

Twentieth Century American Drama
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Lecture - 03
Eugene O’Neil’s The Emperor Jones – Part 2

(Refer Slide Time: 00:15)



The Emperor Jones

SMITHERS [*Stung but pretending indifference—with a wink*]: That’s part of the day’s work. I gottter—ain’t I—in my business?

JONES [*Contemptuously*]: Yo’ business!

SMITHERS [*Imprudently enraged*]: Gawd blimey, you was glad enough for me ter take yer in on it when you landed here first. You didn’ ave no ’igh and mighty airs in them days!

JONES [*His hand going to his revolver like a flash—menacingly*]: Talk polite, white man! Talk polite, you heah me! I’m boss heah now, is you fergettin’? [*The Cockney seems about to challenge this last statement with the facts but something in the other’s eyes holds and crows him.*]

SMITHERS [*In a cowardly whine*]: No ’arm meant, old top.

JONES [*Condescendingly*]: I accepts yo’ apology. [*Lets his hand fall from his revolver.*] No use’n you rakin’ up ole times. What I was den is one thing. What I is now’s another. You didn’t let me in on yo’ crooked work out o’ no kind feelin’s dat time. I done de dirty work fo’ you—and most o’ de brain work, too, fo’ dat matter—and I was wu’th money to you, dat’s de reason.



So, they are both very contemptuous about each other when they are talking about business here. Smithers reminds Jones, “you was glad enough for me ter take yer on it when you landed here first”. We get to know that Smithers had hired him; he had given Jones an opportunity to work work with him when Jones got to the island first and he also reminds Jones that he did not have an arrogant “airs” about him during the early days. Take a look at Jones’ gesture here: “His hand going to his revolver like a flash—menacingly”. Jones uses threatening language quite generously; he exercises his power quite unscrupulously throughout this play. So, Jones tells Smithers, “Talk polite, white man!”

Jones is threatening him, and he emphasizes the quality of whiteness here to show that it is a completely changed order and Smithers need not be at the mercy of Jones just because he had given the latter an opportunity to get started when he first reached the island. We do not exactly know the details at the moment, but Jones is not contesting Smithers’ claims either.

We realise that perhaps he did offer Jones a job or when he first landed on the island. And for the same reason, Jones is being dismissive and reiterates, “I’m boss heah now, is you fergettin’? *The Cockney seems about to challenge this last statement with the facts, but something in the other’s eyes holds and cows him.*”

If you remember the first description when Smithers was introduced, it said that he is mean and cowardly too, and that got the better of him in most situations and kept him safe too. Perhaps there is something counter that Smithers has to offer, to whatever Jones says, but he does not do that because he is scared of Jones. Jones is the kind of person who would not mind killing off the white man.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:37)

SMITHERS: Well, blimey, I give yer a start, didn't I—when no one else would. I wasn't afraid to 'ire yer like the rest was—'count of the story about your breakin' jail back in the States.

JONES: No, you didn't have no s'cuse to look down on me fo' dat. You been in jail you self more n once.

SMITHERS [*Furio-usly*]: It's a lie! [*Then trying to pass it off by an attempt at scorn.*] Garn! Who told yer that fairy tale?

JONES: Dey's some tings I ain't got to be tole. I kin see 'em in folk's eyes. [*Then after a pause—meditatively.*] Yes, you sho' give me a start. And it didn't take long from dat time to git dese fool, woods' niggers right where I wanted dem. [*With pride.*] From stowaway to Emperor in two years! Dat's goin' some!

SMITHERS [*With curiosity*]: And I bet you got yer pile o' money 'id safe some place.

JONES [*With satisfaction*]: I sho' has! And it's in a foreign bank where no pusson don't ever git it out but me no matter what come. You didn't s'pose I was holdin' down dis Emperor job for de glory in it, did you? Sho'! De fuss and glory part of it, dat's only to turn de heads o' de low—flung, bush niggers dat's here. Dey wants de big circus show for deir money. I gives it to 'em an' I gits de money. [*With a grin.*] De long green, dat's me every time! [*Then rebukingly.*] But you ain't got no kick agin me, Smithers. I'se paid you back all you done for me many times. Ain't I perfected you and winked at all de crooked tradin' you been doin' right out in de broad day? Sho' I has and me makin' laws to stop it at de same time! [*He chuckles.*]



And this is a world where the judicial system is not present there the way we know it. There is no system in place except for superstitious systems and the kind of power that Jones and Smithers together wield over them.

They soon reach a sort of reconciliation, and Jones continues to talk to Smithers in a very condescending manner. “I accepts yo’ apology. No use’n you rakin’ up old times. What I was den is one thing. What I now’s another”. There is certainly a change that has come about in Jones’ life from before, leading to his current status.

“You didn’t let me in on yo’ crooked work o’ no kind feelin’s that time. I done de dirty work fo’ you – and most o’ de brain work, too, fo’ that matter –and I was wu’th money

to you, dat's de reason". So, this is a business. This is a relationship from which both have benefitted. Jones, perhaps, was more vital to Smithers since the latter does not have much of an opportunity to lash out against him.

Both of them have been involved in crooked things, and we get to know that Jones was hired precisely to do the dirty work for the white man. Now, Jones enjoys the supremacy because Smithers does not have a standing otherwise. As the play progresses, we get to know that Smithers does not have much standing back in America either.

Jones is not used to the ways of life at the island, and he is perhaps not even aware of how the socio-political and cultural structure, the hierarchies operate within the system. Smithers reminds again of how he gave Jones a start and how everybody else was afraid to hire him, but he was not.

He gives a slight reminder about why the others were afraid to hire Jones, on account of "the story about your breakin' jail back in the States". This is almost like a growing puzzle; now, we can put few pieces together to reconstruct the past of Jones.

Jones had supposedly escaped the jail back in the states, and then he fled to this island where no one else was willing to hire him, but due to his personal interest, Smithers offered him a job. Jones also says, "You been in jail you'self more n once," and this is something Smithers immediately disagrees with and says furiously, that it was a lie and whoever told that was spinning some fairy tale.

