

## **Edward Albee: A Playwright with a Purpose**

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### **Abstract**

*One of the major concerns of the playwrights of the twentieth century is related to the problems of the troubled individuals. In the past, individuals turn romantic to wander lonely as clouds to converse with the captivating codes of Nature. Life in those days of Wordsworth may not be as complicated as it is in the modern era. In the modern world, many troubled individuals turn neurotic unable to cope up with the excruciating modes of torture. Deprived of all basic needs, these poor creatures creep deep into the caves of solitude only to erupt emotional, and, at times, violent. In many such cases, the individuals are not to blame. Many factors contribute to the distasteful deterioration.*

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## **Introduction**

Playwrights of the twentieth century endeavor to lay bare the deterioration and its causes. The plays of Edward Albee too “portray alienated individuals who suffer as a result of unjust social, moral, and religious strictures...” (CLC113). Albee has used his plays to delineate the painful life of such disturbed persons. In the words of Lucina P. Gabbard, Edward Albee’s plays “ring with rage at society’s disregard for its outcasts.” (“*Edward Albee’s Triptych on Abandonment*,” p.14). Indeed, Albee has ably captured the badly nurtured life of the distressed persons of his decomposing society.

Albee’s America, especially after the Great Depression and the World Wars, starts disintegrating socially, though there has been a great boom economically, promising a golden future for the American. The highly deceptive American optimism opens up Pandora’s Box. As a result, human relationships have received damaging cracks resulting in a growing gulf between man and the society. Also, the family tree gets denuded of its traditional importance. The great American dream of a golden future, more importantly the mad craving for material success, has inevitably contributed to the painful deterioration in the family as well as the social fabrics of the country.

Albee has responded to the agonizing maladies of his contemporary America with some stunning remedies through his dramatic art. Realizing that such deep-rooted tumors can’t be removed with soft therapies, he dares to be an avant-garde himself so that he can bombard the malignancy in the mind set of his fellow human beings. He has employed the European absurdist drug to subject his audience to some rare shock so as to effectively cause awareness in them of what is actually wrong with them. Albee himself states in an interview that he has used his theatre to examine the contemporary American scene, attacking the substitution of artificial for real values and condemning the complacency and vacuity in his society. The absurdist perspective in the plays of Albee is but bitter pills prescribed to cure the ills of a decomposing generation. The existentialist views are but humanitarian medication administered to restore the dignity of his fellow human beings.

Many write just to quench their thirst; many others do spontaneously so as to reciprocate the call of their time. There may have been others for whom writing simply means managing financial obligations. However, whatever may be the motivation behind, the final outcome in black and white do reveal their commitment to the society in particular and to the whole of humanity in general. Wordsworth’s love for mankind needs no further probing here. The prophetic cry of Shelley appeals

for the creation of a stronger and healthier world free from “pestilence- stricken multitudes.” Dickens brings to light the evils of his society visualizing a better world for his people. Shavian plays are powerful social documents. Even the absurdist playwrights, who lay bare the purposelessness of human existence, intend a dignified place for man on this universe. This concern for humanity dwell in the hearts of authors, with a few exceptions may be, of all the forms of literature, especially the one performed on stage.

From to the recent Absurd theatre, playwrights do exhibit their active interest in the welfare of the society in which they inhabit. The early Greek theatre filled the stages with offstage acts of violence. The black tragedies of Shakespeare did have scenes that chilled and filled the minds with fear. Such scenes of bloodshed and awesome reports of gruesome murders may have been “acted out on stage to satisfy the audience’s appetite for violence and horror.” (Abrams, 175) Besides catering to this appetite, the playwrights had also used such scenes in their tragedies to evoke “tragic pity and fear (174) in order to achieve a “catharsis of emotion”. Tragedies, besides filling the sights with fear, perform a more important function of purging the minds of not only the characters on stage but also of the people in front of the stage. The comedies, on the other hand, are often a comment on the society and its mores and manners, mirroring delightfully the disorders of a society. The present paper intends to see Edward Albee as an American Playwright with a purpose, with a concern for his American Society.

