



The Melting Pot Israel Zangwill (1908)

The play The Melting Pot was performed for the first time in 1908 in Washington DC, before an audience that included US president Theodore Roosevelt. The play's metaphor of the United States as a melting pot of ethnicities and cultures proved popular. The story centers on David Quixano, a Russian Jew who has emigrated to New York City after surviving the real-life Kishinev pogrom of 1903, in which the rest of his immediate family were killed. (The script spells Kishinev as "Kishineff.") In New York City, David is taken in by his uncle Mendel and his grandmother, who emigrated earlier. David's grandmother adheres to traditional Jewish religious observances; Mendel and David do not. David meets and falls in love with Vera Revendal, a non-Jewish Russian aristocrat who fled into exile because of her anti-tsarist activities and now works at a New York City settlement house. David and Vera's relationship suffers a near-fatal blow when they discover that Vera's father led the pogrom that killed David's family. Even so, the two stand together as lovers at the play's end, a sign that murderous racial and religious prejudices can be purged away in the American melting pot.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the playwright, Israel Zangwill, was a British Jew who visited, but never lived in, the United States. Like his character David Quixano, Zangwill was not traditionally observant and married a non-Jew. Nevertheless, Zangwill resisted readings of his play as pro-assimilationist. The melting pot which his play celebrated was not, he insisted, "assimilation or simple surrender [of minorities] to the dominant type" but rather "an all-round give-and-take" across cultures. Thus "the Jew may be Americanized and the American Judaized." Such cultural exchanges, Zangwill believed, would tend toward social equality between ethnic minorities and the majority, which would in turn lead to intermarriages; but Zangwill deemed marriages inadvisable between individuals committed to different religions. While he touted America's melting pot as one desirable solution to "the Jewish problem," Zangwill did not view it as the only desirable solution. At the same time he wrote The Melting Pot, he led the Jewish Territorial Organization (abbreviated ITO, from the organization's Yiddish name). Inspired by Zionism but dubious that Palestine could be reclaimed as the Jewish homeland, the ITO aspired to establish a new Jewish homeland via colonization in some other part of the world. As ITO president, Zangwill led a series of unsuccessful attempts to secure territory for an autonomous Jewish colony in Canada, Australia, Uganda, Angola, Libya, or Iraq.

1. Vera visits the Quixano home to invite David, a violinist, to perform at the settlement house where she works

David: Oh, Miss Revendal! Isn't that great! To play again at your settlement. I *am* getting famous.

Vera: But we can't offer you a fee. [...]

David: A fee! I'd pay a fee to see all those happy immigrants you gather together—Dutchmen and Greeks, Poles and Norwegians, Swiss and Armenians. If only you had Jews, it would be as good as going to Ellis Island.

Vera: (*Smiling.*) What a strange taste! Who on earth wants to go to Ellis Island?

David: Oh, I love going to Ellis Island, to watch the ships coming in from Europe and to think

that all those weary, sea-tossed wanderers are feeling what *I* felt when America first stretched out her great mother-hand to *me*!

Vera: (*Softly.*) Were you very happy?

David: It was heaven. You must remember that all my life I had heard of America—everybody in our town had friends there, or was going there, or got money orders from there. The earliest game I played at was selling off my toy furniture and setting up in America. All my life, America was waiting, beckoning, shining—the place where God would wipe away tears from off all faces. (*He ends in a half-sob.*)

Mendel: (*Rises, as in terror.*) Now, now, David, don't get excited. (*He approaches him.*)

David: To think that the same great torch of liberty which threw its light across all the broad seas and lands into my little garret in Russia is shining also for all those other weeping millions of Europe, shining wherever men hunger and are oppressed—

Mendel: (*Soothingly.*) Yes, yes, David. (*Laying hand on his shoulder.*) Now sit down and—

David: (*Unheeding.*) Shining over the starving villages of Italy and Ireland, over the swarming stony cities of Poland and Galicia, over the ruined farms of Roumania, over the shambles of Russia—

Mendel: (*Pleadingly.*) David!

David: Oh, Miss Revendal, when I look at our Statue of Liberty, I just seem to hear the voice of America crying: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest—rest—" (*He is now almost sobbing.*)

Mendel: Don't talk any more—you know it is bad for you.