Immediately, Jones offers reconciliation and says that certain things are better not to be told regardless of how things happen. Jones was given a head start by Smithers, but now in two years, the former stowaway had become an emperor. Thus we also get a sense of the number of years that have passed since Jones reached the island.

He was a fugitive, trying to travel in clandestine ways and now he is an emperor, who wields power over the entire island. Now, Smithers also wants to know where the money has been hidden. So, Jones immediately says it is in a foreign bank where no person other than Jones can have access to it.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:35)



[Then rebukingly.] But you ain't got no kick agin me, Smithers. I'se paid you back all you done for me many times. Ain't I pertected you and winked at all de crooked tradin' you been doin' right out in de broad day? Sho' I has and me makin' laws to stop it at de same time! *[He chuckles.]*

SMITHERS *[Grinning:]* But, meanin' no 'arm, you been grabbin' right and left yourself, ain't yer? Look at the taxes you've put on 'em! Blimey! You've squeezed 'em dry!

JONES *[Chuckling:]* No, dey ain't all dry yet. I'se still heah, ain't I?

SMITHERS *[Smiling at his secret thought:]* They're dry right now, you'll find out. *[Chang ing the subject abruptly.]* And as for me breakin' laws, you've broke 'em all yerself just as fast as yer made 'em.

JONES: Ain't I de Emperor? De laws don't go for him. *[Judicially:]* You heah what I tells you, Smithers. Dere's little stealin' like you does, and dere's big stealin' like I does. For de little stealin' dey gits you in jail soon or late.

SCENE ONE 4



And so, Smithers reminds him of the kind of taxes that the money might invite. We find that they are inhabiting multiple worlds here. There is a racial memory which is connecting them and a judicial system from which both of them are fleeing. They belong to different worlds. They are inhabiting, at the moment, in terms of their temporal physical settings a land of superstition.

He is an emperor there, but he is also using the language of modern economy. He is talking about the money which he has put in a foreign bank. These two characters, Jones and Smithers, are occupying multiple worlds, travelling from one to the other with a lot of ease, but things begin to go wrong for them as the play progresses.

At this point, what is more interesting is the kind of modernity that is allowing them to have a little bit of all of these worlds: the very modern world, which has a judiciary system and a banking system, and a world that has not yet encountered modernity, which is still primitive not just in its physical and temporal aspects but also in its belief systems, where the native inhabitants are superstitious enough to believe that the emperor could be killed only with a silver bullet. We will soon come back to discuss this part.

If this is a commentary, they are still talking about the money, and they are also a bit worried about the laws that they have broken. But they also know that within this particular system, they have made laws and broken them as well.

Jones makes this statement: “Ain’t I de Emperor? De laws don’t go for him [Judicially]. You heah what I tells you, Smithers. Dere’s little stealin’ like you does, and dere’s big stealin’ like I does. For de little stealin’ dey gits you in jail soon or late.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:42)



The Emperor Jones

For de big stealin’ dey makes you Emperor and puts you in de Hall o’ Fame when you croaks. *[Reminiscently.]* If dey’s one thing I learns in ten years on de Pullman ca’s listenin’ to de white quality talk, it’s dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years.

SMITHERS *[Unable to repress the genuine admiration of the small fry for the large]:* Yes, yer turned the bleedin’ trick, all right. Blimey, I never seen a bloke ‘as ‘ad de bloomin’ luck you ‘as.

JONES *[Severely]:* Luck? What you mean luck?

SMITHERS: I Suppsee you’ll say as that swank about de silver bullet ain’t luck—and that was what :first got the fool blacks on yer side de time of de revolution, wasn’t it?

JONES *[With a laugh]:* Oh, dat silver bullet! Sho’ was luck! But I makes dat luck, you heah? I loads de dice! Yessuh! When dat murderin’ nigger ole Lem hired to kill me takes aim ten feet away and his gun misses fire and I shoots him dead, what you heah me say?

SMITHERS: You said yer’d got a charm so’s no lead bullet’d kill yer. You was so strong only a silver bullet could kill yer, you told ‘em. Blimey, wasn’t that swank for yer—and plain, fat-headed luck?



For de big stealin’ dey makes you Emperor and puts in de Hall o’ Fame when you croaks. *[Reminiscently.]* If dey’s one thing I learns in ten years on the Pullman ca’s listenin’ to de white quality talk, it’s dat same fact. And when I gits a chance to use it I winds up Emperor in two years”. This is important as we are getting a sense of the timeline here.

He arrived on this island and became the emperor two years ago and before that, we do not yet know the number of years that he had served in jail before he broke out. So, before that, he had spent ten years as a Pullman porter. There is something that he learned there by listening to the white quality talk.

Whatever he is now, he is confessing that it is something that he learned from the white world. The system that he is trying to replicate here is something that he acquired from the white world and one that he very fondly is recollecting as well. So, he says that the moment he got a chance to use that learning he became an emperor in two years.

He has replicated a foolproof system at the island. The learning has been quite foolproof and he also tells a profound thing which is a very stringent critique on the the judicial

system that is prevalent in America and elsewhere about how a little bit of stealing will get you in jail sooner or later.

But, for a huge systematic and an usurping kind of stealing, it will make one an emperor. There is also allusion to the kind of empire that colonialism had built. It is also sort of a subtle way in which the founding of the empire has been critiqued at the wake of in the early 20th century.

It is also the time when a lot of discourses surrounding the new kind of modernity and nation building were gaining momentum, not just in Europe but in different parts of the world. So, here is a subtle critique on the philosophy underlying the formation of the empires and the colonial race for building empires, a race which America was not part of.

So, we do find an outsider's critique here when these notions are being put to test. It is important to note that when Smithers is listening to this, he feels is unable to repress the genuine admiration of the small fry for the large. There is clearly a reversal of the order here.

