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**Illusion and Reality in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman
Cometh***

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Abstract

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In "The Iceman Cometh", O'Neill presents a group of characters who withdraw from society because of their failure to cope with its demands and find in Harry Hope's inn a refuge which protects them from outer threats. They spend their time in drinking alcohol and deceiving themselves that tomorrow they will prove that they are not failures. Each of them dreams of going out, looking for a job or getting their old jobs back. However, they do not put their promises to action but they go on dreaming. Even Harry Hope, the owner of the inn who hasn't set a foot outside his inn for twenty years dreams that one day he will walk out and take part in the social activities of his city as he used to do in the past. The women characters are also building a world of dreams and illusions to compensate for the harsh life they lead. These women are street walkers who have been manipulated and exploited badly by the bartender Rocky but they keep on saying that they are only 'tarts' who like to pass a good time, while Cora dreams of getting married and settling in a farm.

Those characters are waiting for Hickey, a hardware businessman who usually comes to the inn and pays for their drinks. But his sudden change leads to the collapse of their false world. He tells them that he does not need alcohol anymore because he has been liberated from his pipe dream and he comes this time with the task of helping each one of them to free himself from his pipe dream. They received his change with resentment and confusion, when he forces each character to go out and face the world, they come back horrified, and after their failure to put their promises to action, he declares his real intention which is to strip them of their dreams and illusions because this will give them the peace of mind which he gained, and he goes on to the revelation that he killed his wife because he loved her and he wanted to liberate her from the illusion that one day he will stop drinking and be a good husband, but suddenly, this leads him to the realization that he hated his wife and this was the real motive for killing her. Startled by this revelation, the characters think that Hickey is insane and they finally regain their composure and their illusion. Hickey's argument has an effect on two characters, Parriitt, the young radical who realizes that he was motivated by hatred in betraying his mother and with Larry's help, learns that only by killing himself he can ever become free of her.

In this play, O'Neill presents his viewpoint that getting rid of illusions and pipe dreams doesn't bring contentment to man, on the contrary, without illusions life looks bleaker and the future fearful. But living in this way will change man into a passive creature and it will strip him of his will to change things and to direct his life. Therefore, facing reality with all its contradictions and disappointments is more constructive than to bask in dreams and illusions.

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Eugene O'Neill is one of the American dramatists who sheds light on man's struggle to prove his identity in a society in which the human values wane gradually to give place to the materialistic values. In O'Neill's plays, man's attempts to rise in a materialistic and competitive society faces failure as other forces, greater than him try to intimidate him and to deprive him of any chance to achieve his goals. In this struggle man always loses, and the loss is presented in the plays in a variety of ways, for example, man's failure is expressed in his surrender and in his withdrawal from society as he is aware consciously or unconsciously of his weakness, O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* is an example of man's failure to establish himself in this world and as a result, he retreats into a world of illusion which represents an alternative milieu in which he can convince himself of his own worthiness. Through presenting such characters, O'Neill sheds light on the evils of the modern society which imposes its pressures and demands on man without giving him a chance to prove himself as a human being, in the process of development, the human side in man is neglected, and man becomes a machine-like figure, which leads finally to his final collapse.

The events of the play takes place in 1912 in Harry Hope's inn. It is an unpleasant and dirty place. The floor and the ceiling are full of dust and straw. The tables and the chairs are crammed in the place. There is not enough light and the windows are not clean therefore they do not allow much light to come in. However, the characters find in this place a suitable shelter from the outer world. Many characters comment on this miserable place, Larry, for example, tells Parritt that Harry's saloon is "the last harbor. No one here has to worry about where they're going next"(1, p.27), later on, he describes the place as "a graveyard"(1,p.28).The lodgers find in the place a suitable atmosphere where they feel themselves free from any kind of commitment which the outer world imposes upon them. Through presenting such characters, O'Neill criticizes the American society .It is a cruel society, in which the

human values like compassion, sympathy and kindness retreat to be replaced by the new values of this materialistic and competitive society. The society imposes great pressures on its individuals who should exert great efforts in order to conform to the newly established values of this society. In this process, man degenerates and when he fails to cope with the demands of society, he finds consolations in the pipe dreams, which alleviate his pains and make him; live with the deceptive hope that his pipe dreams will come true one day. This is the world which O'Neill described in the play. The characters have a feeling of alienation which comes as a result of their failure to cope with the demands of society.

