Waiting for Tomorrow?
—A Comparative Study of The Iceman Cometh and Waiting for Godot

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Eugene O’Neill (1888—1953), the Noble Prize winner of 1936 and four times Pulitzer Prize winner, is regarded as the greatest and the most well-known American playwright. In his later work, especially in The Iceman Cometh, a sense of absurdity can be easily found out. Samuel Beckett (1906—1989), with the publishing of Waiting for Godot, is considered to be the most influential playwright of the Theatre of Absurd after the World War Two, winning the Nobel Prize in 1969. Though the two literary giants belong to different ages and styles, for the former is a master of Expressionism and Realism and the later the representative figure of the Theatre of Absurd, their works do share certain similarities.

I. Similar Background Information
A writer’s experience is unavoidably a determinative factor to his works. The constantly mishaps happened in O’Neill life force his life view to be extremely pessimistic. Born in a reverent Irish Catholic family, O’Neill abandoned his belief when he found his mother was addicted to morphine. And what’s worse, it was when she gave birth to O’Neill that she was first given morphine by a quack doctor. Since then, with a strong sense of guilty and disbelief, he fell into depravity,
drinking, smoking and going whoring. He married a girl secretly at the age of 21, had to run off to Honduras because of the rejection to this marriage from both sides of the two families, and finally came back to America for his infection of malaria. The marriage lasted just three years, ending with O’Neill’s being accused for adultery. The years from 1910 to 1912 were miserable to O’Neill, for he was expelled by Princeton University and supported financially by his father to lead a drunken life with other lowest tipplers, who were prototypes of the boozers in *The Iceman Cometh*. In the year 1912, O’Neill once attempted to commit suicide for he couldn’t face such a rotten way of life any more. Although this attempt failed, he caught pneumonia instead. This series of misfortunes shaped O’Neill’s philosophy of life into an extremity. He firmly held that “Life’s a tragedy,” and “we are tragedies, the most astonishing ones among the written and unwritten tragedies.”[1] However, after the unsuccessful suicide, O’Neill finally believed that since none of the malaria, suicide or pneumonia could take his life away, he was determined to live on. Ever since then, reading and play-writing became his new way of life, though affliction and desperation never left him alone.

In the year 1939, O’Neill finished the first draft of *The Iceman Cometh*, from June to November. It is the year when Germany invaded Poland, marking the start of the Second World War. This worldly disaster struck O’Neill and drew him back from his melancholic inner world to the crucial mad world. “The outbreak of the European war pushed him into a deeper desperation, which has never been recovered completely again.”[2] This desperation toward the whole human race added to what he felt for his miserable families and the slump of his career, is fully reflected in *The Iceman Cometh*, in which all the characters are doing nothing but wallow in all kinds of “pipe dreams” which they hold the only faith in. The worldwide-spread disaster forced O’Neill to face the essentiality of human existence and living conditions where only greed, sinfulness and fierceness remained.

Beckett, also as a tragedian, was born in a Jewish family in Dublin, and graduated from the Trinity College with diplomas of both French and Italian. After he met James Joyce at Paris in 1928, because of his mastery of several languages, Beckett became the assistant of Joyce who had already been blind, and helped him finish collecting the scripts of *Finnegan’s Wake*. In 1931, Beckett returned to Dublin and started studying Descartes and Kafka, who, together with Joyce, were the most influential figures to Beckett’s works. He was constantly wandering across France,
Ireland, England and Germany, and was hunted by the Nazi because of his working for Britain during the World War Two. This long-time life of vagrancy diminished his sense of belonging, and formed a prototypal tramp life of his characters in almost all his novels or dramas, such as *Waiting for Godot*, *Murphy*, *Molloy*, and *Malone Dies*. Especially after being stabbed by a stranger on January 7th, 1938, Beckett got some further understanding of the absurd human life. Joyce described that injury in a letter to his son: “The stab was above the heart; that is uninjured, and the lungs also, but there is a perforation of the pleura, the layer of tissue surrounding the lungs. My house on the day after your departure was like the stock exchange, telephone calls from everywhere...Beckett has had a lucky escape.” The years of 1938 and 1939, during which time he experienced a slow recovery, were described as “a period of apathy and lethargy” by Beckett. [3]

The world events obviously had more effect on Beckett than O’Neill, for the former was a Jewish intellectual, a resistant and an Irish Red Cross worker, who suffered a series of persecution by the Nazi. When the war ended in 1945, Beckett returned to Paris and reached his creative culmination from that year on. However, the trauma caused by the War continued, to lead Beckett’s works to an eternal desolation.