At so many levels, here is a white man who is unable to locate himself in this world and it is a system where things happen in different ways than it happens in the mainland, because this is a private sort of a creation, where the racial, hierarchical, and economical orders work in a different way, altogether.

Smithers has genuine admiration for Jones, despite all the resentment that he holds against him. They have a brief talk about how Smithers believes that it is all his good luck, and Jones severely dismisses that notion. To Jones, it is not about luck, at all and then they start talking about the silver bullet.

Smithers reminds Jones about how he was saved, how his life was saved because of the the silver bullet, which Smithers sees as luck, but for Jones that was something that he constructed. That is a life saving thing that he made up, and it worked because the others were willing to buy it.

Jones has absolutely no belief in luck; he is a self-made man and he takes great pride in that. He belongs to a system in both sides, whether it is in America or in this current

setting. There is nothing which was organically suited to preserve him. There is nothing in America or at the island which will automatically work to his advantage. He needs to constantly move against the grain, and he needs to constantly reinvent systems, and he needs to fit in ways that is most convenient or advantageous to him.

He is the kind of person who cannot afford to believe in luck but has to believe in the manipulative efforts and the unscrupulous things that he does in order to make himself emperor and stay in power.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:59)



SMITHERS: You said yerd got a cnam so's no lead bullet a kin yer. You was so strong oniy a silver bullet could kill yer, you told 'em. Blimey, wasn't that swank for yer—and plain, fat—eaded luck?

JONES [Proudly]: I got brains and I uses 'em quick. Dat ain't luck.

SMITHERS: Yer know they wasn't 'ardly liable to get no silver bullets. And it was luck 'e didn't 'it you that time.

JONES [Laughing]: And dere all dem fool, bush niggers was kneelin' down and bumpin' deir heads on de ground like I was a miracle out o' de Bible. Oh Lawd, from dat time on I has dem all eatin' out of my hand. I cracks de whip and dey jumps through.

SMITHERS [With a sniff]: Yankee bluff done it.

JONES: Ain't a man's talkin' big what makes him big—long as he makes folks believe it? Sho', I talks large when I bin't got nothin' to hack it up, but I ain't talkin' wild just de same. I knows I kin fool 'em—I knows it—and dat's backin enough fo' my game. And ain't I got to learn deir lingo and teach some of dem English befo' I kin talk to 'em? Ain't dat wuk? You ain't never learned ary word er it, Smithers, in de ten years you been heah, dough yo' knows it's money in yo' pocket tradin' wid 'em if you does. But you'se too shifless to take de trouble.

SMITHERS [Flushing]: Never mind about me. What's this I've heard about yer really 'avin' a silver bullet moulded for yourself?



He elaborates very clear terms, and says, “I got brains and I uses 'em quick. Dat ain't luck. So, there is a clear differentiation here, between luck and the use of brains on which Jones takes great pride on.

There is a brief discussion on how the folks in the island were foolish enough to believe in the story that he created about the silver bullet, that Jones could be killed only with a silver bullet, and this is how he sells the story to him which they believe to.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:37)

backin enough fo' my game. And ain't I got to learn deir lingo and teach some of dem English befo' I kin talk to 'em? Ain't dat wuk? You ain't never learned ary word er it, Smithers, in de ten years you been heah, dough yo' knows it's money in yo' pocket tradin' wid 'em if you does. But you'se too shiftless to take de trouble.

SMITHERS [*Flushing*]: Never mind about me. What's this I've heard about yer really 'avin' a silver bullet moulded for yourself?

JONES: It's playin' out my bluff. I has de silver bullet moulded and I tells 'em when de time comes I kills myself wid it. I tells 'em dat's 'cause I'm de on'y man in de world big enuff to git me. No use'n deir tryin'. And dey falls down and bumps deir heads. [*He laughs.*] I does dat so's I kin take a walk in peace widout no jealous nigger gunnin' at me from behind de trees.

SMITHERS [*Astonished*]: Then you 'ad it made-' onest?

JONES: Sho' did. Heah she be. [*He takes out his revolver, breaks it, and takes the silver bullet out of one chamber.*] Five lead an' dis silver baby at de last. Don't she shine pretty? [*He holds it in his hand, looking at it admiringly, as if strangely fascinajed.*]

SMITHERS: Let me see. [*Reaches out his hand for it*]



“It’s playin’ out my bluff. It has de silver bullet moulded and I tells ’em when de time comes I kills myself wid it. I tells ’em dat’s ’cause I’m de on’y man in de world big enuff to git me. No use’n deir tryin’”. And they are convinced by the logic of that argument because they are already a bit prone to these superstitious beliefs, and he knows the right chord to strike.

And we also realize that Jones becomes handy to Smithers, because Jones in certain ways is an insider. At almost all levels, Smithers is an outsider. He may not fit in any of these worlds that we are introduced to in this play, but Jones becomes an insider in in the same setting and he tells Smithers, “ain’t I got to learn deir lingo and teach some of dem English befo’ I kin talk to ’em?”

He talks about the kind of work that he had to put for Smithers to communicate with them. Jones here acts as a mediator and then grows into an all powerful emperor. We get a sense of time here again. “Smithers, in de ten years you been heah, dough yo’ knows it’s money in yo’ pocket tradin’ wid ’em if you does, but you’se too shiftless to take de trouble”.

So, it is Jones who has put in the effort, has taken the risk and in the last two years, a huge difference has been made despite the long ten years that Smithers had spent there. Smithers must have been one of those people looking for fortune in the world outside of

America and did not quite make it big because he did not know the language. He did not have access to the narrative inside the island, which is being facilitated by Jones.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:34)



SMITHERS: Let me see. *[Reaches out his hand for it]*

SCENE ONE 5

The Emperor Jones

JONES *[Harshly]*: Keep yo' hands whar dey b'long, white man. *[He replaces it in the chamber and puts the revolver back on his hip.]*

SMITHERS *[Snarling]*: Gawd blimey! Think I'm a bleedin' thief, you would.

