

Impact of Death on the Living Persons: A Brief Study of the Plays of Edward Albee

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Abstract

Death is a recurring theme in the works of all the realistic writers, and contemporary American dramatists are no exceptions. They are abnormally sensitive about death, as for them death is more abstract and destructive. Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams have used death in their works in various ways – sometimes their characters are unable to accept the bitter reality, while at other moments they embrace death as a medium for release from this absurd life. Edward Albee, the hardcore realist, has associated countless passages to death in more than a dozen plays. This is why; Albee is able to shift from the naturalistic presentation of death to symbolic and surrealistic presentation of death.

Keywords: Surrealistic, Demonstrates, Autobiographical

Introduction

In an interview with Matthew C. Roudane Albee said,

There are only a few significant things to write about: life and death. I am very interested in the cleansing consciousness of death; and the fact that people avoid thinking about death – and about living. I think we should always live with the consciousness of death. How else can we possibly participate in living life fully? (195)

Death is one of the significant things to write about because it highlights the value of life. Thus, Albee demonstrates various colours of death. In some plays Albee discusses death in general but Albee's mastery can be judged through the plays in which Albee portrays the impact of death on the living persons rather than its impact on the person who is dying. Albee not only attacks human being's inability to face death or death as a medium to release from this absurd world, but also makes a wonderful presentation of death-watch in his plays. This death watch portrays the process of dying along with the presentation of the ritual of waiting and shows us that how this death-watch affects and haunts the life of survivors.

The Zoo Story ends with the Jerry's death which is brought in order to teach Peter the importance of living life at its fullest – not as a 'vegetable' but as an 'animal'. Jerry impales himself on the knife in order to get rid from his alien and absurd life, and thanks Peter for comforting him by releasing him from the absurd life. So, in the very first presented play death is playing a very important role – working both as a teacher (for Peter) and a comforter (for Jerry). *The Death of Bessie Smith*, too, revolves around the death of the Blues singer Bessie Smith. Through her death Albee criticizes the White Americans for being inhumane to Blacks in America. *Tiny Alice*, the most debated play, also ends with the death of the protagonist Julian. *Box-Mao-Box* is full of death symbols – the first part of the threnody fades to the sound of bell, with a darkened stage and the second part unfolds the Long-Winded lady's autobiographical narrative which revolves around her husband's death. *Listening*, too, ends with the Girl's suicide. *Three Tall Women* is a

story of a dying lady who is recollecting her past on the death-bed. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* ends with the death of the child – not the real death but the death of the illusionary child. *All Over* and *The Lady from Dubuque* are the plays which completely focus on the process of dying and the impact of death on the survivors. Breda Murphy has rightly remarked, “*All Over* concentrate on the situation of waiting . . . *The Lady from Dubuque* is an intense treatment of the experience of the loving survivors” (96). By this confrontation of death, Albee makes his audience aware not only of death but also of life. He wants to wake them up from their long death like sleep in order to make them realize the symbolic death which is creeping in their lives.

Death scene is an important part in almost half of Albee's plays. In this chapter we will dissect the plays which focus on death as a major theme, such as – *The Sandbox* (1960), *Box-Mao-Box* (1968), *All Over* (1971), *Listening* (1976), *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980) and *Fragments: A Sit Around* (1993). In these plays death is treated in various ways to save man from the life full of lies. *The Sandbox*, an extremely short play, leaves the characters unnamed and makes them embodiment of their roles which they are playing rather than particular individuals. There are Mommy, Daddy, Grandma and Young Man (The Angel of Death). The title of the play reminds us of the child's sandbox, but there is no child in the play. So, the square sandbox symbolizes the “oversized coffin” (Rutenberg 44). It is really a coffin because Grandma is destined to cover herself up and remain in this box until the Angel of Death takes over. Anne Paolucci explains,

The sandbox is the grave, regression, dreams, heaven, escape, peace, even sexual fulfillment. The Young Man is the male body beautiful, eternal youth, generosity, love, what is gone, what is to come, sympathy, understanding, compassion. (27)

The curtain goes up on a scene at a beach. The play covers almost twenty-four hours – “which alters from bright day to deepest night” (TS 86) and ends with the birth of a new day and death of Grandma. The play opens and we find Mommy and Daddy on a beach. Mommy finding this place perfect for Grandma's death, says “This will do perfectly . . . don't you think so, Daddy? There's sand there, and the water beyond. What do you think Daddy?” (TS 87). After this, she asks Daddy to help her in disposing Grandma. Mommy and Daddy return to the beach, carrying Grandma, and they “dump her in” (TS 88) the sandbox. This act juxtaposes pathos with meanness because a helpless old woman (Mother of Mommy – Grandma) is brought to death by her own daughter.

The younger as well as the older generation is discarding death and life both because they are captured in the web of ‘Life-Lies’. The younger generation discards the older generation not only because of their callousness, but there is a psychological reason as well i.e., the older generation is representing the old age and death in front of the younger generation which they do not want to confront. The older generation is also surrounded by ‘Life-Lies’ as they expect that the younger generation will look after them when they will grow old, but the reality is totally different – they are thrown out of the house like trash-bags.