O'Neill presents in this play a group of derelicts who share a feeling of despair which, in its turn, stems from their low self esteem. Larry Slade is one of the characters who appeared in the opening scene. He is an anarchist, a member of a political group which he left long time ago. He had a great enthusiasm about the movement, but, gradually, his faith in it waned as he discovers the contradiction between the principles which this movement called for and the actual behaviors of its members. His disappointment leads him to this despair. He thinks that death is the only thing that he is waiting for after he lost all his dreams:

Rocky: I s'pose you don't fall for no pipe dreams?

Larry: Mine are all dead and buried behind me.

What is left for me is the comforting fasct that death is a fine long sleep, and I'm damned tired, and it can't come too soon for me.(I,P.16)

Larry has a sharp awareness of the absurdity of his own existence, but he thinks that living in isolation and detachment is better than being involved in a movement whose members are not really committed to the principles they call for:

Larry :I'm through with the movement long since I saw men didn't want to be saved from themselves, for that would mean that they'd have to give up greed, and they'll never pay the price for liberty. So I said to the world, God bless all here, and may the best man win and die of gluttony! And I took a seat in the grandstand of philosophical detachment to fall a sleep observing the cannibals do their death dance.(I,P.16)

The movement is a microcosm of the world, and by criticizing the movement, Larry is criticizing society indirectly. It is noteworthy to

mention that the play was written after the second world war. O'Neill noticed that the war brought destruction, institutional prostitution and corruption to the society, therefore, the movement to which Larry belonged represents society in general. According to Travis Bogard, O'Neill plays present the dilemma of the modern man in a materialistic society which

distorts and deforms the individuals' spirits, destroying man's creative potential by divorcing him from those qualities of humanity which give him dignity and the sense of manhood. The materialistic system is his enemy and the core conflict of the fable is his battle with the exponents of that system.¹

The other characters in the play are also victims of this materialistic society, after facing traumatic experiences, those characters have been neglected and rejected by society which insists on the principles of conformity and competition. These characters look for consolation, for something which alleviates their pains, and they find this consolation in their pipe dreams. Harry Hope, the owner of the bar is one of the characters who avoids making any real contact with the world outside his bar. He never goes out of the inn since his wife's death, twenty years ago. He justifies this by saying that his wife's death has a painful and a paralyzing effect on him:

Harry: Twenty years, and I've never set foot out of this house since the day I buried her. Didn't have the heart. Once she'd gone, I lost all ambition. Without her nothing seemed worth the trouble. (I, P.49)

Then, he convinces himself that he will take a walk around the ward and try to see his old friends again. Harry is avoiding the fact that he hasn't made any real effort to change his life, but instead of taking responsibility for his failure, he convinces himself that one day he will do something to change his passive existence. He hides his defenselessness in his angry disputes with the lodgers.

There are other characters who share the place with Harry and who try to get rid of their feeling that they are failures by living in a world of illusion. Willie Oban is one of those characters. He was a Harvard law alumnus who suffers because of the scandal that his father aroused which

brings disgrace to the family. He leaves the college after that and withdraws from people to live in Hop's inn. He loses his self confidence and he couldn't cope with the situation in a proper way. Though he has the feeling that he is a failure, he tries to soothe the pain which he feels with the dream that one day he will practice law and he tells Pat McGloin that he will help him to prove his innocence in the court. Cecil Lewis is another lodger who was once a captain of British infantry is another character who finds in the dreams a substitute for reality, he remembers the battles that he witnessed in the past. He promises Harry that he will pay his room rent soon. He tells Wetjoen, a one-time leader of a Boer commando, that he will take him on a trip to England, but Wetjoen has another pipe dream, he wants to go back to his country again.