JONES: No, 'tain't dat. I knows you'se scared to steal from me. On'y I ain't 'lowin' nary body to touch dis baby. She's my rabbit's foot.

SMITHERS *[Sneering]*: A bloomin' charm, wot? *[Venomously.]* Well, you'll need all the bloody charms you 'as before lone. s' 'elo me!



Coming back to the brief discussion on the silver bullet, Jones also had a silver bullet made. It is a metaphorical presence in the play; It is like an almost false security system. Jones takes out his revolver, the silver bullet, and Smithers, in complete fascination, wants to reach out and touch it.

Jones does not let him touch it. “Keep yo’ hands whar dey b’long, white man”. This is the second time in scene one that he is addressing Smithers in a derogatory way, calling him a white man. We find that even the way in which swear words operate here, how derogatorily whiteness is being used here, is again a reversal of the order.

So, just the way in this main world or in the mainland world of America, where they are you know being where the blackness becomes derogatory here. Jones is using whiteness as a derogatory term.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:41)



JONES [*Judicially*]: Oh, I see good for six months yit 'fore dey gits sick o' my game. Den, when I sees trouble comin', I makes my getaway.

SMITHERS: Ho! You got it all planned, ain't yer?

JONES: I ain't no fool. I knows dis Emperor's time is sho't. Dat why I make hay when de sun shine. Was you thinkin' I see aimin' to hold down dis job for life? No, suh! What good is gittin' money if you stays back in dis raggedy country? I 'wants action when I spends. And when I sees dese niggers gittin' up deir nerve to tu'n me out, and I see got all de money in sight, I resigns on de spot and beats it quick.

SMITHERS: Where to?

JONES: None o' yo' business.

SMITHERS: N ot back to the bloody States, I'll lay my oath.

JONES [*Suspiciously*]: Why don't I? [*Then with an easy laugh*.] You mean 'count of dat story 'bout me breakin' from jail back dere? Dat's all talk.

SMITHERS [*Skeptically*]: Ho, yes!



Of course, Smithers takes great offense and here there is also this momentary time, right after this when Jones also realizes that whatever he has and the power that he wields and the system he maintains here is not going to last forever.

He thinks he has another six months before they get to him. This awareness also highlights the human, judicial, and discretionary quality within Jones's consciousness. On the one hand, he is recklessly and irrationally holding power there.

He is manipulating the superstitious beliefs of the natives, but he has, very smartly, invested in a foreign bank. He is also conscious that this is not something which is going to last forever. Here, we can always find the subtext of imperialism, of how the empire worked. We will perhaps talk about a bit later about this critique, when we make some more progress into the play.

Smithers also reminds him that there is no place to which he can go back to; he tells him that cannot go back to the "bloody states," to which Jones asks if it is on account of 'that' story about him escaping jail. It is interesting how he keeps referring to it as a story. He does not want to believe in that, and it is seen as a narrative constructed out of nowhere.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:27)



SMITHERS *[Skeptically]*: Ho, yes!

JONES *[Sharply]*: You ain't 'simuatin I'se a liar, is you?

SMITHERS *[Hastily]*: No, Gawd strike me! I was only thinkin' o' the bloody lies you told the blacks 'ere about killin' white men in the States.

JONES *[Angered]*: How come dey're lies?

SMITHERS: You'd 'ave been in jail if you 'ad, wouldn't yer then? *[With venom]* And from what I've 'eard, it ain't 'ealthy for a black to kill a white man in the States. They burns 'em in oil, don't they?

JONES *[With cool deadliness]*: You mean lynchin' 'd scare me? Well, I tells you, Smithers, maybe I does kill one white man back dere. Maybe I does. And maybe I kills another right heah 'fore long if he don't look out.

SMITHERS *[Trying to force a laugh]*: I was on'y spoofin' yer. Can't yer take a joke? And you was just sayin' you'd never been in jail.

JONES *[In the same tone - slightly boastful]*: Maybe I goes to jail dere for gettin' in an argument wid razors ovah a crap game. Maybe I gits twenty years when dat colored man die. Maybe I gits in 'nother argument wid de prison guard was overseer ovah us when we're wukin' de roads. Maybe he hits me wid a whip and I splits his head wid a



When Jones says that it is all talk, Smithers, is very skeptical about it. They both know that it is difficult for Jones to go back, not just on account of the law catching up with him, and not because he broke out from jail in America, but also due to the very pertinent and irrational racial hierarchy.

”You’d ’ave been jailed if you ’ad, wouldn’t yer then? And from what I’ve ’eard...” This subtle reference, ‘from what I have heard,’ is very important. This reveals that Smithers does not have firsthand knowledge about how things operate in America. “From what I’ve ’eard, it ain’t ’ealthy for a black to kill a white man in the States. They burns ’em in oil, don’t they?”

So, Jones had committed a crime; he was in jail for killing a white man. He was in jail in America because he is a black man. Jones is a black man who killed a white man. So, the murder has double significance and implication here and in America, it is a racial crime. It is also a racial crime, not in the sense that we understand today, but it is a racial crime on account of the racial hierarchy that exists there.

It is a more severe crime than a white man killing a white man or a black man or a white man killing a black man. This is a severe and unforgivable crime. Because, if not for the law catching up to him, it is also about the other kinds of punishments, which are more illegal.

Because, it was also the time when racial lynching was happening in America. Smithers reminds Jones very wickedly that he had heard that in America, the offenders are burnt in oil. Jones with a cool deadliness says, “You mean lynchin’ d scare me? Well, I tells you, Smithers, maybe I does kill one white man back dere. Maybe I does. And maybe I kills another right heah ’fore long if he don’t look out”.

