

## An Analysis of Nature as an Actant in The Emperor Jones

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**Abstract:** *This article examines The Emperor Jones from an ecocritical reading through presenting distinctive human-nonhuman interactions. Nonhuman materials are used as the prominent setting atmosphere in the play and they have direct effects on the characters and the plot. This article attempts to propose the significance of nature as one of the nonhuman materials in the play. In fact nature does not only constitute the setting of the play, but it also stands as a dominant characteristic feature especially when significant interactions occur between character(s) and place. This dominant effect of nature is analyzed on the basis of A. J. Greimas' actant model. This article tries to portray the mutual effects between human and non-human interactions in the play by taking an earth-centered approach to the text and critiquing the anthropocentric point of view about nature and human beings. Thus, the voice of nature and the perceptions of the voice by human beings are reflected in the paper by making use of Greimas' structuralist theory.*

**Key Words:** *Ecocriticism, Eco-Theater, nature, actant.*

### İmparator Jones Adlı Oyunda Doğanın Bir Eyleyen Olarak İncelenmesi

**Özet:** *Bu makale İmparator Jones adlı oyunu ayırt edici insan-insan dışı etkileşimleri sunarak ekoeleştirel bir okumayla inceler. Oyunda insan dışı materyaller önemli zaman-mekân ortamın olarak kullanılmaktadır ve bu materyallerin karakterler ve olay örgüsü üzerinde direkt etkileri vardır. Bu makale doğanın insan dışı bir materyal olarak oyundaki önemini ileri sürmeye çalışır. Aslında doğa oyunun sadece zaman ve mekânını oluşturmaz ayrıca, oyunun egemen karakteristiklerinden biri olarak özellikle de karakterler ve yer arasındaki etkileşimlerin meydana geldiği sırada karşımıza çıkar. Doğanın bu egemen etkisi A. J. Greimas'ın eyleyensel örmekçesine dayanılarak incelenecektir. Oyundaki insan ve insan dışı varlıklar arasındaki etkileşimin karşılıklı etkileri yeryüzü merkezli yaklaşımın metne uygulanmasıyla ortaya konulmaya çalışılır ve aynı zamanda insan merkezli görüşün doğa ve insanlar hakkındaki bakış açısı eleştirilecektir. Böylece, doğanın sesi ve bu sesin insanlar tarafından algulanışı, Greimas'ın yapısalcı teorisinin uygulanışı ile çalışmada yansıtılmaya çalışılır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Ekoeleştiri, Eko-Tiyatro, Doğa, Eyleyen.*

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The Emperor Jones by Eugene O'Neill can be examined from an ecocritical reading through exploring distinctive human-nonhuman interactions. Nonhuman materials are used as the prominent atmosphere in the play, and they have direct effects on the characters and the plot. Moreover, nature becomes a significant character in the play. The significance of nature as one of the nonhuman materials in the play is worth considering. Thus, the voice of nature and the perceptions of the voice by human beings can be analyzed in the play by making use of Greimas' structuralist theory.

The actantial model, developed by A.J. Greimas, can be used in the play in order to examine the mutual effects between human and nonhuman interactions. There are six actants and three axes in this model. Greimas notes that "an actant can be thought of as that which accomplishes or undergoes an act, independently of all other determinations" (Greimas and Courtes, 1982:5). It is inferred that an actant does not have to correspond to an anthropomorphic being; it may be any being or thing: such as a concrete, abstract, animate, inanimate element or a concept. Greimas argues that "actants are beings or things that participate in processes in any form whatsoever" (5). According to the explanations mentioned above, it can be claimed that nature can be asserted as actants. The six actants which are subject, object, helper, opponent, sender, and receiver can be grouped into three oppositions according to forms of three axes:

The axis of desire has a subject-object opposition,

The axis of power has a helper-opponent opposition,

The axis of knowledge has a sender-receiver opposition. Thus, the significance of nature which has the dominant effect in the play can be portrayed through changing actantial roles of nature.

