A Chronotopic Reading of Eugene O'Neill's

*The Iceman Cometh*

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Abstract

Although many of Bakhtin’s key theoretical terms have been applied to the novel, many of them are also applicable to the genre of drama. Among these terms “chronotope” is one such instance. As Bakhtin asserts, chronotope is the gate at which the knots of the plot are tied and untied, and the protagonist of a literary work can be defined by as well as reside in a particular chronotopic space. To illustrate the Bakhtinian concept of chronotope in practice, the present paper aims to demonstrate how the interrelatedness of space and time leads to the realistic destruction of characters in *The Iceman Cometh*.

Keywords: Drama, Journey, Mikhail Bakhtin, Modern, Space, Time.

I. Introduction

The process of mixing time and place in literature has a long but unorganized history. The chronotope can, very simply, refer to ways in which spatial and temporal elements in a narrative are thematized. More pervasively, the chronotope may be understood as an inclusive term for the intricate temporal relations of story and discourse as they form themselves within the space of a narrative text. But chronotope is also the dialogic interaction of time and space where human spaces are densely deposited with layers of historical time which are themselves conceived in dialogic interaction with one another. Finally, there are chronotopic perspectives that emerge from the reflections of one narrative's inevitable associations with the time-spaces formed by other narratives that are contemporary with it.

Bakhtin explains the word in his long essay on chronotope, *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel*: “we will give the name *chronotope* (literally, ‘space-time’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981:84). He argues that time and place are dependent on each other, thus the name he chooses to depict this dependency clarifies that time and place are mixed with each other (chronos=time, topos=place) (ibid, 87). In literal and artistic chronotope, temporal and spatial indicators are mixed with each other in a very delicate totality. It seems time gets condensed and becomes alive and artistically visible. Similarly, place becomes sensitive and reacts to the changes of time, plot, and history. The main feature of artistic chronotope is this intersection of different axes and joining various indicators.
Ronald Knowles writes in his *Shakespeare and Carnival after Bakhtin* that in the 1930s, studying Dostoevsky created the third period in Bakhtin's professional life “when the result was numerous articles and eventually the book *Dialogic Imagination*” (Knowles, 1998:7). The most important concept mentioned in this book, Knowles continues, is chronotope. Furthermore, Nele Bemong et al. argue in *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope* that “several other concepts with which we associate Bakhtin are chronotopic as well” (2010: 93).

*The Iceman Cometh* is a well-suited play for the analysis of chronotope in literature. First of all, in this play meeting is of crucial importance and as Bakhtin notes “in any meeting the temporal marker (‘at one and the same time’) is inseparable from the spatial marker (‘in one and the same place’)” (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). *The Iceman Cometh* is a play in which time is trapped in the stagnant space of the saloon. The chronotope of saloon is such crucial for O'Neill that whenever he describes his characters, he immediately goes on to situate them in the saloon. It looks as if the characters’ identities become complete when they are in the saloon.

Throughout *The Iceman Cometh* we are constantly invited to see the characters between two worlds of pipe dreams and reality. One can be of opinion that the real conflict is in fact between two chronotopes, one of the pipe dreams and one of the real world. O'Neill's characters are removed in time through their memories and pipe dreams and this removal corresponds to their removal in place to their past when they lived in splendor and respect. The chronotope of the saloon is the chronotope of despair for O'Neill's characters. However, the pipe dreams have exerted such powerful influence on them that for O'Neill's derelicts it is the chronotope of hope. It is the chronotope they choose that determines their fate. And despite Hickey's attempt to make them see the world as it is, they prefer to choose the chronotope of pipe dreams.