Jones is not pretending that it is a story anymore; he uses it to threaten Smithers. He tells him that he killed a white man in America and that he would not think twice before killing another white man right there. Smithers had thrown Jones off guard for a brief moment.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:02)



The Emperor Jones

shovel and runs away and files de chain off my leg and gits away safe. Maybe I does all dat. An' maybe I don't. It's a story I tells you so's you knows I'sc de kind of man dat if you evah repeats one word of it, I ends yo' stealin' on dis yearth mighty damn quick!

SMITHERS [*Terrified*]: Think I'd peach on yer? Not me! Ain't I always been yer friend?

JONES [*Suddenly relaxing*]: Sho' you has—and you better be.

SMITHERS [*Recovering his composure—and with it his malice*]: And just to show yer I'm yer friend, I'll tell yer that bit o' news I was goin' to.

JONES: Go ahead! Shoot de piece. Must be bad news from de happy way you look.

SMITHERS [*Warningly*]: Maybe it's gettin' time for you to resign—with that bloomin' silver bullet, wot? [*He finishes with a mocking grin.*]

JONES [*Puzzled*]: What's dat you say? Talk plain.



Jones also gets into this mood, and he is beginning to feel a bit boastful about what he did. There is a kind of racial superiority that he also feels here, momentarily. “Maybe I goes to jail dere for gettin' in an argument wid razors ovah a crap game. Maybe I gits twenty years when dat colored man died. Maybe I gits in 'nother argument got into another argument wid de prison guard was overseer ovah us when we're wukin' de roads”.

Through these snippets of conversation, we understand that Jones is in denial. We get a sense of what could have happened. He first went to jail because he killed a white man, and that was a result of an argument over a game, and he was sentenced to twenty years,

and in jail, he again gets into another argument with the guard. We do not know exactly what happened with the prison guard.

“Maybe he hits me wid a whip and I splits his head wid a shovel and runs away and files a chain off my leg and gets away safe”. We do not know the implications of his actions, but he had hit a prison guard and broke out of jail after that. Smithers is now a bit terrified too.

It is one thing to sarcastically taunt Jones when he is in denial and does not want to admit his crime; but it is entirely different when Jones is not in denial and because physically, he is more powerful as he is someone who has committed murder, escaped jail in America, fled from there to reach this country and has also become the emperor.

Smithers is aware of what Jones is capable of and what he has already done. So, now, he is a bit terrified, and he wants to extend the hand of friendship, to which Jones immediately responds.

(Refer Slide Time: 024:03)



JONES [*Puzzled*]: What's dat you say? Talk plain.

SMITHERS: Ain't noticed any of the guards or servants about the place today, I'ven't.

JONES [*Carelessly*]: Dey're all out in de garden sleepin' under de trees. When I sleeps, dey sneaks a sleep, too, and I pretends I never suspicions it. All I got to do is to ring de bell and dey come flyin', makin' a bluff dey was wukin' all de time.

SMITHERS [*In the same mocking tone*]: Ring the bell now an' you'll bloody well see what I means.

JONES [*Startled to alertness, but preserving the same careless tone*]: Sho' I rings. [*He reaches below the throne and pulls out a big, common dinner bell which is painted the same vivid scarlet as the throne. He rings this vigorously—then stops to listen. Then he goes to both doors, rings again, and looks out.*]

SMITHERS [*Watching him with italicious satisfaction, after a pause—mockingly*]: The bloody ship is sinkin' an' 'the bleedin' rats' 'as slung their 'ooks.

JONES [*In a sudden fit of anger flings the bell clattering into a corner*]: Low-flung, woods' niggers! [*Then catching Smithers' eye on him, he controls himself and suddenly bursts into a low chuckling laugh.*] Reckon I overplays my hand dis once! A man can't take de pot on a bob-tailed flush all de time. Was I sayin' I'd sit in six



Smithers and Jones occasionally have very interesting conversations. They both know that the time during which they would have control over the island and Jones' tenure as the self-imposed emperor is coming to an end.

Smithers asks him half-warningly and half-mockingly whether it is time for him to resign with that “bloomin' silver bullet”. Jones is still not entirely sure of what happened in the

morning. Let us quickly recollect how the scene opened when all of Jones' subjects, including the guard servants, workers, and courtiers, had run away.

Jones is again briefly in denial, wondering whether they are all just trying to pretend that everything is normal and convinces himself by saying that "maybe they are all in the garden, sleeping because they usually tend to sneak away and laze around when I am napping too". Smithers challenges him by saying, "Ring the bell and see how who will show up". Jones is startled to alertness, but he continues to preserve that tone.

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catching Smithers' eye on him, he controls himself and suddenly bursts into a low chuckling laugh.] Reckon I overplays my hand dis once! A man can't take de pot on a bob-tailed flush all de time. Was I sayin' I'd sit in six months mo'? Wen, I'se changed my mind den. I cashes in and resigns de job of Emperor right dis minute.

SMITHERS *[With real admiration]:* Blimey, but you're a cool bird, and no mistake.

JONES: No use'n fussin'. When I knows de game's up I kisses it good-bye widout no long waits. Dey've all run off. to de hills, ain't dey?

SMITHERS: Yes—every bleedin' man jack of 'em.

JONES: Den de revolution is at de post. And de Emperor better git his feet smokin' up de trail. *[He starts for the door in rear.]*

SMITHERS: Goin' out to look for your 'orse? Yer won't find any. They steals the 'orses first thing. Mine was gone when I went for 'im this mornin'. That's wot first give me a suspicion of wot was up.

SCENE ONE 7



And this is important now. So, the moment Jones gets a sense of the reality and realizes that everyone has left and things could come down crashing any time, he takes the next rational step. He also realizes that there is hardly anything for him within that palace, within that space to hold on to.

So, he starts for the door in the rear. Smithers asks if Jones is looking for his horse and tells him that he will not find any because before the natives ran away, they first stole the horses. Smithers says his horse was also gone and that made him suspicious that something was amiss.

