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The parable: Analogy of illusion and reality in "The Iceman Cometh"

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Abstract
The Iceman Cometh by Eugene O'Neill has a linear structure of a journey from illusion to reality and back again to illusion. Carefully considered, The Iceman Cometh is a parable analogous to the famous parable of "The Simile of the Cave" in Plato's *Republic*. The parable, which is about the nature of reality and man's relationship to it, describes the human condition as identical to with that of a group of prisoners chained to wall in a cave. Outside of the cave, in the clear light of the sun, lies reality. Plato then describes how painful it would be for the prisoners to face reality, if they were set free.

Keywords: Parable, illusion, reality, simile, cave, darkness, rope, serpent, reflections, prisoners

Introduction
Plato's simile of the cave, incorporated as a parable of illusion and reality in Eugene O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, describes this world as either unreal or real. The serpent or the rope. Serpent is illusion, rope is reality. The modern man, imprisoned in the cave of illusion, is fallen, alienated and full of suffering. And as the play shows, to escape this suffering man weaves illusions around his spirit, and illusion itself becomes reality for him. Life becomes bearable when men contrive not to look at truth.

Parable of Illusion and Reality
Carefully considered, The Iceman Cometh by Eugene O'Neill is a parable analogous to the famous parable of "The Simile of the Cave" in Plato's Republic [1]. Plato's parable, which is about the nature of reality and man's relationship to it, describes the human condition as identical with that of a group of prisoners chained to a wall in a cave. The cave is dimly lit by fire. By the light of the fire they can see forms, their own and others, reflected on the wall. Thus all they can really see is their own shadows and shadows of others; they give names to things but they can never see anything except shadowy reflections. Outside of the cave, in a clear and unequivocal light of the sun, lies reality. Plato then describes how painful it would be for the prisoner if he were set free and forced to climb the cave and out into the sun, and how he would resist the notion that what he had experienced in the cave was not the substance but merely the shadow, not reality but only illusion.

Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him? [2]
Now that he has seen light, says Plato, and his eyes have been used to the lights, they would be blinded by the darkness if the freed prisoner is sent back to sit in his old seat in the cave. And if he is again asked to discriminate between the shadows, in competition with the other prisoners (before his eyes got used to the darkness) wouldn't he be likely to make a fool of himself? And they would say that his visit to the upper world had ruined his sight, and that the ascent was not worth even attempting. And if the freed prisoner tried to release them and lead them up, they would kill him if they could lay hands on him; for they want to remain in their Cave: The world of illusions. The Iceman Cometh dramatises this anti-thesis between illusion and reality.

[1] Plato, The Republic, "The Simile of the Cave" (London: The White Friars Press, 1958), pp. 278-282.
[2] Ibid. p. 280

An in-depth study of Plato's parable will throw light upon three central issues: First, the journey from darkness to light, The play, as a parallel to Plato's parable, can be studied under three broad categories:

1. Thematic Analogy
2. Locale Analogy
3. Character Analogy

Thematic analogy

The Iceman Cometh has a linear structure of a journey from illusion to reality and back again to illusion. To describe this symbolic Journey, O' Neill has used four major images:

- Sunrise (standing for illusion)
- Day (symbolising the process of awakening)
- Dawn or Sunset (signifying reality)
- Deep Night (standing for oblivion and truth telling).

O'Neill's derelicts, like Plato's prisoners, through the long day's journey from the sunrise into the midnight, move from illusion to reality and back again to illusion. At the end of the play the journey of the derelicts ends where it began. They maintain status-quo and remain static. So the long day's journey into night is, thematically considered, analogous to Plato's parable of the simile of the cave.

The play opens in the early morning with the description of O'Neill's derelicts, a motley collection, who exist in the alcoholic darkness of their "cave" - that is Harry Hope's saloon. These derelicts are isolated from human society and stripped of every pretension except the single "pipe-dream" that keeps them going and the sum of these pipe-dreams is meant to represent the total content of human illusions. The only unequivocal statement which illumines the eternal imprisonment of modern man is Larry's quizzical assertion in Act-I:

I was born condemned to be one of those who has to see all sides of a question. When you're damned like that, the questions multiply for you until in the end it's all question and no answer [3].

This existential dilemma further leads to the question: what are the shackles that imprison human beings, blotting the vision of truth?

Larry pronounces the answer which becomes the play's comment upon Truth:

To hell with the truth! As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything. It is irrelevant and immaterial as the lawyers say. The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober [4].