The life experience, as well as the worldwide devastation, pushes the writers directly to meditate on the predicament of human existence. In their masterpieces, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Waiting for Godot*, this meditation is well showed and fully represented in the theme and writing techniques.

II. Similar Theme

*The Iceman Cometh* tells a story of fifteen homeless dead-end boozers and three prostitutes, who gather in Hope’s saloon, with each holding one “pipe dream” of “tomorrow movement”, are waiting for the hardware salesman Hickey’s coming to celebrate Harry Hope’s birthday and to bring laughter to them as he always does every half year. They wait for Hickey so eagerly and wish he has already finished “figurin’ out de best way to save dem and bring dem peace.”[4] But this time, Hickey comes to persuade them to give up drinking besides their pipe dreams, and go out of this “Palace of Pipe Dreams”[3] to the outside world. Most of the boozers manage to go out, as Hickey wishes, but all get back in the midnight, restarting a life with drinking and pipe dreams, for they realize that what Hickey’ attempt to strip life of all rationalizations results in death. After Hickey tells them that he killed
his wife for ending his own pipe dream as well as hers, he is arrested by the police, and the drama ends with nothing changes but only Hickey's arrest and the death of Don Parritt, who sold his anarchist mother off for hatred.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the two acts play, two tramps—Vladimir and Estragon, wait at a country road where only a single tree stands, keeping an appointment with and in hope of meeting someone called Godot. During the waiting, they play games to kill time and communicate with each other on dull subjects. In each act of the play, the tramps encounter Pozzo, a resolute man who drags his weak and withered slave Lucky forward with the method of a rope revolving round his neck and a whip. Both of the two acts end up with a messenger boy informs Vladimir and Estragon that Godot will not arrive today, but tomorrow he would certainly come. The play ends up at where it starts, with the two tramps waiting for Godot day to day, endlessly.

Hope, waiting, salvation and tomorrow are the same topics of the two plays in different times. In these two works, all the characters, the boozers and tramps, are all abandoned by the society, waiting for a savior, and insisting on the pipe dreams or hopes that "To-morrow everything will be better."[6] O'Neill primarily named his play as *Tomorrow*, and *En Attendant*, or in English, *Waiting*, was the first title occurred in Beckett's mind. But is there a tomorrow that one can really wait for, at least, in these two plays? The answer seems to be negative. In *The Iceman Cometh*, Hickey the savior is waited by everyone zealously, then he shows up, bringing in no salvation but death and letting the others still sink into the pipe dreams of tomorrow. In *Waiting for Godot*, the expected Messiah Godot never turns up, but only sends a boy to ensure Estragon and Vladimir that he will certainly come tomorrow, which makes them have to wait continuously. Thus, no matter the wished men come or not in the end, the destiny of the heroes will never be altered, that is, they can’t be saved. What both O'Neill and Beckett want to deliver is that in such an absurd world, we can do nothing but wait—wait for the unprocurable “tomorrow” which, though, never will arrive. Normand Berlin once said, "In *The Iceman Cometh*, O'Neill faced directly to the human existence; perhaps, before him, only Shakespeare and Sophocles, after him, only Beckett ever faced it without a twinkle."[7] Wang Yiqun also sees the predicaments in *The Iceman Cometh* and *Waiting for Godot*, as he believes that *Iceman* is a tragedy that happens when human beings are still waiting for Godot at their last but no-way-to-run-out minutes.[8]
Waiting for Godot is finished in 1948, and first performed in Paris on January 5th, 1953, which was a huge success. In 1956, for the first time, it appeared on the stages of New York. The Iceman Cometh, first represented in the theater in 1946 turned out to be a big failure, as Allardyce Nicoll once criticized:

