

Understanding Compassion: On *The Iceman Cometh*

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Abstract

In O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, we meet another kind of family, seventeen roomers in Harry Hope's saloon who sustain their lives by whiskey and pipe dreams. They all try and help one another, depend on each other, and in fact, their sense of family supports them as they sing the refrains of songs, boast of their glorious past, and wait for the brilliant future that will never come. Through dealing with O'Neill's tragic experience, his viewpoint of the theatre, backdrop of *The Iceman Cometh*, production of *The Iceman Cometh*, the value of strong emotions in tragedy and modern life characterized by repetitious talks, wrangling, laughing and fighting, this paper aims to point out that O'Neill is very close to those social outcasts of his old days at Jimmy the Priest's and there is no doubt that O'Neill portrays them from his loving memory with deep sympathy and understanding.

Key words: Emotion; Understanding; Compassion

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INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill is the foremost playwright and the founder of the American theatre, there has not been any dramatist to equal him. During his lifelong artistic career, O'Neill depicts the tragic facets of life, focuses on the social problem that afflicts us and functions as the moral guide as well as the spokesman for the poor and

downtrodden. Eugene O'Neill transcends the barriers of time and place. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936 because of vital energy, sincerity, and intensity of feeling, stamped with an original conception of tragedy in his dramatic works.

O'Neill thought himself as a "poetic dramatist." Strong emotion is one of essential qualities for a poetic dramatist. From O'Neill's early expressionistic experiments to his late realistic masterpieces, emotion is deeply rooted in O'Neill's plays and works as an attempt at once to express or even to alleviate the suffering of a mind in conflict. O'Neill tries to convey pity, understanding, compassion, despair and hope of modern man in his plays, of which *The Iceman Cometh* is a typical example.

The Iceman Cometh is the heart-broken cry of a soul that has lost faith in man who appears to have taken a devastating path, in which despair becomes hope and hope despair. The yelling, altercation and scoffing, the drunk state, dirty words and funny joke—all are so important to the merciless life. We fail to find any solution to the uncontrollable power behind man's fate. We can only view these people with compassion and understanding.

SOURCE OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S INTENSE FEELING

Eugene O'Neill was born on October 16, 1888 in a hotel room in Times Square. Eugene O'Neil has endured almost all the bitterness of human life since his birth.

O'Neill's memories of childhood were unpleasant. His mother was a drug addict. Young Eugene spent almost five years in keeping his father company on tour for playing the leading role of *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

From the age of seven to thirteen, O'Neill studied at St. Aloysius Catholic school, a boarding school, suffering from deep loneliness and isolation. In the fall of 1906, he was enrolled by Princeton University. O'Neill hated

conventional lifestyle. Leading a more unconventional life than that of most of his generation, O'Neill was expelled from Princeton.

At 21, he was hastily and secretly married to a young woman who had become pregnant by him. A month after the birth of his first child, O'Neill was on the Charles Racine bound for Buenos Ayres.

After leaving Princeton and prior to his confinement in a sanatorium for tuberculosis, O'Neill was a homeless vagabond and outcast; he plunged into alcohol, lived in cheap hotels and frequented brothels.

O'Neill swallowed all the tablets of veronal and attempted suicide at Jimmy the Priest's in 1912. Shortly after his resuscitation, O'Neill contracted tuberculosis.

O'Neill was married three times and had three children. Tragedy also followed and haunted his family members. Eugene, Jr, the son of O'Neill's first marriage, depended excessively on alcohol. After losing the radio and television jobs, Eugene, Jr, lived without an objective. He slashed himself with a razor and bled to death on September 25, 1950. Shane, the son of O'Neill's second marriage, was arrested on a charge of heroin possession in 1948.

O'Neill's early gold mining experiences, sailing adventures, sickness and poverty life in quite long period of time make a large-scale possibility for him to gain a mutual understanding of the lower stratum of humanity. O'Neill's Irish gloominess in personal quality and his broad streak of sentimentality were good at his keen perception of human psyche. Both physical and moral sufferings in O'Neill's life enable him to write the sorrows and pains of life with "blood and tears" in his plays.

