



**ANTITHESIS BETWEEN ILLUSION AND REALITY IN O'NEILLS'
THE ICEMAN COMETH**

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ABSTRACT

Eugene O'Neill is a great writer who has credited to his account large number of one-act as well as full length plays. Most of his dramas unfold the tragedy of dreamers. He is the first American playwright to win Nobel Prize in literature. His plays concentrate on the problems of common people. Most of his plays are packed with violence and destruction and therefore he is considered as a tragic artist. He wrote materialistic plays that are fused with the elements of symbolism, illusion and melodrama and scenes of despair and frustration. It resulted from the improbability and inaction of characters which finally becomes a tragedy of modern life. The Icedman Cometh is one of the greatest plays in American drama. He completed its writing in 1936 but delayed its production due to the war. He wrote tragedies but they are different from the conventional or the Aristotelian form. The basic theme of his story is man's disorientation and unusual bafflement. His characters suffer from bewilderment 'from within and from without'. This happens due to the complete lack of faith in the spirituality, self-esteem and power of religion which ultimately resulted into a feeling of insecurity. Thus the characters suffer from anguish and fear. Life for them is nothing but a mechanical or impersonal process. They do not consider themselves as a part of universe and therefore a feeling of emptiness and not belonging is rooted deeply in their mind. This feeling overshadowed their natural being and they are caught into the violent trap of tragic tension. To get relief from this tragic tension, they starts dreaming and tries to escape from the reality of life. The illusion has become the real cause of their downfall. Almost all the characters from The Icedman Cometh are shown indulged in their own 'pipe dreams' which restricted them from doing anything and from facing the realities of life. Thus the escape from reality is the real cause of tragedy.

Dreams are an integral part of a human mind. It is a virtual reality different from the present open to visualization and change. But how many of these everyday episodes of virtual world do we try to establish into our present existence? The question differs on the very perception of an individual, some dream to build something real out of it, while some just enjoy the dream theatre inside their mind and never make it see the light of the day. It is said that an idle mind is a devils workshop. It is very often appears that man live into the world of



illusions where he projects him as something he wants to become, to work or rule where he wants to, get what he wants all at the cost of a imagination. He is trapped inside his own world covered with trepidation and hopelessness. He does not worry about his condition. But when his dreamland collides with reality, shattering them like glass he suffers from great anguish. However, he again takes the support of dreams to overcome the anguish.

Predicament of human beings necessarily forms a theme of O'Neill's plays. Unlike the classical tragic heroes his characters belong to the common, humble and downtrodden class of society. To escape from the chaos of life, his tragic heroes live life in their pipe dreams and enjoy the life of romantic illusions. The intensity of their suffering makes them cripple emotionally but they do not realize that their illusions are the real cause of their doom. Thus their fate is not determined by the external forces but by the characters inability to face the challenges of life. The inner will is too intense which opposed to the self-realization of a hero. The characters are not typecasts but act as an instrument in the exposure of his theme.

The Iceman Cometh is a four act play. Harry Hope is the chief character of the play and the action of the play takes place in his saloon and rooming house in Westside, New York. The scene is laid in the back room of the saloon early one morning in the summer of 1912. The back room is converted into a bar where number of hopeless derelicts, boozers and neglected people of society including Larry Slade, an Irish man of sixty years who is fed up with life, James Cameron, Joe Mott, a middle aged negro, Piet Wetjoen, a warrior who fought in the Boer war, Hugo Calmer, an anarchist, Captain Cecil Lewis, a former army officer, Pat McGloin, a former policeman and Ed Mosher, a former circus man and Willie Oban a haggard gathered in the bar room to submerge themselves into the glass of liquor. The bar belongs to Harry Hope who pretends to be deaf and blind before the wasted but in fact he is a very generous and kind-hearted and provides free accommodation and food to the vagrant outcasts. The play has autobiographical elements. O'Neill expresses his own experience through the characters. The year 1912 was the most critical year of his life. His father was an actor who performed in a commercial theatre. O'Neill was not happy with his father's career. To escape from the doleful atmosphere in the house and to entertain himself he used visit inns and brothels where he met people who were derelicts. There were women who could bring solace to these frustrated outcasts derelicts. He had frequented brothels and spent most of the nights in drunken state to escape from the harassing, pesky atmosphere of his family. The dramatist used these experiences, characters and situations in the making of his play.

