

Edward Albee's Perception of Death As Reflected in His Plays

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Abstract

This paper examines some existential issues related to death raised by Edward Albee, an American playwright. To elaborate, it explores the pressure of death it exerts on the living human beings and the way to face death. Further, it shows how death generates a ray of hope and optimism and religious fulfilment. Besides, this paper proves that experiencing death with full awareness is a novel experience because it creates a possibility of resurrection and ecstatic peace.

Keywords: existential issues, pressure of death, hope and optimism, religious fulfilment, resurrection and ecstatic peace.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"The shadow of death darkens all Albee's play".¹ Deaths, both natural and violent, haunt the settings, characters and actions of his plays. Life in death scenario prevails on the texture of his plays. The real life is made visible in the presence of death going on. The illusions are all unmasked at this moment. Those who confront death in the plays of Albee "sometimes experience an arrival at rest and peace. Each of the characters is dead to every other. The failure of love is a form of dying."² Albee himself says : "I write plays about how people waste their lives."³ Gilbert Debusscher asserts: "Albee's work contains no positive philosophical or social message. His theatre belongs to the pessimistic, defeatist or nihilistic current which characterizes the entire contemporary theatrical scene....thus Albee suggests that from human solitude there is no exit : only death delivers us in putting an end to our social life."⁴

In **The Zoo Story** we are made to know, in course of Jerry's forcible conversation to Peter, about the death of his mother, the accidental death of this father and his attempt to kill the dog of his land lady. When Peter feels sorry for the death of Jerry's parents, Jerry very frankly admits the fact that he has no emotion for what he has narrated as he has forgotten everything and he, too, should not feel sorry for that. Jerry has no inhibition to say that he leads a life of oblivion and he hardly makes out any meaning in a world where there stands no relationship between two individuals. Animals in the zoo are separated by bars and so are human beings by the bars of one kind or the other. Regarding his attempt to kill the dog he says that he did not have an intention to kill it and he feels ashamed of what he has done but then when the dog survives the poison and is getting normal he wants to draw out a change of relationship that may have possibly occurred between him and the dog. He takes such a harsh step to eliminate the dog that troubles him at the door and at the same time he wants it to survive so as to watch the change in its conduct.

When he impales himself on the knife, Jerry not only gains his expiation but also shatters all the predictable patterns of Peter. Peter appears aroused, angered and ready to define himself through concrete deeds. Jerry finds the ultimate mode of engagement and communication through the attainment of death. It is a knife that gives meaning to his world :

Whether interpreting Jerry as psychopath, Christ figure, or Shaman, it is generally acknowledged that Albee's chief thematic point regarding the play's climax is to present a Peter who, through the cleansing consciousness of death, progresses from ignorance to awareness through Jerry's self sacrifice. His howl – "Oh My God !" – transcends all of his previous banal responses. Markedly altered by internalizing the force of death Peter will never return to routine habits, what Samuel Beckett, who greatly influenced the young Albee, calls "the great deadener" within human experience.⁵

Death seems to be the only way Jerry can break through the well-ordered world of Peter to educated him. Jerry tries his best to teach but he miserably fails and consequently his death is necessitated as a last effort to teach him and he succeeds in it. Albee presents a potential for regeneration, a source of optimism which underlines the overtly aggressive text and performance. Jerry discovers a degree of religious fulfillment by giving his life. The setting of the play is such as to "complement the possibility of repose and inner peace, of

resurrection and salvation".⁶ His death liberates him from an impossible present and also confirms the presence of the "teaching emotion."⁷ Jerry's death is nothing less than Peter's rebirth. Peter feels his spirit recharged though he is baffled at the sight of Jerry dying in his arm. Peter has become sensitive to Jerry to some extent in the sense that his stagnant life has been stirred by the death of a complete stranger who has dispossessed him of his private world.

In **Zoo Story**, thus, we notice the action of sacrificial love. To give one's life for another for the sake of awareness and communication as depicted in the play is a moral proposition of idea that rocks the entire American audience. Peter's murder of Jerry or better say Jerry's impaling himself on the knife finds its source in Peter's earlier indifference and coldness toward others. Jerry, however, has staged his own act of dying. It is an action of passion. His suicide is transformed into an act of martyrdom. At the cost of his own life, Jerry causes Peter to become aware of man's universal animality in order to rescue Peter's humanity. Peter is awakened from his spiritual deadness, and Jerry has arrived at the place he desires amid his restlessness. Although both Jerry and Peter are in a God-forsaken plight at the end, both have gone a long distance correctly. They have arrived at a perception of what it means to face death. Jerry says while dying:

Jerry : Thank you, Peter. I mean that, now; thank you very much.