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The Emperor Jones

JONES [*Alarmed for a second, scratches his head, then philosophically*]: Well, den I hoofs it. Feet, do yo' duty! [*He pulls out a gold watch and looks at it.*] Three-thuty, Sundown's at six-thuty or dereabouts. [*Puts his watch back with cool confidence.*] I got plenty o' time to make it easy.

SMITHERS: Don't be so bloomin' sure of it. They'll be after you 'ot and 'avy. Ole Lem is at the bottom o' this business an' 'e 'ates you like 'ell. 'E'd rather do for you than eat 'is dinner, 'e would!

JONES [*Scornfully*]: Dat fool no-count nigger! Does you think I'se scared o' him? I stands him on his thick head niore'n once befo' dis, and I does it again if he come in my way... [*Fiercely.*] And dis time I leave him a dead nigger fo' sho'!

SMITHERS: You'll 'ave to cut through the big forest--an' these blacks 'ere can sniff and follow a trail in the dark like 'ounds. You'd 'ave to 'ustle to get through that forest in twelve hours even if you knew all the bloomin' trails like a native.

JONES [*With indignant scorn*]: Look--a--heah, white man! Does you think I'se a natural bo'n fool? Give me



Jones is alarmed, but he is also a quick thinker. So, he makes up his mind to leave, almost immediately.

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SMITHERS: You'll 'ave to cut through the big forest--an' these blacks 'ere can sniff and follow a trail in the dark like 'ounds. You'd 'ave to 'ustle to get through that forest in twelve hours even if you knew all the bloomin' trails like a native.

JONES [*With indignant scorn*]: Look--a--heah, white man! Does you think I'se a natural bo'n fool? Give me credit fo' havin' some sense, fo' Lawd's sake! Don't you s'pose I'se looked ahead and made sho' of all de chances? I'se gone out in dat big forest, pretendin' 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. [*With great contempt.*] Think dese ign'rent bush niggers dat ain't got brains enuff to know deir own names even can catch I Brutus Jones? Huh, I s'pects not! Not on yo' life! Why, man, de white men went after me wid bloodhounds where I come from an' I jes' laughs at 'em. It's a shame to fool dese black trash around heah, dey're so easy. You watch me, man! I'll make dem look sick, I will. I'll be 'cross de plain to de edge of de forest by time dark comes. Once in de woods in de night, dey got a swell chance o' findin' dis baby! Dawn tomorrow I'll be out at de oder side and on de coast whar dat French gunboat is stayin'. She picks me up, take me to Martinique when she go dar, and dere I is safe wid a mighty big bankroll in my jeans. It's easy as rollin' off a log.

SMITHERS [*Maliciously*]: But s'posin' somethin' 'appens wrong an' they do nab yer?

JONES [*Decisively*]: Dey don't--dat's de answer.

SMITHERS: But, just for argyment's sake what'd yoy do?



Here again, they are trying to arrive at something not necessarily together. It is difficult to identify whether they were trying to arrive at a decision together or whether they were trying to belittle each other and showcase their power in different ways, with Jones always having the upper hand in this exchange.

Interestingly, Smithers refers to how the blacks can sniff and follow a trail in the dark like hounds. He almost forgot that Jones is also a black man, and Jones comes back up with the derogatory insult again for the third time, calling him a white man.

This reversal of insult is significant here, and it has a lot of bearing in defining the kind of relationship between Jones and Smithers. So, we also get to know that there is a French gunboat on which Jones is relying and that he is hoping to escape to Martinique from the island.

Smithers always loves to put malicious thoughts in Jones' head and make him very uncomfortable. Smithers asks, "But s'posin' somethin' 'appens wrong an' they do nab yer?" and Jones replies, "Dey don't—dat is de answer". If we look through the exchanges, we can find a pattern; Jones's immediate response to every situation is to respond in denial because that is also the time that he takes to process things.

And we cannot blame him for living in denial or responding with denial to certain situations, because he has achieved the status of an emperor, which is entirely unthinkable for a regular black man. So, his first and instinctive response is to stay in denial and process his way towards some practical thought in that process.

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JONES [*Decisively*]: Dey don't—dat's de answer.

SMITHERS: But, just for argyment's sake what'd yoy do?

JONES [*Frowning*]: I'se got five lead bullets in dis gun good enuff fo' common bush niggers—and after dat I got de silver bullet left to cheat 'em out o' gittin' me.

SMITHERS [*Jeeringly*]: Ho, I was fergettin' that silver bullet. You'll bump yourself orf in style, Won't yer? Blimey!

JONES [*Gloomily*]: You kin bet yo whole roll on one thing, white man. Dis baby plays out his string to de end and when he quits, he quits wid a bang de way he ought. Silver bullet ain't none too good for him when he go, dat's a fact [*Then shaking off his nervousness—with a confident laugh.*] Sho! What is I talkin' about? Ain't come to dat yit and I never will—not wid trash niggers like dese yere. [*Boastfully.*] Silver bullet bring me luck anyway. I kin outguess, outrun, outfight, an' outplay de whole lot o' dem all ovah de board any time o' de day er night! You watch me! [*From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts at " rate exactly corresponding to normal pulse beat—72 to the minute— and continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point uninterruptedly to the very end of the play.*]

[*JONES starts at the sound. A strange look of apprehension creeps into his face for a moment as he listens. Then he asks, with an attempt to regain his most casual manner.*] What's dat drum beatin' fo'?



Smithers provokes him into telling him what his backup plan and Jones says that he has five lead bullets. “—and after dat I got de silver bullet left to cheat 'em out o' gittin' me.

So, Smithers continues to mock him and says, “Ho, I was fergettin’ that silver bullet. You’ll bump yourself orf in style, Won’t yer?”

So, this seems to be the tentative plan Jones has made, which is also why the silver bullet continues to be very important. The silver bullet provides him with a false sense of security. It is that metaphorical presence that acts as his safety net. So, he thinks that he will manage to escape in style with the help of the silver bullet.

