

Illusion and Reality: A Psychological Exploration of Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet and Hughie*

L.D.Easter Raj Densingh

Assistant Professor of English,
H.H.The Rajah's College (Autonomous),
Pudukkottai, Tamilnadu, India

"The only force that keeps man going," said O'Neill, "is the dream and the illusion and the pursuit of the unattainable." Illusions serve as defense mechanism to characters to deceive themselves thinking that they have already achieved their desires and also to convince others of their success. The characters create their own illusions just to protect themselves from the bitter truth and reality about themselves. The characters tend to feel that their illusions are the real thing. Eugene O'Neill has consistently presented the struggle between illusion and reality among his characters. Most of his plays are structured by a web of confusions between illusion and reality. Chaman Ahuja observes:

According to Psychoanalysis to avoid pain, men evolve pipe dreams, but gradually these illusions get dissociated from reality and lead to disastrous psychological problems. (p.55)

An exploration into some of the plays of Eugene O'Neill beginning from his early plays reveals that the dramatist is mainly concerned with the man's struggle between illusion and reality.

A Touch of the Poet is one important play which presents the tragic suffering of a character from isolation and loneliness, which arise due to the conflict between illusion and reality. Cornelius Melody, the protagonist of the play, is a man who has created an illusion about himself. The play presents the suffering of Corn Melody who is unable to identify himself to the present as he lives in his illusory past as Major Cornelius Melody. The conflict between these two worlds is the main cause of his isolation.

Con's suffering starts from the beginning of his life, when his wealthy Irish father sends him to Dublin in order to make him a gentleman. Unfortunately he is not accepted by his aristocratic schoolmates and he is snubbed by them. Con then pretends to belong to the aristocratic class in America because of his past background as an officer in the Duke of Wellington's army. As a great officer and gentleman, Con thinks that he deserves to belong to the Yankee gentry, ignoring the Irish around him. As a result his life becomes a constant rebellion against his humble Irish origin, on the one hand and the snobbery of the gentry, on the other. After passing a military career, he becomes the owner of a tavern. But still he identifies himself as a Major and proudly recites Byron before the mirror and rides his thorough-bred mare to project himself a gentleman. This makes him hate his Irish origin where lies his roots.

Con has employed many means to maintain his identity as a gentleman officer. In spite of the fact that his tavern is on the edge of bankruptcy Con keeps an expensive mare. He often displays his authority and generosity by treating the poor Irish fellows with free drinks. He leaves the business to his wife and daughter without owing any responsibility and buries himself

in drinking and dreaming. Con faces the problem of identity that he has lost due to his false ego of aristocracy. By creating an illusionary image about himself, he rejects his own origin and own identity and becomes alien to his true self. Micky Maloy, one of his associates of Con's tavern, says:

The damned Yankee gentry won't let him come near them, and he considers the few Irish around here to be scum beneath his notice. (CP3, p.186)

This shows that Con is not accepted by the aristocratic Yankees as one of their own, and he is hated by the Irish because of his contempt for them and he becomes an alien, an outsider. Thus he is unable to belong to anywhere. His self-pretensions do not allow him to identify himself and keeps himself apart from both the societies. Melody's dual identity not only keeps him apart from the present, but also forces him to lead an estranged life within his family.

The most important event in his life is anniversary celebration of the great victory at Talavera and the illusion of his supposed identity has become his reality. His false aristocratic illusion causes a lot of trouble to his wife and daughter. Corn Melody's wife Nora is the worst sufferer because of her husband's false image. Nora is reduced to begging for money to run the inn as the creditors are unwilling to give further money. Although the Irish peasant in Con loves her in his way, the Major in him despises her. He scolds her even when he is close with her. He tells her:

For God's sake, why don't you wash your hair? It turns my stomach with its stink of onions and stew. (CP3, p.202)

Nora throughout her life remains an alien wife mainly due to her husband's false identity which made him utter these accusing words. But Nora tries to understand the nature of her husband and she reveals it in her words:

I've loved him since the day I set eyes on him, and I'll love him till the day I die! (CP3, p.192)

Though she is alienated from her husband, she loves him but his daughter Sara is very critical about Con's false illusion. She accuses him for giving less importance to his family. She becomes angry when she comes to know that Con has given preference to feed-bill for mare instead of giving importance to fulfill the needs of his family. Through the mare she attacks Con's false image because of his inhuman preference for an animal over the economic needs of the family. Sara does not share her father's identity as a gentleman and out of hatred she says to her father:

¹ O'Neill, Eugene. *Complete Plays*. ed. Travis Bogard. Vol 3. New York: Library of America, 1988. All the subsequent textual references are to this edition only. The page numbers are given in parenthesis immediately after the quotations.

If you ever dared face the truth, you'd hate and despise yourself: (*Passionately*) All I pray to God is that some day when you're admiring yourself in the mirror something will make you see at last what you really are. That will be revenge in full for all you've done to Mother and me. (CP3, p.237)

As wished by Sara, Con Melody's illusion about himself as gentleman shatters when he meets Deborah Harford, the mother Simon Harford, the young man with whom Sara is in love. When Deborah arrives and asks Con whether he is the innkeeper Melody, he responds with "a flash of anger in his eyes":

I am Major Cornelius Melody, one time of His Majesty's Seventh Dragoons, at your service. (CP3, p.217)

He also tries to impress her with his romantic and chivalrous ways and he boasts lustfully:
...I would charge a square of Napoleon's Old Guard singlehanded for one kiss of your lips. (CP3, p.218)