What is this illusion or pipe dream? The Oxford Universal Dictionary defines illusion as "the action, or an act, of deceiving the bodily or mental eye by what is unreal or false." Illusion also denotes maya, that is the fact or condition of being deceived by false appearances. Maya is derived from the root, ma, to form, to build, and originally meant the capacity to produce forms. Through the force of maya man has a bewildering partial consciousness which loses sight of the reality and lives in the world of phenomena. So maya or illusion is the source of delusion (*moha*). The proneness to self-deception lies in the desire for the things of sense which leads man away from the spiritual consciousness of reality. We read in Maitri Upnishad: "Mind is indeed the source of bondage and also the source of liberation. To be bound to things of this world: this is bondage. To be free from them: this is liberation [5]."

So the modern man, imprisoned in the cave of illusion, is fallen, alienated and full of suffering. And as the play shows, to escape this suffering man further weaves illusion around his spirit, and illusion itself becomes reality for him. Brooks Atkinson opines: "Life is bearable only when men contrive not to look at truth [6]."

The word "contrive" here echoes the Upanishadic reference to human mind or spirit as being creative. Mind itself is the creator of illusion or maya.

According to *Brihad-Aranyka Upanishad,* "The spirit of man has two dwellings: this world and the world beyond. There is also a third dwelling-place: the land of sleep and dreams [7]." The derelicts of O'Neill are now living in the third dwelling-places: the land of sleep and dreams. Strong drink is the way of oblivion; it puts one to sleep. In sleep all inhibitions are suppressed, thus allowing speeches of extraordinary candour. Further, alcohol is the great nostalgia-invoker as well, bringing back the past in a special way: roseate, simplified, happier than it really was, falsified, a little island in time that is warmer than the already desolation of present reality: "the pipe dream of yesterday." (p.49) Larry himself says: "Lo, sleep is good; better is death; in sooth, The best of all were never to be born" (p.33). According to *Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad:*

When the spirit of man retires to rest, he takes with him materials from this all-containing world, and he creates and destroys in his own glory and radiance…. In that land there are no chariots, no teams of horses, nor roads; but he creates his own chariots, his teams of horses, and roads …. For the spirit of man is Creator [8].

Thus, the theme of illusion and reality is not only topical but of immense relevance to all of us. Raja Rao has also highlighted the significance of this parable in his famous novel The Serpent and the Rope:

The world is either unreal or real: The serpent or the rope …. We might go on saying all the time 'No, no it's the rope; and stand in the serpent. And looking at the rope from the serpent is to see paradise, saints… For where so ever you go, you see only with the serpent's eyes…. But in true fact, with whatever eyes we see there is no serpent, there never was a serpent [9].

Serpent is illusion, rope is reality. Illusion is beauty, reality is harsh. The derelicts of the play tend to fondle with the "serpent" of past and future, overlooking the "rope" of present. They have contrived not to look at truth. They have created their dwelling-place in the land of sleep and dream. Their world is their own creation. They give their own eyes to whatever they see; they look at the rope from the posture of the serpent. Larry rightly says: "They manage to get drunk, by hook or crook, and keep their pipe dreams, and that's all they ask of life."(p.37)

[3] Eugene O'Neill, The Iceman Cometh (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976, p.32.
[4] The Iceman Cometh**,** 9. 15.
[5] Juan Mascaro, trans. The Upanishads (Hammondsworth): Penguin Books, 1973), p. 104.
[6] Brooks Atkinson, O'Neill and His Plays (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 213.
[7] The Upanishads, p. 134.
[8] Ibid., p.135
[9] Raja Rao, The Serpent and the Rope (Delhi: Orient Paperback, 1968), p.333.

In Act III O'Neill chooses a hot and humid day so that his characters may suffer not only psychologically but also physiologically. Hickey's "reform movement" is thus peculiarly harsh because it involves sending these sodden alcoholics out into the blinding hot streets of New York at midmorning in midsummer. Here the merciless but well intentioned Hickey, a symbol of Guru of the *Upanishads*, is forcing Harry Hope out into the bright sunshine of New York's streets to throw away the snake's skin by looking at reality from the posture of the rope itself rather than that of the serpent. The old man exclaims after Rocky has said it's a "fine day":

What is that? Can't hear you. Don't look fine to me. Look's if it'd pour down cats and dogs may minute. My rheumatism …. No, must be my eyes. Half blind, bejees. Makes things look black.

Owing to his ignorance of the rope – the reality – Harry Hope sees rope as a serpent. He looks at reality through the veil of illusion. Paradoxically for him illusion itself become reality.

