

# A Critical Study of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Yama Chao* from the Perspective of Expressionism

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**Abstract:** *Expressionism is an important genre of modernism that comes arise at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe. It is a philosophical movement due to the modern industrialization, urbanization, social transformation and the World War which brought the shock to traditional culture and humanity from late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Western society. Expressionism generally includes the activities and creations of art, literature, drama, philosophy, architecture that fit the new culture, economic, society, politic of modern industrialize world. In China, after the New Cultural Movement in 1915, the trend of expressionism dramas in Western drama plays was adopted by Chinese drama writers and brought a short period of wave. This article mainly focuses on a comparative study of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Yama Chao* from the perspective of expressionism to show the core differences between two dramas.*

**Keywords:** *Expressionism, Eugene O'Neill, The Emperor Jones, Hong Shen, The Yama Chao.*

## 1. Introduction

*The Emperor Jones* is a representative work of American dramatist Eugene O'Neill. It is the first American expressionist drama, also the first popular play about blacks in the mainstream American theater. The plot of the drama is about an American black man, Brutus Jones, a former Pullman porter, who was sent to prison because of killing his colleague in a dice game. Once again, he killed the jailer and escaped from the prison to an unknown Caribbean Island. With help from Cockney adventurer Henry Smithers, Jones persuades the original inhabitants that he is a magician, and they crown him emperor. He abuses and exploits his subjects and boasts of his power, insisting that only a silver bullet can kill him. Advised that an uprising is in the offing, Jones flees into the jungle. In the jungle, Jones found that the food he did under the stone has gone and his hallucination turned his terror into images of maggot. He fired his first shot in this scene. Later, the phantom of Jeff and the louder drum increased his terror when he fired his second shot. With his terror and hallucination gradually divested all his desire and repentance, Jones fired all his bullets in the process and his soul was finally extracted. In the final scene, the rebels find Jones and shoot him. Smithers, however, suggests that Jones's own fears had already killed him.

*The Yama Chao* is a drama created by Hong Shen in 1922. It was first produced in Shanghai in 1923. The play was well received, together brought fame and established reputation to him. *The Yama Chao* tells a tragic story of a bodyguard to a battalion commander named Zhao Da during Warlord Era. The commander hadn't paid the whole battalion for five months. A veteran, Lao Li told him that the commander pocketed soldiers' pay and squandered by his own will. Zhao opened the case after the commander's left and found the whole battalion's pay. Then he realized that Li was telling the truth. Zhao stole the pay in hesitation and decided to flee away when he bumped into the commander and shot the commander in a hurry. He ran towards the jungle when the beating of drums and voice of flute came from the faraway, so he ran into the jungle. In the jungle, squirrels and the commander brought him fear. The hallucinations of the past came to his eyes. Ghosts of those injured soldiers buried alive came out. He saw the Wang Gouzi, the one he betrayed and

shot by the General. His mind was disturbed. He saw the tragic image of his family persecuted and broken by Western kirk. He shot to these hallucinations until out of ammo. The injured commander dispatched a group of soldiers leading by the escorted Li into the jungle and found Zhao. In the end, Li buried Zhao after pursuers returned and retrieves the money hidden around Zhao's waist and fled away.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Emperor Jones* reflects the racial discrimination of that period and reveals the struggling and dilemma of African Americans in a white-dominant society. According to James Robinson, critiques about this drama has changed due to the development of society and literary theory. When the drama first came out, most of critiques showed their respects to O'Neill's psychological descriptions and his techniques of expression, while some of them made critics to O'Neill of providing the protagonist Jones a stereotype images of African Americans. With the progress of society and literary theory, critiques turned their attention from the perspective of race, gender and even post-colonized. In Western academic circles, critical interest in Eugene O'Neill has long grown and includes almost all of his works. His brilliant themes and clever, innovative theatrical installations captivated his critics. His research focuses on its expressionist features, comparative research and ethno-oriented studies. Expressionism and external influences on its work have been widely studied. In terms of the fundamental elements of expressionism, Manuel (2005) embodied African American artistic expression in *The Emperor Jones*. Zhang Wenqian in his article "Representation of Trauma in *The Emperor Jones*" writes: Expressionism and external influence of his plays are widely investigated, as exemplified by Clara Blackburn's paper which studies the continental influences on O'Neill's expressionistic dramas particularly the impact from Strindberg who is considered to be the father of expressionism in drama because "he dared to project his own soul, his inner self, on the stage." (111)

