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# Representation of Inner Thoughts in Eugene O'Neill's Later Plays

Yui NAGATA

Keywords: Eugene O'Neill / *The Iceman Cometh* / *Long Day's Journey into Night* / *Hughie*

## Introduction

After the production of *Days Without End* in 1934, Eugene O'Neill stopped releasing new plays for about twelve years. In this period, however, he wrote some of his masterpieces, such as *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956). Since most characters in this period are based on O'Neill's family or friends, autobiographic aspects have been the focus of some preceding studies about his later plays. According to Robert M. Dowling, the bar at Harry Hope's hotel in *The Iceman Cometh*, where the characters put up, is modeled after ones that O'Neill frequented, and certain protagonists are also based on his real-life friends (428). John Patrick Diggins points out that *Long Day's Journey* is O'Neill's "most personal" (29) play and states, "It is this play more than any other that has come to identify O'Neill as part of a family whose psychic effects he could never escape" (30).

Examining the hopeless situations in these plays, some critics discuss the relationship between O'Neill's later plays and absurd dramas. Normand Berlin says that his last plays are "Beckettian" and states:

Death and uncertainty and the predicament of living in a purposeless universe, ever-darkening – these are the metaphysical concerns that bring together O'Neill and Beckett, giving O'Neill's last plays a Beckettian contemporaneity. Look at the denizens of Harry Hope's bar, for whom time is frozen. They fill their lives with pipe-dreams and whiskey. They belong together, feed off each other, and, in fact, their sense of community sustains them as they join in refrains of song, tell stories of the past, and wait for the

promising tomorrow that will never come. ("Beckettian O'Neill" 31)

At the end of *The Iceman Cometh*, Hickey, whom the roomers waited for, reveals that he murdered his wife and is seized by the police. Subsequently, the roomers resume drinking and singing. The work is dominated by a sense of despair throughout. As Berlin points out, O'Neill's later plays are characterized by a sense of hopelessness, which is found in many absurd dramas. Concerning this point, Steven F. Bloom also states: "As both Berlin and Ben-Zvi point out, later in his career, O'Neill would write a few plays that are more fully comparable . . . to those of Beckett and perhaps other dramatists of the absurd . . ." (171).

Furthermore, the characters in his later plays cannot interact with the outside world, as in most absurd dramas. Harry Hope in *The Iceman Cometh* has never been outside the hotel bar, ever since his wife died twenty years ago. Stirred by Hickey, he decides to go out of the bar but returns soon after, because he cannot face the reality outside. In *Long Day's Journey*, Mary hates the town she stays in and does not have any contact with her neighbors. Her husband is an actor who travels around the country and the family does not settle in the town, therefore she is acutely aware of being a stranger. Their house is surrounded by dense fog, which separates the family from its neighbors. Moreover, in *Hughie* (1958), Night Clerk is "*chained behind a hotel desk forever*" and "*there is no escape*" (846). Erie, the other character, also tries to leave the place but cannot: "*He makes a move to detach himself from the desk but fails and remains wearily glued to it*" (844). In this way, these characters are confined within closed spaces and cannot go out.

This particular situation may affect the way they communicate within the community. Therefore, I will discuss the characters' relations with others, focusing on the ways in which their inner thoughts are depicted and revealed. I will mainly deal with O'Neill's three later plays, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey*, and *Hughie*.

## Psychological Distance between the Characters

In *The Iceman Cometh*, the roomers at Harry Hope's hotel keep talking about their honorable pasts and vain hope for the future. Larry, who was an an-

anarchist but quit the movement years ago, considers himself to be different from the other roomers in the bar. Larry says, "Forget the anarchist part of it. I'm through with the Movement long since. . . . So I said to the world, God bless all here, and may the best man win and die of gluttony! And I took a seat in the grandstand of philosophical detachment to fall asleep observing the cannibals do their death dance" (570; act 1). Therefore, he does not want to get involved with others or have sympathy for anyone.

