“I stood Among them, but Not of Them”: Con Melody’s Journey of Excess and Ethnic Ambivalence in Eugene O’Neill’s A Touch of the Poet

Olfa Gandouz
University of Sousse, Tunisia

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to investigate the notion of excess in Eugene O’Neill’s A Touch of the Poet by analyzing Con Melody’s ethnic experience and his movement between two contradictory spheres of self-hatred and self-endearment. Excess has negative effects as it removes the protagonist from reality by making him stuck in the illusion of being an aristocratic New Englander. The inability of cleansing the Irish ethnic roots fosters a sense of self-glorification which is the positive outcome of excess. Some gothic elements highlight the protagonist’s desire of cutting off any links associating him with the Yankees. In this respect, he changes his political orientations and relapses into using his native dialect (the brogue), after considering it as the epitome of backwardness and ignorance. The return of the previously repressed Irish self helps Melody conceive of a new vision about identity by defining it as something to be accepted and not reformulated. This article is divided into three parts. Before focusing on Melody’s journey of excess, a historical contextualization is needed. The first part deals with a historical study by locating the notion of excess within the dire experience of some Irish-American immigrants who escaped the traumatic Irish famine of 1845 and were lured by the rosy American dream of acquiring wealth. The second part highlights the negative outcome of excess in A Touch of the Poet by focusing on the myth of ethnic integration which has made Melody resurrect the ghosts of the past, weave outer and inner masks and drop his native tongue in order to be recognized as a New Englander. Finally, the analysis sheds light on the role of excess in creating a compromise between Melody and his Irish peasant roots. Stylistic, dramatic, theatrical and thematic elements are used to map out O’Neill’s reliance on excess to dramatize Melody’s experience of ethnic ambivalence.

Keywords: Excess, Ireland, Identity Crisis, Irish-American dream of Ethnic Integration, Self-Denigration, Self-Glorification.
1. Irish Immigration to “the Land of Opportunities.”:

According to The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories, the word excess has Latin origins and it refers to “Latin excessus, from exceed, go out, and surpass” (“Excess”). In the context of surpassing and going out of the national boundaries, large waves of Irish citizens opted for immigration to the United States because of the Irish famine’s excessively negative impacts. Indeed, economic fiasco and social evils accelerated Irish immigration to the States. During the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants opted for America because it was the epitome of wealth. Because of American exceptionalism Irish immigrants believed that they would move from “rags to riches”. The letters of the first waves of immigrants were loaded with optimism and fascination by the American luxury which was different from the financial crisis created by the Irish famine. We can refer to the letter of an Irish farmer who encouraged his friends to visit the land of opportunities by stating: “I’m exceedingly well pleased at coming to this land of plenty. On arrival I purchased 120 acre of land at 5 dollars an acre. I would advise all my friends to leave Ireland the country most dear to me; as long as they remain in it they will remain in misery” (qtd. in Sheehan 15). The farmer’s accent of delight which is emphasized though the use of the adverb “exceedingly” shows that new horizons opened up for Irish peasants who moved from wretchedness to prosperity. In his homeland, the Irish peasant used to belong to the have-nots but in America he bought a land. The utopian letters made some Irish immigrants believe in the truthfulness of the American dream of ethnic integration.

Irish immigrants’ high expectations were replaced by hopelessness due to the overexploitation and enslavement inflicted upon them. The painful discrimination of some Irish immigrants appears through preventing them from having access to public service. In this prospect, an Irish immigrant declares: “I know that Irish people were almost like blacks for a while…. They were even forced to ride in the back of the bus for a while” (qtd. in Waters 162). This exclusion reveals that the Irish arrival in America was a horrible moment as it made the immigrants aware of the illusory aura that surrounded the American promises. Irish immigrants were also excluded from the job market under the slogan of “No Irish Need Apply” which prevented them from getting jobs. “No Irish Need Apply” was a song written by John Poole, a business manager in New York. Poole’s song contains a complaint of an Irish immigrant who was burdened with the hostile situation: “I saw a place advertised. It is the thing for me says I; but the dirty spalpeen ended with: No Irish Need Apply. Whoo! Says I; but that’s an insult—though to get place I’ll try” (qtd. in Greene 13). The immigrant is deceived by the maltreatment of the Irish and defines the slogan of “NINA” as an insult. The deception emerges through the state of anger which is introduced by describing himself as a “dirty spalpeen”. Poole’s “dirty spalpeen” is used in an ironic way to translate the immigrant’s misfortune and demonstrate the chasm between the fake American promises and the gloomy reality of alienation.