As for *the Yama Chao*, there are few researches for this play from the perspective of literary theory. Many researchers concentrate on the drama techniques the use of expressionism. But many researchers put their focused on from the

perspective of comparative studies. There is a controversy of plagiarism about *The Yama Chao* and *The Emperor Jones* as “it has borrowed from its American prototype the money motif, the structure of plot, the scene division, and the psychological treatment of hallucinations in a forest setting” (Chen 431). Because Hong and O’Neill, the writer of *The Emperor Jones* are both students of Professor George Baker, they are sharing almost the same knowledge taught by Baker. In fact, in China, after the New Cultural Movement in 1915, the trend of expressionism dramas in Western drama plays was adopted by Chinese drama writers and brought a short period of wave. such as *Pan Jinlian* by Ouyang Yuqian, adopted from the aestheticism drama of Oscar Wilde; *The Reborn of Goddess* by Guo Moruo, adopted from the symbolism drama of Maurice Maeterlinck and Leonid Andreyev; *The Yama Chao* by Hong Shen, adopted from the expressionism of Eugene O’Neill; and many other dramas etc.

### 3. Analysis of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Yama Chao* from Expressionism

Expressionism, as a genre of modernism, reflecting one of the important characteristics of modernism that rejects the tradition from The Enlightenment, “rejects the ideology of realism and make use of the works of the past by the employment of reprise, incorporation, rewriting, recapitulation, revision and parody” (Childs 17). Through the use of exaggeration, distortion, and symbolic techniques, expressionism reveal the inner world and emotional conflicts with intensive subjectivity and social critique. It breaks the traditional artistic form and pursues more direct and powerful emotional expression. Expressionism seeks the prominence of inner essence by breaking the surface of things. As one of the literary forms of expressionism, expressionist drama is a new theatrical genre born out of the deep dissatisfaction of a segment of left-wing bourgeois intellectuals with capitalist reality, and their desire to spiritually express this sentiment. They aimed to move beyond the imitation of human actions and speech to express the “soul within,” and to discard individuality in favor of portraying the primitive “eternal qualities” of humanity. In expressionist plays, playwrights borrowed various symbolic techniques from symbolist drama by using subjective expression methods such as internal monologues, visualizations of illusions, and the concretization of dreams to achieve their aims.

#### 3.1 Analysis of *The Emperor Jones* from Expressionism

*The Emperor Jones* set a typical model for upcoming expressionist drama, from the structure design to the stage design, and from narrative techniques to performance techniques. The drama made by these creative techniques can bring an intuitional experience to audience to enjoy the characteristics of expressionism.

As for the structure design, *the Emperor Jones* sets eight scenes in total. The first and the last scene are realistic scenes that echo each other. The rest scenes develop with the backward from the character’s present to the past, and from the character’s past to the racial past. The whole structure produced a curve that shapes from prologue, development, climax to the finale.

As for the stage design, it is quite common to put the image of ghost on the stage in expressionist drama. However, O’Neill creatively gives “fear” a concretized image:

“*Small, shapeless fears crawl out from the deep darkness of the woods. These fears are black and formless, with only their glittering little eyes visible. If they had any describable form, they would resemble crawling maggots the size of infants. They move without sound, always slowly and laboriously trying to stand upright, but they always fail and collapse sideways.*”

Except for the moving forest and the giant ugly crocodile, the famous drumming sound brings the “fear” a stereoscopic image. “The drumming is low and trembling, starting at the pace of a normal heartbeat—72 beats per minute—and gradually increasing in speed until the curtain falls, never stopping.” The drumming sound not only serves as the dominant surrounding sound effect to make audiences feel like they were on the island, but also reflects the heartbeat of Jones to let them directly facing the fear and anxiety of the character.