Concerning his position, Kurt Eisen suggests that Larry is "a narrator-figure" who "not only gives voice to the play's major themes but also assists the playwright in setting the scene" (*Inner Strength* 161). As he states, Larry plays the role of a narrator, introducing roomers to audiences as well as a newcomer to the bar in the first act. He sees everything from a distance and idealizes his position as an observer. Although the main story of this work depicts Hickey, who tries to save the roomers but finally reveals his act of murder, Eisen focuses on Larry's role as well. He also points out:

Because it is primarily through his eyes that we witness and comprehend the play's main action, however, Larry, in a manner far more conspicuous than Edmund Tyrone's in *Long Day's Journey*, should be regarded as *Ice-man's* narrator surrogate, a novelistic central consciousness whose psychological upheavals may be mediated forcefully in the theater, without masks and without thought asides. (*Inner Strength* 164-65)

As he states, Larry's position is distinct from the other characters, and his inner thoughts, which are often revealed only to audiences, are presented in detail, as the narrator's thoughts in novels. When Larry's inner thoughts are not shared with anyone but with audiences, we see his disconnection from the other characters. In O'Neill's other later plays, a particular character's inner world is depicted in detail, but they are often represented as being distant from others.

In *Long Day's Journey*, which depicts a family who stays in their summer home, Edmund suffers from tuberculosis and is supposed to go to a sanatorium. Mary, his mother, has been addicted to morphine since she gave birth to Edmund. In this play, the characters obviously feel distant from Mary. Edmund states, "The hardest thing to take is the blank wall she builds around her. Or it's

more like a bank of fog in which she hides and loses herself. . . . You know something in her does it deliberately—to get beyond our reach, to be rid of us . . .” (801; act 4). As Diggins points out “a dreamlike atmosphere” created by “a fog-horn groaning in the background; puffs of white fog wafting across the open porch . . .” (227), the fog leads Mary into her own memories and symbolizes the barriers between her and other characters. Moreover, their distance from each other is also highlighted when Mary goes upstairs to take morphine. Tyrone, her husband, says, “I don’t want to go upstairs, anyway, till she’s asleep” (800; act 4). Edmund also says, “Yes, she moves above and beyond us, a ghost haunting the past, and here we sit pretending to forget, but straining our ears listening for the slightest sound . . .” (811; act 4). Although we cannot see the room upstairs, the characters make us imagine the presence of it and feel the physical as well as psychological distance between Mary and them. Mary’s withdrawal into her memories separates her from her family, and as the image of fog symbolizes, she is presented as being distant from the other characters.

In *Hughie*, Erie, a hotel guest, talks to Night Clerk at the front desk and tells him about Hughie, who was a clerk in the hotel but had recently passed away. However, Night Clerk does not interact with him. Although Night Clerk appears to listen to Erie, “*his mind is blank and he doesn’t hear unless a direct question is put to him, and sometimes not even then*” (834). Erie knows that Night Clerk is not interested in him but keeps talking:

ERIE. . . . (*He waits for approving assent from the Night Clerk, but the latter is not hearing so intently he misses his cue until the expectant silence crashes his ears.*)

NIGHT CLERK. (*hastily, gambling on “yes”*) Yes, Sir.

ERIE. (*bitingly*) Sorry if I’m keeping you up, Sport. (*with an aggrieved air*) Hughie was a wide-awake guy. He was always waiting for me to roll in. . . . (836)

The play proceeds with a conversation between two characters, but communication is hardly established. As I will discuss later, when he listens to Erie, Night Clerk turns his attention toward the outside of the hotel and is lost in a reverie. Furthermore, their eyes and words do not meet directly in this play.

ERIE. . . . Ain't it the truth, Charlie? (*He again stares at the Night Clerk appealingly, forgetting past rebuffs. The Clerk's face is taut with vacancy. . . .*  
 NIGHT CLERK. (*His glassy eyes stare through Erie's face. He stammers deferentially*) Truth? I'm afraid I didn't get—What's the truth?  
 ERIE. (*hopelessly*) Nothing, Pal. Not a thing. (*His eyes fall to the floor. . . .*  
 (846)

Erie stares at the Night Clerk “appealingly,” but the latter does not pay attention to Erie. When he stares at Erie's face, his eyes are directed toward the floor. The expression “glassy eyes” also implies that he is not paying attention to the conversation.