Edward Albee, who has often been classed with the theatre of the absurd, shot into fame with his first one-act play, *The Zoo Story* which was first produced in Berlin along with Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* as part of a double bill. The rousing response that *The Zoo Story* received in Berlin paved a promising way for Albee in America. His entry into the world of American Theatre was surprisingly well-timed. “If Edward Albee had not existed he would most certainly have been invented”, (p.249) wrote C.W.E. Bigsby. He wrote so because when Albee emerged in 1959, the American theatre was in an unusual stage of crisis. After the exit of almost all the prominent playwrights, such greats as Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, the theatre in America wore a deserted look till the arrival of Albee. *The Zoo Story* did not only announce the arrival of a sound stage magician but indeed did help in rescuing the theatre from what seemed deeper and more irremediable crisis. The recognition that Albee was accorded with as a new voice in contemporary American drama greatly inspired him. He responded to the recognition with some really awesome theatrical contributions. The suicidal-murder in the Central Park and the verbal pyrotechnics in the New Carthage Campus in the

Southern suburb did indeed captivate the theatergoers who first got bewildered, bemused and then eventually praised Albee for his brilliant and distinctive theatrical achievements. *The Sandbox*, Albee's favorite and in his opinion the most perfect of his plays and requires just thirteen to fourteen minutes on the stage, and *The American Dream*, another play that grew out of *The Sandbox*, emphatically established Edward Albee's credentials as a playwright of an extraordinary caliber.

As it has been already mentioned, Albee is often identified with the theatre of the absurd. These playwrights of the Absurd Theatre are usually out of harmony with the rest of the theatre. They portrayed man who is precariously out of harmony with the rest of the world, especially the world after the World Wars which shattered the faith of man and also landed him in a world which is ineradicably absurd. Albee has certainly projected absurdist views in his plays. But, though Albee used the absurdist rituals in his plays, he is not an absurdist like Beckett or Pinter or Ionesco. He has certainly been affected by the French avant-garde. But he is "only partly absurdist" (p.148, *Post-War American Drama*). There is a sense of purposelessness in the absurdist plays and there is also no meaningful plot because absurdist playwrights believe that nothing meaningful can happen in this meaningless and slippery world of ours. But, the plays of Edward Albee, who writes with a purpose, do have meaningful plots with a well intended purpose.

"Theatre must be an important shaping force", opined Albee in an interview with Krohn and Wasserman, and true to his belief, he used the theatre as an informing and shaping force. In the fifties and sixties in America, illusion uprooted reality and occupied the core of American life. The success myth and the idea of great American society had its impact on the social life. There seemed to be a growing gulf between man and his society. The great American optimism and the various experiences of life especially after the wars prevented the individual's real and meaningful communication with others. This degradation in human relationship seemed to have affected Albee who endeavored to use his dramatic art to make his audiences aware of this unpleasant deterioration. Albee believes that the main function of art is "to direct our attention to a sense of rhythm, to a sense of order – to a comprehension of what it is to be, to be aware of oneself." (Interview with Krohn and Wasserman) his plays are but his attempts in this direction. "As a playwright, Albee could be credited with employing the whole range of his dramatic/theatrical repertoire in service of a single cause – to give a rude jolt to the very foundations of American optimism and complacency, and while doing so, attempting to resurrect social conscience among his audiences as well." (Preface, Rana Nayar)

The rude jolt that Rana Nayar talks about can well be seen in Albee's first play *The Zoo Story*. The basic situation that Albee provides for his *The Zoo Story* is absurd. A stranger meets another stranger in a Central Park, attempts a conversation and, after having failed in his attempt, orchestrates his own (suicide) murder. Tom F. Driver attacks the basic situation as illogical in his "What's the Matter with Edward Albee?" Whether absurd or illogical, the happenings in the central park on that fateful Sunday evening has clearly brought to light how indifference drives human beings to desperation and eventually to death. Indeed, this basic situation is very hard for anyone to believe. But behind this absurd situation, there is a strong message. Breakdown in communication caused by indifference and complacency can never make, but only break the lives of poor individuals. A society where such poor individuals turn schizophrenic, learn lessons from dogs, burn his passions with strangers for some conversations, and finally turn violent, can never be a healthy society. It needs fine tuning. Albee just attempts this fine tuning with the shocking episode at the Central Park in *The Zoo Story*.

"The main theme of *The Zoo Story* is communication." (p.131, Dialogue in American Drama) A "permanent transient" (Jerry) tries to communicate with a proper publisher (Peter), whom he meets one Sunday on a Central Park bench. One human being tries to communicate with another. Man is a social animal and he cannot live alone. He needs to share his feelings and findings with others. The health of a society will be in tatters when man is deprived of this need. A healthy interaction is a parameter to a healthy inter-personal relationship which in turn is a parameter with which the healthy state of a society can be measured. Any breakdown in meaningful communication is but a symptom of a rotten and disintegrating society. Albee by resenting the shocking suicide-murder on the stage gave a severe jolt to the complacency which benumbed life. The story of Jerry and Peter might have certainly directed one's attention "to a comprehension of what it is to be."