The use of nature as a performative element is one of the basic characteristics of eco-theater. Sarah Standing asserts that "the intersection of the theatre and ecology (eco-theatre) is a new subgenre of theatre and performance studies" (Standing, 2008: iv). Theatre is also accepted in the frame of ecocritical studies. Theresa Joette May in her Ph.D thesis asserts that "theatre's responses to ecological issues are often hidden, in some way disguised, and as yet un-named. Finding those responses depends not only on where we look, but how. Ecocriticism provides useful set of tools to name those responses, in their variety and ambiguity. Under an ecocritical lens, what was not visible can be revealed; what has not been named can be identified" (May, 2000:308). It is possible to argue that an ecocritical analysis of theatre may be beneficial in order to understand the responses of theatre to ecological issues. One of the main responses is that "[eco-theatre] does not represent nature, as so many other art forms inescapably must do. Rather, it allows nature, the 'ultimate other,' to represent itself" (Standing, 2008:5). It may be argued that theatre provides a new vision for ecocritical thinking through discussing the issue of representation. Eco-theatre simply allows nature to represent itself. Thus, eco-theatre differs from the use of nature as a mere backdrop and uses nature as a performative element--inserting nature, as "the real" into the production. (5) Nature itself can be regarded as one of the effective characters in plays.

The Emperor Jones by Eugene O'Neill is an example of ecotheatre. It allows nature to represent itself so that nature becomes a character in the play. "The mise-en-scene itself becomes a character, the forest trees closing around Jones, expressions of the terror that suffocates and immobilizes him" (Bigsby, 1989:55). Nature is not just a mere backdrop and it is not just an arena for the actor but it is an active and effective actant (s) in the play. Robert F. Whitman's argument on this subject supports the idea that nature is an active part of the text. According to Whitman, one part of nature, "Great Forest in which Jones loses himself to find himself is not just a place where something happens to Jones. It is part of what happens to him a primeval, elemental force which literally and figuratively strips him of the superficialities of civilization" (Whitman, 1964:149). In order to explain the relationships between nonhumans, especially nature, and humans and the use of nature as one of the dominant characters of the play, it is useful to examine the actantial model developed by Greimas. Nature can play almost all the roles of the six actants in the play according to the character Jones's point of view which shows differences during his so-called voyage from civilization to primitivism.

Jones, who has the genes of his African ancestry that are in harmony with nature, escapes from America to White Indies by leaving two murders behind. The city life and the thoughts of civilized American people have made him a modern man who relies on wisdom and adopts capitalism and Christianity. Jones, equipped with technology, changes his social position from a stowaway to an Emperor. "If dey's one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca's listenin' to de white quality talk, its dat same fact[the doctrine of materialism and capitalism]. And When I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor I two years" (O'Neill, 1972:11). Jones succeeds by abusing the natives' belief in superstitions and through using his mind which has been mainly filled with the thoughts of modernity. At the beginning of the play Jones is depicted as:

He is a tall, powerfully-built, full blooded Negro of middle age. His features are typically negroid, yet there is something decidedly distinctive about his face-an underlying strength of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in himself that inspires respect. His eyes are alive with a keen, cunning intelligence. In manner he is shrewd, suspicious, and evasive. He wears a light blue uniform coat, sprayed with brass buttons, heavy gold chevrons on his shoulders, gold braid on the collar, cuffs, etc. His pants are bright red with a light blue stripe down the side. Patent-leather laced boots with brass spurs and a belt with a long-barreled, pearl-handed revolver in a holster complete his make up. Yet there is something not altogether ridiculous about his grandeur. He has a way of carrying it off (9).

Jones has two kinds of personality: one is civilized and the other is primitive (I use this term in the sense of far from the thoughts of capitalism and modernity). This complex personality of Jones, in other words his changeable behavior, is a significant agent for his

relationship to nature. Whitman notes that “this [The Emperor Jones] is not a play about fear; panic is simply the ‘acid test’ which reduces Jones to his essential nature as Man. Nor is Jones’s race important; it is simply that, in the Negro, man’s journey from savagery to ‘civilization’ has been tremendously foreshortened” (Whitman, 1964:149). Therefore, Jones’ story is simply a universal story, it is our journey, and the human being can see its variable relationships with nature in all history by reading The Emperor Jones.

When the play begins, the natives have realized the exploitations of Jones, so there is already an uprising in the island. In this part Jones prepares an escape through the great forest to French Gunboat. Nature acts the receiver actant in this condition.

