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Pipe Dreams: Short Term Happiness, Long Term Suffering

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines a pipe dream as “a hope, wish, or dream that is impossible to achieve or not practical.” Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* explores the idea of a pipe dream and its ramifications throughout, and leaves the reader to come to their own conclusions about the effects a pipe dream can have on people. All of the members of the story’s cast are blinded from reality by a pipe dream they constantly talk about, but never act upon. This allows them to perpetuate a pitiful existence in which they believe they are happy. This existence continues until one of their friends, whom they call Hickey, comes and tries to tear them away from their pipe dreams. The cast’s loss of their pipe dreams throughout the story is accompanied by both their metaphorical, and sometimes literal death. Hickey himself seems to be deluded in a pipe dream of his own throughout the story, as is revealed by the end. O’Neill considers pipe dreams positive in the short-term, as they help people live from day to day in unpleasant living conditions, but believes that they are very negative long-term, as all pipe dreams will eventually crumble, devastating those who used them to hide from reality.

*The Iceman Cometh* centers around several unfortunate people, and how their delusions about life and about their futures are what enable them to continue existing from day to day. In describing the patrons of the bar, Larry, the self-proclaimed “Foolosopher” explains the patrons of Harry Hope’s bar to Pickett, one of the play’s more important characters, saying “They manage to...keep their pipe dreams, and that's all they ask of life. I've never known more contented men. It isn't often that men attain the true goal of their heart's desire.” (O’Neill 1). Larry tells the truth; he has surrounded himself with these men and women who seem completely content in their lives. They visit Harry’s bar and drink their days away, oblivious to the world around them and to how truly hopeless their lives are. The group drunkenly laughs and jokes with each other, and all of them seem perfectly content to stay as they are. By saying they have attained their true goals, Larry is describing the bar as this group’s final destination; having made it to their final destination, they no longer have to struggle day to day and can be at peace in their own way. An outsider looking at this group, however, would see a very different picture. They would see a group of people drunkenly stumbling through each passing day, with barely enough money to survive and begging for handouts constantly; they would see a hopeless group of unemployed drunks, harming nobody but themselves. The group may have been happy in the short term, and even for months or years going forward, but they would find that they could not run from reality forever.

For the patrons attending Harry Hope’s bar, reality struck in the form of Hickey, a salesman and a good friend of the group. The group likes him for his tales of travel and, more importantly, because he buys them booze for big events, like Harry’s birthday. He arrives like usual, but he comes with a new sales pitch for the entire group. In his own words: “I [want to] save you from pipe dreams. I know now, from my experience, they're the things that really poison and ruin a guy's life and keep him from finding any peace.” (O’Neill 1). Hickey psychoanalyzes everyone in the group over the course of the play, identifies their pipe dream and urges them to either abandon it or to take action, making it no longer a pipe dream. By pulling them away from their nonsensical dreams, Hickey believes he can help the patrons of the bar truly find peace. This belief directly contradicts Larry’s earlier claim that the bar goers had already found peace. As it turns out, neither of these beliefs ends up being completely correct, as Hickey’s disruption of the group’s daily lives proves that pipe dreams cannot protect them from reality forever, as Larry implied, and coming to terms with their own lives does not result in them coming to peace with themselves, as Hickey believed.

The entire group reacts very poorly to Hickey’s gospel. One by one they either realize the folly of their aspirations, or make half-hearted attempts to make them come true, in a foolhardy attempt to prove Hickey wrong. By the end of the play all of the patrons are broken shells of who they were at the beginning; they sit practically motionless, robotically going through the same motions of getting drunk and numbing themselves from the world’s problems. This time, however, the motions seem to have no effect. Harry repeatedly complains to Hickey, saying “Bejees, what did you do to the booze, Hickey? There's no damned life left in it.” (O’Neill 3). It is very interesting that Harry chooses to describe the booze as having no life, because saying that mirrors the state of the group as a whole -- one in the room has any life left in them. In dismantling the group’s pipe dreams, Hickey brought death to the entire group, instead of the peace he claimed to be delivering. The hopeless patrons of the bar rely on the booze to make it through each passing day, and if the booze has lost its life, then they have lost their life as well. This metaphor becomes much more literal later on in the play.