...all we may say is that his [O’Neill’s] first contribution to this his latest work, The Iceman Cometh, is a vastly disappointing play. The characters talk too much; we become wearied with the constant repetition of the phrase “pipe dreams”; the philosophy of the scenes is confused...What this farrago of despairing scenes implies no one can tell: O’Neill’s latest play is perhaps his poorest. [9]

However, The Iceman Cometh revived in 1956. It is easy for one to understand the dramatic change here. For in the year of 1946, with the triumph of the Second World War and the witness of America’s constructing hegemony in politics, economy and military affairs, Americans were fully confident and optimistic toward the future life. They couldn’t accept the absurdity about human life showed in this play at that time. But in 1956, the trauma left by the WW II were not dying out, besides, the tension between America and the Soviet Union led to a fear of the breaking out of the Third World War, which caused a sense of insecurity all over the world. To Americans, specifically, the loss of Korean War knocked them down to the ground, since it was the first defeat in American military history. The disillusionment of all the beliefs and hopes ended in a mental crisis among all Americans. The absurd works vividly reflected the Westerners’ true feelings of absurdity and nothingness toward the post-war western society. Thus, it was doubtless that when The Iceman Cometh, a play with absurdity and disillusionment reappeared in the American theater, it was easily accepted by the audience then. Besides, the success of Waiting for Godot in America should also play an important part in the victory revival of The Iceman Cometh, since Americans could applaud at Beckett, why could not they rethink and fall in love again with their literary icon’s predictive masterpiece?

III. Similar Writing Techniques

(1) The Circular Structure

As Aristotle said, beginning, middle and end are three elements of a drama’s essential features, and it should be constructed along traditional lines, with exposition, development, climax, resolution and denouement. However, neither The
*Iceman Cometh* nor *Waiting for Godot* is structured in that “rational” way: they both end in the same conditions where they begin; what happens in the beginnings happens exactly again in the ends. In *Waiting for Godot*, in both of the two acts, the constant troubles with shoes and hats, the at least thirty times repetition of “to wait for Godot”, the same characters to appear, the almost same locale of a country road and a tree (in Act II the tree’s suddenly having four or five leaves marks the only change in the locale), the exactly same conversations and actions in the end of each play, all these circularities express a despairing situation where human beings exhaust their meaningless lives in such endless and empty world with nothingness. The locked circular structure, replacing the traditional linear one, shows that no matter what happens in the process, the play is to stop at where it starts, giving a sense of destination and cycling.

*Waiting for Godot* explores a static situation in which “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.” [10] The two acts of this play are cyclic; the events of Act II largely repeat and parallel those of Act I. *Waiting for Godot*, therefore, appears to be parts of an endless series, as Vladimir seems to realize when he comments, “In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!” [11] Ihab Hassan points out: “The inaction of the play is cyclical, and its events are endlessly repetitious: its two acts are symmetric, both equal images of an absence. Two acts, as Samuel Beckett know, are enough to represent a sequence stretching to infinity.” [12]

Compared with the obvious circularity of *Waiting for Godot*, *The Iceman Cometh* is structured in a more inconspicuous circle. This “titanic drama,” [13] with nearly 20 characters and more than 4-hour length, plots a rather simply story: a crowd of dead-end boozers, having good faith in their pipe dreams about tomorrow, are waiting for Hickey the Savior, who turns out to be Hickey the Death, and after he leaves, they all get back to the former conditions of dreaming. Thus, the coming of Hickey becomes a “strange interlude” and a false climax, for the expected salvation hasn’t come about, what’s worse, death enhances the desperate atmosphere. The play, the same as *Waiting for Godot*, is ended at the beginning. The similar cycles into which the two plays develop predict an irreversible but no-way-out extremity.