Deborah is horrified and repulsed over his performance and her disgusting reaction to his romantic gesture shatters his pride. He then rushes to Harford's home to avenge his pride and prove his noble identity. While trying to enter into the house of Harford four policemen pulled him out to the street and he was beaten and ill treated. Being beaten by the police and humiliated by Harford, he finally returns to his own self. When Con returns home after this incident, he is a different person whose elegant stature is changed into a wooden and lifeless one. He feels that he is no longer the Major but the son of the Irish shebeen-keeper. He kills the mare which is the symbol of his false aristocracy and by shooting the mare he shoots his false image. His explanation of this action reveals the change within himself. He says:

Wasn't she the living reminder, so to spake, av all his lyin' boasts and dreams? He meant to kill her first wid one pistol, and then himself wid the other. But faix, he saw the shot that killed her had finished him, too. There wasn't much pride left in the auld lunatic anyway, and seeing her die made an end av him (CP3, p.273)

Con feels ashamed after the episode of fight and imprisonment and he finds it very difficult to hide himself from facing the reality. In a reply to her mother's words that Con would come back to normal life, Sara says, "No, he'll never be. He's beaten at last and he wants to stay beaten" The struggle between illusion and reality seems to be hurdle in the case of Con Melody to recognize his real. Con believes that he looks like an officer and a gentleman but his illusion about himself as Major Cornelius Melody vanishes when he comes face to face with reality of just Con Melody, an Irish peasant trying to grind out a living from his second rate "shebeen." Tom Driver observes:

Yet instead of coming to himself he takes on another role, adopting a false brogue and playing the beaten down Irishman with such gusto that his frightened wife and daughter beg him return to his old "self" (p.119)

In his last one-act play *Hughie*, O'Neill once again creates a character whose illusion about him is affirmed by others with whom he comes into contact and who are willing to accept his false identity. Earlier in *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill has presented some of his protagonists in the same situation. Similarly in *Hughie*, O'Neill dramatizes Erie's attempt to regain his false identity through Charlie Hughes. The entire play has only two characters, Erie Smith and Charles Hughes. The former is the speaker and the latter is the listener. There is another character Hughie, after whom the play is titled. Hughie was the former night clerk in the hotel until his sudden death. Despite his death, Hughie's presence is felt in the play as Erie speaks more about his past relationship with Hughie.

The play begins as Erie Smith arrives at the hotel to which he belongs for the last fifteen years. Erie gets the key to his room from the new night clerk and when the clerk says his name is Charles Hughes, Erie tells, "...you remind me to him somehow" (CP3, p.832). Erie's is a gambler whose world is designed by horses and poker and crap games. He confesses, "When the horses won't run for me, there's draw or stud. When they're bad, there is a crap game" (CP3, p.836). Erie identified his life through Hughie, as Randal observes:

Hughie obviously provided a sounding board for him and also a reinforcement for his dream of being a big-shot Broadway gambler and horse-race handicapper. Hughie also gave Erie a chance to be superior to him as a 'sucker' (p.304)

Even when Hughie was hospitalized, Erie expressed his deepest concern about his luck:

Not awin. That ain't natural. I've always been a lucky guy – lucky enough to get by and pay up....But now I got a lousy hunch when I lost Hughie I lost my luck – I mean I've lost the old confidence. He used to give me confidence. (CP3, p.849)

Throughout the play, Erie's obsessive reminiscing about Hughie indicates that the latter was willing to accept the inflated, aggrandized image of the big time gambler and racketeer that Erie projected because he knew it was essential for Erie's existence. After the death of Hughie, Erie sense of belongingness is shattered and he desperately needs someone to continue the role of Hughie to regain his belief in himself. Erie believed that an illusion was necessary because he said:

Oh, I was wise I was kiddin' myself. I ain't a sap. But what the hell, Hughie loved it, and it didn't cost nobody nothin', and if every guy along Broadway who kids himself was to drop dead there wouldn't be nobody left. (CP3, pp.845-846)

Erie Smith actually needed Hughie and his admiration in order to keep his illusions alive. His need is evident when he says to the night clerk, "I miss Hughie, I guess. I guess I'd got to like him a lot. Not that I was every real pals with him, you understand. He didn't run in my class. He didn't know none of the answers. He was just a suker" (CP3, p.838). Erie seizes upon the new clerk as a replacement for Hughie. But Charlie pretends to show an interest in Erie's running speech and he considers Erie merely as one more guest who must be endured and he thinks of Erie only with room number 492.

Erie creates an illusory self-image about himself and when the clerk comes to know that Erie was a gambler, he asks Erie whether he knew a gambler named Arnold, and Erie replies boastfully:

...I ought to know, Pal. I was in the bucks when Arnold was a picker. Why, one time down in New Orleans, I lit a cigar with a C note, just for a gag, y' understand. I was with a bunch of high class dolls and I wanted to see their eyes pop out – and believe me, they sure popped! After that, I could a made 'em one at a time or all together! Hell, I once win twenty grand on a single race...Hell, I've been in games where there was a hundred grand in real folding money lying around on the floor. That's travelin'! (CP3, p.850)

After telling this story, Erie looks at the clerk's face for some expression and continues that one day he would be back in the bucks and roll in the hotel with a big blonde that would make the clerk to look with awe. Later Erie starts talking aloud to himself after becoming tired of establishing a relationship with the night clerk. Now Charlie seems to be frightened by the death-like silence and shows some interest towards Erie. Erie sensing the sudden interest of Charlie takes a pair of dice and asks, "How about shootin' a little crap, Charlie?". With Erie winning the round, the play end and at last the relationship has been established through which Erie regains his sense of belongingness and identity. Charlie has taken the place of dead Hughie and Erie uses the clerk to boost his illusion as a big-shot and shore up his confidence.

O'Neill through his characters present that man cannot live forever without illusion and it spreads through both characters' psychic journeys and allows them to inhabit a situation in which they have forsaken the reality.

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