

A POSTMODERNIST READING OF IMAGERY IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S
"THE ICEMAN COMETH":
HUMAN IDENTITY REDEFINED

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Abstract. The characters, in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, are remarkably motionless, drinking and daydreaming. However, their portrayal is based upon motion and continuous shift from one image to another. These images are meant to reflect the (post)modern psychological and socio-political conditions in which the derelicts are trapped, and probe issues related to human existence and human identity. Much has been said about the characters in O'Neill's play and their portrayal in a way that reflects the playwright's nihilistic vision about Man and society. However, the bulky images employed in the play still open new horizons of interpretation. In this context, the paper attempts to read the device of imagery as a dramatic and textual device and decipher its different meanings as far as the question of human identity is concerned. Imagery and its role in determining Man's definition will be studied from the psychoanalytical, poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives.

Psychoanalytical, poststructuralist and postmodernist theories share the common feature of escaping the linguistic sign and opening the possibility of dealing with a reality unmediated by language. These theories offer a solid background to revisit the classical definition of Man, as suggested by classical theories of the Enlightenment and rationalism, providing new possibilities to go beyond the linguistic determinants of meaning. Drawing from notions suggested by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Jean François Lyotard, the paper proposes an exploration of imagery in *The Iceman Cometh* towards a redefined concept of human identity that blurs boundaries between the human and the non-human.

Keywords: imagery, classical, modern, postmodern, animal, human

1. INTRODUCTION

Excessive, controversial and prolific, imagery is a stylistic device that helps writers create artistic portraits in their texts and evoke themes

so emblematic that words alone fail to convey. “The image gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion in a way no precise description, however clear and accurate, can possibly do” (9), says Caroline Spurgeon in *Shakespeare’s Imagery*, arguing for the complexity and richness of such a device. As far as dramatic texts are concerned, imagery seems to be very persuasive in telling about the playwright’s concerns and beliefs. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, the imagery of darkness, incest and guilt can hardly be contained in simply descriptive words. William Shakespeare’s classical tragedy *King Lear* is another instance of the functional role of imagery as a dramatic technique:

Gloucester. As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods.
They kill us for their sports (IV.2.)

[...]

Lear. Blow winds and crack your cheeks, rage low [...]
And thou all-shaking thunder, strike flat the thick
Rotundity O’th’ word. (IV.4)

Several of the main themes of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* are inherent in images of beasts, animals, storms and other natural elements. Such images connote universal themes like lust, deceitfulness, jealousy, cruelty, and envy.

The use of imagery, however, is not a feature of classical drama only. Suggestive as it is, imagery remains a device of paramount importance in the modern dramatic text. In Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, imagery is abundantly employed revealing the dialectical situation of a desire to express and the failure of words to articulate the inexpressible. The collapse of the world and the absurdity of modern life are readily communicated through the use of imagery in O’Neill’s play. First-generation critics like Christopher Bigsby find in imagery a way to reflect the fallacies of an inverted social consciousness and the struggle between the individual and his society. Through images of darkness and decay, the playwright ironically conveys society’s efforts to enforce its “lifeless standards” upon spiritually crippled and marginalized characters (Bigsby 136).

Likewise, in “Eugene O’Neill as Social Critic,” Doris M. Alexander argues that the sense of nihilism in the play is the outcome of the failure of a political system striving for power over others to compensate for its inner failure (358).

Additionally, in *O’Neill: Son and Artist*, Louis Sheaffer highlights the autobiographical element of imagery in the play, claiming that the device is used to create the sense of self-delusion through which Man can escape reality and endure life (450). John P. Diggins, in *O’Neill’s America: Desire under Democracy*, equally associates the use of imagery with the playwright’s life and his perception of Man’s relation with God and society which is based on the idealistic endeavour for perfection even if it meant the suffocation of the self and the drowning into images of darkness and illusion (16).

Other critics discussed the use of masks as the physical performance of imagery in the written text. In this respect, masks as a type of performed imagery are equivalent to the grotesque and animal imagery in the written text. Oscar Cargill and Eugene Waith, for instance, suggest that, through the mask, O’Neill projects the tension of disintegrated consciousness and the inner reality of characters who try to conceal their concerns yet they fail¹. Likewise, Robert Whitman posits that the mask O’Neill uses “is not simply a superficial façade the individual uses to hide from the world but the perversion of a basic side of his personality or nature” (153).

Second generation critics similarly address imagery and probe its different motifs and motives in O’Neill’s play. In *Eugene O’Neill and the Reinvention of Theatre Aesthetics*, Thierry Dubost stresses another aspect of imagery in *The Iceman Cometh*, stating that it expresses the playwright’s religious and cultural attitudes: “The image of the earth turned into hell belongs to Christian imagery and was close to O’Neill’s culture” (57), he explains. Dubost adds that moving from the convention of the “problem play” O’Neill revisited the theatre aesthetics resorting to masks, silence and imagery.

In *Hopes of the Human Race in Eugene O’Neill’s plays*, Veena Neerudu examines the use of imagery from a social and philosophical perspective arguing that *The Iceman Cometh* is “more humanistic and

symbolic as it is mainly concerned with society and the nature of Man (39). Through imagery, the playwright underlines the tragic conditions of modern Man who is alienated and struggling in an industrial society. Such a struggle, Neerudu believes, is represented through characters living on pipedreams as a way to escape their bleak reality (39).