Locale analogy

As the characters in The Iceman Cometh are symbols of the ideals by which men live, so the place in which they live is made symbolic by the paradox. It is a "morgue wid all de stiffs on deck." The morgue is man's shelter, a place where he is spiritually dead or dying or just waiting for death; it is a world of life-in-death. It is also the "palace of pipe dreams," the haven where man's last hope for salvation is preserved in cheap whisky. Larry tells Parritt:

Larry … what is it? It's the No Chance saloon … No one here has to worry about where they are going next, because there is no farther they can go. It's a great comfort for them. Although even here they keep up the appearances of life with a few harmless pipe dreams about their yesterdays and tomorrows. (p.27).

Plato says in "The Simile of the Cave":

The visible realm corresponds to the prison, and the light of the fire in the prison to the power of the sun [10].

Harry Hope's saloon corresponds to Plato's cave (prison) and the illusions of the derelicts to the light of the fire in the cave-prison.

All the derelicts in the play, compelled by a callous society, are living on illusions. Hugo's aristocratic will to power through pretended love of the proletariat reflects on political illusions; Joe's pugnacious demand for equality with the whites indicates social illusions; chunk and Cora's fantasy of marriage and a farm manifests domestic illusions; the prostitutes' mysterious distinction between "tarts" and "whores" reveals status illusions; Parritt's false motives for having betrayed his mother demonstrate psychological illusions; Willie Oban's excuse for having discontinued law school shows intellectual illusions; Larry's pretence at disillusionment and detachment refers to philosophical illusions, and Hickey's belief that he has found salvation reflects religious illusions. All of these dreams represent a family of men, inextricably bound up with each other. Each is able to see the lie of the other without being able to admit his own. And all this has been possible because O'Neill has brought them together at once place. Plato also points out:

They are drawn from … do you think our prisoners could see anything of themselves or their fellows except the shadows thrown by the fire on the wall of the cave opposite them? … Then if they were able to talk to each other, would they not assume that the shadows they saw were real things? … And if the wall of their prison opposite them reflected sound, don't you think that they would suppose, whenever one of the passers-by on the road spoke, that the voice belonged to the shadow passing before them? They would be bound to think so [11].

They are so much bound by their illusions that they can't see anything existing beyond illusions; they have become short-sighted.

One of the ambiguous pleasures of the morgue in which they live is that nothing is ever quite certain or clear-out, even occupations and names. Names take on almost magical powers: you are what you are called, although what you are called may not be truth about you:

Pearl to Rocky: Aw right, Rock. We're whores. You know what that makes you, don't you?

Margie. A lousy little pimp, dat's what!

Pearl. A dirty little Ginny pimp, dat's what!

(PP. 91-92)

But when the reconciliation occurs at the end of the play, Rocky becomes once more "our little bartender" and "a cute little Ginny at dat!" Similarly Joe Mott is considered morally "white", though "black" in colour, in times of peace. But once Hickey's "curse" starts its work, Joe becomes "a dinge," a "black bastard," or "doity nigger." To Mott is given the single most ironical speech, concerning the problem of identity, in the play: "Don't you get it in your heads I's pretending to be what I ain't, or dat I ain't proud to be what I is, get me?" The prisoners in Plato's republic are also nameless. They are known only by their label, that is prisoners. They become nameless because the locale or the space in which they live is only a dream world, and in dream man has no identity.

Character analogy

This aspect of the play is concerned with the main issue of the parable: the contrast between the freed prisoner and the chained prisoner. Into the illusory world of the derelicts comes the catalytic agent, Hickey, the Iceman of death, the symbol of salvation. Raleigh correctly characterises him as "Hickey, the bringer of reality [12]", Hickey – the guru of the Upanishads – the one who brings lantern and shows reality to us. As dawn usually signifies reality – cold, austere, sombre, inescapable, so Hickey does not come in Act I until Rocky has turned off the lights and the back room of Harry Hope's is lit by the dim light of dawn. He has faced reality after casting away illusions. He ultimately preaches the gospel of reality:

I meant to save you from pipe dreams. I know now, from my experience, they're the things that really poison and ruin a guy's life and keep him from finding any place. If you knew how free and contented I feel now. I'm like a new man. And the cure for them is so damned simple, once you have the nerve. Just the old dope of honesty is the best policy – honesty with yourself, I mean. Just stop lying about yourself and kidding yourself about tomorrows [13].

[10] The Republic, p.282.

[11] The Republic, p. 279.

[12] John Henry Raleigh, The Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Iceman Cometh, ed. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p.