O'NEILL'S VIEWPOINT OF THE THEATRE

In the early period of the 20th century, American theatre was in pursuit of commercial interests. Entertainment plays were popular on Broadway.

It was apparently that O'Neill's acquaintance with modern European drama that opened O'Neill's eyes to his own possibilities. The discovery of Strindberg further inspired him to write for the theatre.

In O'Neill's eyes, what the superficial American theatre lacked is "A powerful emotional ecstasy, approaching a kind of frenzy (Floyd, 1985, p.509)," —the quality O'Neill saw in Strindberg. This, he said, was what he wanted to confide to his audience.

BACKDROP OF *THE ICEMAN COMETH*

In the early 20th century, America became the monopoly capitalism country, and entered the period of imperialism. High-developed science-technologies threatened the traditional moral and religious belief. Machine, material and money became the power that dominated mankind. As a result, the advancement of industrialism, science-technologies and commercialism motivated American

dream, which referred to the occupation of tremendous wealth and all the possibilities.

O'Neill perceives and records the phenomenon, the drive to attain wealth and the morality distorts. Not only in his plays and poems but also in his public statements, O'Neill viewed America as sick spiritually:

I'm going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure. It's the greatest failure because it was given everything, more than any other country Its main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside of it This was really said in the Bible much better. We are the clearest example of 'For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul (Floyd, 1985, p.470)?

Although Eugene O'Neill lived in a world of pragmatism, he made great efforts to search for the meaning of life. O'Neill stated: "All of my plays even when most materialistic, are for me, in their spiritual implications, a search and a cry in the wilderness (Floyd, 1985, p.306)."

PRODUCTION OF *THE ICEMAN COMETH*

O'Neill went through two world wars. The calamity-ridden First World War not only mercilessly smashed the prosperous, peaceful and progressive western world, but also completely disintegrated the value system of the ascendant period of the capitalism and afflicted great delusion on human psyche. In 1940 the Second World War intensified in Europe. All people felt that a strange shadow hung broad and heavy over their lives. The atrocity of Hitler made O'Neill desperate and lonely as never before in his life.

The Iceman Cometh was written in 1939, the period when O'Neill had been depressed and pessimistic owing to the dreadful and monstrous evil of World War II. The gloomy mood of 1939 closest to that of 1911 and 1912 in O'Neill's life. In 1912, life of impoverishment at Jimmy the Priest's and the uncertain future and the longing for death had driven O'Neill to attempt suicide.

Although O'Neill completed *The Iceman Cometh* in 1940, he did not approve of putting it on the stage until 1946. O'Neill cited his illness and the gruesome political situation as the reasons for the delay of its production. He deemed that *The Iceman Cometh* is "the best" play he had ever done.

The production of *The Iceman Cometh* caused a sensation among the viewers. Although the complexity, ambiguity as well as richness of *The Iceman Cometh* got focus attention among the reviewers, the emotional pattern of *The Iceman Cometh* is a comparatively less explored area.

The Iceman Cometh is such a work that eulogizes the "hopeless hopes", and shows O'Neill's deep solicitudes for man's living situation, impasse and disillusionment. The important role of emotion is also typically embodied in *The Iceman Cometh*.

VALUE OF STRONG EMOTIONS

In *On the Sublime*, the ancient Greek philosopher Longinus emphasizes that strong emotion is one of the five sources of the sublime.

Like Longinus, O'Neill also puts emphasis on the importance of emotions, and found it superior to rational thinking. In an early interview in *American Magazine*, he highly championed the value of emotions in the theatre: "Our emotions are instinctive..... They are the deep undercurrent, whereas our thoughts are often only the small individual surface reactions. Truth usually goes deep. So it reaches you through your emotions (O'Neill, 1988)."

UNDERSTANDING COMPASSION

The Iceman Cometh is O'Neill's loving tribute to the close friends he had made at Jimmy the Priest's in 1911-1912. The people O'Neill met at Jimmy the Priest's, lived at the bottom rung of society: thugs, pickpockets, writers, artists, red-faced coachmen, prostitutes, gamblers.....—whom his wife Carlotta sarcastically called his "blood brothers".

The Iceman Cometh is a play in four acts and sets in a hotel on the down West Side of New York, selling the cheap five-cent whiskey. The action covers two days and nights in early summer, 1912.