*The Zoo Story* has only two characters – Peter and Jerry representing the socio-economic poles. Peter is a successful family man living comfortably on the East side while Jerry is only a drifter from the West Side. A look into the lives of these two will make one aware of the gap between two members of the same society. Sundays bless Peter with a break from this normal routine. He finds a secluded part of the Central Park for his usual pastime – reading. He prefers reading to any conversation with a fellow human being. The world of Jerry is completely different. He leads a lonely miserable life in a shabby brownstone on the West Side. So chaotic is his world that Jerry often turns crazy and longs fanatically an irrationally

for a deeper and genuine contact with others. In search a meaningful and deeper contact, he rushed to a Zoo on a Sunday to understand how animals co-exist in this world. From the Zoo, he walked “northerly” to reach the Central Park where he met Peter and this meeting in a secluded section of the park forms the structure of the play. “Being a highly unorthodox individual, Jerry uses highly unorthodox means of communications – entirely verbal at first” (131) and shockingly violent in the end. Failing in his verbal attempts to induce Peter into a real communication, Jerry finally throws himself forward, impaling himself on the knife held by Peter in a highly desperate attempt to achieve his longing for a real contact with a fellow human being.

Jerry resorted to an act of violence in order to achieve an everlasting contact with a fellow human being. Acts of violence or aggression are nothing new to theatre. In the early Greek Tragedies, such acts were used in a “religious context.” In the modern plays, especially in the absurdist plays, this “religious context” may be out of context. But, these acts are used as tips of icebergs to point to deeper problems that mar modern life. Violence, be it constructive or destructive, is not a sign of one’s strength. It “is an expression of weakness.” (P.140 Power and Innocence) When lips fail, the fist will come into act. When the normal mode of communication fails, the unorthodox modes will come into act.

“When the bond between human beings is destroyed and when the possibilities for communication breaks down, aggression and violence occur (p.67, Power and Innocence). This is exactly what happened in *The Zoo Story*. Jerry is not the only one of his type. He is only a representative of thousands of drifters from the West Side. The loneliness, desperation and dejection drove Jerry to death. The miserable life that he lived and the violent death he met with point to an unhealthy society. Violence is a sign of weakness and the society where an act of violence is the only fruitful mode of communication is not a healthy society. Albee with this unorthodox end, the shocking suicidal-murder of Jerry, has certainly directed persons like Peter to an awareness of what it is to be. The playwright has achieved a catharsis of emotion in order to purge the society from the self-imposed isolations of Peters’ and the inflicted isolations of Jerrys’.

The very fact that Albee sued his theatre as a shaping force has clearly distanced himself from the rest of the Theatre of the Absurd. While the absurdist playwrights were busy depicting the darker aspects of modern life, Albee, who called himself a “demonic social critic”, was not interested in the “bleakness of the scene but in identifying the one area of possible hope” (p.260, Bigsby) for humanity. His

plays do have purposes. *The Death of Bessie Smith* is another example of Albee's name and fame as a social critic. The racial situation in the South is dramatized by Albee in *The Death of Bessie Smith*. The collapse of human values and the degradation of moral values in society are handled effectively in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* *The American Dream*, the playwright himself commented, was "an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and fatuity..."

Albee is a social critic. He has used his plays to critically examine the various problems afflicting his society. He wants to conjure up sort of teaching emotions that his audience may experience while and after watching his plays. Indeed, Albee endeavors to educate his theatre-goers with an intention to make them better human beings. Albee is indeed a humanist, rather a critical humanist. He is highly critical of the faults and fallacies of his society. However, unlike others, he does not stop with mere criticism. He attempts to find out ways for his characters so as to help them come out of their illusionary world to rebuild their lives. Albee has been repeatedly reminding his audience or readers about his commitment to a purposeful art. As his own creative urge being vested in the "dissatisfaction with the way things are," (Wasserman, p. 13) he wants his art as a "social kind of instruction," (Wasserman, p. 11) having a "teaching and liberating" (Wasserman, p. 13) effect on the audience. Albee sincerely wanted welcome changes in the society. "If society changes, then the plays won't be written any more" (Playwrights Speak, p.48), replied Albee to a question during an interviews with Michael Nardacci and Walter Chura, clearly reaffirming his belief that by enacting real experiences on the stage a playwright can effect welcome changes in the society.

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