According to R.S. Singh;

“By the time O'Neill had experimented with psychological realism, he realized his own life had been dramatic enough to be transmuted into art. It is almost axiomatic that an artist takes material from his personal experiences every time he creates a piece of art”.¹



When the play opens we see Rocky, the bartender, brings a bottle of whisky for Larry Slade. He told him that the owner of the bar decided not to provide free drinks to the drunkards from 'tomorrow' and if they need, they would have to pay for it. Larry replies that he and other inmates would pay up "beginning tomorrow". The word 'tomorrow' has been indigenously attached to their lives because it is their pipe dream. It is their illusion and becomes a part of their life. They live in an illusionary world and become members of 'Tomorrow Movement'. All of them make resolution that they would make a new start from tomorrow. Harry Hope, the owner of the saloon lives under the illusion that he loved his wife and his life has become hell due to her death twenty years ago. He has not gone out the saloon since her death and everyday decides to renew his social contacts tomorrow. Pat McGloin and Ed Mosher are his permanent roommates. Pat McGloin, an ex- police officer lives under the illusion that he would get back his job someday. Ed Mosher, an ex-circus man constantly thinks that he can go back to his old job any time as he wishes. General Wetjeon, a Dutch and Captain Lewis an Englishman hopes that they can go to their respective countries someday. Willie Oban, a law-graduate from Yale lives under the illusion that he would become a successful lawyer one day. Jimmy 'Tomorrow', the ex- news reporter always plans to give up drinking without making a start. Hugo, an ex-anarchist always talks about the revolution and dreams of drinking champagne under a willow tree. Larry's illusion is that he is disinterested in life and therefore waits for death to come. Joe Mott, an ex-owner of the gambling house dreams of starting a new gambling house. There are other minor characters like Chuck and Rocky who are the bartenders and three street walkers namely Cora, Pearl and Margie who likes to call themselves tarts and not whores. All these bums' drinks constantly which make them sleep and dream.

As they live comfortably in their dreams without making any attempt to bring to reality their desires; their tomorrow never comes. Harry Hope is very much acquainted with this fact. He knows very well that when their illusion will shatter they would endure the fact and may die. The bar mates then meets two visitors named Hickey, a travelling salesman and Don Parritt, whom nobody likes. Parritt is a young man of eighteen. He greets Larry but Larry appears indifferent to him. His entry discloses the past of Larry. When Larry was a member of Anarchist Movement, he befriended Parritt's mother. His mother was a faithful member of the movement. As the time passed, Larry had lost faith in the movement as he realized that the movement was just a 'pipe dream'. He also abused the members of the movement and called them corrupt. Even Parritt realized that the movement was just a pipe dream far from reality. Then he started moving with the prostitutes. When his mother objected, he put a quarrel with her. After the bomb explosion his mother was arrested. As he has to hide himself from the police, he comes to Larry. He thinks that the bar is the safe place to hide. Here he confesses that he has betrayed his mother and sold her to the police for money. He hopes that



Larry should give him punishment but Larry denied helping him. In fact Larry has become “a philosophical drunken bum”. He says,

“I have a strong hunch you’ve come here expecting something of me. I’m warning you, at the start, so there’ll be no misunderstanding, that I’ve nothing left to give, and I want to be left alone and I’ll thank you to keep your life to yourself. I feel you’re looking for some answer to something. I have no answer to give anyone, not even myself”.²

The other visitor of the bar is Hickey, a travelling salesman and a friend of Harry. All bar mates are waiting for his arrival. He comes for Harry’s birthday. He entertains all the occupants with his salesman talk and jokes and making comments on his wife. When Rocky has brought drinks for all of them, he announced that he has given up drinking. All the inmates realize that he is a changed man. This is because he gathered the courage to face the truth about him. He determined to throw away his pipe dream that had made his life miserable. Finally he got the solace and peace of mind. So this time he did not entertain them but decided to strip all of them out of their pipe dreams.