The circular structure in both the plays represents the living-dead condition of human beings. Because in such circularity, there is no difference among yesterday, today and tomorrow, just like Larry states in *The Iceman Cometh*, “Worst is best here, and East is West, and tomorrow is yesterday.” [14] The time in these two plays
reveals the meaninglessness of the modern Western life, which strongly frightens and disappoints the modern Westerners. Time is just a patchwork of many casual things; it is useless to find out the inevitability of what’s going to happen. In this play, time, contrary to its traditional functions, cannot solve any problems, but brings death and nihility.

(2) Symbolism

The title characters of both the two plays have the same symbolic meaning, symbolizing the false savior. O’Neill once declared that he always tried to indicate a deeper meaning under the title itself. “Ice man” is from an American underbred folktale, and Hickey uses it as a joke that he leaves his wife sleep with the iceman so that he can take part in the binge at Hope’s saloon. The biblical usage of “cometh” deliberately gives an indication of the cometh of the bridegroom, or the Lord in Matthew 25. Thus the coming of Messiah here turns out to be the coming of Hickey, showing that Hickey is the savior-like man in the boozers’ mind. Like Willie Oban, the Harvard Law School alumnus says to all the Hickey-waiters, “Let us ignore the Great Salesman, will soon arrive bringing the blessed bourgeois long green! Would that Hickey or Death would come!” Hickey is the only hope that all the boozers hold now, and waiting for his coming means “waiting to be saved” by him. However, Hickey is a false savior who cannot even save his own or his wife’s pipe dreams. In order to run away from the guilty of betraying his wife who constantly forgives his betrayals, Hickey kills her and gives himself up to the police. Here the infidelity is Hickey’s not his wife’s; the “iceman” turns out to be Hickey himself. He cannot save his believers, but bring them death only. Here, the iceman, the false Messiah, the Death are all coming into one, that is, Hickey.

In Waiting for Godot, although Godot never physically present on stage, the 41-time mentions of his name make his presence everywhere. The mystery of such a crucial figure leads to the various guesses of the meaning of Godot. Godot is mostly interpreted as a symbol of “God”, though it might be certainly wrong to Beckett, who apparently stated that if he had meant “God”, he would have written “God” directly. But actually, there are still many indications for the readers and critics to identify Godot with God. First of all, Godot’s appearance is implied to be similar to the appearance of God described in Bible.

Vladimir: (softly) Has he a beard, Mr. Godot?
Boy: Yes Sir.
Vladimir: Fair or... (he hesitates)...or black?
Boy: I think it's white, Sir.
Silence.
Vladimir: Christ have mercy on us! [19]

Secondly, the heartily waiting of the two tramps is the exact obedience of what the Bible tells its believer, “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” [20] What’s more, the play mentions that there are two boys who separately mind goats or sheep for Godot and he treats them differently. This can also find its reference in the Bible that “he [the Son of Man] will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” [21]. Thus, Godot is very likely described by Beckett with God’s reflection, though the author himself never admitted that.

The Iceman Cometh and Waiting for Godot both achieved huge successes in 1950’s because there’s a striking similarity between the plays and reality. People at that time, buried God in response to Nietzsche’s God-dead conception, and believed in another two new “Gods”—rationality and science. The new Gods, however, also disappointed people a lot. In the highly developed industrial world, humanity is replaced by commercialization and capitalization; in the terrible world wars, those “rational” countries made use of the advanced technology to produce lethal hardware which killed hundreds of thousands of lives. The concept of God has become meaningless. Iceman and Godot are two symbols of the false savior and no matter whether the savior-like figures show up or not, people can only stubbornly stick to the hopeless hope. Thus, mankind, just like the crowd of boozers or the two tramps in the plays, is outcast in the universe and can never get the salvation.