II. Chronotope and *The Iceman Cometh*

The time of the action can best be summarized as clearly present in relation to its readers and this is the feature which keeps O'Neill's plays, especially *The Iceman Cometh*, meaningful for readers of different time periods. The abandoned world of Harry Hope's saloon has been made much more palpable for the audience by the meticulous descriptions O'Neill initiates the play with. The amount and accuracy by which O'Neill describes the saloon is crucial to the tragic sense it is designed to convey to its audience. For O'Neill the “place” dimension of time seems to be much more important than the “time” dimension of it. “Harry Hope’s saloon in *The Iceman Cometh* is the land that time forgot” (Porter, 2007: 13). For O'Neill it is enough that his reader will know the misery the characters are going to endure occurs in 1912. O'Neill quite purposefully undermines the time dimension of *The Iceman Cometh* to indicate it would happen at any time whether it is 1912, 1812, or 2012. What matters for O'Neill is that what follows is the story of man, alone and alienated with a lot of misleading pipe dreams.

Time becomes important for O'Neill only when it comes into place and gets interrelated with it. The chronotope of saloon is the determining chronotope of the play. The saloon is not an ordinary one where characters come, go, sit and express themselves. In fact it is the saloon that forms the play for it has this ability to bring all various characters together and paves the way for their dialogues. The chronotope
of saloon is such important for O'Neill that when he describes his characters, he immediately goes on to locate them in saloon. In Larry Slade and Hugo Kalmar's cases, their location in the saloon even precedes their own descriptions: “Larry Slade and Hugo Kalmar are at the table at left-front, Hugo in a chair facing right, Larry at rear of table facing front, with an empty chair between them. A fourth chair is at right of table, facing left” (Act 1, 619).

Their locations in the saloon being determined, O'Neill goes on to describe them: “Hugo is a small man in his late fifties. He has a head much too big for his body, a high forehead, crinkly long black hair streaked with gray, a square face with a pug nose, a walrus mustache, black eyes which peer nearsightedly from behind thick-lensed spectacles, tiny hands and feet” (Act 1, 620). And in the next paragraph O'Neill goes on to say that: “Larry Slade is sixty. He is tall, raw-boned, with coarse straight white hair, worn long and raggedly cut. He has a gaunt Irish face with a big nose, high cheekbones, a lantern jaw with a week's stubble of beard, a mystic's meditative pale-blue eyes with a gleam of sharp sardonic humor in them” (ibid).

If we were to define what is new about the “chronotope” of The Iceman Cometh (and indeed of most O'Neill's fiction since) it must surely lie in the collision between the world represented in the text and that inhabited by its author. At first sight, this is no more than to restate an obvious truth, one usually taken for granted in any discussion of dramatic fiction during the last two centuries. How radical this collision is, in terms of the “historical poetics” of drama over time, only becomes fully apparent when the world the characters carry with them in their pipe dreams comes into contact with reality: a bitter reality which their harbinger is going to bring with him. Although all characters in The Iceman Cometh live in a “deathlike calm” (Porter, 2007: 13), they are not tragic till the Iceman arrives and “singles out each and enjoins them to turn their illusions into reality” (Krasner, 2012: 269). The tragic effect of the play owes much to the collision between the chronotope of the real world and the chronotope of the pipe dream world which characters used to inhabit. As O'Neill states, man's vital problem is to come to terms with himself. Once in the play Rocky scolds Larry for having no pipe dream: “De old Foolosopher, like Hickey calls yuh, ain't yuh? I s'pose you don't fall for no pipe dream?” (Act 1, 624). Rocky, very much like most characters of The Iceman Cometh is proud of the world he has created. Hickey – The Iceman of the title – has always been the only harbinger of hope for the derelicts of Harry's saloon for he has made them believe there is no other chronotope except their pipe dreams. They are all waiting for him. In the first Act of the play, Rocky tells Larry that “Yuh'd never tink all dese bums had a good bed upstairs to go to. Scared if dey hit the hay dey wouldn't be here when Hickey showed up, and dey'd miss a coupla drinks. Dat's what kept you up too, ain't it?” (Act 1, 625).

When Hickey is late, the saloon's outlaws start to complain as if their pipe dreams are expiring and Hickey is required to extend them. Joe, for instance, states that “Whose booze? Gimme some. I don't care whose. Where's Hickey? Ain't he come yet? What time's it, Rocky?” (Act 1, 627).

