ANALYSIS

The Iceman Cometh (1946)

Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

"The exceptionally long and painful play he wrote in 1939, *The Iceman Cometh* is perhaps the most relentlessly depressing drama written by any modern playwright. *The Iceman Cometh* refuted a belief that its author had become reconciled with the Catholic faith of his childhood—a belief which had gained some currency after the presentation of his earlier play *Days Without End* (1933)."

John Gassner
A Treasury of the Theatre: From Henrik Ibsen to Arthur Miller
(Simon & Schuster 1935-57) 788

"[In] 1946…*The Iceman Cometh* was presented by the Theater Guild. This long and somewhat grotesque tragedy has as its theme the attempt of a dipsomaniac to free himself from his last hopes and last illusions. It is less appealing than either *Strange Interlude* or *Mourning Becomes Electra,* but it exhibits much of the same tragic power."

Joseph Wood Krutch
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1249

"*The Iceman Cometh* was almost as much of a new departure for O'Neill as *Long Day's Journey,* and it is equally the end of a long day's journey for the author. It marks the end of his voyagings after new forms and a 'theatre of tomorrow.' Here, finally, O'Neill settles for the theater of yesterday. The form of *The Iceman* is conservative and contains nothing that would have surprised his father. The…rejection of realism is itself rejected. We are back with the kind of theater of low life which Gorky envisaged for his *Lower Depths.* Gorky's naturalism was not, however, the dramaturgic model. There is nothing episodic about *The Iceman.* The structure is unified and, though large, almost symmetrical….

There is Hickey, and there is Parritt. Both are pouring out their false confessions and professions, and holding back their essential secret. Yet, inexorably, though against their conscious will, both are seeking

punishment. Their two stories are brought together through Larry Slade whose destiny, in contrast to this intention, is to extract the secret of both protagonists. Hickey's secret explodes, and Larry at last gives Parritt what he wants: a death sentence. The upshot of the whole action is that Larry is brought from a posturing and oratorical pessimism to a real despair…. Larry is…the centre of the play, and the audience can watch the two stories being played out before him….

The main ideas are two: …that people may as well kept their illusions; second, that one should not hate and punish but love and forgive… In a way the truth-illusion theme is a red herring, and…the author's real interest is in the love-hate theme…O'Neill is unclear…it is his play, and not life, that is unintelligible. I now think that the play becomes more intelligible if we follow up this hint: 'the author's real interest is in the love-hate theme.' Hickey really hated his wife, as Perritt really hated his mother. These are the repressed truths which it is the function of the action to bring to the light of day…. He has decided to let them keep their dreams after all. Why? It is not a simple question.

Ten years ago I would probably have answered: because he now sees the need which weak people have of illusions, for I thought of the play as a footnote to Ibsen's *The Wild Duck.* Today, I would find the clue in O'Neill's own stage direction: 'Harry Hope's expression turns to resentful callousness again.' It is to check this 'resentful callousness' that Hickey agrees to be considered insane. Ten years ago, I wrote: Hickey 'is a maniac,' and there is a case for applying such a word to men who murder their wives under the illusion that they love them. Nonetheless, the dramatic point is different. Hickey regards himself as sane, but is willing to be regarded as insane by the others, so that Harry Hope will stop being 'resentful callous' to him. We are back with the love-hate theme.

This play presents…the 'compulsion to confess.' The intent of Hickey's confession—whose weight and position make it the climax—as of his previous shorter declarations, is to bring 'peace.' The source of this peace is his supposed love for Evelyn. But where previously, before the men tried unsuccessfully to drop their dreams, Hickey's speech-making did elicit love—made this well-liked salesman even better liked—now they are all angry at him. They hate him. And Hickey, like many O'Neill characters, if not all, is a man completely at the mercy of other people's love and hate. As Evelyn's love drove him to hate and kill her, so the men's hate drives him to declare himself insane—and rush toward the electric chair.

Nowhere more than in the scene where the men rise up and try to make a new life do we feel the power of O'Neill's playwriting. We see, as various critics have noticed with approval, a pipe dream take shape before us. But is that just an incidental bit of virtuosity? Is not the chorus [the men in Jimmy the Priest's] equally important—and dramatic—in the final scene?

An analogy can be drawn between *The Iceman Cometh* and *Lazarus Laughed.* If they are very different, it may well be because the pattern has been exactly, and perhaps deliberately, reversed. *Lazarus* was O'Neill's attempt to affirm life and love, and put down death and hate. Most of his life, as in *The Iceman Cometh,* death and hate dominated his thoughts and seemed to him to dominate the world: it is not bridegroom that cometh with love, it is an iceman—bringing death. As for love, it is only lust—as is implied by popular sayings concerning housewives and their affairs with icemen.