As stated in the Introduction, the characters are in a closed space and do not have anywhere to go. Although the characters are physically in close proximity, the psychological distance between them is prominent. Therefore, in the following sections, I would like to provide further insights into their interactions with each other, focusing on how they reveal their inner thoughts to others.

### Inner Thoughts Revealed as Monologue

In *Long Day's Journey*, all the characters are haunted by their respective pasts, which has a profound effect on their current situation. Dowling states:

Overarching everything in *Long Day's Journey* is the horrifying surety of a wasted past. James and Mary, along with their dissipated elder son Jamie, present two selves—the selves that might have achieved their potential and the selves they've been fated to endure. (433)

As he points out here, Mary cannot forget the past because she deeply regrets letting her son Eugene die of measles at an early age. While she was going out, Eugene got measles from his brother, Jamie. Although Mary suffers from painful memories, she also recalls her schooldays—when she dreamed of being a pianist or a nun—the happiest time of her life. Mary, who cannot cope with the current situation, takes drugs to withdraw into her own happy memories.

In the third act, Mary is impaired by the drugs and “*paler than before and*

*her eyes shine with unnatural brilliance*" (772; act 3). In this scene, she talks with her maid, Cathleen. However, Mary "*has Cathleen with her merely as an excuse to keep talking*" (773; act 3). Talking about drugs she says the following:

MARY. (*dreamily*) It kills the pain. You go back until at last you are beyond its reach. Only the past when you were happy is real. (*She pauses—then as if her words had been an evocation which called back happiness she changes in her whole manner and facial expression. She looks younger. There is a quality of an innocent convent girl about her, and she smiles shyly.*) . . . (777; act 3)

However, Cathleen does not listen to her carefully, because she is drunk and drowsy. Mary does not really communicate with Cathleen; rather, she talks to herself. While she says she wants Cathleen to stay with her, she just relies on her memories of happier times and disconnects herself from the people around her.

At the end of the play, Mary appears in front of her family, holding her wedding dress, which completely draws her into her memories. They get upset and begin arguing, but Mary does not care about them: "*She has paid no attention whatever to the incident. It is simply a part of the familiar atmosphere of the room, a background which does not touch her preoccupation; and she speaks aloud to herself, not to them*" (824; act 4). Mary seems to see illusions, talking about her student life and piano lessons as if they are happening now. While she recalls her younger days in the third act, she recedes to the past completely at the end of the play. Mary uncovers her own deep-seated memories, which the other characters cannot enter. As Edmund states that "The hardest thing to take is the blank wall she builds around her" (801; act 4), the memories narrated by herself seem to create walls between them. In the last scene, Mary says the following:

MARY. (. . . *She passes a hand over her forehead as if brushing cobwebs from her brain—vaguely*) That was in the winter of senior year. Then in the spring something happened to me. Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time. (*She stares before her in a sad dream. Tyrone stirs in his chair. Edmund and Jamie remain motionless.*) (828; act 4)

When the curtain comes down, Jamie and Edmund remain motionless. In this scene, they give up communicating with her, and finally, the possibility of conversation is cut off. Over the course of the play, Mary's words become monologues, directed at no one in particular.

In *The Iceman Cometh*, the character's pipe dreams unite them. Larry explains: "Although even here they keep up the appearances of life with a few harmless pipe dreams about their yesterdays and tomorrows . . ." (578; act 1). For example, Lewis was a captain in the British infantry and he always talks with Wetjoen, who was the leader of the Boer commandos. They still speak about the war with nostalgia, in which they fought one another. Lewis also dreams about traveling to his homeland, England, with Wetjoen. However, they postpone it perpetually. Lewis says, "We'll make it next year, even if we have to work and earn our passage money, eh?" (594; act 1). Wetjoen soon accepts his suggestion. They rely on each other and dream together to sustain their happy memories and hopes for the future. In this way, the characters in this play share their illusions. Eisen points out: "Their pipe-dream selves depend on a mutual validation by the others; this is the internal social contract that shields them from the rapidly changing external world" (*Theatre* 64).