Without Hickey there is no dream and therefore no need to be awake. When Hickey is late, Joe comments lazily: “Never mind de time. If Hickey ain't come, it's time Joe goes to sleep again. I was dreamin' Hickey come in de door, crackin' one of dem drummer's jokes, wavin' a big bankroll and we was
all goin' be drunk for two weeks” (Act 1, 628). Hickey's arrival is such important for them that Joe asks Larry “if Hickey comes, Larry, you wake me up if you has to bat me wid a chair” (Act 1, 631). Hickey is important for everyone and every body's life is interconnected with his coming. Towards the end of Act I when Hickey has not arrived yet, Hope says Ed worriedly: “What the hell you think's happened to Hickey? I hope he'll turn up. Always got a million funny stories. You and the other bums have begun to give me the graveyard fantods. I'd like a good laugh with old Hickey” (Act 1, 651).

Finally Hickey arrives. But he is not the same Hickey they know or wish to know. They gradually begin to notice that the messenger of hope has changed. Admitting that he is not the Hickey he used to be, he says to Harry, “No, honest, Harry. I know it's hard to believe but--(He pauses--then adds simply) Cora was right, Harry. I have changed. I mean, about booze. I don't need it any more” (Act 1, 660). This is one of most defining moments of the play. It is the moment when two chronotopes collide with each other. O'Neill's stage direction after Hickey admits he has changed is quite telling: “They all stare, hoping it's a gag, but impressed and disappointed and made vaguely uneasy by the change they now sense in him” (Act 1, 661). It is not a gag. It is a new chronotope they shun to believe. It is the chronotope of the real world just outside the saloon waiting for them to shatter. Hickey “urges them to go out the next day to fulfill the ambitions they all have harbored so well in their pipe dreams. They follow his advice, only to discover that their ambitions were illusions. The result is indeed peace, but it is the peace of death” (Driver, 1964: 116).

O'Neill, unlike his former American playwrights, confronts his characters with historical situations which were contemporary with the writing of the book, and would have been familiar memories to its first readers. “The Bakhtinian concept acts as the negation of a formalist tradition” (Brandao, 2003: 133). The memories of the past weigh heavily on all characters' shoulders. “The saloon is inhabited by a curious collection of misfits and societal outcasts who are living in the past. Appropriately, as the curtain rises, all but two of them are asleep” (Porter, 2007: 13). LaBelle argues that O'Neill, too has “locked himself in his memories” (LaBelle, 1973: 441) when writing this play. Nearly all characters were formerly socially-respected figures. Pat McGloin, for instance, is a one-time Police Lieutenant. Willie Oban is a Harvard Law School alumnus. Piet Wetjoen (“The General”) is a one-time leader of a Boer commando. Cecil Lewis (“The Captain”) is a former Captain of British infantry and Hugo Kalmar is a one-time editor of Anarchist periodicals. In Harry Hope's saloon, however, they are nothing but pipe-dreamers and all their past in this new chronotope is a worthless honor. Hickey, upon his arrival, endeavors to introduce them to a new world, but they all resist because they know once they change their chronotope they will ruin. Time, by the end of the play, has come round so that the characters are reported to be living in the same miserable condition, hopeless and drowned in the oceans of pipe dreams. It is as if “the whole movement of the play, which occupies just under two days' time, is like the advance and retreat of a huge wave” (Waith, 1961: 189). The title of Laurin Porter's article “The Iceman Cometh and Hughie: Tomorrow is Yesterday” refers to the same point (Porter, 2007: 13-31). When describing the scene for Act IV, O'Neill writes: “Same as Act One--the back room with the curtain separating it from the section of the barroom with its single table at right of curtain, front. It is around half past one in the morning of the following day” (Act 4, 629).
No one welcomes the change. They don't welcome Hickey, either. Rocky, who in Acts I and II was eagerly waiting for Hickey to arrive, is afraid of him now. He is afraid of the world Hickey wants him to live in and wants to enjoy his pipe dreams. Hickey tries to convince Rocky but he moves away from him toward right-sharply: “Keep away from me! I don't know nuttin' about yuh, see?” (Act 4, 736). As O'Neill states, his tone is threatening but his manner as he turns his back and ducks quickly across to the bar entrance is that of one in flight. In the bar he comes forward and slumps in a chair at the table, facing front.

