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Medley of Dramatic Modes in Edward Albee's Plays

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the different dramatic modes present in Edward Albee's plays. In this paper, I am including eight plays of Edward Albee – The Zoo Story, The Sand Box, The American Dream, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Tiny Alice, A Delicate Balance, All Over, Listening. Edward Albee does not fit into the watertight compartments of absurd drama as he mingles realism, expressionism, and 'absurdism' in his plays. The oscillations between the different dramatic modes in Albee's plays are traces of the socio-historical-political-cultural module of the then American society wherein Albee grew up and wrote his plays, thus structuring Albee as an 'absurdist' playwright and not as an 'absurd' playwright.

Key words: Dramatics modes, Absurdism, Realism, Expressionism, Existentialism

One of the most fascinating characteristics of modern American drama is the medley of the different dramatic modes in it. The dramatic modes are realism, expressionism, existentialism and absurdity. These modes mingle in the works of the same period and in the works of the major playwrights. A single mode cannot characterise the works of the major playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee. The developments of the dramatic modes is visualized in the realistic plays of Henrik Ibsen, then to the expressionistic plays of August Strindberg, and last but not the least, the absurdist plays of Samuel Beckett. With the changes in the dramatic modes, the changes occurs in the notion of character, which further leads to the changes in dialogues, plot development and dramatic representation as well.

Characterisation plays a vital role in the development of modern drama. In Ibsen's realistic plays there appears to be a strong relationship between an individual and his social existence. Arthur Miller says "society is inside of man and man is inside society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not" (Martin 139). Again, in Strindberg's expressionistic plays, the characters are something much less rational and amalgamated than in the realist tradition, something emotional rather than rational, and something dangerously fragmented and vague. In absurdist plays, the characters are locked-up in alienation and isolation, where there is no outlet except in the existence of real and forceful human needs to interaction, communication and contact. No real communication takes place and the characters live in a void cut off from historical and societal contexts. Thus, there occurs disintegration of dialogues, and even plot of the play. Martin Esslin is quite right when he says that in theatre of the absurd there occurs "the devaluation and disintegration of language" (Esslin 396). In absurd drama, meaningful order is abandoned, but it may be metaphorical as *Waiting for Godot* is a metaphor for the meaninglessness of life.

In Edward Albee, there is the medley of dramatic modes. What makes *The Zoo Story* (1959) and *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960) dense and difficult to define is the style in which it is written. It does not fit into the purely realistic nor the totally absurd genres that were both popular in 1958 when Albee wrote the play. Albee uses the absurd style and combines it with acute realism in his plays in order to comment on American society in the 1950s. The playwright is also drawing from existential philosophy in his plays. 'Absurdism' as well as expressionism is found in *The Sandbox* (1960) and

The American Dream (1961)), realism in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1961)), symbolist expressionism in *Tiny Alice* (1964), realism again in *A Delicate Balance* (1966), surrealist expressionism in *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968), expressionism with some hues of realism in *All Over* (1970), a realistic framework in *Seascape* (1975), something between absurd and expressionistic drama in *Listening* (1976), and 'absurdism' in *Counting the Ways* (1977).

I would like to pay no heed to the chronology in this paper, but rather would like to amalgamate the plays based on their thematic concerns. In this paper, I am including eight plays of Edward Albee – *The Zoo Story*, *The Sand Box*, *The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *Tiny Alice*, *A Delicate Balance*, *All Over*, *Listening*. Since Albee started his career as a realist playwright with *The Zoo Story*, so let me include the realist plays together. Brian Way in "Albee and the Absurd: *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story*," argues that *The Zoo Story* partly belongs in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd because the action and the dialogue are dislocated and arbitrary, and because it uses the technique of pseudo-crisis (in Jerry's long story about the dog) (Biggsby 1975: 37-41).

Albee's first play *The Zoo Story* effectively gave birth to American absurdist drama. The theme of isolation, alienation, loneliness is representative of the human condition in this play. The characters lack simple social skills and go on alienating themselves from the rest of the world. Pain follows this isolation, thus compelling an individual to embrace death. In this play, the theme of wealth and poverty, and the illusions that are created between the social and economic classes. It is closely related to isolation and separation because Albee establishes the societal pressures of class as the cause of his character's (Jerry) sufferings. With *The Zoo Story*, Albee points to the French playwright Eugene Ionesco's idea that human life is both fundamentally absurd and terrifying, therefore, communication through language is equally absurd. The playwright uses various literary devices in his plays – the first device is that of the anti-hero. Along with the anti-hero, he uses satire and black humour also. Albee uses both of these devices in *The Zoo Story* to comment on the way different social classes choose to view and ignore each other in American society. Specifically, he highlights the way in which members of the upper classes deal with members of the lower ones. This is illustrated with the character of Peter, who Albee uses as an example by having Jerry methodically bring him down to an animalistic level in order to show that he is just like everyone else.