Hickey also clings to his illusion that he killed his wife Evelyn because "that was the only possible way to give her peace" (700; act 4). However, as he recalls the time when he shot her, he says:

HICKEY. . . . I remember I heard myself speaking to her, as if it was something I'd always wanted to say: "Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!" (*He stops with a horrified start, as if shocked out of a nightmare, as if he couldn't believe he heard what he had just said. He stammers*) No! I never—! (700; act 4)

Hickey cannot believe what he thought about her deep inside. We see he murdered Evelyn out of hatred, but he does not admit that. He insists that he laughed at her because he was insane. When he was seized by the police, he says, "All I want you to see is I was out of my mind afterwards, when I laughed at her! I was a raving rotten lunatic or I couldn't have said—Why, Evelyn was the only thing on God's earth I ever loved!" (703; act 4). According to Berlin, Hickey's love for



Evelyn was his pipe dream, and Hickey leaves the stage, “pleading insanity, not to escape punishment, as they seem to think, but because his pipe dream persists” (Berlin Endings 99).

Although Hickey reveals his hatred of his wife, he denies it soon after and tries to convince the lodgers that he was simply insane. Listening to Hickey’s insistence, Hope regains his energy and says, “We’ve known him for years, and every one of us noticed he was nutty the minute he showed up here! Bejees, if you’d heard all the crazy bull he was pulling about bringing us peace . . .” (702; act 4). After that, the other roomers agree with Hope and go back to racketing as before. They try to forget what Hickey said to them and stop facing reality.

In contrast, Larry is no longer able to share the illusions with them at the end of the play. Just as Mary’s memories in *Long Day’s Journey* are revealed in the form of monologues that break down the possibility of communication, the depiction of Larry’s inner thoughts during the last scene also suggests that he is unable to communicate with others. One day, his former girlfriend’s son Parritt visits the bar and reveals to Larry that he betrayed his anarchist mother and thereafter she ended up in prison. He follows Larry around, asking Larry to judge him. Although Larry believes he takes a “grandstand” and maintains a distance from everything in his life, Parritt reminds him of his former girlfriend and the movement he used to be involved with. As Parritt causes Larry to face his past as well as himself, the latter feels intense hatred toward him. In the end, Larry judges Parritt, urging him to jump down from the emergency stairs. Just after that, Parritt goes up the stairs and Larry hears him hurtling. Although we do not see Parritt jump off, the sound leads us to visualize the fire escape and what happened there. Just as the family members in *Long Day’s Journey* feel distant from Mary, who is in the room upstairs, Parritt leaves Larry and goes up to a point beyond his reach. The spatial distance between them highlights Larry’s disconnect from the other characters. Then Larry says:

LARRY. . . . Poor devil! (*A long-forgotten faith returns to him for a moment and he mumbles*) God rest his soul in peace. (*He opens his eyes—with a bitter self-derision*) Ah, the damned pity—the wrong kind, as Hickey said! Be God, there’s no hope! I’ll never be a success in the grandstand—or anywhere else! . . . (710; act 4)

In this line, he recognizes that the idea of being in the grandstand was an illusion. However, the other roomers, who are making a racket, do not care about what happened. They hear something fall, but surmise that a mattress had fallen off the fire escape. One of them says, "Hey there, Larry! Come over and get paralyzed! What the hell you doing, sitting there?" (710; act 4). They do not know about Parritt's death or what Larry says. Although the pipe dreams unite the roomers with each other in the bar, only Larry faces Parritt's death and his real situation. Thus, while this monologue reveals Larry's awareness, it also highlights the contrast between him and the other characters, implying that they will never understand him.

From this perspective, it should be noted that this play ends with the description of Larry: "*They pound their glasses on the table, roaring with laughter, and Hugo giggles with them. In his chair by the window, Larry stares in front of him, oblivious to their racket*" (711; act 4). He is left alone and "stares in front of him", not at the other characters. His eyes and his words are directed to no one in particular. As the characters' eyes do not meet and communication is not established in *Hughie*, Larry's gaze here also suggests that he cannot communicate with anyone. As stated in the previous section, Larry is presented as being distant from the others. In the last scene, the distance between them seems to have increased.