Even Harry has got issues with Hickey. He, in the voice of one reiterating mechanically a hopeless complaint, tells Hickey “when are you going to do something about this booze, Hickey? Bejees, we all know you did something to take the life out of it. It's like drinking dishwater! We can't pass out! And you promised us peace” (Act 4, 736). Following Harry, his group all join in a dull, complaining chorus, “We can't pass out! You promised us peace!” (ibid).

Similarly, as was mentioned above, the space in which all the action unfolds, whether in biographical (what characters bring with them to the play) or adventure (what takes place in the course of the play) time-space, is homely and can be presumed to have been familiar to the majority of the book’s first readers. O'Neill’s accomplishment here has been to map on to a landscape that is intrinsically the opposite of the melodramatic, superficial world of a typical American play, a monotonous sequence of adventures which mirror those of earlier dramatic works. As a consequence, in *The Iceman Cometh* it is only the boundaries of the text that mark off the textual space and time inhabited by the fictional characters from the time and space in which O'Neill, his publisher, and his readers also live.

O'Neill has incorporated the pastness of his characters into their dialogues and thus has diminished the gap between the characters of *The Iceman Cometh* and every reader who approaches the text. “The concept of pastness is transformed from a realm of finalized objects or ‘horizons’ into a dialogical arena of active reinscription” (Bell and Gardiner, 1998: 202). Generally, in the microcosm constructed by O'Neill, time, space, plot and characters constitute an organic unity, being organized in such a manner that the resulting chronotope can only be designated dynamic.

This dynamic chronotope disrupts logical sequences, impeding the characters' fundamental ability to know things out of their world of pipe dreams either firsthand or by report, to hear messages and to see clues. Struggling to indicate they don't care about what Hickey tells about killing his wife, Chuck tells him “(without looking at Hickey--with dull, resentful viciousness) Aw, put a bag over it! To hell wid Evelyn! What if she was cheatin'? And who cares what yuh did to her? Dat's your funeral. We don't give a damn, see?” (Act 4, 738).

And other pipe-dreamers agree with him with a muttered chorus of assent. O'Neill's characters are so overwhelmed by their fantasies that they cannot distinguish the chronotope of the real world from that of the dream world. After Hickey is arrested by the police for murdering his wife, Hugo turns to Larry and says, “I'm glad, Larry, they take that crazy Hickey avay 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” (Act 4, 752).
Taking a sociological approach to analyze the play brings us to the notion of chronotope once again. One of the outstanding chronotopic features of *The Iceman Cometh* is the interconnectedness of time and space. Play is not distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration. *The Iceman Cometh* is set in an ordinary saloon and in an ordinary day, both of which tangible to the audience of the play. The issue of understandability for the audience was quite important for O'Neill since he had written the work five years earlier, but it was withheld from production during the war years because, as he told his friend,“a New York audience could neither see nor hear its meaning. The pity and tragedy of defensive pipe dreams would be deemed downright unpatriotic… But after the war is over, I am afraid … that American audiences will understand *The Iceman Cometh* only too well” (qtd. in Diggins, 2007: xi). This is one of the main characteristics of play: its universal ordinariness while admitting and making use of its limitedness. *The Iceman Cometh* begins, and then at a certain moment it is “over”. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, but the play is never hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this limited space and time the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain.