The Sand Box as well as *The American Dream* shows isolation taking place within the social arrangement, the family in the context of the period's excessively consumerist society. It also shows individuals isolated from responsibility and reality. As Albee himself said: "...it is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real value in our society... a stand against fiction that everything in this sleeping land of ours is peachy-keen (Amacher 61). These two plays do not use repetition and circularity like that of absurd drama, but have plot development leading to climax at the end of the play. Thus, in and out these two plays cannot be considered as absurdist, whereas they may be termed as expressionistic plays. The destruction of language and break of communication amongst the characters put forward the elements of absurdism in these plays. These features are purely absurd, but they function within a specific social context in the plays, which makes them part of a meaningful rather than a hollow worldview. Throughout *The Sand Box* and *The American Dream*, Albee dramatizes the damage of human empathy and accepting it through specific social attitudes that are savage and dehumanizing.

In Edward Albee's plays there seem to be a deconstruction of human privilege over animals. The plays seem to be a proof of civilization's decadence or may be even possessing the breath of apocalypse. In *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the primary conflict is observed in the theme of language and communication breakdown and Albee positions his characters into 'speciesist' discourses against one another for a myriad of purposes, specifically as a way to make sense of their position within a society. The animal, an entity that humans have tried to mitigate as inferior and uncivilized is very much within human beings, within one-self. In the plays of Albee, it seems that the animal has transformed into a philosophical centre of discourse, where the 'mark' of Derrida can be used. The animal is placed by the human outside the borders of the human through the distinctive and extremist strategies that the binary of Animal/Human has begun to collapse upon itself. In fact, these strategies have become so overtly extreme that the human, in fearing the loss of civilization, has animalized the human and, in this act of animalizing the subject, the hierarchy of human over animal has been overturned.

Bigsby in his essay, "Edward Albee: Journey to Apocalypse", in *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* (2000) says, "

Nevertheless, without fail, all of Albee's plays bring up the question of the animal in some shape or form, as with the theme of civility in *A Delicate Balance*, as religious breakdown in *Tiny Alice*, and most notably in a direct questioning of animal-human discourse in *The Zoo Story* and *Seascape*. Even in the 21st century, when the theatre community has come to view Albee as a hoary playwright of the past, his play *The Goat: Or Who is Sylvia?*, a play centred entirely on an animal and the theme of bestiality... (Bigsby 2000: 150).

The animal exists in Albee's plays as a theatrical effect, a literary technique to render emphasis to the breakdown of Human and American society altogether. Albee, essentially, hollows out the human subject and leads his characters to a more "primitive" being, or a state of existence for which the Human and Animal are one and the same, which leaves the audience with an emotion of ambivalence and unsettledness. Man considers language his own domain and dominion being privileged in contrast to animals, but Edward Albee deconstructs this dominion in his plays through the characters.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf and *A Delicate Balance* provide an image of man's loneliness and isolation, and his inability to make contact with other people in the contemporary world. The experience of human alienation, isolation and loneliness has been one of the major subjects, which have been taken in most of Albee's plays. In both plays, almost similar problems are dramatized, involving couples who have spaced out and are aware of it, who cannot quite ignore the incongruity between what they sought their lives to be, and what they have happened to be. Underneath the verbal conflict in both plays, there is a grim note, a sense of loss, disappointment and frustration is involved. *Tiny Alice* is a play about isolation of a complex sexual, spiritual and social sort. The theme is a familiar, ironic one: a naive subject, isolated from the world of others, is seduced by others and decides to join within the status quo. Instead of finding metaphysical comfort and human love, the naïf experiences only further isolation from things of their are and more betrayal by the others. *All Over* and *Listening* are no exception to this theme. In *All Over*, a sense of realism is observed through characterization and setting. Very little action takes place in the play - the dialogue moves backward and forward, thoughts are broken off. In a way, the dialogues tend to break down into monologues. Thus, the play inclines to reflect a kind of dramatic super-naturalism. In *Listening*, the note of ambiguity works as it depicts a pervasive relativity in human relations. The many features of absurdist drama in this play engender this impression: the dialogue frequently dissolves into disconnected and meaningless exchanges of phrases.

It is observed that the construction of the structure of the game in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* contributes towards the structure of the whole play. Matthew C. Roudane in *Understanding Edward Albee* (1987) says, game is the main structural device, becomes a central metaphor...Albee by this device emphasises the childish behaviour of his characters...chooses words very carefully...knows how to evoke the impression of game (Roudane 1987: 70). In the games, a battle for intellectual superiority occurs through language, which includes allusions to well-known personalities like Bette Davis, Dylan Thomas, Oswald Spengler, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Selerie's words in *Brodie's Notes on Edward Albee's - Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1992) well summarizes the parts about games: "Since American culture places great value on success in games and sport, Albee's play becomes an ironic commentary upon the means by which people gain approval in society. Behind the facade of absolute rules in a game, there is no standard against which behaviour can be judged..." (Selerie 1992: 54).