Although they provide an insightful basis for the use of imagery in O'Neill's play, these views overlook crucial issues related to imagery in O'Neill's text, namely the psychoanalytical element of imagery and the poststructuralist/postmodernist attitude toward language as a powerful medium of articulation. Indeed, through the device of imagery, O'Neill persistently looks for modes of breaking barriers of representation toward deeper, ineffable meanings. Drawing from psychoanalytical and postmodernist theories this paper proposes an exploration of imagery in *The Iceman Cometh* and its different meanings that go beyond the social and the cultural to reach the aesthetic and the political.

2. IMAGERY IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S "THE ICEMAN COMETH"

In Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, imagery is startling, deliberate and abundant all through the play. In fact, imagery is recurrently used to reflect the characters' psychology and create the convenient mood and the thematic concern of the play. Imagery is so diverse in *The Iceman Cometh* that it readily falls into four categories: animal imagery, the grotesque, ghost and beast imagery, imagery of nature or vegetation, and imagery of filth. The recurrence of such imagery is deliberately meant to evoke various (post)modern questions related to socio-political issues. This stylistic device also prevails in the play to be readily connected to the *mise-en-scène* as a theatrical technique.

Animal Imagery

O'Neill presents his characters as a gathering of hardly seen shadows

who are victimized by society, by their own will, and by their haunting memories. They are epitomes of people who are reduced to a state of motionlessness and meaninglessness, being portrayed as sub-human, even as animals. Harry Hope's saloon is, indeed, transformed into an animal farm or a "modern zoo" through the device of animal imagery. Himself, Harry Hope, for instance, "has a face of an old family horse" (O'Neill 7). Jimmy Tomorrow "has a mouse-coloured thinning hair, a little nose, and buck teeth in a small rabbit mouth" (6). Cecil Lewis's complexion is "that of a turkey" (6). Larry Slade "is shaking in his sleep like an old dog" (14). Chuck's eyes "are clear and he looks healthy and strong as an ox" (70). Hugo "thrusts his head down on his arms like an ostrich hiding its head in the sand" (201). Wetjoen, addressing Lewis, says: "Lewis, we should have taken you to the London Zoo and incarcerated you in the baboon's cage" (143). Hugo calls the denizens: "leedle monkey-faces?" (105). The abundant use of animal imagery can be read as O'Neill's portrayal of his characters, and hence Man, as an emblem of deterioration, decay and bestiality. Such animalistic portraits are further emphasized by the device of the grotesque.

The Grotesque

The Grotesque is generally "anything distorted, ugly, abnormal, fantastic or bizarre to the point of being ridiculous or absurd" (Morner and Raush 93). Applied to decorative art, the term grotesque denotes a style in which fantastic representations of human and animal forms are combined and interwoven to form a strange compound (93). Seen from this perspective, the grotesque in *The Iceman Cometh* may pertain to the paradigm of imagery insofar as it is a category of caricatured images based on clash and disproportion. The grotesque is clear in the description of the derelicts, adding a gloomy tone to the already established zoological portrait of Man: "Hugo is a small man in his late fifties; he had a head much too big for his body, a square face with a pug nose" (O'Neill 4). Larry also "has a gaunt Irish face with a big nose" (4). Willie Oban has "blond hair, badly in need of a cut" and "clings in

a limp part to his skull” (8). Ed Mosher, “like McGloin, is slovenly. His head is thrown back, his big mouth open” (7). Harry Hope is “so thin; the description “bag of bones” was made for him” (7). It is obvious that through the grotesque, O’Neill caricatures his characters and turns them into beast-like creatures, deformed beings, and even motionless ghosts, confirming to Timo Muller’s statement in *The Self as Object in Modernist Fiction* that “modernism in the arts seems to become more chaotic, or at least more confusing, the longer one looks at it” (10).

Ghost Imagery

Throughout the play, a ghostly shadow keeps hovering around Harry Hope's saloon. The ghost image is reflected in almost every character. For instance, Jimmy Tomorrow's “speech is educated, with the ghost of a scotch rhythm in it” (O’Neill 6). Willie Oban is depicted as a ghost with his clothes which “belong on a scarecrow” (8). Hickey appears as an incarnation of the death ghost when he “sleeps like a dead man” (88). Cora adds that Hickey is “[o]ld cemetery! That's him. Hickey!” (111). The latter ironically comments: “We don't want corpses at this feast” (143). Through ghost images, O’Neill deepens the doom and the gloom of the “half-dead” denizens and portrays them as paralyzed “wax figures” overwhelmed by darkness and death (212). Hickey, for instance, is haunted by his dead wife's ghost throughout the play.