Now, if we have in mind these two contrasting attitudes to life and death, we can take Lazarus and Hickey as corresponding figures. Both are salesmen to a clientele. Lazarus is selling love and everlasting life; Hickey is selling hate and everlasting death. But where Lazarus is candid, Hickey claims to be selling—precisely what Lazarus is selling! The earlier play is direct; the later, ironical. This is one factor, I believe, that makes *The Iceman* the superior play. And it would seem that O'Neill's natural bent was toward what is called realism, for what seems awkward and 'arty' about the chorus in *Lazarus* falls into place in the everyday setting of *The Iceman.*…

As in *Lazarus Laughed,* the crowd is excited and inflamed by a Savior, only later to be disenchanted. They end in *Lazarus* shouting: 'Hail to Death!' They end in *The Iceman,* first in complaints, and then in the noisy relief of a return to pipe dreams. In this way, *The Iceman Cometh* is seen to have its own peculiar emotional dynamics, and the ending effects a negative catharsis: the expenditure of emotion leads not to a

new beginning but to the admission of exhaustion…. It is futile enough to profess pessimism in any art—but above all, perhaps, in the drama; for a play cannot but be playful.

If in *Long Day's Journey* O'Neill transcends his usual vision, *The Iceman Cometh* is the quintessence of O'Neillism. I have tried to show how the word 'justice' loses its meaning in O'Neill's world. Of necessity, the word 'punishment' must also lose. If by justice, O'Neill only means revenge, by punishment he only means inflicted suffering—as when a boxer 'takes a lot of punishment.' Hence, in *The Iceman,* though thee is a Dostoevskian sound to the word when we hear that Parritt seeks punishment, he actually is only seeking suffering and a conclusion. He is a masochist. He wants Larry to hurt him. And he has lost the wish to live, or will have as soon as he is hurt. He wishes his own death—the only alternative in O'Neill's bleak world to wishing other people's death. Life equals murder and suicide….

We suffer some confusion of the feelings as to the direction, happy or unhappy, in which the main characters are traveling, but, in a very clever play, O'Neill does something very clever about this: Hickey's punishment is over before the cops arrive; Parritt's punishment is over before he kills himself. By that token, their punishment takes place before our eyes during our whole evening at the theater. Parritt is punished by Larry Slade, not at the end—which is a release—but all through. Hickey is punished by all the men—again, not at the end, but all through, except for one moment of vertigo when it seems they may be transformed.

This is where the pipe dreams of the three main characters come in. The illusions are what stand between them and the punishment they seek. In what he thinks about illusions, O'Neill is systematic. Best is not to lose one's illusions and die as soon as possible. Second best is not to lose one's illusions and die later—like most of the men in *The Iceman.* Third best is to lose one's illusions and die as soon as one does so—like Hickey and Parritt. The worst fate of all is to lose your illusions and live on. This fate is reserved for Lady Slade—whom, on this interpretation as on others, we find to be the central figure in the composition.

Now the spectator figure in literature is nearly always a portrait of the author. I imagine that Larry Slade represents a piece of self-criticism on O'Neill's part, that O'Neill puts into Larry his own tendency towards an empty and oratorical pessimism—the mere inversion of the official optimism of American society—and, since it is not in the cards that either Larry or O'Neill should turn optimist, the most that can be achieved is that his pessimism should turn from the spurious to the genuine. Larry learns sincerity: which was precisely what O'Neill was learning in the final phase of his writing career.

Larry learns sincerity, which is something—not love, which would be everything. However, O'Neill does try to cope with love in *The Iceman Cometh,* and the topic is a suitable one with which to close this discussion both of the play and the playwright. Taking my cue from O'Neill's own words and those of his biographers, I have spoken of ambivalence as a central fact, perhaps the central fact, of both the life and the work. If the word 'ambivalence' implies an exact balancing of opposing attitudes, the formulation, finally, seems inexact. The relevant attitudes, in O'Neill's case, are indeed love and hate. But we do not find them balanced: we find the former utterly swamped by the latter.

This fact is not in itself surprising: the negative emotions are more prominent than the positive ones throughout the whole of literature. What is important, and disappointing, about O'Neill is that, while he does deal with love, it is always a very inadequate kind of love that he deals with—while the hate he feels would be adequate for blowing up the universe. I do not speak just quantitatively. It is the quality of the love that is insufficient—I mean of course for the purposes which O'Neill himself proposes.

If we consider, for example, the relationship of Hickey and his wife Evelyn, we learn that she loves him, and we are given to understand that her love is simply wonderful because she keeps forgiving him. But to reread Hickey's long account is to realize that O'Neill, as his habit was, has equated true love with maternal warmth while leaving sex to prostitutes. Yet he does not use this fact to characterize Hickey with, because it is not a fact he can see as an artist—it is a fact that he is involved in as a man. The perfect marriage which Evelyn offered was the union of mother and child. What the play 'ought' to have been

about is Hickey's unresolved Oedipus complex. But it could not be about this because O'Neill's Oedipus complex was unresolved….

The Iceman Cometh is a typical O'Neill work in that, while it has very considerable merit, it does not achieve the transcendence I am speaking of, but substitutes the standard O'Neill pessimism—or rather a more sincere brand of it… It is arguable…that O'Neill did achieve transcendence in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and perhaps in some of the plays of his youth. An author's talent is often most abundantly at work in his least 'serious efforts,' and it may well be that such an item as *The Emperor Jones* will withstand time better than the big plays."

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 572-75

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