The deep hostility against the Irish was aroused because of some distinctive Irish features. For example, Catholicism made the Irish stigmatized in a completely different Protestant and Urban American society. In the nineteenth century, the western hemisphere

---

1 « Rags to riches »: an expression used by the nineteenth century American author Horatio Alger. He rose from misery to wealth in the land of opportunities because of hard work .
was dominated by Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. Despite the fact that America encapsulated the key concepts of freedom, Catholicism was undermined. Hostility and phobia can be observed through the rumors which appeared in 1850 claiming that Irish Catholics were conspiring against Protestants and claims “were made plausible by the argument that Catholics were agents of Satan” (Lyons 47). Because of this hatred Irish Catholics could not assimilate to the American cultural network. The aspects of the immigrant’s marginalization during their arrival in America can also be studied through the position of some Irish servants who were stigmatized by their American masters because of their Catholicism. In the context of fathoming the major hardships that Irish servants faced, the literary critic, Robert Ernst affirms: “potential employers disliked and even feared their religion, shuddered at Irish impulsiveness and turbulence and were disgusted and morally shocked at the Irish propensity for strong drink” (66). The disrespect of ethnic belonging made the Irish arrival in America a nightmarish experience.

Irish American citizens did also face linguistic hindrances because of their local dialect (called brogue). This rural Irish accent was associated with the poor, ignorant and rural Irish immigrants who were compelled to abandon their native dialect for the sake of assimilation. The politician Daniel O’Connell was among the proponents of the mother tongue’s decline and adopting English as a modern alternative: “The Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine round the hearts of Irishmen, yet the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great that I can witness without a sigh the great disuse of the Irish” (O’Connell 15). We infer through the paradoxical oscillation between respecting the native language and calling for its abandonment that O’Connell is trying to be diplomatic by playing on the sentimental chords of the Irish people to make them use a more dominant language. In this context, we can refer to Reginald Byron who studies the American threats to Irish ethnic identity by showing that “those who came to America as Gaelic speakers, but bilingual, shifted to English quite rapidly, normally more or less upon their arrival, and brought up their children as monoglot English speakers” (124). The embrace of English by the offspring of Irish immigrants led to the oblivion of the native language.

Eugene O’Neill’s grandparents were among the Irish immigrants who faced various problems during their arrival in the United States. Eugene’s father, James could not “forget the tragedy of how his father, a famine emigrant, refused to adjust to life in America and abandoned his wife and eight children to return to Ireland” (Diner 60). We deduce that immigration did not solve the problem of poverty because O’Neill’s family continued to be overwhelmed by hunger and endured financial hardships. This state of extreme misery made the father return to the native soil as he could not adapt to the American urban way of life. The father’s inability to settle in America shows his regret about leaving Ireland.

2. Erasing Irish Roots:

After studying the Irish American immigrants’ excessive belief in the dream of ethnic integration, we will move to A touch of the Poet’s hero who represents a significant example of some Irish immigrants. In the play, excess is recognized from the very beginning through the utopia of crossing ethnic boundaries and the attempts to transcend ethnic limits. In his utopian quest, Melody invents a world of fantasies to accomplish his dream of being an aristocrat. Melody acquires the manners of a gentleman and is interested in “overplaying a role which has become more real than his real self” (Act 1, 151). The wish of joining the high
sphere of Yankee gentry is induced by his father who decided to enroll him in a college of wealthy people “to prove himself equal of any gentleman’s son” (Act 1, 140). The protagonist’s excessive wish of being integrated within the mainstream American aristocratic society makes him abide by the rules of American gentry. That’s why he displays a refined behavior to be recognized as an American citizen and not an Irish immigrant with peasant roots. His refined behavior is manifested through his gallantry towards the female American characters. For instance, he accepts an American woman’s insult by arguing “as gentlemen, I should grant it as a pretty woman’s privilege to be always right even when she is wrong” (Act 2, 84).