Delimiting play time is the express concern of Eugene O'Neill. Making the play replete with pipe dreams about glorious pasts is one of the strategies O'Neill implements to expand the scope of the play while preserving its ordinariness. For instance, when introducing Captain Lewis and General Wetjoen to Parritt, Larry says: “That's Captain Lewis, a onetime hero of the British Army. He strips to display that scar on his back he got from a native spear whenever he's completely plastered. The bewhiskered bloke opposite him is General Wetjoen, who led a commando in the War” (Act 1, 636).

O'Neill accomplishes a specific task: to survey the limits of the peculiar coherent time dimension in drama and to make the audience aware of the spatial and temporal rules which preside over it. We are compelled to share the angst of mistiming: missed words (take, for instance, Rocky when he objects to Willie “Piano! What d'yu tink dis dump is, a dump?” (Act 1, 640)), missed meetings, and missed meaning. O'Neill in *The Iceman Cometh* personalizes the experience of tragedy by making us enter its chronotope.

Harry Hope's saloon which is home to almost all the scenes of the play heightens O'Neill's earlier tension between private and public by narrowing the stage from street to the saloon and turning it into an O'Neillean microcosm in which the author had already fought tooth and nail to survive. A feeling of a perilous outside, of boundaries transgressed, pervades the atmosphere of the saloon from the beginning to the end of the play. On such a stage, privacy is very close to impossibility.

Hickey is first introduced in the play on a question of his locale. Joe, whose eyes are blinking sleepily asks “Where's Hickey? Ain't he come yet? What time's it, Rocky?” (Act 1, 647). The combination of “where” and “what time” questions as exemplified in this quotation recurs much during the entire play and thus one can contend that this interrelatedness of time and play i.e. the chronotope is one of the key concepts in *The Iceman Cometh*. This interrelatedness of time and space in the play exemplifies Bakhtin's saying that “time and space merge here into an inseparable unity, both in the plot itself and in its individual images. In the majority of cases, a definite and absolutely concrete locality serves as the starting point of the creative imagination” (Bakhtin, 1986: 95).
Characters' removal in time through their memories and pipe dreams matches their removal in place to their past when they lived in glory and respect. “The action of Ice man takes place in 1912. … But this is only nominally the era of the play, since all of the boarders at Harry Hope’s saloon are living in the past” (Porter, 2007: 14). The chronotope of the saloon can be said to be the chronotope of despair for O'Neill's characters. However, pipe dreams have exerted such powerful impact on them that for these derelicts it is the chronotope of hope; a promised hope which can only be fulfilled in Hope's saloon.

The saloon, though it is the ultimate hope for characters, never makes a community out of them. Nor is it meant by O'Neill to do so. The interesting point about The Iceman Cometh is that although there is no interior monologue in the play and the entire play is a meeting, all characters seem to be isolated. The play is replete with choral repetitions, loud laughs, jokes and gags but characters are lonely and isolated to death. The more the characters try to interact with each other, the more they share their isolations with each other and the result is a “joint isolation”. This isolation becomes a unity in time and place in their own, private chronotope.

This dubious feeling of isolation is the underlying motivation in the murder of Hickey's wife. In one of the most revealing moments of the play when everyone is shocked by the news that Hickey had killed his wife, Hickey refers to his long-tormenting feeling of loneliness, “Lonely and homesick. But at the same time sick of home. I'd feel free and I'd want to celebrate a little. I never drank on the job, so it had to be dames. Any tart. What I'd want was some tramp I could be myself with without being ashamed—someone I could tell a dirty joke to and she'd laugh” (Act 4, 716).

O'Neill's story has meaning as a poetic unity in the Aristotelian sense: that is, an integrity and wholeness defined by the limits of time and place imposed upon an action. It is meaningful because we watch at a distance from the action, further even and thus broader in scope than the characters within the play who yet manage to garner something from their joint isolation.