[Peter's mouth drops open. He can't move; he is transfixed.]

Oh, Peter, I was afraid I'd drive you away. You don't know how afraid I was you'd go away and leave me. And now I'll tell you what happened at the zoo. I think... I think this is what happened at the zoo... I think that while I while I was at the zoo I decided that I would walk north.... northernly, rather... until I found you.... or somebody.... and I decided that I'd talk to you....I'd tell you things... and things that I'd tell you would.... Well, here we are. You see ? Here we are. But.... I don't know.... Could I have planned all this. No.... no. I couldn't have. But I think I did. And now I have told you what you wanted to know.... Thank you... I came unto you... and you have comforted me. Dear Peter.⁸

Jerry's experience of death is novel in itself. He feels comforted. He feels to have turned out victorious in his effort to sensitize a vegetable sort of person in the form of Peter whom he encounters in the park and engages in a conversation despite his wishes. Peter avoids communicating with the people as he is absorbed in the world of his own having all the facilities of life. He is well off, married and is blessed with two daughters. But Jerry, who feels dispossessed with all kinds of human relation and is tired of leading a wretched and meaningless life, makes his life meaningful at the end by stirring the emotions of a pathetic Peter so far by having a long conversation with reticent Peter so far. He feels happy and comforted even when he is on the brink of death because he dies the death of a successful man who succeeds in driving his points home to Peter.

Tiny Alice is a typical play in which the dying man is his last effort of self-delusion creates and believes in what he knows does not exist. Julian wishes to be priest without reconciling his idea of God with the God men create in their own image. He is sent by his superior to tie up loose ends of a business matter between the church and a wealthy lady. He tries to finalize with Miss Alice a multi-million dollar donation to the church. Miss Alice is beautiful and happens to be the wealthiest woman on earth. Julian enters her house only to find himself the object of a conspiracy. Lawyer, Butler, Miss Alice, even Cardinal, succeed in destroying Julian's faith in God. They convince him that he worships a denatured abstraction of God, not God himself. Julian's quest of meaning and his fear of the unknown leave him completely vulnerable to his antagonists' scheme. It results in Julian's marriage to Tiny Alice, a false deity in the castle. When Julian protests and threatens to thwart his enemies, he is shot. He bleeds to death.

But in his death he finally confronts an appalling reality that he has been betrayed by his own faith and that pain lies in consciousness. Julian's selfless devotion to God is admirable. He performs his tasks dutifully. His directing force in life evolves around self-effacing gestures : "The house of God is so grand.... it needs many servants."⁹ He refuses to compromise his search for God. He is willing to embrace false deity even though he can't fully certify his own faith. He is a truth-seeker as is Jerry in **The Zoo Story** or George in **Who Is Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?** The image of Julian is one victimized by an evil conspiracy : "I worship God, the creator, not the God created by Man.... I wish to serve and be forgotten."¹⁰

It is Miss Alice who is an evil conspirator, a sophistic temptress hastening Julian's fall. She deceives and seduces the lay brother and is an accomplice to his murder. Albee here presents a healthy dose of skepticisms:

The History of the church shows half its saints were martyrs, martyred either for the church, or by it. The chronology is jammed with death-seekers and hysterics : the bloodbath to immortality, Julian. Joan was only one of the suicides."¹¹

Death is "the essential event that gives shape and form to life. Death is what defines the individual, and marks him off from the continuity of life that flows indefinitely between the past and the future."¹² One of the most famous plays of Albee's, **All Over** revolves round the subject of death. The reality of death forms the shaping principle of the drama. The real concern of the playwright is the existential pressure that death exerts on

those who are living. The play extends the author's absorption with individual and social responses towards death and dying : "Death is nothing; there.... there is no death. There is only life and dying."¹³

The scene and setting of the play hover round a dying man who is very famous. All the characters congregate to watch his death. The social awkwardness lies in the psychohistory of different characters over there who are important enough to shape the play into an organic whole.

In the experience of death, whether as a participant in the dying of another or in the encounter with death itself, one is attempting "to recapture the lost rapport with the natural cycle". Thus, the experience of death in Albee's plays attempts to recapture a lost rapport with other men, both family and neighbours, intimates and strangers.

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