In the play, too, Mommy and Daddy dump Grandma into the sandbox for the above mentioned reasons. Grandma, too, cries and throws sand at them just like a child. Unknowingly Grandma helps Mommy and Daddy by half-burying herself with sand. Michael E. Rutenberg remarks,

What she really doing is digging her own grave. The joke then becomes an ugly one. There is nothing left for Grandma to do. Her family doesn't want her, and at the age of eighty-six the possibility of old friends still alive is quite remote. (47)

Along with digging her own grave, Grandma narrates her own life story to the Young Man on the beach who is actually the Angel of Death. She complains about the bad treatment she receives, and says: “Honestly! What a way to treat an old woman! Drag her out of the house . . . stick her in a car . . . bring her out here from the city . . . dump her in a pile of sand . . . and leave her here to sit” (TS 90). And finally she declares “There is no respect out here!” Further she narrates her own life story and tells the Young Man that she married a farmer, who died when she was just thirty years old and left her all alone to raise their unpleasant daughter. Firstly her husband’s death devalued her life, and now Mommy and Daddy are devaluing life. They are treating Grandma as a discarded animal by making her sleep on a blanket in the kitchen, and at the hour of death, they are dumping her in the sandbox.

As the play approaches towards end, the Musician (brought by Mommy and Daddy for funeral) plays nice and soft music. Off-stage rumbles convey the message that Grandma’s death is approaching. The author parodies theatrical conventions in order to satirize the vacuity and hypocrisy of a death-watch. Mommy and Daddy are not concerned with Grandma’s life or death but they are dedicated to the principle of conforming outwardly what other people expect from them.

MOMMY. It means the time has come for poor Grandma . . . and I can’t bear it.

DADDY. (vacantly) I . . . I you’ve to be brave. (TS 92)

Mommy and Daddy put a good show and when they think Grandma is dead, Mommy says, “so is it! Our long night is over. We must put away our tear, take off our mourning . . . and face the future. It’s our duty” (TS 93). With these words both the hypocrites leave the stage and Grandma has outwitted them by “playing dead” (TS 93), as she is not dead till now and nor does she show any intention of dying, not yet.

Finally, Grandma is completely shocked when she realizes the reality that she cannot move her legs. At this moment audience as well as Grandma realizes that she is half-buried and half-way gone to death. Half-buried in the sand, Grandma can be compared to Beckett’s submerged couple Willie and Winnie in *Happy Days*. At this moment it is difficult to return to life. The Young Man –the Angel of Death – asks her to be quiet. He “kisses” Grandma and tells her “I am the Angel of Death. I am . . . uh . . . I am come for you” (TS 94). This time Grandma does not grumble and compliments the Young Man: “you did that very well, dear” (TS 94). The Young Man thanks her for the compliment and Grandma closes her eyes and finally says: “You’re . . . you’re welcome dear” (TS 94). In this way the last scene reveals an unexpected turn of events and brings the play to a satisfying close.

In the psychological context, death, as in Freud, appears like pleasure’s hidden agenda. In later writings, Freud elevates death and pleasure into mythic forces, Eros and Thanatos – as if Greek Gods – as they sometimes oppose each other and sometime become the two facets of the same entity Grandma’s address to the Angel of Death as “dear” makes it quite clear that death seems more acceptable to this wretched woman than the senseless life. Thus, the acceptance leads to an existential idea. This journey from denial to acceptance of death makes it crystal clear that from the mind, as believes Freud, no experience can ever be erased. One can suppress his death instinct but can never erase it. Grandma’s acceptance shows that death has a certain life in it, so is believed by Freud, as once he said, “destruction caused by winter before spring returns the beauty of nature to us” (qtd. in Smith 19).

So to say, Albee, like Emily Dickinson, treats death as a lover not as an enemy. This is why, the Angel of Death is portrayed as a sexually aware, masculine and attractive man. Michael E. Rutenberg compares this portrayal of Albee’s Young Man to Jean Cocteau’s film *Orphee* in which death arrives as a

beautiful woman. In both the situations “Death’s sensual guise attracts us and we naively follow with mistaken expectations” (Rutenberg 45). In this play, too, Grandma was not ready to die in the beginning, but in the final scene she easily surrenders herself to death’s gentle embrace because, as puts Albee, “she really doesn’t die; she merely departs from a form of life that is a great deal more dead than anything else” (Rutenberg, *Interview* 232).

The Sandbox handles the theme of death and dying in such a broad and wonderful manner. However death purges Grandma’s death-like-existence on this earth; but, unlike Albee’s other plays, the process of Grandma’s dying does not result in the purgation, purification and reconciliation of the watchers. Mommy and Daddy leave the stage with the same carelessness, indifference and inhumanity with which they came. Thus, in this play death, just like Jerry’s planned death, is a medium of salvation for the dying person; but unlike Peter, Mommy and Daddy are unable to learn anything.

The Sandbox not only deals with death, but also with the death-in-life existence of modern man in the modern absurd world which is the central idea of *Box* and *Quotation from Chairman Mao-Tse-Tung*. Box is a common Albee symbol which occurs in a number of his plays. In *The Zoo Story* Jerry keeps a small strongbox, in *The Sandbox* Grandma buries herself in the box which symbolizes grave, in *The American Dream* Grandma packs her life away in the little boxes, in *Tiny Alice* the mansion is curious set of Chinese boxes. In all the plays box symbolizes coffin or graveyard. Anita Maria Stenz says, “The box could be suggesting a place where someone would like to go to die, a place with room inside for a rocking chair and room to move about in . . . some. Enough. The box could be a coffin” (90). The symbol of box demonstrates that sometimes life can be worse than death itself, and at that moment, like Grandma, man understands the value of death. *Box-Mao-Box*, too, gives a pathetic demonstration of this death-in-life existence.

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