Some critics compare Larry with Lavinia in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), whose words make her brother kill himself. She decides to get herself imprisoned in her house. Eisen points out, "Larry ultimately defies this self and enters his prisonhouse of silence, as Lavinia Mannon is entombed finally in the family mansion at the close of *Mourning Becomes Electra*" (*Inner Strength* 169). However, while Lavinia's last words are directed to her gardener Seth, Larry talks to himself in the last scene. When Lavinia proceeds toward her house, Seth tells her "Don't go in there, Vinnie!" (1053; part 3, act 4), and the play ends with a conversation between Lavinia and him. Seth is situated between Lavinia's family and the neighbors, but no one mediates between the bar and the outside world in *The Iceman Cometh*. Thus, Larry's isolation and the closed nature of the space are emphasized in this play.

As I have stated, both Mary in *Long Day's Journey* and Larry reveal what they think deep inside, but communication is not established. Larry's eyes,

which are not directed at anyone, also highlight this situation. Their words emphasize the closed nature of their inner world, which separates them from the other characters.

### Undisclosed Inner Thoughts in *Hughie*

In this section, I will discuss the communication between the characters in *Hughie*. It is the only surviving work of a planned series of one-act plays (Dowling 437). This play's uniqueness lies in its stage direction, which elucidates the thoughts of the characters. O'Neill himself says the following regarding the series:

I've forgotten how much or little I explained about this series—there will be seven or eight of them if I ever manage to get them all done. *Hughie* is a good example of the technique. In each the main character talks about a person who has died to a person who does little but listen. Via this monologue you get a complete picture of the person who has died—his or her whole life story—but just as complete a picture of the life and character of the narrator. And you also get, by another means—a use of stage directions, mostly—an insight into the whole life of the person who does little but listen.

These plays are written more to be read than staged, although they could be played. (*Selected Letters* 531)

As he refers to its characteristic directions, *Hughie* has certain features that O'Neill's earlier plays do not have. In this work, Night Clerk creates his own world in his mind, which hinders communication with his customer, Erie.

Although Erie talks to him intently, he is not willing to interact with Erie or even look into his eyes. Moreover, when we see the directions, it is clear that he does not concentrate on the conversation. When Erie talks about prostitutes, Night Clerk thinks as follows:

ERIE. . . . I still can make 'em. You watch. I ain't slippin'. (*He looks at the Night Clerk expecting reassurance, but the Clerk's mind has slipped*

*away to the clanging bounce of garbage cans in the outer night. He is thinking: "A job I'd like. I'd bang those cans louder than they do! I'd wake up the whole damned city!" Erie mutters disgustedly to himself) Jesus, what a dummy! . . . (837)*

In this scene, he speaks to Erie, but his mind has "slipped away" to the outside. He thinks about garbage collection, which is what he would like to do instead of working at the reception.

Erie keeps talking about Hughie and himself. He says he was talking to Hughie as if he were a big gambler and Hughie liked listening to him. Then he realizes, "I'd get to seein' myself like he seen me. . . . I was wise I was kiddin' myself" (845). Talking to Night Clerk, he recognizes that he is not a big gambler, and he was "kiddin'" himself. However, he still tries to make himself look like "*a Broadway sport and a Wise Guy*" (832), implying he had a little relation to famous gamblers. Erie obviously does not want to return to his room. Diggins states:

The death of the night clerk Hughie reminds Erie of his own finitude, and he cannot stop talking to the replacement clerk out of fear of solitude and the thought that he could go upstairs to his room and jump out the window. Talking is as desperate as praying, and the words spill out at random. (187)

As he points out, Erie utters words at random, and he does not try to communicate with Night Clerk. Rather, he seems to hold on to his illusion that he is a big gambler.

Despite Erie's constant talking, Night Clerk keeps thinking about the outside of the hotel:

ERIE. . . . (*He stares at the lobby floor. The Night Clerk regards him with vacant, bulging eyes full of a vague envy for the blind. . . . The Clerk's mind remains in the street to greet the noise of a far-off El train. Its approach is pleasantly like a memory of hope; then it roars and rocks and rattles past the nearby corner, and the noise pleasantly deafens memory; . . . Only so many El trains pass in one night, and each one passing leaves one less to pass, so the night recedes, too, until at last it must die and*

*join all the other long nights in Nirvana, the Big Night of Nights. And that's life. "What I always tell Jess when she nags me to worry about something: 'That's life, isn't it? What can you do about it?' " Erie sighs again—then turns to the Clerk, . . . (838)*

Night Clerk's thoughts are also described in this scene. This line starts with a third-person perspective, describing the noise of the train, and then his subjective memories are presented. Eisen points out: "Moving in and out of the Night Clerk's point of view, O'Neill draws no clear distinction between the directing voice of the playwright and the free-ranging mind of his character . . ." (*Inner Strength* 182). O'Neill seems to have tried to write the direction as a novelist would write his characters' thoughts. It is clear from his own words that *Hughie* is "written more to be read than staged".