The prototypes of the characters in *The Iceman Cometh* were those vagrants of O'Neill's poverty-stricken days at Jimmy the Priest's and it is pretty sure that O'Neill presents his old pals with intense sympathy and deep understanding and strong passion.

O'Neill draws our attention to the seventeen social outcasts who imprison themselves in Harry Hope's bar. Harry Hope's bar, the setting of the play, located on the west side of New York—its two windows were so spotted with grime that one cannot see through them. Larry Slade, the only lodger in Harry Hope's place who is sober, offers the following description of the saloon: "It's the no chance saloon. It's Bed Rock Bar, The End of the Line Café. The Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller! Don't you notice the beautiful calm in the atmosphere? That's because it's the last harbor..... (O'Neill, 1988, p.578)" The bar is the refuge for them to keep away from the painful reality, to hide themselves in the past or in an illusionary world.

As the scene begins, a picture of drunkards lingering in Hope's barroom is clearly present to the readers. Their dialogues mix with alcohols and are concerned with alcohols.

Besides drinking, immersing themselves in pipe dreams is another important activity of the seventeen male characters' life. If drinking makes them apathetic, pipe dream is their spiritual support, a line of sunshine in their meaningless life. Each social pariah has his own dream: Harry Hopes plans to get back into political life. Ed Mosher wishes to work in the circus again. Hugo

Kalmar desires to regain the initiative in the "revolution". Lewis speaks of the settlement of a family estate. Jimmy Tomorrow hungers for going back to work in the publicity department of a newspaper, and so on.

At the outset of Act I, Larry describes the sleepers with sarcasm in tone but at the same time showing his affection for them. Captain Lewis and general Wetjoen served opposing armies in the Boer war (1899-1902), met at the St. Louis Fair, became friends, and often happily recalled the brave days in South Africa when they tried to murder each other. Jimmy Tomorrow was a correspondent for some English paper. Harry Hope has become a Hermit since his wife died twenty years ago, he has no interest in the outside world and is satisfied with life. Ed Mosher, Harry Hope's brother-in-law, who once worked for a circus. Pat McGloin was a one-time police lieutenant. Joe Mott was a one-time proprietor of a Negro gambling house.....As Larry's introduction is over; most of the sleeping vagrants open their eyes. From now on, we will feel amused when they open their mouths because their individual pipe dream is delusion in illusions. The most ironic thing is that they can see the deception in others' pipe dreams but not in his own.

These innocent creatures are unfortunate outcasts of society as well as of one-time heroes. These people indulge in their brilliant past and the prostitutes boast of their tricks with their customers. It is at once terrible and absurd.

This continues till Willie starts introducing himself pompously with affected quotations and legal terms. His self-introduction ends ironically when he speaks of whiskey: "Sir reminds me —and I hope, reminds you —that when meeting a Prince the customary salutation is 'What'll you have?' (O'Neill, 1988, p.586)". Soon this "Prince" starts singing, rapping and tapping.

In the following situations, the bums become restless, shout, intimidate, rebuke one another and make offensive remarks; but when they are reminded that they are preparing for Hope's birthday party, they feel guilty and return to normal.

The coming of Hickey will break their monotonous living. He is also good for free drinks and a few laughs. For almost the first act, they wait for his coming, talking about his well-known joke—which he left his wife in bed with the iceman. Such anxious anticipation of his coming takes on some significance. Willie Oban, the most educated of the bums, says: "Let us join in prayer that Hickey, the Great Salesman will soon arrive bringing the blessed bourgeois long green! Would that Hickey or death would come (O'Neill, 1988, p.587)."

At this moment Hickey enters. He is about fifty, a little under medium height, with a round face and bright blue eyes. To everyone's surprise, Hickey announces that he has given up drink. He has decided that his aim now is to help all his old pals to turn their individual pipe dreams into action.

“All I want is to see you happy (O’Neill, 1988, p.616).” declares Hickey at the close of Act I ; but in Act II we see what happiness he has brought —a strained gaiety in the conduct of everyone.

