. Jones dismisses the threat with forced bravado:

Brutus Jones: *Cer'mony? Let 'em! Dey'll sho' need it!* (O'Neill 25)

The defiant tone masks a refusal to recognize the seriousness of the situation. Once in the forest, denial becomes more explicit as Jones is confronted by unfamiliar noises and rising fear. He insists on invulnerability even when his voice betrays uncertainty:

Brutus Jones: *Who dar? ... I ain't skeered o' you!* (O'Neill 33)

Freud observes that denial often reveals the very fear it attempts to suppress through the language of negation (Freud 49). Jones's statement "I ain't skeered" thus functions less as a declaration of confidence than as an unintentional acknowledgment of mounting terror.

As Jones proceeds deeper into the forest, he leans heavily on symbols—particularly the silver bullet—to reinforce his imagined superiority. His earlier boast encapsulates the defensive fantasy on which he relies:

Brutus Jones: *I ain't skeered of no man! I'se de Emperor!* (O'Neill 14)

The title "Emperor" becomes a psychological shield, a role through which he denies vulnerability. Yet this self-fashioned identity disintegrates as the hallucinations intensify. When confronted with the formless fears, Jones reacts with bravado rather than recognition of internal panic:

Brutus Jones: *Git away from me befo' I shoots yo' up!* (O'Neill 39)

Here, denial takes the form of aggression, an attempt to project fear outward rather than admit it inwardly. But this mechanism cannot sustain him. When the illusions become overwhelming, denial collapses altogether. In a moment of stark clarity, Jones's defensive façade breaks:

Brutus Jones: *Oh Lawd, save me! I done wrong!* (O'Neill 43)

This shift from bravado to supplication reveals the failure of denial as a protective strategy. Jones can no longer maintain the illusions of power that once defined him. The forest strips away his constructed authority, forcing him to confront a vulnerability he has long denied.

Ultimately, denial functions less as a shield than as a trap. By refusing to acknowledge danger and fear, Jones blinds himself to the psychological forces closing in on him. O'Neill uses this mechanism to underscore the fragility of identities built on illusion; when reality intrudes, the defensive structure collapses, leaving the self-exposed and unprotected.

Projection and the Construction of External Enemies

Projection constitutes the third major psychological defence shaping Jones's collapse, transforming his inner anxieties into external threats that he can confront. Freud explains projection as the mechanism through which the ego "locates within the outside world impulses and fears that originate within itself" (*The Ego and the Id* 31). O'Neill dramatises this process by allowing Jones's unacknowledged guilt, fear, and rage to materialise in the forest as the

enemies he believes are pursuing him. As Stephen A. Black notes, O'Neill's characters often "invent the dangers they dread, giving form to emotions they cannot bear internally" (Black 69). Jones's imagined persecutors are thus displaced expressions of his own psychic turmoil.

Projection begins subtly when Jones hears indistinct sounds in the jungle and immediately interprets them as a hostile presence:

Brutus Jones: *What's dat odder queer clicketty sound I heah? Fo' God sake, sound like some nigger was shakin' crap!* (O'Neill 35)

Rather than admitting fear, he attributes the threat to the environment, turning vague noises into imagined adversaries. This displacement intensifies in the Jeff scene, where guilt is externalised as an attacker. Although Jeff remains silent and motionless, Jones treats him as an active threat:

Brutus Jones: *Ain't you gwine—look up—can't you speak to me? Is you—is you—a ha'nt?* (O'Neill 41)

Jones cannot confront the memory of the murder internally; instead, he casts the unresolved guilt outwards and battles it as an external force. This is the clearest projection: inner conflict is converted into a persecuting presence.

A similar dynamic unfolds in convict-gang hallucinations. The appearance of the guards and prisoners symbolises Jones's internalised fear of punishment, yet he experiences it as an external coercion:

Brutus Jones: *Yes, suh! Yes, suh! I'se comin'!* (O'Neill 46)

Moments later, the same fear is displaced as aggression:

Brutus Jones: *I kills you, you white debil… I kill you agin!* (O'Neill 47)

The rapid shift from submission to violence reveals the projection's instability—Jones fights not an external oppressor but the contradictory impulses within himself.

The slave auction vision further demonstrates this mechanism. What is essentially historical memory becomes, in Jones's mind, an immediate threat.

Brutus Jones: *Is dis a auction? Is yo' sellin' me like dey uster befo' de war?* (O'Neill 50–51)

This hallucination externalises the racial trauma Jones seeks to escape, transforming collective memory into a present assault. As Travis Bogard argues, O'Neill uses the stage to "project the psyche outwards, making internal crisis appear as visible action" (Bogard 120).

In the later scenes, projection overwhelms Jones's ability to distinguish between the inner and outer worlds. The accelerating tom-tom, shadows in the forest, and emerging visions all reflect the collapse of the boundary that once separated fear from perceptions. By projecting his own psychological fragmentation onto the environment, Jones creates enemies where none exist, ensuring that he is ultimately destroyed by the forces he has displaced.