David: But Miss Revendal asked—and I want to explain to her what America means to me.

Mendel: You can explain it in your American symphony.

Vera: (*Eagerly, to David.*) You compose?

David: (*Embarrassed.*) Oh, uncle, why did you talk of—? Uncle always— My music is so thin and tinkling. When I am *writing* my American symphony, it seems like thunder crashing through a forest full of bird songs. But next day—oh, next day! (*He laughs dolefully and turns away.*)

Vera: So your music finds inspiration in America?

David: Yes—in the seething of the Crucible.

Vera: The Crucible? I don't understand!

David: Not understand! You, the Spirit of the Settlement!

(He rises and crosses to her and leans over the table, facing her.)

Not understand that America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! "Here you stand, good folk," think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, "here you stand *(graphically illustrating it on the table)* in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these are the fires of God you've come to—these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American."

Mendel: I should have thought the American was made already—eighty millions of him.

David: Eighty millions! *(He smiles toward Vera in good-humored derision.)* Eighty millions! Over a continent! Why, that cockleshell of a Britain has forty millions! No, uncle, the real American has not yet arrived. He is only in the Crucible, I tell you—he will be the fusion of all races, the coming superman. Ah, what a glorious finale for my symphony—if only I can write it.

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2. Vera has just left the Quixano home after exchanging confessions of love with David

David: *(He throws his arms boyishly round his uncle.)* I am so happy.

Mendel: Happy?

David: She loves me—Vera loves me.

Mendel: Vera?

David: Miss Revendal.

Mendel: Have you lost your wits? *(He throws David off.)*

David: I don't wonder you're amazed. Maybe you think *I* wasn't. It is as if an angel should stoop down—

Mendel: *(Hoarsely.)* This is true? This is not some stupid Purim joke?

David: True and sacred as the sunrise.

Mendel: But you are a Jew!

David: Yes, and just think! She was bred up to despise Jews—her father was a Russian baron—

Mendel: If she was the daughter of fifty barons, you cannot marry her.

David: (*In pained amaze.*) Uncle! [...] You say that! You who have come to the heart of the Crucible, where the roaring fires of God are fusing our race with all the others.

Mendel: (*Passionately.*) Not *our* race, not your race and mine.

David: What immunity has our race? (*Meditatively.*) The pride and the prejudice, the dreams and the sacrifices, the traditions and the superstitions, the fasts and the feasts, things noble and things sordid—they must all into the Crucible.

Mendel: (*With prophetic fury.*) The Jew has been tried in a thousand fires and only tempered and annealed.

David: Fires of hate, not fires of love. That is what melts.

Mendel: (*Sneers.*) So I see.

David: Your sneer is false. The love that melted me was not Vera's—it was the love *America* showed me—the day she gathered me to her breast.

Mendel: (*Speaking passionately and rapidly.*) Many countries have gathered us. Holland took us when we were driven from Spain—but we did not become Dutchmen. Turkey took us when Germany oppressed us, but we have not become Turks.

David: These countries were not in the making. They were old civilizations stamped with the seal of creed. Here in this new secular Republic, we must look forward—

Mendel: (*Passionately interrupting.*) We must look backwards, too.

David: To what? To Kishineff? (*As if seeing his vision.*) To that butcher's face directing the slaughter? To those—?

Mendel: (*Alarmed.*) Hush! Calm yourself!

David: Yes, I will calm myself—but how else shall I calm myself save by forgetting all that nightmare of religions and races, save by holding out my hands with prayer and music toward the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God! The Past I cannot mend—its evil outlines are stamped in immortal rigidity. Take away the hope that I can mend the Future, and you make me mad.

Mendel: You are mad already—your dreams are mad—the Jew is hated here as everywhere—you are false to your race.

David: I keep faith with America. I have faith America will keep faith with us. (*He raises his hands in religious rapture toward the flag over the door.*) Flag of our great Republic, guardian of our homes, whose stars and—

Mendel: Spare me that rigmarole. Go out and marry your Gentile and be happy.

David: You turn me out?

Mendel: Would you stay and break my mother's heart? You know she would mourn for you as for a child of her own. Go! You have cast off the God of our fathers!

David: (*Thunderously.*) And the God of our children—does *He* demand no service?