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The Emperor Jones



SMITHERS *[With a mean grin]*: For you. That means the bleedin’ ceremony ’as started. I’ve ’eard it before and I knows.

JONES: Cer’mony? What cer’mony?

SMITHERS: The blacks is ’oldin’ a bloody meetin’, ’avin’ a war dance, gettin’ their courage worked up b’fore they starts after you.

JONES: Let dew! Dey’ll sho’ need it!

SMITHERS: And they’re there ’oldin’ their ’eathen religious service—makin’ no end of devil spells and charms to ’elp ’em against your silver bullet. *[He guffaws loudly.]* Blimey, but they’re balmy as ’ell!

JONES *[A tiny bit awed and shaken in spite of himself]*: Huh! Takes more’n dat to scare dis chicken!

SMITHERS *[Scenting the other’s feeling—maliciously]*: Ternight when it’s pitch black in the forest, they’ll ’ave their pet devils and ghosts, ’oundin’ after you. You ’ll—find yer bloody ’air ’ll be standin’ on end before termorrow mornin’. *[Seriously.]* It’s a bleedin’ queer place, that stinkin’ forest, even in daylight. Yer don’t know what might ’appen in there, it’s that rotten still, Always sends the cold shivers down my back minute I gets in it.



Now he is brought back to reality with the sound of the drum beating, and Smithers clarifies that the drum is beating for Jones; he tells Jones that they are coming for him. “That means the bleedin’ ceremony ’as started. I’ve ’eard it before and I knows”. Smithers is showing off his knowledge of the island. He has been there for ten years, while Jones has been there for only two years.

“Cer’mony? What cer’mony?” He is clueless about it; it is a very genuine question. “The blacks is ’oldin’ a bloody meetin’, ’avin’ a war dance, gettin’ their courage worked up b’fore they starts after you”. Jones is back to his usual confident self, saying that they do need the courage to come after him and then they proceed to have a brief discussion on religion.

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appear in there, it's that tough shit, always sends the cold shivers down my back, mine I gets in it.

JONES *[With a contemptuous sniff]:* I ain't no chicken-liver like you is. Trees an' me, we'se friends, and dar's a full moon comin' bring me light. And let dem po' niggers make all de fool spells dey'se a min' to. Does yo' s'pect I'se silly enuff to b'lieve in ghosts an' ha'nits 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 dem try deir heathen tricks. De Baptist Church done pectect me and land dem all in hell. *[Then with more confident satisfaction.]* And I'se got little silver bullet o' my own, don't forgit.

SMITHERS: Ho! You 'aven't give much 'eed to *your* Baptist Church since you been down 'ere. I've 'eard myself you 'ad turned yer coat an' was takin' up with their blarsted witch-doctors, or whatever the 'ell yer calls the swine.

JONES *[Ehemently]:* I pretends to! Sho' I pretends! Dat's part o' my game from de fust. If I finds out dem niggers believe's dat black is white, den I yells it out louder 'n deir louddest. 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 bein'. *[Stops abruptly to look at his watch - alertly.]* But I ain't got de time to waste no more fool talk wid you. I'se gwine away from heah dis secon'. *[He reaches in under the throne and pulls out an expensive Panama hat with a bright multi-colored band and sets it jauntily on his head.]* So long, white man! *[With a grin.]* See you in jail sometime, maybe!

SMITHERS: Not me, you won't. Well, I wouldn't be in yer bloody boots for no bloomin' money, but 'ere's wishin' 'ver luck just the same.



Interestingly now, Jones is also trying to draw strength and confidence from the Baptist church, a religious system, Christianity that he left behind. On a very contemptuous note, he reminds Smithers that he was a member in good standing of the Baptist church before he got into trouble.

He claims that the Baptist church will protect him from whatever is about to befall him from the superstitious heathens. Jones believes that the drum beating, the ceremony and the pagan things cannot stand before this protective level layer of Christianity that he has. So, we find that Jones is the kind of person who can use such tropes to his advantage.

Jones rejects the white system in so many ways, but he also brings back certain elements to use as a protective covering. Smithers, very quickly retorts to that and says, “you ’aven’t give much ’eed to your Baptist church since you been down ’ere”.

What is interesting here is how the discourse of religion operates and how very conveniently Jones thinks about using some dominant tropes as long as it works for him. So, it is not a complete rejection of any of those systems that he resents. He is instead trying to replicate those systems to his advantage here.

Whether it is the judiciary system or the model of the empire or here, the moral framework of Christianity, Jones is happy to draw from whichever system that comes in

handy for him. Interestingly, he is familiar with all these systems since he has been a part of all these systems. He knows how things work in those systems, perhaps a bit more than Smithers himself.

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WANTS TO BE EMPEROR. HE'S BEEN TO COURT, AND I HAYS TRY TO SHOW YOU MY SHIRT FOR ME THIS COURT. *[Stops abruptly to look at his watch—alertly.]* But I ain't got de time to waste no more fool talk wid you. I'se gwine away from heah dis secon'. *[He reaches in under the throne and pulls out an expensive Panama hat with a bright multi-colored band and sets it jauntily on his head.]* So long, white man! *[With a grin.]* See you in jail sometime, maybe!

SMITHERS: Not me, you won't. Well, I wouldn't be in yer bloody boots for no bloomin' money, but 'ere's wishin' yer luck just de same.

JONES *[Contemptuously]:* You're de frightenedest man evah I see! I tells you I'se safe's 'I was in New York City. It takes dem niggers from now to dark to git up de nerve to start somethin'. By dat time, I'se got a head dat dey never kotch up wid.

SMITHERS *[Maliciously]:* Give my regards to any ghosts yer meets up with.

JONES *[Grinning]:* If dat ghost got money, I'll tell him never ha'nt you less'n he wants to lose it.

SMITHERS *[Flattered]:* Gern! *[Then curiously.]* Ain't yer takin' no luggage with yer?