Sender	Object	Receiver
Natives/uprising	Jones	Nature

To Jones nature is his friend and will help him in his retreat from the island. “Trees an’ me, we’s friends, and dar’s a full moon comin’ bring me light” (O’Neill, 1972: 21). And Jones also argues that he knows the forest very well. “I’s gone out in dat big forest, pretending to hunt, so many times dat I knows it high an’ low like a book. I could go through on dem trails wid my eyes shut” (19). It can be suggested that Jones thinks that he lives in harmony with nature as a primitive man so there is nothing wrong with nature and nature can help him. Therefore, Jones says “I’ll be ’cross de plain to de edge of de forest by time dark comes. Once in de woods in de night, they got a swell chance o’ findin’ dis baby! Down tomorrow I’ll be out at de oder side an de coast whar dat French Gunboat is stayin’” (19).

Subject	Helper
Jones	Nature

Nature acts the helper actant in this situation. Nature is a kind of shelter for Jones. As soon as he gets in the forest he would feel that he is safe, and nature facilitates his escape.

Even though this escape into nature benefits Jones, he still has problems because he forgets that he is now not pure primitive man living in harmony with nature. He has been under the effects of the doctrines of religion, capitalism, and civilization. Therefore, he cannot find what he expects in nature, so troubles begin for him, and nature acts as the opponent actant. First of all, Jones begins to doubt his idea that he knows the forest as well as the back of his hand. When Jones is in the forest, he says that “Gorry, is I in de right place or isn’t I?...*(While he is talking he scrambles from one stone to another, turning them over in frantic haste. Finally, he jumps to his feet excitedly.)* Is I lost de place? Must have! But how dat happen when I was followin’ de trail across de plain in broad daylight?” (27). Jones has not realized that he has been alienated from nature by choosing a lifestyle which ignores nature and puts the human being is the center of the universe. Therefore, nature has been forced to act as an opponent of human beings.

Nine o'clock. In the forest. The moon has just risen. It beams, drifting through the canopy of leaves, makes a barely perceptible, suffused, eerie glow. A dense low wall of underbrush and creepers is in the nearer foreground, fencing in a small triangular clearing. Beyond this is the massed blackness of the forest like an encompassing barrier. A path is dimly discerned leading down to the clearing from left, rear, and winding away from it again toward the right (30).

Subject	Opponent
Jones	Nature

In this part of the play, nature becomes a barrier; it is a kind of opponent that does not let Jones pass the inside the forest which can take him to the other side of the island. Moreover, nature forces Jones to face the possible terrors that come out of his mind.

Eleven o'clock. In the forest. A wide dirt road runs diagonally from right, front, to left, rear. Rising sheer on both sides the forest walls it in. The moon is now up. Under its light the road glimmers ghastly and unreal. It is as if the forest had stood aside momentarily to let the road pass through and accomplish its veiled purpose. This done, the forest will fold in upon itself again and the road will be no more (33).

Sender	Subject	Object	Receiver
Nature	Jones	to meet the terrors	Jones

In this case nature acts to orient Jones to feel his own conscious. In this part of the play "the forest closes around the protagonist, driving him back to meet the terrors of his own mind" (Bigsby, 1989:63).

When the play wears on, the treatment of nature by Jones also shows differences. As mentioned before, when the play begins Jones thinks that nature is his friend and a means for his success, but then Jones tries to make nature an object by again using the doctrines that he has learned from the white people in New York. One of the doctrines is religion. Religion, especially anthropocentric forms of religion, makes nature inanimate. Moreover, religion strengthens the idea that nature must be in the service of the human being who is the king of the universe.

Does yo' s'pect I'se silly enuff to b'lieve in ghosts an' ha'ants an' all dat ole woman's talk? G'long, white man! You ain't talkin' to me. [With a chuckle] Doesn't you know dey's got to do wid a man was member in good standin' o' de Baptist Church? Sho' I was dat when I was porter on de Pullmans, befo' I gits into my little trouble. Let them try deir heathen tricks. De Baptist Church done perfect me and land them all in hell (O'Neill, 1972:21,22).

Sender	Subject	Object
Religion	Jones	to make nature an object

In this sense, Lynn White advocates that:

“In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or damned a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (Glotfelty, 1996: xxvii).

Therefore, religion, in this context Christianity, has given way to the transformation of nature from a kind of ontological being into a kind of object which is open to the exploitation of the human being.

One of the others doctrines that makes nature an object is technology. Technology, like religion, provides the human advantages over nature and over possible creatures existing in nature. Therefore, Jones gets confidence and feels safe when he meets the formless creatures by making use of the products of technology. He overcomes his fear by using his gun against these creatures.