Joe Mott is another lodger who feels that he has been rejected by society because of his dark skin. He was a one time proprietor of a Negro gambling house and he dreams that one day he will open his gambling house again. Through presenting the suffering of this character, O'Neill is shedding light on the problem of racial discrimination which is one of the problems of the American society. This problem exposes the superficiality of this society which depends on appearances in evaluating people and their roles in life. Ed Mosher is another lodger who, like other characters finds in the world of dreams a better substitute for reality. He tries to convince himself and others that one day he will get back to his old job in the circus. Another character who shares the others their dreamy world is Pat McGloin, a former police lieutenant who has been fired after being caught red-handed, he thinks that one day he will open his case again in the court and he will prove his innocence in the court. James Cameron(Jimmy Tomorrow) is another lodger who tries to deceive himself that he will be successful again as a correspondent to one of the journals. Through these characters O'Neill portrayed a picture of the human frailty. It is a gloomy picture which, according to Sievers, "so bereft of the dynamic promise of betterment for the human race which modern psychology invasions."²

Even the women characters in the play live in the same world of illusion. They are Pearl, Margie and Cora, all of them are prostitutes. They have been exploited by Rocky who forces them to give him money. They continue to deceive themselves that they are not prostitutes but "tarts", who like to have a good time. Through presenting such characters, O'Neill is attacking the American society with the values it calls for, but beneath this bright appearance lies the gloomy reality. Those women characters have been forced to choose prostitution as a job after being denied a chance to earn their living without losing their dignity.

Cora is the most pathetic characters of all the three women because while the other two women try to convince themselves that there is no way to escape from this painful situation, Cora dreams of marrying Chick , the other bartender and to settle with him in a farm. Even Rocky, the bartender, lives with the illusion that he is not a pimp though he exploits Pearl and Margie and forces them to go out looking for men. In this respect, Glenda Frank points out that prostitution and bartenders are

emblematical of all failed dreamers. They are the saddest group; we may not dismiss them as we do the comical chorus nor find elevation in their stories, as we do with the tragic characters . They are distinctly young, non with the possible exception of Chuck Morello is alcoholic ,and they demonstrate a work ethic. They function in teams so the germ of a new community is in place, and they recognize the dim future that lies in wait but they cannot change.³

When Cora and Chuck try to live in the illusion that they are different from the other prostitutes and the typical bartenders, they fail to keep their illusions that they will get married and settle in a farm. This brings O’Neill’s message that there is no future for the people who live in dreams.

The place in which the characters live symbolizes a protective shelter. It reflects their unconscious yearning to return to the passive existence of the fetus in the womb, but in the life of each of the characters there is no growth or development like that of the fetus . It is a static life in which the place is like a tomb rather than a womb in which they bury their dreams and ambitions. They seek protection “from the need to accept a personal history and a social role; but it is equally a static, enclosed world which denies any development. It is a reified world which has a deconstructing effect on character.”⁴

In spite of their deep- rooted feeling of failure and inferiority, they give many promises that they will try to achieve something in the future. Virginia Floyd argues that the discussion between Larry and Parritt on anarchism “summarizes O’Neill’s social statements : neither ‘ism’ is able to provide its followers with sufficient hope for the present, as a consequence, they retreat into a world of ‘tomorrow’ pipe dreams”⁵In act one, O’Neill succeeds in depicting those characters who reach into a state of disillusionment and spiritual void which comes as a result of

living in a capitalistic system in which there is a wide gap between the ordinary working man and the rich people who manipulate them. The new values of the capitalist society shaped the mentality of the American citizen and consequently, the religious and moral values wane to be replaced by “the unchristian evolutionary thesis of the ‘survival of the fittest’”⁶

The characters spend their time in drinking wine, in fact, whenever they wake up, they ask for wine. It helps those character to maintain their pipe dreams and to accentuate their withdrawal. In a study of alcoholism, Edward Strecker and Francis Chambers point out that heavy drinking is an expression of an “unconscious desire to regress.”⁷ This regression is a way of “escaping the burdens of maturity and retreat to childish levels of mentality.”⁸ This regression can be seen clearly in some characters like Hugo whose empty slogans and unstable behavior seem to indicate this kind of regression . When Larry introduces the lodgers of the inn to the new comer Parritt, he tells him that nobody takes Hugo seriously suggesting that he has been treated rather like a child , someone who cannot be blamed for his behavior.