This joint isolation functions as a missing chain that destabilizes the plot of O'Neill's play and frustrates its meaning, while at the same time providing a commanding presence against which the characters struggle in their attempt to mend it. The most influential struggle in this regard is Hickey's attempt to overcome his loneliness through killing his wife. This along with his confession when he arrives at Harry's saloon effects – although temporarily– the most strongly established chronotope of the play, the chronotope of pipe dreams. The time it takes for this cycle to be completed determines the fate of the characters and thus the tragic effect of the play.

For O'Neill place is never a given, but always a social space to be negotiated and reproduced. In this regard, place in The Iceman Cometh, considered as the physical manifestation of spatiality, of social space as created, experienced, and lived by real people with whom O'Neill shared a likewise saloon in his youth, is constituted by social encounters and created by the ties of the plot. To quote Bakhtin, “the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. If an event can be communicated, it becomes information” (Bakhtin, 1981: 250).

Although the chronotope of the saloon in The Iceman Cometh finds a specific spatial realization, the centre of concentration shifts to a metaphysical level, namely the characters' internal journey and their
negotiations of personal (albeit still socially constructed) space while they have to triumph over geographical as well as personal obstructions on their way. Notice, for instance, how Hickey sees his act of murder as a removal of an obstacle on his way to peace: “And then I saw I’d always known that was the only possible way to give her peace and free her from the misery of loving me. I saw it meant peace for me, too, knowing she was at peace. I felt as though a ton of guilt was lifted off my mind” (Act 4, 747).

Space is more than just a space in *The Iceman Cometh*. For the characters who are constantly marked as outcasts, outsiders, and dilapidated, it is the literal escape from the society and coming into the saloon which gives them an identity.

For Hickey and Parritt, two important figures in the saloon, the quest to leave their pipe dreams takes the form of crossing the chronotopic limitations that society has imposed on them. “Hickey and Parritt felt compelled to destroy the dreams which Evelyn and Rosa tried to impose on them but quail now under the terrors of the real present and seek death as the only possible way to peace” (Granger, 1958: 185). For other characters who are on the run together, the same perception of time and space – in other words – the same perception of chronotope seems impossible. Bakhtin contends that chronotope is where knots of the plot are tied and untied. This is clearly observed in *The Iceman Cometh* where the real struggle of the characters is whether to stay with their current chronotope or to violate it and face a new one which is the reality of the world. The chain reaction caused by the arrival of Hickey thus brings about a more or less violent struggle over space and time.

**Conclusion**

The current study endeavored to focus on Bakhtin's theory of chronotope and apply this theory to shed light on the similarities and differences in various chronotopic representations in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. The significance of saloon in *The Iceman Cometh* turns the setting into a crucial “gate” where the main knots of drama are tied and untied. In addition, upon investigating the chronotope of journey in the play, it is discussed that the play demonstrates a figurative journey for the protagonist. Moreover, the chronotope of the real world vs. the chronotope of pipe dreams and the importance of space in stopping the time of *The Iceman Cometh* were discussed. Thus, we can conclude that the use of different chronotopes by O'Neill in *The Iceman Cometh* corresponds to various space-time relations between the characters which in turn necessitate the hopelessness and dreariness of this great American tragedy.
قراءة "زمكاني" لمسرحية يوجين أونيل (ويأتي رجل الجليد)

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الملخص
مع أن الكثير من المصطلحات باختلاف النظرية قد طُبق على الرواية، فإن العديد منها تطبق أيضاً على المسرحيات ويشكل مصطلح "الزمكاني" (Chronotope). أحد هذه المصطلحات و(الزمكاني) كما يؤكد باختلاف، هي البوابة التي تُعقد فيها الحبكة وتجل، ويمكن للشخصية الرئيسية للعمل الأدبي أن يكتسب هويته وأن يكمن وجوده في فضاء "زمكاني". ولكي توضح مفهوم "الزمكاني" عند باختلاف تطبيقاً، تقوم هذه الدراسة بشرح كيفية التي يقود فيها الترابط الداخلي بين المكان والزمان إلى تدمير الشخص واقعاً في مسرحية"ويأتي رجل الجليد". 

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References


