

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**MORAL DREAMS: THE TRADITION OF
THE MORALITY PLAY IN THREE
PLAYS OF EDWARD ALBEE**

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ABSTRACT

MORAL DREAMS:

THE TRADITION OF THE MORALITY PLAY

IN THREE PLAYS OF EDWARD ALBEE

BY

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Albee's plays can be taken as modern morality play since they are linked to its tradition both through their subject and through their form. As to the subject, they are concerned with the predicament of the modern man who is entangled between the social pressure and his own weakness. The former is embodied in the fact of the reversal of values and lack of communication in the contemporary age; and the latter is materialized by man's inability to face bitter realities of life and also by his escape into his illusions; this is the fall of Albee characters. However, he designs man's redemption suggested by his ultimate power to confront his problems. Thereby, salvation of the characters lies in their understanding the truth. As to the form, Albee's plays resemble the morality play in their applying allegorical or typical characters and a universal setting.

Three plays of Albee are chosen for this study which treat the fall and redemption of the characters at three levels of social, family and individual life respectively. *The American Dream* treats the plight

of the modern American society which is due to the substitution of the old humanistic values by the new materialistic ones. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?* depicts the cold and terrible relation between a couple who are apparently linked together merely through their verbal attacks. *Tiny Alice* shows how false beliefs make man blind to the truth, driving him away from realities of life.

All the three plays, however, end with a suggested optimistic redemption for the characters, consisting of the probable revival of the old values, reconciliation of the couple and the final learning of the truth about faith. These conclusions hint at Albee's belief in perseverance against the existing shortcomings of the contemporary life, rather than a pessimistic desperation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The plays of Edward Albee, it can be said, are exceptional in the contemporary American drama in that all of them leave the audience unsure if they have understood them. In fact, there is an unclear portrait of characters, an undeveloped design of plot, together with a close and restricted setting in Albee's drama which make it difficult to understand. Consequently, critics have passed different judgments on Albee's plays from the very beginning. Definitely, the oblique and unfamiliar plays of Albee--in contrast to his contemporaries such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller who produced tangible subjects--caused people to associate him with the Theater of the Absurd which was dominant in Europe at the time when Albee appeared. This association was incited by the fact that Albee's first play, *The Zoo Story* (1958), shared the bill at the Provincetown Playhouse with Beckett's *Kraspp's Last Tape*. Moreover, this impression was further reinforced by the idea Albee cherished: lack of communication in the world, which should have been a result of his "exposure to Beckett and the late O'Neil," he admits, when he started as a playwright (Albee 1975: 133).

Albee's later works, however, introduced new subject matters which led to his deviation, in a way, from the Theater of the Absurd in Europe and directed him more towards subjects concerning American civilization. In fact, it is doubted if Albee exclusively belongs to the Theater of the Absurd, since it signifies a group of plays which flourished in the early twentieth-century Europe and presented, through a new technique, the idea that there is no security and meaning in life. This idea, as Martin Esslin claims in his introduction to *Absurd Drama*, is a kind of reaction to, and an aftermath of the two great wars, Nazi's mass murder, and similar social anarchies which caused man to feel desperate and insecure in his life (13). Thus, the Theater of the Absurd is realistic since it depicts the illogical and incoherent realities in the society.

Presently, following the Theater of the Absurd, there appeared several playwrights in the States among whom Albee is the focus of this study. Clearly, Albee is influenced by the Theater of the Absurd and its precepts towards communication in the modern world; and Esslin is the first critic who included him in the cycle of the Absurdists; and in his *The Theatre of the Absurd*, he compared *The Zoo Story* with Pinter's world because of its realistic dialogue and its subject of isolation (302). Nevertheless, later critics were not all contented with that and tried to throw more light on the hidden meanings of Albee's works.

In fact, Albee has some similarities with the Absurdists, while his differences are also conspicuous. He overlaps with The Theater of the Absurd in areas covering the question of man in the modern world, or the lack of communication and love between the individuals. However, while the Absurdists are engaged in depicting the terrible world facing them and the helplessness of the conventional religious, social or whatever myths of order and dignity, Albee proceeds to picture the final possibility of man's salvation by means of breaking through pervading miserable situation.

The Theater of the Absurd playwrights showed man as a deformed figure at the hand of contemporary life, and their writings were a kind of protest against the resentful life. Any protesting writing has a seed of suggestion for a better situation. Albee, as a complement to the revolting movement of the Absurdists, goes on to show the existence of the potential power of man needed to tolerate the difficulties which may, of course, result in a change of the dominant situation.

Whatever social or psychological reasons differentiating Albee from the Absurdists, he takes up the started process of picturing the contemporary situation and directs it to a possible hopeful end in a calm and humanistic life. These views can be gathered from his article "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?" (1962) written a year after the publication of Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* including him as a new American member to the cycle. Though the article is a criticism

on the plays on Broadway, Albee comes to define the Absurd drama as:

an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempts to make sense--which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to "illusion" himself have collapsed. (Meserve 174)

According to this definition, his plays can be grouped with the Absurdist drama; but this link is on a philosophical ground since his plays unleash themselves practically from that theater through their developing plots. In other words, while the Absurdist wrote--in a protesting manner--plays with no apparent action leading to a decisive result--with whatever philosophy behind them--Albee succeeds to fulfill their prolonged wish for a rescue from the suffocating life reflected in his works where characters reach a final understanding of their state and decide to change it. Thus, Albee's theater came to be aptly labeled as The Drama of Confrontation by Bigsby in his book *Confrontation and Commitment*.