Melody’s excessive belief in the illusion of being an American aristocrat reaches its paroxysm when he refers to America as his own country. He boasts “This country—my country now will drive the English from the face of the earth” (Act 1, 160). The use of the possessive adjective “my” is an indication of his identification with America. In his journey of excess and immersion in the utopia of being a Yankee gentleman, Melody encourages the relationship between his daughter and the American gentleman Simon. He feels exited and privileged after his conversation with the Yankee character: “I have enjoyed my talks with him. It has been a privilege to be able to converse with a cultured gentleman” (Act 1, 164). The father fancily believes that his daughter’s American lover will help him climb the social ladder. On the other hand, he has an antagonistic relationship with the other Irish characters with whom he refuses even to have dinner at the same table: “I may tolerate their presence of charity, but I’ll not sink to dining at the same table” (Act 1, 158). The refusal of sharing the same table with the Irish characters is a sign of the denial of Irish origins.

Melody uses different tools to weave the mask of aristocracy. He resorts to the mirror which allows him to see the images that he wants to see and gives him the impression of being an aristocrat. In front of the mirror, he recites some of Lord Byron’s verses about self-esteem. Arrogance is the common point between Melody and Byron; that’s why the constant reference to Lord Byron is a relief for Melody. The mirror’s reflections echo an arrogant Byronic hero who escapes the reality of being a despised Irish immigrant. Then, the mirror is a tool of blurring the boundaries between the past and the present. O’Neill uses expressionism as a technique to introduce the character of Melody who survives with unearthing his memories and living with the ghosts of the glorious past when he used to have a high rank in the army. He celebrates the Anniversary of Talavera because he wants to be identified by his position as a Major. The Talavera anniversary is a fetish for the protagonist for it helps him stress his bravery and highlight his scintillating position among the new American wealthy elite. Another instance of the intrusion of the past in the present is revealed when he strives to inculcate in Sara the principle of aristocratic pride; when she is not sure whether old Harford would consider her the suitable bride of his son, Melody reacts violently by screaming: “I would remind him that you, my daughter was born in a castle!” (Act 3, 210). The birth in a castle remains the main symbol of aristocracy.

The use of some theatrical elements like the depiction of Melody’s costume is evocative of his desire to be distinguished as a man of real nobility. The uniform provides Melody with spiritual comfort because it represents him as a brave knight who transcends his modest origins. When Deborah humiliates him, his wife tries to change his mood of disappointment

---

3 The Battle of Talavera: a battle fought during the Peninsular war. The Anglo-Spanish allied army won the battle against the French in 1809.
by encouraging him to put the uniform: “he will feel proud again in his uniform” (Act 2, 185). The positive functions of the uniform encourage Melody to take care of it: “the costume has been preserved with great care. Each button is shining and the cloth is spotless. Being in it, Melody has notably restored his self-arrogance” (Act 2, 194). Although it is merely a relic of the past, the uniform is still shining because it determines Melody’s present and defines him as a prestigious man.

Having a mare is a sign of belonging to the new gentry and holding a respected position within the American upper social fabric. Instead of paying Neilan who threatened not to provide Melody’s family with groceries, Melody prefers to pay Dickinson’s feed bill for the mare. Sara is dissatisfied with her father’s deep care of the mare at the expanse of the family’s basic needs and “attacks his inhuman preference for an animal over the human needs of the family” (Gutpa 137). The preference of this animal is shown when the protagonist declares: “I’ve the mare! And by God, I’ll keep her if I have to starve myself so she may eat” (Act 1, 165). Melody’s efforts to take care of the mare and to give it a high favor even over himself is a pertinent example of his excessive wish to be an aristocrat. That’s why, Melody reacts vehemently and teases his daughter when she complains about his special interest of the mare: “Why are you so jealous of the mare, I wonder? Is it because she has slender ankles and dainty feet” (Act 3, 206). Melody’s praise of the mare is thus an indication of his endeavor to define himself as a man of honor and denigrate his Irish roots.

In addition to the mare, Melody resorts to language to cut off any nostalgic yoke reminding him of Ireland. He opts for American English as a prestigious mode of expression and orders his daughter to get rid of the brogue by sending her to school to talk like a gentleman’s daughter. Sending Sara to school in order to cure her reflects Melody’s desire to tame his daughter and force her to wear the social mask of aristocracy by using the upper class’s dialect. Furthermore, the denial of Irish origins can be traced through the relationship between Sara and Melody, especially through the latter’s anger wherever his daughter uses the Irish dialect. His fury appears when he rebukes Sara by screaming loudly: “You’re a great tease Sara, I shouldn’t let you score so easily. Your mother warned me you only did it to provoke me” (Act 1, 163). Sara uses brogue only to tease her father and react against his constant insult of Nora when she relapses into her original dialect.