The locales in the two plays also convey symbolic meanings. The Iceman Cometh happens in a dark, dusty, dirty, splotched and isolated saloon whose name is ironically “Hope”. In this “No Chance Saloon,” everyone adds his meaning to this little world, a place is said to be “the last harbor,” and a place “No one here has to worry about where they’re going next, because there is no farther they can go.” [22] The outside world is terrible for the crowd who cannot face the reality, and although the inside world is just a “Palace of Pipe Dreams”, it offers them a place to dream and wonder, releasing their fears and despair provisionally, and giving them the courage to go on living. This saloon is the concentration of the whole society, where
human beings are experiencing fear, lost, sorrow, desperation, numbness and self-deception.

The locale in Waiting for Godot is dead simple: “A country road. A tree. Evening.” (Act I) “Next day. Same time. Same place.” (Act II) The whole story, if there is a story happening at all, takes place on a terrifying empty road near a tree, or a wasteland. It symbolizes the site of the vanished civilization where a few survivors exist in scattered pairs. It has no direction, no location but a great extension. The place they are at is “indescribable”, says Vladimir to Pozzo, who does not remember being here yesterday, “It’s like nothing. There is nothing. There is a tree.”[23] The tree is the only landmark; there is no place to go from it. Nature has not been restored because of the disappearance of civilization and the wasteland represents a condition in both civilization and nature.

IV. Conclusion

Though the analyses of the author’s background information, the themes of both the plays and the writing techniques O’Neill and Beckett both use, the similarities lying in The Iceman Cometh and Waiting for Godot are easily to be found clearly. In both plays, no matter how the events develop, the plays would always reach where they begin. In the social reality, people find their struggle for eternal peace and happiness is just like an endless circle. There is no way out, but only an unrealized tomorrow and a hopeless future for people to wait, and “waiting” itself is a painful and futile process. What transmits from the two predictive tragedians is that, although there is actually no exist for human society, human beings still needs a hopeless hope or a pipe dream to comfort them and to encourage them to live on.

Notes:

[1] 转引自汪义群:《奥尼尔创作论》，北京: 北京戏剧出版社，1983年，第2页。
[2] Lee, Robert C. “Evangelism and Anarchy in The Iceman Cometh,” Modern Drama. No. 2, September, 1969, 2.
[3] Cohn, Ruby. Ed. Samuel Beckett. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1975, ix.
[4] O’Neill, Eugene. The Iceman Cometh, Eugene O’Neill: Complete Plays. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988, 606.
[5] Ibid., 611.
[6] Beckett, Samuel. Waiting for Godot, New York: Grove Press, 1954, 35.
[7] 转引自汪义群: 《奥尼尔创作论》，北京: 北京戏剧出版社，1983年，第41页。
[8] Ibid., 41.
[9] Nicoll, Allardyce. “Eugene O’Neill,” in World Drama: From Aeschylus to Anouilh. Harcourt: Brace & World, Inc., 1950, 880-93.
[10] Beckett, Samuel. Waiting for Godot, New York: Grove Press, 1954, 28.
[11] Ibid., 52.
[12] 转引自林亚大. 朱子新. 《等待是一种生命状态》, 《商丘职业技术学院学报》, 2007年第1期, 第43页。
[13] Birlin, Normand. Eugene O’Neill. London: Macmillan, 1982, 142.
[14] O’Neill, Eugene. The Iceman Cometh, Eugene O’Neill: Complete Plays. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988, 589.
[15] Barlow, Judith. Final Acts—The Creation of Three Late O’Neill Plays. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985, 86.
[16] O’Neill, Eugene. The Iceman Cometh, Eugene O’Neill: Complete Plays. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988, 586.
[17] Ibid., 606.
[18] 朱虹. 《荒诞戏剧集》, 上海: 上海译文出版社, 1980年, 第23页。
[19] Beckett, Samuel. Waiting for Godot, New York: Grove Press, 1954, 103.
[20] Matthew 24:42, Holy Bible, NRSV.
[21] Matthew 25:33, Holy Bible, NRSV.
[22] O’Neill, Eugene. The Iceman Cometh, Eugene O’Neill: Complete Plays. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1988, 577-8.
[23] Beckett, Samuel. Waiting for Godot, New York: Grove Press, 1954, 56.

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