As for narrative techniques, six of eight scenes are filled with real and hallucination Jones fled in the forest and jungle, but his memories and the phantoms he saw were out of the island—from the slave market in America to voodoo ritual in Africa, from the labor camps to ships at sea. O’Neill bravely blends reality and imagination to create an externalized psychological image of Jones that beyond the limits of time and space, allowing the narration guiding by character’s memory and imagination.

As for performance techniques, in most scenes of the play, there is only one character, Jones, so the play mainly focuses on Jones’s action and monologues. Jones transforms from an emperor to a fugitive. He gradually strips off his clothing and repeatedly fires his gun, symbolizing he gradual stripping away of everything that civilization has given him. Jones pours out his inner fears in long monologues and reacts to his surroundings with screams, questions, shouts, and gasps. The psychological pain of being born Black is portrayed vividly and powerfully. All of this performance techniques points to the character’s psychology.

#### 3.2 Analysis of *The Yama Chao* from Expressionism

*The Yama Chao* can be considered as a representative work of expressionism in China Drama history. The most advanced progress brought by Hong is the use of stage. Unlike the Chinese traditional dramas, the use of stages brings a vivid image of Zhao’s mind in visual, but not only in description and narrator and this rejects the ideology of realism. This can give audience a more direct way to participate into the mental world of characters.

Hong cleverly cutting the plot into pieces and mixed them together to make dramatic conflicts and brings the reflection to audiences. He showed a neutral image about Zhao at first. With the plot unfolds, audiences could see the past of Zhao and judge by the story about ghosts of buried soldiers and the one he betrayed that Zhao is an evil bastard. But when the plot came to Zhao’s family, audiences might feel sorry for his

experience and reconsidered Zhao's evaluation. At the end of the play, Zhao's hidden money was taken by Li and then buried. Li took the money and fled away. In fact, the inspiration to create this play is during a train ride to Northern China, Hong heard about some conversation between some soldiers. After the war between Zhang Zuolin and Wu Peifu, Wu won the war and buried Zhang's injured soldiers if they had money with them in order to take possessions of their enemy belongings. This unnerving conversation eventually led Hong to dramatize this incident in *The Yama Chao* and set it as the finale. The finale is a huge ironic to everyone—not only to Zhao, but to audiences as well. Zhao's death has two kinds of meaning: the first is evil leads to evil. The second is a man not evil by nature; he sees himself as a good man; he has done wicked things to all. The society made Zhao a tragic man, the society made a pile of numbing man.

Hong broke the tradition and advanced ideology into pieces and mixed them together, trying to make common people accept new thoughts. But the reaction is not as good as expected. He could disintegrate the traditional drama and re-structure them easily, but he could not disintegrate the traditional opinions in common people's mind as easy as he done in drama. *The Yama Chao* received positive reputation in common people in 1929, six years after its first appearance. It is a leap of modernism in Chinese drama developing. But it a long time to for people to appreciate it. "The play strongly opposed the brutal warfare that plagued China at the time, which is now known as the Warlord Era" (Ye and Zhu 75). From this perspective, *The Yama Chao* could more likely to be seemed as a localization work to bring advanced ideology of western drama to Chinese drama.

#### 4. Suggestion

In *the Yama Chao*, Hong Shen adopts expressionist creative techniques from *The Emperor Jones* to present a localized realist theme, giving the work unique artistic value. However, as Chinese audiences could not accept the giant leap from tradition directly step to modernity; Chinese drama writers could not totally understand the meaning of Western expressionism or modernism either, many of them just put it in a story with Chinese characters and regardless the unfitness between story logic and current society atmosphere. The Chinese expressionist drama only appeared for a short period and drowned in history. But through the absorption, adaptation, and integration of European and American drama, together with the development of society and open-mindedness, Chinese modernist drama ultimately developed into a new form of modern drama, it is the product of the clash and exchange between Chinese and foreign drama.

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