After adopting the dialect of the American dominant group, Melody becomes politically engaged with this group and promises to cast his vote with the Yankees for Quincy Adams against Andrew Jackson and the Democrats. Melody will vote for Adams to avoid the stigma of being an Irish immigrant and be classified as a Yankee gentleman. When he encounters the Democrats’ political slogans in the paper, he accuses Jackson of being “a contemptible, drunken scoundrel!” (Act 1, 158). We infer through Melody’s disdain of Jackson that he is different from the other Irish characters who praise Jackson and appreciate his political maxim of disseminating the roots of equality and respecting ethnic minorities. Unlike the majority of Irish characters in the play who prefer Jackson because of his sympathy with the poor immigrants, Con considers this candidate as “the idol of the riffraff” (Act 1, 157). Melody’s difference triggers the anger of his Irish neighbors who rage at him because he identifies with the Yankees. In this context, “Father Flynn, stopped [Melody’s wife] on the road and told [her she] would better warn him not to sneer at the Irish and call them scum, or he ‘ll get in trouble” (Act 1, 150). Father Flynn’s threat is the outcome of Melody’s derision of Irish-American characters because of their high appreciation of Jackson’s philanthropic agenda. Melody diverges from his Irish community by expressing his political devotion for
Adams since both share the same degree of deep hatred towards Irish immigrants. So, excess is noticed through his radical trial of purging the Irish roots and weaving the mask of aristocracy. The inner masks are manifested through the experience in front of the mirror and the outer masks are created through his physical appearance, uniform, language and political orientations.

3. A Parody of the American Dream:

Excess has negative effects as it has made him believe in the fiction of equality and tolerance. Through Melody’s experience of excess O’Neil aims at parodying the American dream of ethnic integration. In the play, parody appears when Sara depicts her father’s wishes of assimilation as “a fairytale where only dreams are real” (Act 1, 166). Melody fails because he could refine his manners but could not change his physical profile or get rid of his Irish vitality. Excess is another factor behind his failure as it led to his removal from the harsh reality of the marginalization of the ethnic other. Marginalization reaches its peak when the American father decides to impede his son’s marriage to the Irish girl; he is ready to pay the sum of three thousand dollars provided that the Irish family leaves Boston. Melody is shocked when he discovers the bitter reality of ethnic marginalization; he reacts violently by considering Harford’s settlement as an insult and decides to “take a whip and drag [Harford] out of his house and lash him down the street for all his neighbors to see” (Act 3, 220). Melody’s antagonism to the Harfords because of their deep humiliation shows that his fervent desire of integration starts to vanish. The abortive dream of creating an aristocratic ego proves that equality is an inexorable demand in an American community dominated by the biased prejudices against Irish characters. In this way, O’Neill subverts John Locke’s ideal belief in equality and debunks his claim that “all creatures of the same species and rank, are born to all the same advantages of nature and the use of the same faculties” (Locke 3). This utopian vision is contradicted with the atmosphere of marginalization that prevails in the play and is echoed through the inability of creatures who belong to the same species to share equal opportunities. Thus, “in contrast to Lockean liberalism, O’Neill recognized the emotional force of desire but regarded it as leading not to life liberty and property, but to illusion, despair and an insatiable quest for the impossible” (Diggins 38). The link between desire, illusion and despair mirrors Melody’s journey of excess; his strong desire of being a gentleman pushed him to wear the mask of aristocracy and led to his hopelessness because of marginalization.

4. The Glorification of the Irish Self:

The failure of the dream of ethnic integration and the inability of negating the Irish roots lead to the compromise with the Iris self. Self- glorification is the positive outcome of excess. Melody reaches a higher degree of maturity when he decides to cut off any link reminding him of the aristocratic class. The presence of some gothic elements like the atmosphere of terror suggested by the act of killing the mare in the underground show his rebirth as an Irish citizen. The act of killing the mare stands for the symbolic death of Con’s aristocratic ego. He kills the mare because it reminds him of the American female character’s aristocratic features. Melody’s challenge of Deborah and her high class is revealing about his hatred towards this aristocratic class and his rebirth as a common man. He declares: “I’m fresh as a man new born” (Act 4, 253). Melody’s rebirth presents the positive aspect of excess. Excessive deception allows him to have steady steps in the ground of reality and have a more realistic
vision in the mirror by clearly observing his original identity. The mirror has a dramatic function because it has allowed him to admire his fake glory as a gentleman and prevented him from recognizing his true identity.