In Act II we see Hickey is busy in making arrangements for Harry’s birthday party. Instead of amusing them by telling jokes he is seen preaching them about meaning of life and ways to find peace. He tells them that his wife Evelyn is dead. In Act III on the following morning we see Hickey succeeds in convincing everyone to do today whatever they dreamed of doing tomorrow. He asked Harry to take a walk and see the world outside the saloon. He advised Willie and Jimmie to find the job they are longing for tomorrow. He asked Chuck and Cora to marry and settle in life. He told Cecil and Piet to make arrangements for their departure to their respective countries. Due to the effect of preaching, all their dreams get shattered and one by one they leave the saloon. Harry is back within two minutes swearing that he is nearly run by a car. Others also come back knowing that their tomorrow s dead. Hickey advised them that their time for lying down is over and they must find peace. He asked them to lead a life of peace and contentment which is only possible when they accept the world of reality ‘where no pipe dreaming can ever nag at you again’. It appears that Hickey is a deceitful preacher. In Act IV he tells his story of his changed attitude towards life. Once he was also a dreamer. He spent his days in drinking. His wife Evelyn had always forgiven him for his habit. When the burden of her forgiveness became unbearable and when he realized that he had hurting her feelings, a sense of guilt overpowered his mind. The hurt became an agony for him. To overcome the burden of guilt and remorse in he killed her. By killing her he thinks that he has given her peace and also obtained his peace.

As Harold Bloom has mentioned in his foreword of the play:



“To deprive the derelicts of hope is right, and to sustain them in their illusory “pipe dreams” is right also. Caught between right and right, Hickey passes into phantasmagoria, and in that compulsive condition he makes the ghastly confession that he murdered his unhappy, dreadfully saintly wife. His motive, he asserts perversely, was love, but here too he is caught between antitheses, and we are not able to interpret with certainty whether he was more moved by love or hatred”³

He then realized that he should accept the reality and comes out of his illusion. He ends his story with the words:

“And then I saw I’d always known that was the only possible way to give her peace and free her from the misery of loving me. I saw it meant peace for me, too, knowing she was at peace. I felt as though a ton of guilt was lifted off my mind. I remember I stood by the bed and suddenly I had to laugh. I couldn’t help it, and I know Evelyn would forgive me. I remember I heard myself speaking to her, as if it was something I’d always wanted to say: “Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!”⁴

He gets horrified as he could not remember what he had just confessed. He was stunned. He could not believe what he had just said. Realizing his mistake he bursts into a hysterical denial. He thinks that he had gone insane. He could do any harm to Evelyn because he loved her better than anything in life.

As Harold Bloom comments:

Rather than a de-mystifier, whether of self or others, Hickey is revealed as a tragic enigma, who cannot sell himself a coherent account of the horror he has accomplished. Did he slay Evelyn because of a hope-hers or his-or because of a mutual despair? He does not know, nor does O’Neill, nor do we, Nor does anyone know why Parritt betrayed his mother, the anarchist activist, and her comrades and his. Slade condemns Parritt to a suicide’s death, but without persuading us that he has uncovered the motive for so hideous a betrayal. Caught in a moral dialectic of guilt and suffering, Parritt appears to be entirely a figure of pathos, without the weird idealism that makes Hickey an interesting instance of High Romantic tragedy.⁵

Here Hickey becomes nasty, cynical, and pessimistic. He repents his guilt. It is not clear whether he is sane or insane. For he has telephoned the police for his arrest and when they arrive he claims that he is and wants to join Evelyn to ‘the chair’. For some period all the bums came out from their illusionary world. But when Hickey is arrested by the police



officers, they again begin to drink and have got a new pipe dream to survive. Margie and Pearl also returns and join them in drinking and laughing. The old atmosphere once again returns in Harry's saloon except for Parritt and Larry. Hickeys' story makes a great impact on Parritts' mind. He realizes that he has betrayed his mother out of hate and not out of love. Hickey killed his wife but he has at least sent her to .peace but his mother still lives and suffers the torture of imprisonment. As Parritt confesses his guilt to Larry, he sits dejectedly. When the play ends we see Larry lost in thought while all other bums engaged in singing their drunken song.

Thus the play is tale of deep despair, refutation and rejection. The basic theme of the play is antithesis between illusion and reality. Illusions are destructive but sometimes they are essential to make life bearable.

Dreams can bring horrors of the past, or give a new idea. Dreams should be put into reality but one should always be wise in doing that, by using it for constructive purposes. This is really essential in self-development. Its helps us to choose which road we wish to go, learn and influence others. For example, a person can get ideas that can drive the world on the ladder of success but it is not possible unless he chooses to act sincerely and strive hard to bring it in reality, otherwise he is just limiting his development. Daydreamers think about their ideas and fantasies in the same fashion limited only to themselves. They dissolve into those repeating and intermingled and mangled thoughts and become lazy. Laziness deprives them of mental and physical health and renders them totally ineffective.

It is the undying treasure which we inherit and it is us who face the real trial on the choice of jewels because it will change our life in that significant way.

REFERENCES

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3. Harold Bloom, *Eugene O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1987) p. xi
4. Ibid
5. Ibid p.xii