The rare public interview given by O’Neill after his “silence,” in anticipation of the opening of *Iceman* [1946], clearly reveals his attitude toward America. His oft-quoted words provide the context to any evaluation of his history Cycle. America, he said, “instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure. It’s the greatest failure because it was given everything, more than any other country . . . . Its main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possesses your own soul by the possession of something outside of it.” Possession and greed, he believed, had destroyed the soul of America, and this was the theme of his projected history Cycle.

. . . We know that O’Neill was thinking about *Iceman* and *Long Day’s Journey* while he was writing the history Cycle. These plays were always inside him; now they came out. Simon Harford’s words in *Mansions* clearly anticipate *Iceman* when Simon, probably speaking for O’Neill, asserts that men’s lives “are without any meaning whatever—that human life is a silly disappointment, a liar’s promise . . . a daily appointment with peace and happiness in which we wait day after day, hoping against hope, listening to each footstep, and when finally the bride or the bridegroom cometh, we discover we are kissing Death.” His words describe the situation of *Iceman* and point to the play’s unusual title. His phrase, “the bridegroom cometh,” comes directly from the Bible: “While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold the bridegroom cometh” (Matthew 25: 5-6). O’Neill, always paying special attention to his titles, combines the archaic word “cometh” with the “iceman” of a bawdy joke told by Hickey whenever he comes to Harry Hope’s saloon. According to O’Neill’s friend, the writer Dudley Nichols, when Evelyn married Hickey she took Death to her breast, and “her insistence on her great love for Hickey and his undying love for her and her deathlike grip on his conscience . . . is making Death breathe hard on her breast as he approaches ever nearer—as he is about to ‘come’ in the vernacular sense.” This combination of the biblical and the vulgar reflects the realistic-symbolic nature of the play, revealed by Larry Slade’s words when he describes Hope’s saloon:

  It’s the No Chance saloon. It’s Bedrock Bar, The End of the Line Cafe, the Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller! Don’t you notice the beautiful calm in the atmosphere? That’s because it’s the last harbor. No one here has to worry about where they’re going next, because there is no farther they can go. (3.577-78)

This saloon is a dying place containing sleepy men filled with booze and pipe dreams, men who are waiting for death to come. Death comes in the person of Hickey, the son of a preacher who, Jesus-like, wishes to be their savior but becomes the “death” of them, just as he was the death of his wife. Simon Harford’s words point not only to the play’s title but to the waiting, exactly what Harry Hope’s lodgers are doing in anticipation of Hickey who, they believe, will
bring them a little “peace and happiness,” again Simon’s phrase. (The first three acts in this four-act play end with the word “happy,” always uttered by Hickey.) The play could have been given the less interesting, but more clearly descriptive, title “Waiting for Hickey,” a title that would prod us to think about Iceman in relation to the great modern play of our time, Waiting for Godot. . . .

I find that Iceman and Godot share characteristics that help us to appreciate O’Neill’s modernity and to understand the great success of the revival of Iceman in 1956 after the tepid reception of the 1946 production. Hickey’s arrival is so long in coming, so eagerly anticipated, takes on such significance when it comes, that he is certainly more than a mere salesman; he is, as Willie Oban, the youngest of Hope’s roomers, labels him, the “Great Salesman,” more than a mere mortal. Those waiting for Hickey, like Didi and Gogo waiting for Godot, are in a frozen condition, a boundary situation, the “last harbor,” to use Larry Slade’s phrase. Sustained by their pipe dreams and alcohol, the waiters in Hope’s saloon belong together and feed off each other; they are family. They fill their time with sleep and repetitious talk. They wait for a tomorrow that will never come. They also wait for Hickey who, unlike Godot, comes, and when he does, death enters the play. His illusion-destroying, salvationist activity converts Harry’s place to a morgue. He puts all the derelicts on ice, so to speak, and Hickey becomes the iceman of death for them and the iceman of his own bawdy joke when he reveals, at play’s end, that he murdered his sleeping wife, with the word come taking on sexual overtones.

O’Neill and Becket share the same metaphysical ground. Their dramatic art, so different in particular traits, makes waiting and the atmosphere of death reflections of the bedrock reality of human existence. Their dramatic representations of illusion and despair strike deep responsive chords in a modern audience, and it seems that O’Neill’s audience was more “modern” in 1956 than in 1946 when, despite the fanfare connected with O’Neill’s return to Broadway after his twelve-year absence, Iceman closed after only 136 performances. In 1956, three years after O’Neill’s death, Iceman began O’Neill’s revival, and it had the longest run of any O’Neill play ever (565 performances).