The other characters are symbolically portrayed as slumbering and lifeless ghosts whose only meaningful motion is either “yawning” or “sighing”. Such animal, ghost, and grotesque images create characters who oscillate between life and death, the human and the animal in a way that revises the classical centrifugal definition of Man as a unified whole and a harmonious total. Respectively, in *O’Neill’s America: Desire under Democracy*, John P. Diggins stresses the bar denizens’ inability to conform to the classical definition of Man, arguing that in O’Neill’s plays “characters rarely progress toward self-realization or even to the beginnings of a higher order of understanding” (262). Diggins

points out that in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh*, the characters are too overwhelmed with discrepancy to achieve a proper state of being. Hence, "they can never be sure who they are or where they belong, or what it is that they want or what it is that obstructs them from getting it" (262). Animal imagery and the grotesque are the playwright's means to account for this sense of discord and distortion characterizing modern Man's portrait.

Imagery of Nature

Images of nature are also functional in depicting the characters' situation throughout the play. Unlike classical drama where nature is depicted as a lush and fertile realm in which the tragic hero finds refuge and consolation - King Lear, for instance, finds in nature a warm shelter during the storm scene (IV.4) - nature in *The Iceman Cometh* is barren, dark, and gloomy. The imagery of the "willow tree" is reiterated throughout the play as an emblem of barrenness and death. Toward the end of the play, the characters "(Shout in enthusiastic chorus) 'Tis cool beneath the "willow trees" (O'Neill 260). The "willow tree" here is a functional image that is reminiscent of the cemetery and the grave and that stresses the tragic situation of psychological death in which O'Neill's characters are vulnerably caught. "The bottom of the sea" imagery is also frequently referred to throughout the play. Paritt says: "You can't hide from yourself, not even here on the bottom of the sea" (123). On his arrival, Hickey advises the derelicts: "Let yourselves sink down to the bottom of the sea and rest in peace" (86).

The imagery of nature is then meant to underline the funeral-like existence led by the inhabitants of Harry Hope's saloon, to establish the idea of the "no outlet" by the frequent recurrence to "the bottom of the sea" analogies and portray the conditions of the characters who belong to a metaphorical "Waste Land" which is remarkably and extremely dark and filthy.

Imagery of Filth

In *The Iceman Cometh*, mud, filth, decomposition and decay are

equally key images. Indeed, the description of the setting turns around the periphery of dust. “The right wall of the backroom is a dirty black curtain” (3) and the “two windows [are] so glazed with grime one cannot see through them” (3). Moreover, “the walls and ceiling once were white, but it was a long time ago, and they are now, splotched, peeled, stained and dusty that their colour can be best described as dirty” (63). This grimy atmosphere is further established through Larry's philosophy and his description of his surrounding: “The material, the ideal society must be constructed from is Men themselves and you can't build a marble temple out of a mixture of mud and manure” (30). Later in the play, Larry views his own life as “a dirty, stinking bit of withered old flesh” (66). Likewise, in his long confession in Act IV, Hickey sees himself as “something lying in the gutter [and] such a rotten shunk” (235).

3. FUNCTIONS OF IMAGERY IN “THE ICEMAN COMETH”

Autobiographical Element

Filth and decomposition images are meant to tell about the total insignificance of the human species when considered biologically as well as modern Man's impossibility of ever-achieving transcendence and substantial unity. The abundantly employed imagery is indeed so functional that it tells about the playwright's predilections and constructs the main themes of the play. In *O'Neill: Son and Artist*, Louis Sheaffer points to the biographical element of imagery in the play, relating it to the playwright's own experiences:

The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into Night, A Moon for the Misbegotten and Hughie are literally suffused with images of sickness and death. The first two are set in 1912, a watershed year in O'Neill's life, a year which saw his attempted suicide at Jimmy the Priest's New York waterfront dive where he had been living with bums and outcasts. (518)

In a letter about *The Iceman Cometh* to Theatre Guild producer, Lawrence Lagner confessed: “Personally, I love it and I am sure my

affection is not wholly inspired by the nostalgia for the clear dead days on the bottom of the sea” (qtd. in Berlin 86).

Jimmy the Priest’s, O’Neill’s most frequented bar in New York, becomes Harry Hope’s Saloon in the play and all the other characters are, indeed, real. O’Neill admits that:

Harry Hope and all the others, the anarchists and Wobblies and French syndicalists, the broken men, the tarts, the bartenders and even the saloon itself are real. It is not one place, perhaps it is several places that I lived in at one time or another [...]. I once knew, put together in one. (qtd. in Berlin 85)

Therefore, the imagery of decay, gloom, and darkness in the play can be read as the outcome of O’Neill’s own perception of a life lived with the pains of sickness and disillusionment. Seen from this perspective, the imagery of vegetation (willow tree) and “the bottom of the sea” may readily be relevant to the construction of the biographical element in the play.

Social Reality

“Every true drama is a mirror of its epoch; its characters mirror those social classes that, so to speak, embody the avant-garde of the objective spirit” (51), Peter Szondi explains. Whether a stylistic or a theatrical device, imagery tells about the destruction of the myth of the perfect Man. It creates a visual effect reflecting the gloomy mood in which the mythical portrait of the idealized Man is destroyed. It is also O’Neill’s vision of the world and perhaps no one could expect an optimistic vision of life from a man struggling with the pain of sickness and agony.

The various images of the barflies and the stagnant obscure atmosphere are a replication of modern Man’s situation of loss and despair. Man, like the bar dwellers, has lost his origins, his identity, his moral values, his conscience, his sense of time and place, and his relationship with the other. In short, Man has lost his humanity and become a beast imprisoned in darkness and oblivion. This is due to the fact that many modernist schools of thought cling to one term in their definition of Man, reducing the diversity of human life to

one single constituent. For instance, “Marxism, stressed the agent as the motivating force, reducing human action to the interplay of class forces. Darwinism, conversely, focused only on the scenic background in which the struggle for survival took place” (Genter 145-46). Modern philosophy trapped Man within narrow meanings and failed to address his complexities. In this sense, imagery in *The Iceman Cometh* is the playwright’s way to address Modern Man’s concerns and the sense of diversity that should be the core of his identity.

Through recurrent imagery, the play turns into an artistic portrait depicting a gloomy social, psychological and historical reality and conforming to the modernist trend in which drama “climb[s] down the social ladder [...] from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie in the 18th century, [...] to the naturalistic incorporation of the proletariat” (Szondi 50-51). Imagery in modern drama stems from a real environment presenting Man in conflict with himself. It is no longer celestial dealing with a mythic struggle between divine powers and Man. The device of imagery is rather “an expression of the negative condition of a waiting being - one in need of transcendence but unable to achieve it” (54).

4. IMAGERY: FROM A STYLISTIC TO A THEATRICAL DEVICE

Animal imagery, the grotesque, the imagery of the sea bottom and filth are a symbolic reflection of a reality witnessed by O'Neill. However, the device of imagery can be appropriate only when we consider *The Iceman Cometh* as a text to be read. Imagery is abundantly recurrent in the stage directions. Though very functional in the dramatic text, stage directions become of less significance when it comes to the theatrical performance of the play, becoming no more than informative signs to the actors. This will lead to the vanishing of animal, and beast images. Nonetheless, though transformed from a written text into performed dialogue and action, the play’s atmosphere remains a realm of ghost-like creatures and gloominess

and imagery, as a stylistic device in the dramatic text, is transformed into a theatrical technique readily detected in the lighting, the decor and the costumes and makeup.

Lighting

The general mood of the *Iceman Cometh* is characterized by gloom and fuzziness. O'Neill himself insists, in the stage directions, that it is not appropriate to bathe the stage in light: "Light comes from the street windows off right, the grey subdued light of early morning in a narrow street" (O'Neill 4). *The Iceman Cometh* needs a highly sophisticated lighting technique, for it is not possible to present it without the precise light details that O'Neill himself emphasizes in every stage direction of the play: "lighting comes from a single wall bracket" (3).

These specific details, together with the dusky light which filters through the windows of the bar suggesting a state of darkness and the blurring of the distinction between night and day throw the inhabitants of the saloon, as well as the audience, in a kind of a mysterious universe with all its depressing silence and its gloomy ceremonial celebration of darkness and oblivion. So, lighting, as an element of the *mise-en-scène*, is quite functional in as much as it creates the same thematic concerns already established by animal, ghost and beast imagery.

Décor

The décor is another essential element of the *mise-en-scène*. O'Neill impresses his audience with the simple and rudimentary features of the decor. The stage consists of a poorly furnished bar room with juxtaposed tables and chairs: "The black room is crammed with round tables and chairs placed so close together that it is a difficult squeeze to pass between them" (3). The decor of "the backroom" is so telling of a state of disorder and overcrowdedness: "The right wall of the backroom is a dirty curtain" (3). The filth of the decor is a manifestation of the abundant imagery of dirt and repulsion in the written text. The bareness of the decor highlights a modernist

conception of the audience. Brecht insists on the bare decor to destroy the illusion of life on stage. Indeed, modern drama is keen on not achieving the catharsis effect on the part of the audience. The simplicity of the decor is the modern playwright's way to create the A-effect² and ensure the distancing of the spectators so as to increase their critical ability.

In *Theory of Modern Drama*, Peter Szondi argues that imagery in modern drama is part of a transitional “stylistic change” (45) meant to rescue the European as well as the American stage from “the crisis experienced by the drama at the nineteenth century” (45). This stylistic change, including imagery, “radicalizes the alienation” (60) and, thus, destroys the illusion of life through bare stage decor and deformed characters. Images of filth are then used in the play - whether written or performed – not only to create the alienation effect but also to symbolize the state of confusion, loss, dislocation and decay of the barflies whose costumes and makeup unveil much about them.

Costumes and Makeup

Of equal significance is the choice of costumes. Like the setting, costumes are dirty and ragged. Hugo, for instance, is “dressed in threadbare black clothes and white shirt frayed at collar and cuffs” (O'Neill 4). Joe Mott is “wearing a light suit that had once been flashingly sporty that is now about to fall apart” (5). Larry's “clothes are dirty and much slept in” (4). McGloin “wears old clothes” (7), and Willie Oban's “clothes [...] belong on a scarecrow” (8). Therefore, in an atmosphere of decay and decadence, costumes contribute to the projection of the distorted reality of those who wear them. Costumes turn the derelicts into eccentric creatures that are out of place and out of time. The makeup of the characters adds to their deformity and aggravates their state of gloom and ugliness. Cora, for instance, “[...] is drunk, dressed in her gaudy best, her face plastered with rouge and mascara, her hair a bit dishevelled, her hat on anyhow” (185). So, the costumes and the makeup in the play, as a performance, are as functional as the imagery of animals, ghosts

and the grotesque. Both, indeed, portray the inhabitants of the saloon as gloomy, slumberous, and mysterious creatures.

Through the light mechanism in the play, the decor, the costumes and the makeup, the playwright skillfully creates a visual effect that is so expressive of a general mood of a modern life haunted by the ghost of war and death.

During the years when the Depression was taking its toll on this country, the storm clouds of war were rapidly gathering over Europe and Asia. Preoccupied with [...] recovering from the scars of World War I, a war in which it seemed to many the U.S. had paid a price for allowing itself to be involved in the disputes of other countries. (Wertheim 2)

The Americans of the late 1930s, who were dealing with the harsh impacts of the Depression and imminent war, were inclined to “pacifism and splendid isolation” (2) and to avert their eyes from what was happening beyond their land. Art provided an escape from the depressing reality of the time. Although this sense of escapism is irrelevant to the bleak world of *The Iceman Cometh*, the pipe dreams of the dwellers of Harry Hope’s saloon are an ironic reflection of the era’s need for an escape from the tension of daily life. “The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober” (O’Neill 16), says Larry in Act I, admitting the pipe dream’s necessity to escape from the horrors of modern life.

5. IMAGERY IN “THE ICEMAN COMETH”: THE PHILOSOPHICAL, PSYCHOANALYTICAL AND THE POSTMODERNIST

The Philosophical

Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy claiming the “death of God” and his questioning of reality are clearly present in the saloon’s images of decay, darkness and doubt about religion. In O’Neill’s encounter with religion, “it is understandable that he would be attracted to

Nietzsche and think that he could regard the once shocking saying ‘God is dead’ as a celebration” (Diggins 184).

Charles Darwin’s theory of Evolution, usurping the vantage point of Man in the universe and reducing him to a state of bestiality, is also relevant to the thematic course of the play and the portrayal of the characters as animals and beasts through the device of animal imagery. O’Neill’s sense of trauma upon discovering the discrepancy between religion and modern science is reflected in his nihilistic vision of Man’s existence.

With modernists like Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, O’Neill no longer saw Man at the center of a benevolent universe whose energies could be brought under control. At the same time, to accept a godless world is to live without meaning and significance. (196)

O’Neill’s reflections on Man’s struggle to populate his world with meaning and spiritual truth are voiced by Larry’s confessions:

I’m afraid to live, am I? — and even more afraid to die! So I sit here, with my pride drowned on the bottom of a bottle, keeping drunk so I won’t see myself shaking in my britches with fright, or hear myself whining and praying: Beloved Christ, let me live a little longer at any price! If it’s only for a few days more, or a few hours even, have mercy, Almighty God, and let me still clutch greedily to my yellow heart this sweet treasure, this jewel beyond price, this dirty, stinking bit of withered old flesh which is my beautiful little life! (170)

Such confessions ironically confirm O’Neill’s belief that people need religion even though it leads them to a condition of perpetual struggle, suffering and disillusionment. Larry’s words show how religion compels humankind to seek rescue from exterior forces, preventing the mind from its will, and turning Man into an animal-like mindless creature driven by his emotions and instinctive desires.

O’Neill’s predilection to the portrayal of the derelicts as lethargic beasts, motionless ghosts, and deformed “sub-human” creatures is certainly a deliberate and symbolic unveiling of the disturbing image of Man in the modern world. Indeed, the “great” war and the massive death of Man are reflected in the apocalyptic dark

atmosphere of the saloon which can be seen as a microcosm of the world with its sense of decay, stagnation, and cynicism.

Drawing from dirty and repulsive images, the device of imagery can be described as a modern device, which highlights a philosophical stand about the other and reiterates Plautus definition of man as “*Homobomini lupus*” (qtd. in Freud 58), meaning that every human being is potentially a werewolf to the other. “Hello, leedle Harry! Hello, nice, leedle, funny monkey-faces! [...] Gottamned stupid bourgeois! Soon comes the Day of Judgment! (O’Neill 213), Hugo addresses the denizens overtly voicing the werewolf in him and his hostility towards them.

The Psychoanalytical

Sigmund Freud’s speculation about the “wolfman” can be plausibly read in animal, ghost and grotesque images in the play. In *Civilization and its Discontent*, Freud argues that Man sees in the other a potential tempter to satisfy his governing sense of aggressiveness. He tends to humiliate, cause pain, and torture the other (58) in order to satisfy his instinctive drives and pleasures. Man’s erotic propulsion, Freud explains, may trigger a new form of defiance by the desire to destroy. In this sense, the animal drives are not merely part of culture; they are rather its essence. Animal imagery and the verbal tension between the characters in *The Iceman Cometh*, as well as their desire to exterminate each other, are the manifestation of the animal and the instinct of aggression toward the other.

The Freudian revolution in psychoanalysis and the dissection of the modern Man into perpetually conflicting polarities (Ego - Superego - Ed) led to the destruction of the myth of Man as a sovereign unified entity. This is quite clear in the depiction of the denizens who keep struggling to understand themselves and give meaning to their existence, yet in vain. The characters’ description also projects such psychological findings. That the inhabitants of Harry Hope’s saloon are nearer to ghosts, beasts, and “wax figures” (212) than to human beings is in fact indicative of a sense of revision

of human identity and an attempt to delve into the labyrinths of the human psyche.

The Post-Structuralist / Postmodernist

Though established as a modernist play, *The Iceman Cometh* can readily be classified as a postmodernist script through the study of animal imagery. In “The Animal That Therefore I Am”, Jacques Derrida highlights the significance of animal imagery in the postmodernist work of art, stressing its political dimension:

We had above all to explore the logics organizing both the submission of the beast (and the living being) to political sovereignty, and an irresistible overloaded analogy between the beast and a sovereign supposed to share a space of some exteriority with respect to law and right. (Farrell Krell 13)

Animal imagery in this vein is the playwright’s instrument to take the work “outside the law, and above the law” and reconsider “the origin and foundation of the law” (13). Questions about what is proper to the human condition and the lines of demarcation between the human and the animal can be raised through animal imagery in the construction of characters. Accordingly, animal imagery in the postmodernist text brings forth Derrida’s conclusion that “bestiality/bêtise can be proper to man in relation to his own kind and foreign to the animal” (14), and hence it has to be highlighted in the portrayal of characters in the narrative or dramatic text.

According to Derrida, what the beast and the human share is their “outlaw” status; that is their readiness to exist outside the law. The figures of the beast and the sovereign are reflected in the image of the derelicts who are trying to escape their human reality and share a past record of crime and lawlessness. Their bestiality is further highlighted through their association with different animal figures as well as their eagerness to “sink down to the bottom of the sea and rest in peace” (O’Neill 86), invoking Derrida’s description of “*le fond sans fond*” or the bottomless foundation in his criticism of

the classical definition of human identity and the distinction between the human and the animal.

In *The Iceman Cometh*, Hickey's advice to the derelicts to go down to the bottom of the sea and rest in peace, as well as Larry Slade's description of the place as "the No Chance Saloon [...], the End of the Line Cate, the Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller" (O'Neill 61), are suggestive of the sense of an ending characterizing the classical definition of Man and the necessity to inquire about the essence of Man in a postmodern age of hybridity and difference:

At bottom, who or what is the beast and who or what is the sovereign? At bottom, if there is a bottom, a ground or foundation for an answer? Or do we confront here once again *le fond sans fond*, the bottomless foundation? (Farell Krell 18)

Going down to the bottom of the sea is a metaphorical quest for identity that ironically reveals the baseless argument about human sovereignty and uncovers the inadequacy of the classical self-proclaimed qualities of the human being.

In Derrida's view, bestiality is the very essence of Man, for humankind is essentially *bête* in that its philosophers always try to appropriate for the other species features they believe to be proper to them. To try the distinction "human vs. animal" is itself a *bêtise*, argues Derrida. Meanwhile, "no animal is capable of *bêtise* or any other beastly act, for the beastly and the insane are qualities proper to the ratiocinative humankind" (17). In this context, Derrida talks about the modern zoo, especially the "animal-friendly zoo" where exercised care can conceal and substitute iron cages. These are zoos "with a liberal, idealist and spiritualist grimace" (398), which are reminiscent of Michel Foucault's image of the asylum where the mad faces enclosure combined with friendly care. Respectively, Harry Hope's saloon in which O'Neill's characters are incarcerated becomes an "animal-friendly zoo" and an asylum in which the distinction between the human and the animal becomes blurred.

In postmodernist conception, the pure categorization of human vs. animal has a political and ideological dimension and is based on

false premises. Pure categorization as a grand narrative is called into question to be substituted by mini-narratives of plurality and hybridity. Linked to this is the argument that pure categorization is created and “used politically to include one group, such as humans, whilst excluding another, such as animals” (Taylor 39). These pure categories are in fact about power in the Foucauldian sense whereby power lies in the discourse. In this case, the discourse is that of the distinction animal vs. human in which the human represents culture, reason and language while the animal stands for irrationality, bestiality and instinct. This grand narrative, deeply rooted in the western discourse as absolute truth, is debunked in *The Iceman Cometh* through the depiction of characters living on the margins of humanity and exhibiting animal attributes in their physical description.

In postmodern theory, nothing is absolute or certain. “All absolute values become sites of questioning, of rethinking, of new kinds of affirmation” (Bennett and Royle 280). This implies that postmodern theory and practice highlights the “undecidable” and rejects the rational restraints of modernism. In this context, the boundary between the animal and the human becomes blurred and human identity is revised as Derrida explains, suggesting a sense of confusion upon the human encounter with the animal other. Sitting like animals in a dark cage-like setting and driven by the pleasure principle (cf. an addiction to alcohol and sexual desire), characters in *The Iceman Cometh* become figurative animals governed by the instincts of desire and disorder.

The intersection between the human and the animal can equally be explained in terms of privileging the body over the mind in reaction to the rationalism of the renaissance philosophy. In fact, “neither the aesthetics of modernism nor the philosophical values of humanism [...] can cope easily with hybrid forms which unsettle boundaries, most especially the boundaries of the human and the non-human” (Baker 99). In the modernist conception, there is an inclination to homogenize and organize the human-animal relationship as a way to attain meaning and eliminate dissimilarity

and disintegration. Conversely, the postmodernist thought celebrates the bodily drives and denounces the grand narrative of Man as a rational being which led to more political corruption and further dehumanization of the subject. Animal imagery in *The Iceman Cometh* is meant to criticize such a classical story of violation and injustice whereby gender, class, and race categorization deprived humans of their rights and reduced them to the figurative status of animals.

In a postmodernist orientation, Michel Foucault rejects the difference-excluding definition of Man in classical schools of thought. He argues that difference is of paramount significance in establishing the human identity, and marginalized groups who are excluded due to their difference have to be voiced and included in the postmodern definition of humanity. In *The History of Sexuality I*, Foucault argues that post-Renaissance culture is authoritarian and egocentric as it is keen on the marginalization and demonization of difference by setting standards of behaviour and by establishing strictly controlled institutions, like insane asylums, prisons, and hospitals, in order to deal with the other who is different. These institutions are the embodiment of political power and a means by which a dominant group can impose its control on difference, described as perversion and lawlessness. “Doubtless acts ‘contrary to nature’ were stamped as especially abominable, but they were perceived simply as an extreme form of acts ‘against the law’” (Foucault 38).

In this respect, animal imagery and the grotesque in *The Iceman Cometh* can be read as an ironic investment in difference in the postmodern centrifugal definition of Man as synonymous with hybridity, plurality, and otherness. The device also voices the other “that was overlooked by the law, but not so neglectful of itself that it did not go on producing more species, even where there was no order to fit into” (Foucault 43). The proliferation of selves in postmodern Man’s definition and the blurring of boundaries between centre and periphery, and between human and animal, in the character construction in *The Iceman Cometh* reflect the

Foucauldian suggestion about “the implantation of multiple perversions [...] and taking revenge on a power that has thrust on it an excessively repressive law” (49).

In *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker states that even victims who counter-violence are equally reduced to the same figurative animal status (100). Indeed, perpetrators and victims of violence become alike in undergoing the dehumanization experience. In *The Iceman Cometh*, animal imagery is aesthetically and politically employed to highlight the postmodern conception of the borderless human-animal relationship. The different characters in the play are violent toward each other, becoming both victims and perpetrators and sharing the process of dehumanization and undergoing a border-crossing experience leading to a postmodern condition of hybridity and “humanimalism”.

Respectively, Baker argues that a common feature of the postmodernist conception is the characterization of the human self or body as “impure, hybrid or monstrous” (99). He explains that modernity is a repressive “process of purification” excluding “any monster or hybrid” that threatens to move beyond the border. Likewise, in *Between Monsters, Goddesses and Cyborgs*, Nina Lykke suggests that in postmodernism there exists a “cyborg” realm where such “creatures are becoming more and more common and their repression, conversely, less and less successful” (16). She explains that the “cyborg” realm is where hybrid creatures, excluded in modernist discourses, proliferate and coexist with the human. In the postmodernist hypothesis, the “cyborg” is the outcome of rejecting the modernist fear of contamination by the other, such as the animal. The “cyborg” is thus a step toward impurity, monstrosity and hybridity as an aesthetic act of creation. Animal and filth images in *The Iceman Cometh* fall within the employment of the “cyborg” as a metaphor of plurality and open-endedness.

In *Struggle, Defeat or Rebirth: Eugene O’Neill’s Vision of Humanity*, Thierry Dubost states that in O’Neill’s play “the conclusion drawn is that the fusion of two human beings can take place only in the world of pipe dreams” (102). Through the device of animal imagery,

the fusion happens at a more universal level to include the human and the animal and turn the characters into hybrid “cyborgs”. In the same vein, in “Cyborgs and Symbionts”, Donna J. Harraway focuses on the political dimension of the “cyborg,” explaining that it “has a subversive power, [being] the source of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (160). Likewise, Mark Hutchinson argues that “the monster might prove to be a more complete idea of subjectivity than the rational, moral western subject” (144). He adds that the monstrous work is a way of escaping the modernist law of morality, being a means to experience pleasure and intensity and overcome the constraints of aesthetic and moralistic judgment (147). Being the cornerstone of Western philosophical thought, the single unified subject is revisited through the notion of the “cyborg” to be substituted by a “humanimal” - a hybrid and fluid subject.

In *The Iceman Cometh*, animal imagery employed in the portrayal of the derelicts is crucial in Deleuze and Guattari’s process of “becoming-animal” and the sweeping away of self-centred conceptions of the subject, turning the denizens into “cyborgs” with a fluid and heterogeneous identity. “Leedle *monkey faces* [...], soon, leedle proletarians, vevill have free picnic in the cool shade, vevill eat hot dogs and drink free beer beneath the villow trees! Like hogs, yes! *Like beautiful leedle hogs!*” (O’Neill 105), Hugo addresses his mates using animal-saturated imagery and simile and revealing his emotional commitment to the dream of a new border-crossing identity.

In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari stipulate that “becoming-animal” is reached through a “deterritorialization” process, or the “unhumaning” of the human, “which the animal proposes to the human by indicating ways-out or means of escape that the human would never have thought of by himself” (35). Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “deterritorialization” is built upon the Nietzschean assumption of the cosmos as the incessant becoming of a multiplicity of interconnected forces of no stable entities, and which must be understood in terms of difference rather than singularity. The “becoming-animal” is, therefore, part of the

postmodernist endeavour to decenter the subject of singularity and unity toward a more hybrid identity that blurs the lines between the self and the other.

“Becoming-animal” testifies to the incredibility of the grand narrative of Man as a supreme and unique creature privileged with reason and language. In *Kafka*, Deleuze and Guattari claim:

There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the world [...]. There is no longer a man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other [...] in a continuum of reversible intensities [...]. There is no longer a subject [...]. Rather, there is a circuit of states that forms a mutual becoming, in the heart of a necessarily multiple or collective assemblage. (22)

In their attempt to establish a plural and hybrid identity, Deleuze and Guattari conclude that the animal is “still too close, still too perceptible, too visible, too individuated” (37-38) and that the animal is capable of showing Man how to overcome the rigid definition of the subject and how to exist beyond the constraints of such a definition.

This very notion of “becoming-animal” or turning into a “cyborg” corresponds to Jean François Lyotard’s argument about moving away from grand narratives and resisting self-contented certainties of sovereignty and singularity in order to create a collective multiplicity of the subject. “We no longer have recourse to the grand narrative. [...] The grand narrative has lost its credibility,” (76) stresses Lyotard confirming that it is part of living in a postmodern world that grand narratives are no longer credible. Instead, multiple mini-narratives are constructed to stand against the grand narrative’s confining authoritarianism.

In *The Inhuman*, Lyotard criticizes the modern era’s “techno-science” forces that attempt to exclude the body and make life possible without it. “Techno-scientists” strive to reduce humanity to its alleged essence, which is reason, and make this possible in computer-program forms, trying “to make thought without a body possible; a thought that continues to exist after the death of the

human body” (13). The human being, as body and reason, has no place in the new order of things and reducing Man to a thought process is an act of exclusion and repression. Lyotard claims that abstract thought and phenomenological body are inseparable, explaining that

what makes thought and the body inseparable isn't just that the latter is the indispensable hardware for the former, a material prerequisite of its existence. It's that each of them is analogous to the other in its relationship with its respective (sensible, symbolic) environment: the relationship being analogical in both cases. In this description, there are convincing grounds for not supporting the hypothesis of a principle of the “separability” of intelligence, a principle [...] through which he could legitimate an attempt to create artificial intelligence. (16)

Resisting these dehumanization attempts is an ethical commitment to defend difference which has to be advocated in rejection of the human identity as dictated by the grand narratives of modernity. Animal imagery in O'Neill's play emphasizes the character's bodies and equates their identity with difference. This device even enables the playwright to go a step further and favour the body over the thought, creating a new human identity characterized by openness, plurality, and difference.

CONCLUSION

Imagery in O'Neill's work is an open field of meanings that cannot be constructed by words. Connected to the grotesque and animal images, the characters and their environment can be described as a reflection of modern Man's portrait resting upon decay, illusion and meaninglessness. Imagery can also be an ironic revisiting of the rigid definition of the human being as a sovereign and rational entity. The device of imagery can equally be a projection of the human *psyche* and its perpetually conflicting forces. It is likewise an expression of the postmodernist definition of Man as a being constructed upon

difference and hybridity. Whether approached with classical or postmodernist lenses, imagery remains the playwright's instrument towards meanings that go beyond the barriers of words, telling much about the human identity though nothing seems to be articulated.

What often escapes the notice of critics who deal with imagery in *The Iceman Cometh* as a reflection of modern Man's portrait and reality is the fact that this device plays a crucial role in creating another image of Man constructed upon the internal workings and conflicting forces of the human *psyche*. Imagery is also employed to highlight the postmodernist argument about the end of the linguistic sign's sovereignty as inscribed within established modes of representation. Hence, imagery uncovers the "betrayal of reality by signs" (Baudrillard 48) and destroys the classical definition of Man toward a larger concept of human identity going beyond rationalism, singularity and unity.

NOTES

1. For a further discussion of the use of masks in O'Neill's plays see Oscar Cargill. "Fusion-point of Jung and Nietzsche. In *O'Neill and His Plays*. Ed. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher. New York: New York University Press, 1970 and Eugene M. Waith. "Eugene O'Neill: An Exercise in Unmasking". *Educational Theatre Journal*. 13.3. (1961): 182-191.
2. The Alienation effect is the English translation of Bertolt Brecht's term "verfremdungseffekt", which is a dramatic effect aimed at encouraging an attitude of critical detachment on the part of the audience instead of submitting to realistic illusion. Different techniques like interrupting the play's action, sudden changes and switching of roles are aimed at stimulating a rational view of history as a changeable process rather than a fate to be accepted as predetermined (Baldick 7).

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