Another character who displays similar childish regression is Willie Oban . When he sings “The New England Folk Ballad” (1, pp.40-41), he seems like a naughty adolescent. Harry treats him like a child when he tells him that he will punish him if he does not stop singing. Willie’s visible behaviors are “Often those of withdrawal rather than of intoxication.”⁹ Rocky’s early reference to “de [sic] Brooklyn boys”(1, P.14) is a key to understand Willie’s condition. When Willie was yelling, he awakens Hope and the others, Rocky explains to Hope that the Brooklyn boys are after him, he means that Willie “is suffering from delirium tremens.”¹⁰ The other characters show anxiety, signs of depression and illusions. It is important to note that when each character wakes up, he asks for another glass of wine in order to “ward off the effects of withdrawal as well as to enable one to face the world.”¹¹ In fact, the characters need alcohol because it helps them to alleviate the terror they feel of facing life and to forget ,even for short moments, the feeling that they are not strong enough to cope with it. Larry comments on this :

Larry: All I know is I’m sick of life! I’m drowned and
contented the bottom of a bottle. Honor or dishonor,
faith or treachery are nothing to me but opposites of
the same stupidity which is ruler and king of life,
and in the end they rot into dust in the same grave.
All things are the same meaningless joke for

me, for they grin at me from the one skull of death.
(I, 128)

Whitman found that there is a relationship between the characters' fear of existence and alcohol. He points out that "afraid of life, and hating it, but equally afraid of death, men try to find at least temporary escape or forgetfulness by hiding at the bottom of a bottle"¹² Their fear of facing life led them to live in a world of illusion which they choose as an alternative for the real world.

All the lodgers in Hope's inn are waiting for Hickey, a traveling businessman who visits the inn. The characters like him because he encourages their drinking habit. He tells them that he couldn't drink much this time because he has changed. The other characters are full of resentment as they listen to him while he tries to convince them that he doesn't have any pipe dreams now because he decides to face life as it is. He tells them that they should do the same and face life:

Hickey: I'm not trying to put anything over on you. It's just
that I know now from experience what a lying pipe
dream can do to you-and how damned relieved
and contented with yourself you feel when you're
rid of it. (*Iceman*, 80)

While trying to convince the other characters to quit their pipe dreams and to face life as he does, Hickey finds himself trapped in a new pipe dream. Now he dreams that he will be the reformer, the one who will change those characters into the better. After his arrival, he begins to give each character pieces of advice about the best way to get rid of their fears and to start a new life. As he talks to other characters, Hickey reveals some painful experiences in his childhood. He tells them that he had a very domineering father who treated him badly. His father was "a preacher in the sticks of Indiana" (I, P.76), he, though unconsciously, tries to re-enact the role of the preacher, which is a reminiscence of his childhood experiences. He reveals a desire to dominate and direct others, a role which he enjoys because it affirms his own worthiness. The other characters refuse this change in Hickey and they become antagonistic to his interferences in their lives, he threatens their false world as he "brings out the important latent truths which each character tries to hide throughout the play"¹³ Thus The characters' psychologies are revealed as they react to Hickey's presence. He represents a threat to their world of illusions. He forces each character to face the truth which each one tries hard to hide. He succeeds to break Parritt's defenses and deprives him of

the safety which he feels at the beginning which leads him to confess that he betrayed his mother. His confession is parallel to Hickey's confession of murdering his wife. Hickey tries to justify the act by claiming that his wife's death freed both of them of their pipe dreams:

Hickey: she always stuck up for me. She wouldn't believe the gossip or she'd pretend she didn't. No one could convince her I was no good. Evelyn was stubborn as all hell once she'd made up her mind. Even when I'd admit things and ask her forgiveness, she'd make excuses for me and defend me against myself.(I,P. 199)

Her love for him represents a kind of burden for Hickey and by killing her, he liberates himself from this burden and liberates her from the pipe dream that he would quit drinking and be a caring husband. Moreover, by killing his wife, Hickey released himself from the dream that one day he would be a good husband. His crime liberates both of their pipe dreams and he wants to help others to face reality and get rid of their pipe dreams as he does. When he convinces Hope to walk out of the inn, Hope obeys reluctantly, but when Hope comes back, he was terrified of facing the world. He creates the story of an automobile which was about to hit him, " That automobile...feller driving it must be drunk or crazy. He'd run right over me if I hadn't jumped .(Iceman,2, P.171) The other characters try to go out and to fulfill their promises but they failed, one after the other. Hickey leads them to realize the futility of their pipe dreams. Jimmy claims at the beginning of the play that his wife's infidelity and his failure in his job led him to alcohol. At the end of the play, he admits that his drunkenness led to his wife's betrayal and to his failure in his job as a correspondent, an admission which he wouldn't be able to reach to without Hickey:

