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**Principal Investigator:** Wayne Narey

College of Liberal Arts and Communication

Department of English and Philosophy

## Eugene O'Neill's 'Irish Play': *The Iceman Cometh*

Proposal submitted by Wayne Narey

Most scholars and appreciators of Eugene O'Neill's plays agree that *The Iceman Cometh* represents his second-most successful play, after *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Yet O'Neill's *Iceman*, drawn from his experience at "Jimmy the Priest's" lower Westside bar in New York City, has more depth to it than usually acknowledged. While we don't know the full-extant Eugene had of his father's ancestral homeland, the bar in the West Village of New York, which becomes Harry Hope's bar and boarding house in *Iceman*, had first and most notably a parallel and historical primacy from Ireland's then contemporary and most recent past at the turn of the Twentieth-Century.

Viewers and readers often assess the play by its Greek tragic influence, given that the work anticipates an Aristotelian *peripeteia*, followed by the "awakening," or *anagnoresis*, with the appearance of the salesman Hickey's arrival for the birthday celebration for Harry Hope, owner of the decadent bar and boarding house comprised of dissipated occupants. Their frightful lives await his yearly return—another Dionysian festival for the failed and lost. That "volta" does not, however, take place; rather the recipients of Hickey's revelation feel revulsion and waves of increasing dissolution from his message of *freedom*.

As a defeated Chorus with self-assured fantasies, their "pipe-dreams"—a term that O'Neill's characters repeat as if a vow to their gods—reminds us of Apollo's oracle at Delphi, where the inscription awaits all visitors as a mandate: "Know Thyself." Hickey, of course, demands such an admission from each, even as their dissipated lives deny the truth he bears. As a messenger of the feared Apollo, Hickey brings truth to those least able to bear its burdens.

With its considerable *Attic* quality—seconded only, I submit, by the Euripidean-like tragedy of *Desire Under the Elms*—this play has a structure more akin to the national condition of Ireland’s political stupor, which existed contemporaneously with O’Neill’s *Iceman* set in the West Village of New York in the first two decades of the Twentieth Century. One wonders how much the younger O’Neill knew of his father’s ancestry in his native Ireland, as well as the degree to which that history impacted Eugene’s assembled failed socialists, anarchists, and soldiers who knew momentary victories and ultimate defeat.

The debilitated assembly of drunks who occupy Harry Hope’s ironically named bar, boarding house and isolated, stagnant island stand for the national state of Ireland in its own stagnation and failure, which followed the death of Parnell with a drunken anticipation of its next savior, one who could raise the populace from its self-deluded promise: “home rule,” or, otherwise put, an “unrented homeland.” Those dissipated, failed lives that await Hickey and his promise of life, even if momentary, offer a glimpse of lost causes with a temporary expectation of victory and joy.

Obviously, other interpretations of the play abound, including the insightful essay on the religious overtones of the play by Cyrus Day. Yet, O’Neill’s travels prior to and immediately after his stay at Jimmy the Priest’s Fulton Street home in New York seem too relevant to the “Liverpool Irishmen” he sailed with, the relevant events in Dublin, and his awareness of the stupor then extant in his father’s homeland. Parnell’s shame with Kitty O’Shea, the “Evelyn” in *Iceman*, left the patriots, socialists, and ever-present “anti-West Briton anarchists” questioning when and if another savior would restore their sobriety.