SCENE ONE 9



Now, Jones is leaving, and Smithers is also oscillating between these emotions. On the one hand, he is very malicious and resents Jones, but he is also very flattered when he notices that Jones is leaving without taking any luggage with him.

(Refer Slide Time: 33:05)

The Emperor Jones

JONES: I travels light when I wants to move fast. And I got timed grub buried on de edge o' de forest. *[Boastfully:]* Now say dat I don't look ahead an' use my brains! *[With a wide, liberal gesture.]* I will all dat's left in de palace to you—and you better grab all you kin sneak away wid befo' dey gits here.

SMITHERS *[Gratefully]:* Righto—and thanks ter yer. *[As JONES walks toward the door in rear—cautiously.]* Say! Look 'ere, you ain't goin' out that way, are yer?

JONES: Does you think I'd slink out de back door like a common nigger? I'se Emperor yit, ain't I? And de Emperor Jones leaves de way he comes, and dat black trash don't dare stop him—not yit, leastways. *[He stops for a moment in the doorway, listening to the far-off but insistent beat of the tom-tom.]* Listen to dat roll-call, will you? Must be mighty big drum carry dat far. *[Then with a laugh.]* Well, if dey ain't no whole brass band to see me off, I sho' got de drum part of it. So long, white man. *[He puts his hands in his pockets and with studied carelessness, whistling a tune, he saunters out of the doorway and off to the left.]*

SMITHERS *[Looks after him with a puzzled admiration]:* 'E's got 'is bloomin' nerve with 'im, s'elp me! *[Then angrily:]* Ho—the bleedin' nigger-puttin' on 'is bloody airs! I 'opes they nabs 'im an' gives 'im what's what! *[Then putting business before the pleasure of this thought, looking around him with cupidity.]* A bloke ought to find a 'ole lot in this palace that'd go for a bit of cash. Let's take a look. 'Arry, me lad. *[He darts for the doorway on right as*



“I travel light when I want to move fast”. No wonder, Smithers is also forced to hold him with a lot of admiration. So, he says he cannot travel with any baggage because he is using his brains to try to escape. This is like another adventure, and he has a gut feeling when it comes to making decisions, and he also says very proudly that he will not “slink out de back door like a common nigger”.

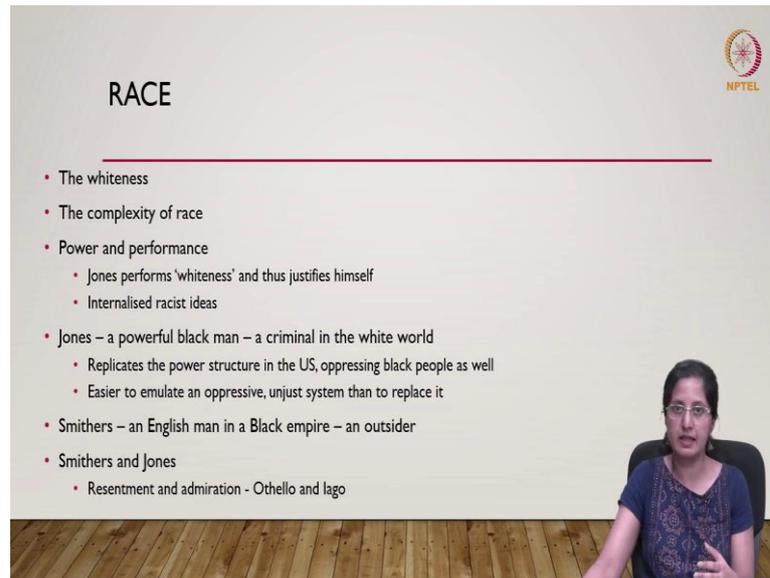
Look at the way in which he is using the terms nigger and white man. Both are used in a derogatory manner here, regardless of Jones’ own identity. Here, his identity keeps shifting. He is the dominant person here with the power to use derogatory terms from any of the systems.

The play on language and how these terms acquire meaning, depending on the context and the hierarchical systems built around is very interesting. We can see that Smithers continues to look at him with puzzled admiration. Jones leaves out of the doorway, and he is in no hurry, and he leaves the palace as a very confident person.

The kind of attitude Smithers has towards Jones is puzzled admiration because, on the one hand, he is totally in awe at Jones’ confidence and courage, but he also resents it. “Ho—the bleedin’ nigger –puttin’ on ’is bloody airs”. He is very calculative and manipulative, and so, he does not leave right away.

He also decides to look around in the palace to pick up something that he could later exchange for cash. So, he also makes a practical call from his capacity, and after that, he darts for the doorway and the curtain falls, bringing scene one to an end.

(Refer Slide Time: 35:04)



The slide is titled "RACE" in a large, bold, black font at the top left. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a red and white design and the text "NPTEL" below it. A horizontal red line is positioned below the title. The main content of the slide is a bulleted list of topics:

- The whiteness
- The complexity of race
- Power and performance
 - Jones performs 'whiteness' and thus justifies himself
 - Internalised racist ideas
- Jones – a powerful black man – a criminal in the white world
 - Replicates the power structure in the US, oppressing black people as well
 - Easier to emulate an oppressive, unjust system than to replace it
- Smithers – an English man in a Black empire – an outsider
- Smithers and Jones
 - Resentment and admiration - Othello and Iago

In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue patterned top, sitting in a black chair and speaking. The background of the video inset is a wooden floor.

So, let us bring this discussion to an end. In scene one, we found that there is a lot of complexity about how race is presented. There are some discussions that we will revisit. We will soon talk about how the complexity of race becomes a very compelling trope in this discussion.

Race is talked about in a very unconventional way, and we will notice how the different kinds of memory: the personal, individual and collective memory, become very important in defining the language, the emotions around which race gets articulated and situated.

With this, we bring this discussion to an end, and we will resume the rest of the play in the consecutive session. Thank you for your time, and I will look forward to seeing you in the next session.