In the same 1946 press conference in which he lamented the spiritual emptiness of America, O’Neill makes this revealing comment:

It’s struck me as time goes on, how something funny, even farcical, can suddenly without any apparent reason, break up into something gloomy and tragic . . . . A sort of unfair non sequitur, as though events, as though life, were being manipulated just to confuse us. I think I’m aware of comedy more than I ever was before; a big kind of comedy that doesn’t stay funny very long. I’ve made some use of it in The Iceman. The first act is hilarious comedy, I think, but then some people may not even laugh. At any rate, the comedy breaks up and the tragedy comes on.

O’Neill directly confronting his own play’s genre, seems to be describing the kind of tragicomediy Beckett gives us in Godot. Comedy veering toward tragedy, a difficult linkage which prods critical debate. There’s no doubt that O’Neill considers Iceman finally to be a tragedy. A letter to Lawrence Langner . . . makes this crystal clear: “There are moments in it that suddenly strip the soul of a man stark naked, not in cruelty or moral superiority, but with an understanding compassion which sees him as a victim of the ironies of life and of himself. Those moments are for me the depth of tragedy, with nothing more than can possibly be said.” But he also knows—despite his tentative “I think” —that his dark play contains comedy, and it does, almost every kind of comedy: jokes of all kinds, especially sexual jokes; comic wordplay, including semantic differences (tart vs. whore); comic types (parasite, drunkard,
trickster, braggart soldier); comic physical activity; clichéd comic participants in the battle of the sexes (shrewish wife, henpecked husband, cuckold). And, of course, his presentation of characters who are both comic and tragic help to complicate our response to the play. For example, how should we take Hickey—tragic protagonist or comic catalyst? O’Neill’s description of him—a bald “stout roly-poly figure” with a “salesman’s winning smile of self-confident affability and hearty good fellowship”—together with with his glad hand, his singing, his verbal retorts, all suggest a comic character. Those waiting for him expect to laugh and drink; he will be the life of the party. The Hickey they knew belongs to a comic holiday world.

The affable salesman who arrives does want to make them “happy,” but he is selling death without realizing it. When he forces his buddies to face themselves, when he attempts to destroy their pipe dreams, they figuratively die. Even their whiskey has no kick. He shatters their contentment, their family feeling, by forcing them to face the truth of their lives. Larry Slade, on the other hand, understands that “the lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten lot of us.” Larry’s own pipe dream is that he is not involved with the others, that he’s merely an observer of mankind, and that he wants to die. By play’s end Larry, very much connected to Don Parritt, whom he sends to his death, loses his pipe dream and faces the truth about himself. In Iceman the truth means death. As Larry realizes, he is “the only real convert to death Hickey made here.” Hickey, the truth teller, has his own pipe dream, that he loved his wife, but this becomes shattered momentarily when he, during his long confessional speech taking fifteen minutes of stage time, reveals that he laughed when he killed his wife and said to her: “Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!”

But this unconscious slip, revealing his deeply buried hatred and his desperate need to rid himself of his wife’s forgiveness and his own guilt, does not lead him to face the truth about himself. “Good God, I couldn’t have said that! If I did, I’d gone insane! Why, I loved Evelyn better than anything in life!” (3.700). He leaves the stage with pipe dream intact. The derelicts, latching on to Hickey’s insanity as the reason for his strange behavior, can sink back into their illusions about yesterday and tomorrow. At play’s end they, again filled with pipe dream and alcohol, continue to survive in their self-contained “comic” world, whereas Hickey, also holding on to his pipe dream, is going to his death, and Parritt, having no pipe dream to sustain him, has committed suicide, and Larry is staring at death. Larry Slade, who throughout the play was the critical commentator, the old “Foolosopher” who functioned much like the Fool in Shakespearean comedy, who saw things with clear eyes and sardonic humor, emerges as the play’s tragic character. When O’Neill says, “the comedy breaks up and the tragedy comes on,” he is tracing both the mood of the play and the development of Larry Slade as a character. Before the final curtain drops on Iceman we hear the bums carousing and we see Larry, oblivious to the noise, facing the truth of things. We witness the life of illusion and the death of illusion, and we recognize that O’Neill’s vision of life, tragic though it unquestionably is, contains the important dimension of comedy, thereby offering to us, as do Beckett and Shakespeare, the deepest sense of reality.