[13] The Iceman Cometh

The crux of the problem is that one's illusions make one guilt-ridden; because one fails one's own ideals and the failure ultimately leads to self-hatred and self-denial.

Hickey is obviously disenchanted with his illusions and persuades others to follow his way. Larry is the first person to admit that he has been converted by Hickey. Hugo is also disillusioned about his pipe dream of a revolution. Similarly Chunk and Cora are disillusioned with their illusion of marriage and setting on a farm. Harry Hope reluctantly goes outside but comes back more frightened and confused. Mosher and McGloin are also disillusioned about their imagined worth. Willie Oban is disillusioned about his intellect. Joe Matt reconciles himself to the racial prejudice of reality. Piet Wetjoen and Cecil Lewis realise that they are no longer war-heroes. James Cameron finds that it was alcoholism that broke his marriage and that he is to blame for it and not his wife. Ironically, after disillusionment they are more frustrated. They complain that even with alcohol, they are unable to pass out. Like Plato's prisoners, they feel blinded by the light. Larry realises their anguish and remarks bitterly:

Larry (turns to Hickey – with bitter anger) It's the peace of death you've brought him.(p. 175)

According to the *Upanishads*

When the spirit of man has had his joy in the land of dreams, and in his wanderings there has beholden good … he then returns to this world of waking. But whatever he has seen does not return with him, for the spirit of man is free [14].

Like Plato's prisoners, all the derelicts think that "what (they) used to see was more real then the objects now being pointed out to (them)." As Chuck says:

Hickey done me a favour, makin' me wake up … on' y it was fun, kinda, me and Cora kiddin' ourselves … where's dat son of a bitch, Hickey? I want one good sock at dat guy – just one! (p. 182).

Plato's parable illustrates that if the freed prisoner tries to release the prisoners, they would kill him if they could lay their hands on him. Similar is the case with Hickey. Jimmy, in a burst of futile fury abuses him, "You dirty swine," and tries to throw the drink at Hickey's face.

As a result of this native shrewdness, Hickey has, by the end of the second Act, transformed all the derelicts into caged animals, snarling at each other in their agony: each is beginning to open the other's wound in order to protect his own. What results is death-in-life. Hugo asks:

What's matter, Harry? You look funny. You look dead.

The third Act takes place in cold, daylight horror. And then they blame Hickey for such a state:

Rocky (His face hardens). Jees, we all ought to git drunk and stage a celebration when dat bastard goes to de chair.

Larry (vindictively): Be God, I'll celebrate with you and drink long life to him in hell! (p.189).

This proves the hollowness of Hickey's "salvation," which in turn is also illusion. No salvation is possible without brining about a drastic change in social system.

The *Upanishads* assert

The spirit of man moves along beside his two dwellings: this waking world and the land of sleep and dreams … When he has had his joy in this world of waking and in his wanderings here has beholden good and evil, he returns by the same path again to the land of dreams [15].

So the derelicts also return to their world of illusions. Like Plato's prisoners they think that "the ascent was not worth even attempting."

Hickey escapes reality by pleading insanity; Parritt by committing suicide; the derelicts by returning to their illusions. Hugo says: "I' m glad, Larry, they take that crazy Hickey away to asylum. He makes me have bad dreams. He makes me tell lies about myself. He makes me want to spit on all I have ever dreamed. Yes, I am glad they take him to asylum" (p.214). Hope pretends that he had gone out just to humour a madman as they all were doing: "Bijees, it does queer things to you, having to listen them, to kid him along and doing any crazy thing he wants to humour him. It's dangerous, too. Look at me pretending to start for a walk just to keep him quiet. I knew damned well it wasn't the right day for it." (p. 215)

The play ends in laughter, song, and the drunken babble of Hugo in the antechamber of the morgue. As the happy derelicts carouse, one character who is without illusions, that is Parritt who has betrayed his anarchist mother to the police, goes out and commits suicide, and another character, Larry Slade the philosopher, who is also capable of facing truth, indicates that he will soon join him in a plunge from the fire-escape. Life, then, consists of illusion, and if death is reality, reality is also death. Paradoxically, illusions are the only reality, because they are life-giving. The crux of the play is pronounced by Dudley Nicholas:

How fiendishly clever the human mind is! When one dream is punctured, when we are finally brought face to face with ourselves or with "reality," the mind jumps to another pipe dream and calls it truth – calls it facing reality [1616].

Like the derelicts, Plato's prisoners also refuse to face reality. They are contented with what they are and with what they see and experience.

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[16] John Henry Raleigh, Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Iceman Cometh, p.35.