In the final act, Melody looks away from the mirror and when he sees the crowd, he sings: “I’m alive in the crowd; they can deem me one of such! I’ll be among them and of them too” (Act 4, 254). Melody’s mirror is similar to the mirror of Shakespeare’s historical protagonist, Richard II. In fact, “Melody’s mirror is made of the same glass as the mirror of Shakespeare’s Richard that O’Neill and Shakespeare use the mirrors in similar ways” (Berlin 14). The common point between Melody and Richard’s mirrors is hiding the real identity and resulting in a critical moment of identity loss. Richard’s glass is dramatic because it introduces the protagonist’s downfall when he is no longer the king of England; he personifies the mirror when he blames her: “O’ flattering glass! Like to my followers in prosperity, thou dost beguile me” (4.1.276.95). Richard speculates over his true identity when he is compelled to give the crown to Henry Bolingbroke and accuses the mirror of hiding his authentic position by making him believe in the lie of being a glorious king. Like Richard, Melody accuses the mirror of making him believe in the lie of being an aristocrat. That’s why, in the final scene “[Con’s] eyes are fastened on the mirror [and] he leers into it” (Act 4, 254). This unpleasant glare translates Melody’s blame of the mirror and accusing it of being responsible for his identity crisis.

Excessive deception helps Melody solve his identity crisis and declare his fresh start that is realized through the use of his native Irish brogue. He celebrates his Irishness when he uses brogue fluently as his primary mode of expression. His insult of some Irish characters because of their Irish brogue that is a sign of backwardness is replaced by a harmonious relationship with them. He shifts from hating his wife to highlighting his passionate love towards her. Nora is glad about Melody’s shifting position because his respect of ethnic roots makes him respect her Irish side. Nora’s response can be analyzed through the comparison between her reaction and Sara’s reaction towards Melody’s decision to be an Irish peasant again. When Sara persuades her father not to be “the leering peasant again” (Act 4, 255), Nora advises her daughter to let Melody choose whatever suits him: “Lave your father be. It’s best” (Act 4, 255). This advice suggests Nora’s satisfaction with her husband’s rebirth. She is overwhelmed with joy when Melody informs her that he will join the Irish American community: “Ah well! That’s good. They won’t all be hatin’ him now” (Act 4, 257). Nora appreciates Melody’s glorification of the Irish self when she enjoys the harmonious relationship with her newly born Irish husband. This harmony is revealing about Melody’s accomplished mission of finding an earth mother. Indeed, as Manheim puts it, “O’Neill frequently has his central character search for an earth mother, a total provider, a bringer of comfort, a figure in all respects physical and emotional, more respectful than himself” (158). Nora is Melody’s provider of warmth because she reminds him of his native roots, reacts positively to his nostalgia towards the mother land and appreciates his compromise with the Irish self.

Melody makes a compromise with his Irish self when he defines himself as a simple man and decides to vote with the Irish for Andrew Jackson. Jackson’s care for paupers encouraged the protagonist to vote for him as he used to respect Irish immigrants. In fact, Jackson was among “the Democrats [who] welcomed the Irish and seemed to accept their ethnicity without questioning their capability of integrating into American society” (Gleeson 95). Melody’s preference of Jackson proves that he has a new perception about democracy by
Defining it as the mob rule. At the end of the play, Melody dies and his death is a sign of his physical destruction; he is physically destroyed but morally victorious because by accepting the reality of being an Irish citizen he has finally grasped that identity is a compromise between different warring elements.

6. Conclusion:

To conclude, in his journey of excess Melody falls from idealism to the reality of accepting his origins. This fall is meant to question the dominant linguistic and socio-political myths and reach the conclusion that within the American context there is not one monolithic culture but different cultures that coexist. The protagonist’s excess helps us acquire a new definition about ethnicity. In fact, Melody’s ethnic ambivalence or his shifting position from self-hatred to self-gloryfication makes us define ethnicity as something that has to be accepted because it is part of one’s anthropological existence. In this respect, Melody shifts from complaining “I stood among them, but not of them” (Act 2, 178) to singing “I’ll be among thim and of them too” (Act 4, 254). He ultimately understands that difference is a source of richness.
References

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources: