



The Iceman Cometh

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Harry Hope's saloon and rooming house are autobiographically derived from a lower Manhattan dive, Jimmy-the-Priest's, which O'Neill frequented between 1910 and 1912, and where he attempted suicide in the latter year. The play's theme is that humans cannot live without illusions, no matter how ill-founded those illusions may be.

Harry Hope's customers have seen better days, but they now blunt the pain of their lost lives with drink and dreams of "tomorrow"--the day they will renounce alcoholism and return to their former occupations. Harry subsidizes his guests in return for their supportive fellowship as he pretends to mourn for the wife he hated. The intellectual champion for these men of Tomorrow is Larry Slade, onetime anarchist, who has resigned himself to the conviction that life is lousy, man is doomed, and nothing matters.

Opposing the Tomorrow men is a hardware salesman, Hickey, who kicks away the crutches of their self-deceptions out of professed love for them and confidence that the truth shall set them free. In the last act, having made the derelicts hopeless with the horror of self-confrontation, Hickey delivers a long speech, revealing that he has slain his long-suffering wife, Evelyn, not out of love but out of a lifetime of hatred and self-loathing. Unable to face his authentic feelings, he then claims to have murdered her in a fit of insanity.

Relieved that they have been tricked by an apparent madman, the drunks relapse into their cherished fantasies.

Bibliography

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Floyd, Virginia. *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill: A New Assessment*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1987. Reviews the plot of the play in detail.

Raleigh, John Henry. *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965. Stresses the autobiographical and sociological elements in *The Iceman Cometh*. Argues that the characters form a hierarchy, not a democracy.

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