The concept of confronting the real world and its merits seems to have always been ringing in Albee's head; it is proved by his selection of the lines from Esslin he quotes in the mentioned article, which encourage man's tolerance:

. . . For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions--and to laugh at it.

(Meserve 148)

It seems he has caught intuitively the truth of this statement, and more importantly, has applied it in his following plays.

This theme of confrontation in Albee gives rise to the conception of this study which aims at a broader investigation on him and trace his plays back to the medieval morality play. Thus, the present study will focus on the comparison between Albee's play and the morality play to draw attention to the morality elements in Albee. The basic mutual concern in Albee's works and the morality play is that both picture an individual undertaking a spiritual journey, who finally attains salvation through his perseverance and understanding of truth.

1.2 Review of Literature

Various approaches have been taken as regards to the criticism of Albee's theater. Driver, for instance, judges Albee rather severely and considers his plays as senseless and magnifying violence. Taking a realistic approach, he sees the theme of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* merely the insight that "in many marriages illusions grow and have to be 'exorcised' . . . in order to save what is left of the partners" (241). Brian Way regards Albee as a failure in absurd drama since "a

certain point is reached" in his plays which goes not with the absurd drama (189). Hinchliffe takes Albee as "only a part-time Absurdist, eclectic in his use of techniques and consistent only in the pessimism behind all his plays" (87).

Some critics, however, have done more comprehensive criticism on American drama, and on Albee specifically. Baxandall, for example, criticizes Albee's theater on the ground of family relationship, and classifies three types of character in accordance to different cultural and historical periods:

Three generations comprise Albee's archetypal family: *Then*, the epoch of a still-dynamic national ethic and vision; *Now*, a phase which breaks down into several tangents of decay; and *Nowhere*, a darkly prophesied future generation. (81)

Amacher approaches Albee's works from a structural aspect, while, he has not ignored historical and social facts at all. Allan Lewis, in his book on American drama, devotes one chapter exclusively to Albee. He notes that in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "Albee has captured in modern terms the dramatic power of man, destroyed by his own acts, still clinging to life, still groping for meaning" (94). This characteristic especially applies to the morality play.

Bigsby has written several books on American theater, and on Albee specially, which give a quite comprehensive understanding of his theater. He takes *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *After the*

Fall, by Arthur Miller, as modern secular morality plays, and believes that “the gospel they teach . . . is the primacy of human contact based on an acceptance of reality” (*Confrontation and Commitment* 84). He believes that there is a need to confront reality; and any failure to accept this need not only deprives man of dignity but leaves him “adrift in incomprehension, in flight from the world as it really is. This is the modern hell of Albee’s morality plays” (85).

In all his plays, Albee tries to show man’s perseverance against his difficulties, overcoming them and getting salvation; and his characters act as prophets to preach his gospel. Since his first play, he has used Christian images making critics pass religious judgments on his plays. In this light, Jerry in *The Zoo Story* can be taken as a messianic figure who sacrifices himself to make communication possible in the modern world. Zimbardo believes:

Albee, in recreating this theme, has used a pattern of symbolism that is an immensely expanded allusion to the story of Christ’ sacrifice. But the symbolism is not outside of the story which he has to tell, which is the story of *modern* man and *his* isolation and hope for salvation. He uses the allusion to support his own story. He has chosen traditional Christian symbols, I think, not because they are tricky attention-getters, but because the sacrifice of Christ is perhaps the most

effective way that the story has been told in the past.

(53)

In this way, Albee begins to create meanings for himself in the heat of the turmoil of meaninglessness, as the Absurists cried out (Bennett 56). He takes up his gospel-teaching through Christian tone and images in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Tiny Alice*. In the former, it is suggested by Martha's exclamations of "Christ!" or "Jesus!" either addressed to George or just preceded by "George!" (11, 57, 104). Further, it is upheld by sacrificial humiliation of George to make a better life, and as Bigsby believes--affirming Ihab Hassan's critique on Saul Bellow--there is a progress from humiliation to humanity (*Confrontation and Commitment* 72). On the other hand, the death of their fantasy son can be taken symbolically as a sacrificial act to save them from their illusions; at any case, there is a sacred image. The religious image and tone are concrete in *Tiny Alice*: its religious figures, and the image of Julian's death--bleeding--which is brought on after his illumination. If Albee succeeded in *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to teach the gospel that the primacy of human contact is based on an acceptance of reality, in *Tiny Alice*, he presents a saint for his religion (Bigsby, *Confrontation and Commitment* 88).

Thus, Albee's plays have been criticized from different points of views; however, it is fair to claim that a comprehensive study on Albee's plays, especially, on the common grounds with morality plays,

has not been undertaken so far. Therefore, while all the criticisms on Albee are invaluable and helpful in making Albee's works understandable, this study intends to investigate the traditional elements of the morality play in Albee and the impact of this tradition on the criticism of Albee's drama.

1.3 Objectives and Significance of the Study

The most important aim of this study is to find similarities between Albee's theater and the morality play, both in subject and form, and draw conclusion on the significance of this comparison. In fact, the term "morality play" can be applied to much of Albee's works, since they depict an individual person undertaking a spiritual journey. The individual is confronted with a distressing situation whether in his family life or out in the society, but rather than giving up his hope, or even his life, he gets to know the truth and realities of life so that he attains a sort of salvation. In other words, Albee's characters undergo a morality-type redemption.

Needless to say, a study of the role of fun and games, and also the importance of perseverance is the focal point of this study. Both theaters--Albee's and the morality play--are to an extent, didactic; and both are closely linked to the notion of the dream. The two historical periods concerned are presented in the plays as times when ideals and value systems are not consistent with the contemporary realities. Besides, they both express the isolation of the characters.