Hickey’s preaching comes back against him at the end of the play, when it is revealed that his belief in embracing the hopelessness of one’s life by abandoning their pipe dream is a pipe dream in and of itself; this entire facade was his way of justifying his murder of his wife, Evelyn. His pipe dream helped him mask his guilt, either consciously or subconsciously. Upon telling the group about how he murdered Evelyn he recounts exactly what he said: “Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!” (O’Neill 4). Startled by this, he becomes mortified, then denies that he ever could have said that. He comes to the conclusion that he must have been insane, as that is the only way he could have said that to the love of his life. The entire group jumps excitedly at this notion; Hickey being insane would render all of his rhetoric null and void, and the group could easily disregard everything he had said, returning to their old way of life. Hickey tries to rebuke Harry for bringing up the notion, but ends up conceding out of desperation to justify his actions towards Evelyn, saying “Yes, Harry, of course, I've been out of my mind ever since! All the time I've been here! You saw I was insane, didn't you?” (O’Neill 4). This is the final nail in the coffin for all of Hickey’s hard work, but ends up saving a majority of the bar’s patrons, who are finally able to drink happily again now that reality was not directly confronting them anymore.

Not all of the patrons of the bar were able to return to their pipe dreams and live merrily as they always had. Pickett, who had not been a regular at the bar and was only hiding from the police after having ratted out his mother’s anarchist movement, saw several parallels between himself and Hickey throughout his stay at the bar. He looked up to Larry as a father figure as Larry was one of Pickett’s mother’s ex-lovers; Pickett constantly seeks judgement for his crime from Larry throughout the play. After Hickey was declared insane by the members of the bar and was taken away, Pickett continues to ask Larry to help him find peace. Angrily, Larry yells out “Go! Get the hell out of life, God damn you, before I choke it out of you! Go up--!” (O’Neill 4). Pickett is grateful for this, and goes to jump off of an upper story window sill. Upon his death, Larry cringes and buries his face in his hands. As the group’s “Foolosopher,” Larry had always claimed that he had buried all of his pipe dreams and simply awaited death. Pickett’s death makes him realize this was not necessarily true, remorsefully declaring “Be God, there's no hope! I'll never be a success in the grandstand--or anywhere else! Life is too much for me! I'll be a weak fool looking with pity at the two sides of everything till the day I die!” (O’Neill 4). Larry had come to realize that his pipe dream was the belief that he, like the others, had found contentedness in the bar and had no further aspirations. Pickett’s death made him realize he simply had no other choice, as his life was doomed to be hopeless until the day he died. In a sense, though Pickett had died literally, Larry had died metaphorically, having been robbed of any contentedness in the present, and left with no hope for the future. As this happens the rest of the bar patrons return to their old, happy, contented ways, relishing their pipe dreams and the shelter from reality that they provide. O’Neill leaves Larry off to the side of the room, showing the only true end for anyone living life under the protection of a pipe dream. Reality may not hit any of the bar goers any time soon, but when it does they will be left in a state very similar to the one Larry is in. O’Neill manages to convey both the short-term happiness a pipe dream can provide, as well as the long-term suffering it can cause, in the final scene of the play.

The pipe dream is a complicated construct. On one hand, having aspirations for one’s life is a good thing. However, the pipe dream, for all intents and purposes, is one that is impossible to achieve. These impossible dreams promise a bright future, while helping keep one’s mind off of an unpleasant present. In *The Iceman Cometh*, most of the cast lives day to day in the protection of their pipe dreams. They live pitiful, misfortunate lives, but are content and happy day in and day out. Unfortunately, reality always finds a way to intrude on these dreams, just like how Hickey dismantled the entire group’s pipe dreams, one at a time. Hickey’s dramatic confession at the end of the play leaves him desperate and in denial about his own actions, and enables the rest of the cast to ignore his words and continue living their facade of a happy existence. Reality took its toll, however: Pickett came to terms with his crime against his mother and ended his own life, and Larry’s life figuratively ended at the same time. The hopelessness and long-term suffering caused by pipe dreams can be seen in Pickett, Larry, and Hickey, three of the largest roles in the play. By using the play’s most important characters to show the negative consequences of pipe dreams, O’Neill is showing that pipe dreams are ultimately detrimental to any person’s life, and while they may enable an optimistic life in the present, they will only lead to suffering when they come crumbling down, sometime in the future.

Works Cited

O’Neill, Eugene. *The Iceman Cometh.* Australia: Project Gutenberg. Kindle File.

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