Jimmy: It was all a stupid lie-my nonsense about tomorrow. Naturally, they would never give me my position back. I would never dream of asking them. It would be hopeless. I didn't resign. I was fired for drunkenness. And that was years ago. I'm much worse now. And it was absurd of me to excuse my drunkenness by pretending it was my wife's adultery that ruined my life. As Hickey guessed, I was a drunkard before that, long before. I discovered early in life that living frightened me when I was sober.(I,P. 195)

Joe and Wetjeon go out but they come back terrified of their real contact with the outer world. Hickey knows from the beginning that they will not be able to make their dreams come true. Hickey breaks the barriers between the world of illusion and reality, "By tonight, they'll all be here again" (*Iceman*, 169) but this time they will be stripped of their illusion, so what might seem as an altruistic task of helping the others to get rid of their illusions and to have a feeling of their own worthiness and efficiency as human beings turns out to be a destructive task of bringing the characters to realize the absurdity of their existence and of their worthlessness as human beings. He accentuates their suffering by bringing them to realize the futility of all their dreams:

Hickey: Can't you appreciate what you've got, for God's sake? Don't you know you're free now to be yourselves, without having to feel remorse or guilt, or lie to yourself about reforming tomorrow? Can't you see there is no tomorrow now? You're rid of it for ever! You've killed it! You don't have to care a damn about anything anymore! (I.P.192)

Hicky has done something different this time. Instead of saving the characters from their despair and encouraging them to face life positively, he convinces them that they should not cling to the illusion that they will change their lives to the better in the future. They should face the fact that they are failures. At the end of the play, the characters are drunk again but without the illusion of a better life in the future, and for Parritt death is the solution. He commits suicide by jumping off of the fire escape while the others are drunk and busy celebrating Harry's birthday. Larry is the only one who is oblivious to the noise and stare out of the window. He realizes that pushing Parritt to commit suicide is his 'admission that he has been a poseur and his recognition that his pipe dream is gone.'¹⁴ He is unable to join his friends now or to follow Parritt off the fire escape. He stands alone mourning his transformation and his new self-knowledge. "Be God,[sic] I'm the only convert to death Hickey made here. From the bottom of my coward's heart, I mean that now!" (*Iceman*, 222) Hickey brings death this time because he kills "what man needs for life, according to O'Neill, his pipe dreams and his ties to his fellow men, the only visible proof that he belongs."¹⁵

At the end the play presents O'Neill's pessimistic views of man's existence through the inhabitants of Harry's inn which represents a

microcosm of the human life. According to O'Neill, man is torn between sweet illusions and bitter reality. Man clings to the illusions as a better alternative when he feels powerless in a world bereft of positive values and real compassion.

NOTES

1. Travis Bogard , *Contours in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (New York:Oxford Press, 1972),. p.249.
2. W.David Sievers, Freud on Broadway, *A History of Psychology and the American Drama* (New York:Cooper Square Pub.,1970), p.129.
3. Glenda Frank, "*Fractured Comedy :A Glimpse into Eugene O'Neill's Tragic Constructs*" in *The Eugene O'Neill News Letter*, ed.Zander Brietzke, vol.27,2005
an internet source(www.eoneill.com/library/review/27.htm)
4. C.W. Bigsby , *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, vol.1.(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.87.
5. Virginia Floyd, ed.*Eugene O'Neill at work* (New York:Frederick Ungar Publishing,co.,1981), p.208.
6. Rod W.Horton and Herbert W. Edwards, *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought* (New York:AppletonCentury-Croffs, Inc.,1952), p.254.
7. Frederick Wilkins, "*Drinking and Drunkenness in 'The Iceman Cometh': A Response to Mary McCarthy*",in *The Eugene O'Neill news letter*, ed. Steven F. Bloom, vol.1x.No.1, Spring, 1985), p.3.An internet source(www.eoneill.com)

⁸. Ibid.p.3.

⁹. Ibid.

¹⁰. Ibid.

¹¹. Ibid.

¹². Robert Witman, "*O'Neill's Search for Language of the Theatre* 'in *O'Neill : A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Gassner (Englewood cliffs, N. j.: prentice-hall, Inc.,1964), p.73.

¹³. Gerald Weales, "*Eugene O'Neill :The Iceman Cometh*," in *Landmarks of American Writing*, ed.Henning Cohen (Washington D.C., :International Communication Agency, 1979), p.409.

¹⁴. Floyd, p.277.

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