In O'Neill's portrayal, projection becomes both Jones's defense and his undoing. By attributing anxiety to the world outside himself, he avoids acknowledging the psychological origins of his terror; yet this very displacement propels him toward the collapse of the self. The tragedy emerges not from external persecution but from the destructive power of fears Jones can no longer contain internally.

The Collapse of the Defended Self

Taken together, repression, denial, and projection form the psychological structure that sustains Brutus Jones's identity, and their sequential failure shapes the tragic arc of *The Emperor Jones*. Freud notes that the ego remains coherent only as long as its defences can contain the pressures of guilt, fear, and desire; when these defences erode, "the repressed returns with a force the ego can no longer master" (*The Ego and the Id* 41). O'Neill dramatises this collapse by placing Jones in a space where the mind's protective barriers disintegrate, allowing buried material to surface with increasing intensity.

Repression fails first, releasing personal and ancestral memories that Jones has long attempted to exclude from his consciousness. The appearance of Jeff, the chain gang, and the slave auction stages guilt, punishment, and racial history are not distant recollections but immediate confrontations. Denial, which initially sustains Jones's bravado, falters as he encounters experiences that cannot be dismissed through speech or posturing. His repeated claims of fearlessness—*"I ain't skeered o' you!"*—give way to the admission of helplessness. Projection, the final

defence against collapse, externalises the conflict that erupts from within; as the visions intensify, Jones loses the ability to distinguish between internal fear and external threat, turning his psychological turmoil into perceived pursuit.

By the end of the play, the cumulative breakdown of these mechanisms leaves Jones without the protective structure that once held his identity. The accelerating tom-tom embodies this dissolution: a rhythmic representation of rising anxiety that overwhelms the fragile self-constructions he has relied upon. Thus, O' Neill presents a tragedy rooted not in external forces but in the disintegration of the inner world. Jones's death marks the moment when the mind's defences are exhausted, revealing a self undone by the very mechanisms meant to preserve it.

Brutus Jones as a Modern Tragic Hero

Brutus Jones emerges as a distinctly modern tragic hero because his downfall arises not from fate or external forces but from the collapse of the psychological structures that sustain his identity. O'Neill departs from the classical model of tragedy by locating the source of the catastrophe within the protagonist's inner life. Jones is not destroyed by the islanders' rebellion; he is undone by the failure of repression, denial, and projection—the very mechanisms through which he has fashioned his authority and his sense of self. Therefore, his tragedy reflects the modern shift from external causation to internal disintegration.

Jones possesses qualities traditionally associated with the tragic protagonist: force of will, charismatic presence, and extraordinary capacity for self-fashioning. His ascent from convict to emperor demonstrates his ambition and resourcefulness, traits that lend him a stature comparable to classical heroes. However, these same qualities contain the seeds of his downfall. His self-created identity hardens into delusion; his belief in his invulnerability blinds him to danger; and the silver bullet he carries as a symbol of superiority becomes a reminder of the fantasy on which his authority depends. As Travis Bogard notes, Jones's tragedy lies in "a will that drives him forward even as it leads him into the darker regions of his own mind" (Bogard 121).

The moment of recognition that marks many tragic figures appears for Jones not as philosophical insight but as psychological exposure to the truth. Stripped of his illusions and confronted with the return of repressed memories, he experiences a brief but profound awareness of his vulnerability—*"Oh Lawd, save me! I done wrong!"* (O'Neill 43). This admission, emerging only after his defences have collapsed, reveals the capacity for self-knowledge that underscores his tragic status.

Thus, O' Neill redefined the tragic hero for the modern stage. Jones's fall is not caused by a flaw imposed by destiny but by the instability of a self-constructed through denial and illusion. His journey through the forest symbolically strips away the protective layers that hold his identity together. Ultimately, Jones's tragedy lies in his confrontation with the truths he has tried to evade: guilt, fear, and the fragility of the persona he created. O'Neill's portrayal demonstrates that in modern tragedy, the most formidable adversary is often the self, and the hero's downfall emerges from the collapse of the psychological defences meant to preserve him.

Conclusion

In *The Emperor Jones* (1920), Eugene O'Neill shifts the tragedy from the realm of external forces to the interior landscape of the mind. Brutus Jones falls not because fate turns against him but because the psychic structures he builds for protection eventually give way. Repression buries his guilt until it returns as terror, denial sustains his imperial illusion until it collapses, and projection turns his inner fear into an external threat. What once guarded him becomes the very force that destroys him, marking his journey through the forest as a descent into the unconscious rather than as a physical escape.

This study confirms that O'Neill departs from the classical notions of hamartia and recasts tragedy as a psychological breakdown. Jones is neither a victim of destiny nor divine punishment; he is a man undone by the return of the repressed and the failure of his own defences. Freud's reminder that "the ego is not master in its own house" becomes the governing truth of O'Neill's play, where the unconscious emerges as the true antagonist of the self.

By bringing Freudian theory into dramatic form, O'Neill gives modern tragedy a new vocabulary

shaped by inner conflict rather than external doom. The originality of this research lies in tracing Jones's breakdown as a structured failure of defence mechanisms, revealing *The Emperor Jones* as a model of modern psychological tragedy where the mind becomes both the battlefield and the ruin.

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