Again, circularity seems to be the main strategy in the play *A Delicate Balance*. The characters spend thirty-seven years on living through their lives in sort of an inner despair. Gilbert Potter in his essay "Toby's Last Stand" in *Critical Essays on Edward Albee* (1986) says that the static nature of the characters is thus thematically functional (Kolin 1986: 167). The integrating dramatic principle is a strategy of circularity in characterization, situation, and language. The circular strategy reflects the play's cycle of emptiness beginning in the nothing and culminating in the loveless void that engulfs all the characters in the final scene, where Tobias' self-awareness occurs as he sees himself in the lives of other characters. Gilbert Potter says in *Critical Essays on Edward Albee* (1986),

...the dawning recognition of his own emptiness provides the dramatic tension in the play and renders him the hub, around which the play's circularity revolves. To use Tobias as the

critical focus of the play is not to ignore or distort the other characters, but simply to see them as satellites moving around him, sharing the same space, the same light and darkness, for their various failures are counterparts to his own (Kolin 1986: 167-168).

Even the balloon image in this play suggests the spiralling exploration of the quest of love and the various forms of insularity available to disguise the absence of love in contemporary society. The image captures the shape and character of the family circle. Here Robin Skynner's statement in *Families and How to Survive* (1983) is quite suggestive:

Imagine a box and a number of balloons in that box. The balloons represent the family members or, rather, their unrealistic maps of themselves, and the box is the world. If each balloon- family member believes it is omnipotent, it tries to fill the whole box. And it cannot do that without squeezing all the other balloons out of existence...all the other family members are tending to wipe the others out. Therefore, there is an endless struggle, punctuated sometimes by periods of very uneasy truce "(Skynner 1983: 94).

Whether it is the circularity present in Albee's plays or games played, language plays a vital role in adding to the structure of the plays within the Theatre of the Absurd standards. The games "demand little action, only an abundance of verbal energy" (Malkin 1992:165), and to win or to lose a game depends upon one's level of "verbal mastery" (Malkin 1992: 162). The characters use language "as a power tool, to be controlled and possessed" (Malkin 1992:171) - to prevent or to limit another speaker is to control how much and what they are able to say and to establish oneself as the more powerful speaker. The absurdity lies in the fact that the characters use language to construct reality.

Edward Albee has explored a great variety of subjects, and he has been strikingly innovative in his experiments with form. His main concerns, however, do not deflect. The themes that Albee had been dramatizing on are complacency about human suffering, the ruinous passion to dominate, loneliness, and the difficulties of communication. The playwright's significant contributions are abrasive dialogue, and the remarkably skilful use of one of drama's most fundamental elements, the battle of wits and dramatic 'blindspot'. Albee believes that the responsibility of drama is to help modern man discern the ultimate significance of human life and in his plays there is a constant concern with 'will' to meaning in life.

There is a constant oscillation of dramatic modes in Edward Albee's plays. However, Albee is certainly not exclusive in this respect. Both O'Neill and Miller also use different dramatic modes. It seems that the American dramatists in general have constantly felt the need to experiment with different dramatic forms - expressionism and absurdism in particular, without being able to feel quite at home with them. Hence, there have been medley of dramatic modes and Edward Albee is no exception in this regard. This constant oscillation and medley of dramatic modes in Albee's plays can be naturally attributed with that of the nature of modern American society. It is important to note here that Edward Albee was born a year before the Great American Economic Depression. In 1929 began the Economic Depression, which lasted for a decade with 'Hooverilles' - 'Hoover blanket' (old newspaper used as blanketing), 'Hoover flag' (an empty pocket turned inside out), 'Hoover leather' (cardboard used to line a shoe with the sole worn through), and a 'Hoover wagon' (an automobile drawn by horse because the owner could not afford gasoline). It was in this period that Albee grew up, the reflections of which appears in his personal as well as the societal context, in turn, in his plays as well.

C. W. E. Bigsby considers Albee as "a post-nuclear writer" (Bigsby 2000: 125). The term post-nuclear clearly designates as the Second World War period and its post-period, but Albee can be considered as a post-nuclear writer in a much wider sense. He lived and grew through and after-effects of the Great Depression and the Second World War, which depicts the symbolic disintegration of the American nuclear family and the state of domestic affairs in the context of the period's excessively consumerist society. In a period when criticism refuses to link art and life, the playwright consciously employs a considerable amount of personal stories that function as critical 'intertexts'. In this sense, Albee is both a post-nuclear writer and commentator of his own works because his alternating families set in critical motion in a variety of almost obsessive autobiographical elements. Thus, all these affairs contribute towards the medley of dramatic modes in Edward Albee.

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