(*Quieter, coming toward his uncle and touching him affectionately on the shoulder.*) You are right—I do need a wider world. (*Expands his lungs.*) I must go away.

* * *

3. David's finished symphony has been enthusiastically received as part of a concert at the settlement house; Mendel has been reconciled to David's desire to marry Vera; Vera and David stand on the roof of the settlement house as the concert concludes below them

Vera: (*They stand quietly hand in hand.*) Look! How beautiful the sunset is after the storm!

(*David turns. The sunset, which had begun to grow beautiful just after Vera's entrance, has now reached its most magnificent moment; below, there are narrow lines of saffron and pale gold, but above, the whole sky is one glory of burning flame.*)

David: (*Prophetically exalted by the spectacle.*) It is the fires of God round His Crucible. (*He drops her hand and points downward.*) There she lies, the great Melting Pot—listen! Can't you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth (*he points east*)—the harbor, where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian—black and yellow—

Vera: (*Softly, nestling to him.*) Jew and Gentile—

David: Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross—how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame! Here shall they all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. Ah, Vera, what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem, where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labor and look forward!

(*He raises his hands in benediction over the shining city.*)

Peace, peace, to all ye unborn millions, fated to fill this giant continent—the God of our *children* give you Peace.

(*An instant's solemn pause. The sunset is swiftly fading, and the vast panorama is suffused with a more restful twilight, to which the many gleaming lights of the town add the tender poetry of the night. Far back, like a lonely, beautiful star, twinkles over the darkening water the torch of the Statue of Liberty. From below comes up the softened sound of voices and instruments joining in "My Country, 'Tis of Thee." The curtain falls slowly.*)

Source: Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 33-38, 99-104, 198-200, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t3bz6sc9f>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Dramatic formatting condensed. To avoid textual clutter, ellipses are not used to indicate where text has been omitted immediately after character cues at the beginning of scene excerpts. A run-on sentence broken up. A verb tense emended in a stage direction (*has* → *had*) to better fit the context. In two instances, the word *only* relocated within a sentence to avoid misunderstanding of the intended meaning. British spellings Americanized, including in the quotations from the 1914 afterword that appear in the shaded headnote. The place-name spellings *Roumania* and *Kishineff* retained from the source publication. Punctuation modernized. The word *Purim*, always italicized in the source to mark it as foreign, has been converted here to roman type. Elevating capitalizations retained from the source publication for *Crucible*, *Melting Pot*, *Spirit of the Settlement*, *Republic* (referring to the United States), *Republic of Man*, *Kingdom of God*, *Past*, *Future*, *Peace*, and divine pronouns; however, *settlement* by itself and *finale*, both capitalized in the source, have been converted to lowercase. In line with modern conventions for capitalization in titles, *'tis* is capitalized here in “My Country, 'Tis of Thee,” although it is lowercase in the source publication. The use of lowercase for colors used as racial labels (*black*, *yellow*), but the capitalizing of other ethnic labels (*Celt*, *Latin*, *Slav*, etc., including *Gentile*), replicates the source.

These edited excerpts from Zangwill’s play are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

See also: The quotations from Zangwill that appear in the shaded headnote—clarifying his views on assimilation, cultural exchange, and intermarriage—are taken from an afterword that he wrote for the 1914 edition of the published play: Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 199-214 (esp. 203, 207, 208-209), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/cool.ark:/13960/t2z32cn78>. As examples of American minorities contributing to the national culture, Zangwill cites the adoption of foreign words into English and the popularity among whites of ragtime, a musical style originating among African Americans.

In that same afterword, Zangwill predicts that dread of marriage between blacks and whites will gradually ease in US society, so that “even upon the negro, the ‘Melting Pot’ of America will not fail to act in a measure as it has acted on the Red Indian, who has found it almost as facile to mate with his white neighbors as with his black.” Zangwill adds, however: “This is not to deny that the prognathous face is an ugly and undesirable type of countenance, or that it connotes a lower average of intellect and ethics, or that white and black are as yet too far apart for profitable fusion. Melanophobia, or fear of the black, may be pragmatically as valuable a racial defense for the white as the counter-instinct of philoleucosis, or love of the white, is a force of racial uplifting for the black” (205-206; punctuation emended for readability and British spellings Americanized, but the capitalizing or lowercasing of racial labels replicates the source).



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