What’s dat? Who’s dar? What is you? Git away from me befo’ I shoots you up! You don’t?-(He fires. There is a flash, a loud report, then silence broken only by the far-off, quickened throb of tom-tom. The formless creatures have scurried back into the forest. Jones remains fixed in his position, listening intently. The sound of the shot, the reassuring feel of the revolver in his hand, have somewhat restored his shaken nerve. He addresses himself with renewed confidence.) Dey’re gone. Dat shot fix ‘em. Dey was only little animals-little wild pigs, I reckon (O’Neill, 1972:29).

Sender	Subject	Object
Technology	Jones	Nature

With the rising of scientific inquiry during modernity, science and technology have been used to reveal the secrets of nature in order to gain advantages over nature. Harold Fromm asserts that technology has created the false illusion that we control nature, allowing us to forget that our “unconquerable minds” are vitally dependent upon natural support systems (Glotfelty, 1996:xxvii). As a human being believes that he has the capacity to produce technology for the benefit of human beings, he or she also believes that he or she can overcome every problem which disturbs him or her by creating solutions out of his or her mind.

As the play develops, Jones begins to strip away the burden of civilization and comes close to his primitive side when he is alone with nature. When there is no need for civilization, capitalism to survive, he needs to be in harmony with nature in order to go on his way. Thus, there is no use of technology in this situation; moreover, it creates difficulty for Jones.

I'm meltin' wid heat! Runnin' an' runnin'! Damn dis heah coat! Like a strait jacket! (He tears off his coat and flings it away from him...Den! Dat's better! Now I kin breathe!...Oh my po' feet! Dem shoes ain't no use no more 'ceptin' to hurt. I'se better off widout dem. (He unlaces them and pulls them off-holds the wrecks of the shoes in his hands and regards them mournfully.) You was real, A-one patin' leather, too. Look at you now. Emperor, you'se gittin' mighty low! (O'Neill, 1972:33-34).

Sender	Subject	Object
Nature	Jones	the uselessness of technology

In this situation technology has no advantage over nature. In order to survive, Jones has no chance to determine the rules. There is no need for superiority. Jones needs to get on well with nature as he has before.

Jones realizes that in nature he is no more majesty. He is and must be a primitive man. Jones says that“(wearily) How long r been makin' tracks in dese woods? Must be hours an' hours. Seems like fo'evah! Yit can't be, when de moon's jes'riz. Dis am a long night fo' yo', yo' Majesty! (with a mournful chuckle) Majesty! Der ain't much majesty 'bout dis baby now” (31). In this context, nature begins to help Jones, who has pure thoughts in his mind, again.

Jones remembers God, and he can now listen to his conscience. He faces reality and has little hope for his real success. In a capitalistic society he must believe what the profits require. As Jones mentions, “If I finds out dem niggers believes dat black is white, then I yells it out louder 'n deir loudest. It don't git me nothin' to do missionary work for de Baptist Church. I'se after de coin, an' I lays my Jesus on de shelf for de time hem” (22). But nature reminds Jones of Jesus again by providing him opportunities for spiritual and physical salvation.

Oh Lawd, Lawd! Oh Lawd, Lawd! (Suddenly he throws himself on his knees and raises his clasped hands to the sky-in a voice of agonized pleading.) Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer! I'se a po' sinner, a po' sinner! I knows I done wrong, I knows it! When I catches Jeff cheatin' wid loaded dice my anger overcomes me and I kills him dead! Lawd, I done wrong! When dat guard hits me wid de whip, my anger overcomes me, and I kills him dead. Lawd, I done wrong! And down heah whar dese fool bush niggers raises me up to the seat o' de mighty, I steals all I could grab. Lawd, I done wrong! I knows it! I'se sorry! Forgive me, Lawd! Forgive dis po' sinner!” (39).

Sender/Helper	Subject	Object
Nature	Jones	Salvation

Nature presents the chance of salvation for the primitive Jones. Nature helps him to find a suitable way of life in order to solve his physical and psychological problems. And Jones has accepted this kind of salvation until he remembers the charming power of technology. He refuses nature's offer and determines his own end.

Sender	Subject	Object	Receiver
Technology	Jones	Death	Nature

Jones is dead, but nature is still alive. The play depicts, in essence, changing relationships that occur between human and nonhuman. Nature has significant effects on the human being as well as the human being on nature. The dominant and determiner effects are the human being's thoughts and his perceptions of voices of nature. In a sense, Jones like Yank is "a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal, and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way"(Whitman, 1964:652).

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