Before O'Neill completed this play, he tried to use characteristic asides in *Strange Interlude* (1928). In this work, the protagonists often reveal their real thoughts although the other characters cannot hear them. Dowling states, "That the characters' thoughts are conscious, rather than windows into their subconscious, amplifies the dramatic irony, the point at which the audience knows what some characters do not" (342). If the asides in *Strange Interlude* represent the characters' "conscious" thoughts, stage direction in *Hughie* describes their subconscious thoughts as well, without mediating the characters' words, which is totally subjective and will never be shared with others.

At the end of the play, Night Clerk suddenly remembers a professional gambler, Arnold Rothstein. Then, his mind begins to pursue "*an ideal of fame and glory within itself called Arnold Rothstein*" (847). Although Night Clerk did not care about Erie, he suddenly gets interested in him and asks Erie, "Do you, by any chance, know the Big Shot, Arnold Rothstein?" (847). Although Erie gets puzzled initially by the change in Clerk's attitude, he regains the confidence. Subsequently, Erie and Night Clerk start playing dice, which Erie used to do with Hughie. Although they appear to begin to communicate, they do not understand each other. Erie only goes back to his illusion of being a big gambler, and Night Clerk admires Arnold, not Erie himself. In this play, Night Clerk's inner world is depicted in detail, which highlights the individual's closed nature.

## Conclusion

As I have already stated, the characters' inner thoughts in these plays are often revealed as monologues directed toward no one, and their inner world is represented as a realm where others cannot reach. In *Hughie*, the characters' consciousnesses are depicted only via stage directions. Thus, they do not understand each other, and communication is hardly established in these works.

I also focused on the characters' eyes, which effectively represented their relationships with others. In the last scene of *The Iceman Cometh*, Larry simply stares ahead and no longer sees the other characters. In *Hughie*, although Erie and Night Clerk talk to each other, it is suggested that their eyes do not meet. Their eyes wander, which implies that the characters do not interact with anyone. When we read the stage directions of *Hughie*, we find the gaze of the third person narrator as well, who depicts the characters' inner thoughts. As O'Neill himself said this work was "written more to be read than staged", he might have introduced the gazes described above to suggest that the characters, in fact, do not understand each other. In his later works, O'Neill tried this novel technique and explored the problem of communication.

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## SUMMARY

## Representation of Inner Thoughts in Eugene O'Neill's Later Plays

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Eugene O'Neill wrote some of his masterpieces, such as *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), in the latter part of his career. Since these works have a certain sense of despair, some critics have discussed the relationship between the plays and absurd dramas. The characters in these plays rarely interact with the outside world and seem to have problems with communication. This article provides insights into the thoughts of the characters of O'Neill's later plays and elucidates the ways in which they fail to communicate, with reference to the two plays stated above and his last one-act play, *Hughie* (1958).

In *The Iceman Cometh*, Larry's desperate monologue in the last scene is contrasted with the other characters who have a drinking party. Mary in *Long Day's Journey* recalls her student days, but her words also become monologues. Eventually, her family members are left with no other choice but to discontinue interacting with her. When the characters' inner worlds are revealed, they are represented as realms where the others cannot reach, and communication with others is hardly established in these plays.

In *Hughie*, the characters' thoughts are depicted only via the stage directions. Although Erie and Night Clerk appear to converse, when we consider the stage direction, it is clear that the clerk turns his attention toward the outside of the hotel and is lost in a reverie. *Hughie* also explores the subjective nature of one's inner world, and it is suggested that the characters will never understand each other. Furthermore, their eye movements imply that they do not interact with anyone. In his later years, O'Neill utilized a novel style that included detailed stage directions and he explored the problem of communication.