In Act two, it is midnight of the same day. The room has been prepared for a party. The rest of the room has been cleared for dancing. In the midnight, the whole gang come together to celebrate Harry Hope’s birthday. Hickey reappears with packages. The cometh of Hickey stirs a commotion in the bar. Though they expect a funny cordial man, the man who brings the cold touch of death to the comical scene becomes a skeleton at the feast. Hickey continues to persuade them to get rid of their pipe dreams. He convinces, tempts, or encourages each one to attempt to act on the dream, to create a real tomorrow.

Act III is around the mid-morning of Harry Hope’s birthday. The atmosphere becomes more anxious and bellicose. They are no longer jolly fellows; they are so nervous that facing reality was like a lamb to the slaughter. The extensive nervousness is terribly revealed in Jimmy’s throwing wine in Hickey’s face before he leaves Hope’s exit. To cover up their weak wills, they desperately grip one excuse after another which is almost a microcosm of man’s inventing defense. Hugo too realizes that his love of the proletariat is a camouflage of his aristocratic sense of excellence; consequently, he cannot sleep or become intoxicated now, whereas earlier he could not wake up.

After a lot of persuasion, Harry Hope, who has not left his house since the death of his wife, Bessie, twenty years ago, decides to wander around the town tomorrow. Hope sets forth but does not walk across the street. They all make the attempt and they all fail and come back by night.

Facing the real society, they find they can only be kept alive by alcohol and pipe dreams. Instead of despair, they keep their lives with illusions again. Only in the world of illusion can they find the meaning of life and survive in the cracks.

In Act IV, the same setting as Act I, 1:30 A.M. of the next day, with a new arrangement of tables. These vagrants sit still in a trance-like state. As Hickey points out, they are self-loathing creatures with dead indifferent souls. Only Parritt is toured and responds to Hickey’s cajoling in the form of confession.

Hickey reenters, he looks around and rebukes all the drunks because they are complaining. Again he speaks about facing the truth and continues with his confession. Of course the play’s most important love–hate relationship is Hickey with his wife Evelyn. Anxious to destroy the pipe dreams of all the lodgers at Harry Hope’s, Hickey, however has his own pipe dream, that he loved his wife. His love is a lie—he hated his wife for the guilt she made him feel.....He killed her to get rid of her forgiveness and love and his own guilt because he cannot face the truth of his hatred. He says: “Good God, I couldn’t have said that! if I did. I’d gone insane! Why, I loved Evelyn better than anything else in life (O’Neill, 1988, p.701)!

To Hickey, killing Evelyn was the only way to free himself from his eternal guilt and commit the utmost self-punishment. For him, to commit murder was to commit suicide. He has already called the police at the time of his confession. Hickey is arrested and leaves the bar.

Realizing that life is virtually negligible and there is no hope, Larry sits soberly and longs for death. The other roomers begin harsh and unmusical sing—everybody indulges in his own song, which reflects the state of human being. We cannot look down upon them, nor can we support Larry and Parritt’s suicidal behaviours.

Life in Harry Hope’s mingles with yelling, wrangling, jittering and ridiculing, the loud laugh and joking. We fail to see any solution to the madness. Caught in the deadlock, he can neither act nor escape and he will either to live or to die.

O’Neill displays the state of man from one to another, from superiority to inferiority, from hope to despair, from illusion to reality, from torment to teasing.

CONCLUSION

The Harry Hope’s bar is the miniature of the American society. By depicting the life of the social outcasts, O’Neill reveals the so much misery and vice of the lower stratum of humanity, the weakness and the greatness of human psyche and the living dilemma of the western world after World War I. He prefers life rather than death in *The Iceman Cometh*. What O’Neill celebrates in *The Iceman Cometh* is the tragic, comic, resplendent reality of life. O’Neill aims to probe the meaning of life and focuses on the spiritual origin of man’s tragic fate.

There are moments in the play, he remarks, “.....that suddenly strip the secret soul of a man stark naked, not in cruelty or moral superiority, but with an understanding compassion which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself. Those moments are for me the depth of tragedy (Manheim, 1996).”

The Iceman Cometh awakens our empathy, compassion and understanding. Instead of the tragic emotion of commiseration and fear, our response is a mixture of pity and lament.

By showing one of the prominent traits of his work: an “understanding compassion”, O’Neill enables *The Iceman Cometh* to be a moving play.

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