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Violence in the Plays of Edward Albee



An M. A. Thesis



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1999

To the soul of my father.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to all those who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to this thesis.

My first thanks go to Prof. Nabaweya Wakid for her invaluable guidance and continuous encouragement, advice and support. Her extended knowledge, constructive remarks, and useful comments have had great impact on the work for this study. I would say that without her wise and sincere guidance, this piece of work would not have been possible. I owe her more than thanking and gratitude.

I am also grateful to Dr. Karma Sami for her valuable remarks and eagerness to help.

Special thanks are due to Prof. Mohamed Anani for his sincere assistance, guidance and encouragement. He, truly, made his best to usher me to the right path.

I also do thank Prof. Hanaa Hassanein for her illuminating remarks. Furthermore, I do thank Prof. Abdel Aziz Hamouda for his willingness to help whenever he has the chance.

My profound gratitude is due to the purest and most compassionate heart, mother, for her continuous support and assistance. She has been always caring and tolerant during the period of the thesis.

Candid thanks are due to my brother and two sisters for their love and encouragement.

Abstract

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The study aims at exploring the aspect of violence that is prominent in many of Albee's major works. It also expounds its formulation and how it is used as a device with which Albee pours astringent criticism upon the defective aspects in his society.

The study is divided into four chapters. Chapter One deals with the aspect of violence in the Albeean dramaturgy. Albee's violent tone is influenced by the principles of the Theatre of Cruelty, the Theatre of the Absurd, the Angry Young Men and the Beat Generation. It is the product of chaotic social circumstances that deliver two contrasted types of violence: malignant and benign.

Each of the following three chapters elucidates the aspect of violence in terms of plot, characterization, themes and technique. Chapter Two is a representation of the benign violence of the oppressed and the isolated who aspire to start communication with the successful middle-class. Chapter Three depicts the malignant violence of the middle-class that exercises violence to satisfy feral instincts and, somehow, to communicate as language is no more a viable means of communication. Chapter Four portrays two types of violence: the malignant of the anti-intellectualists, and the benign one of a true intellectualist who makes of violence a means of communication and weapon with which he defies the illusions created by the social maladies.

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Introduction

Albee is primarily interested in man and how he acts and reacts in a hostile world. The aspect of violence in his plays is the product of defective social circumstances disturbing human relationships and severing the prospects of sane communication. Albee's dramatic approach focuses on twisted human relationships in the establishment. The veracity and sincerity of his approach provide him with a capability of analysis and introspection. His works are, principally, social criticism. His dramas examine the serious social relationships of marriage, parenthood and filial love. Through a confrontational method whose motivating power is violence, he exposes the maladies in the social system in an attempt to find an appropriate cure for them. Further, Albee tries to highlight the factors conducive to violence.

The study attempts to exhume the aspect of violence spreading in the wide majority of the Albeean dramaturgy. It is reckoned a major theme under which most of his commonly employed set of themes is gathered, and the subtle device he uses in his attacks and protests against the social system.

Violence in the plays of Edward Albee will be fathomed through an ample analysis of three of his most outstanding works, *The Zoo Story* (1958); *The American Dream* (1960) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). Such plays granted him the reputation of an angry avant-garde playwright and defined his revolutionary artistic path. They are epics of anger representing the human conflict with the social system. Their feral tone reflects Albee's indictment of the social establishment that replaces the human aspect with mechanized and vacuous motives. Moreover, the spectrum of themes in Albee's subsequent plays are variations of the themes of these three ones.

The study falls into four chapters, as well as, an introduction and a conclusion. In Chapter One, violence as a term is defined on both the lexical and the psychological levels. The definition is given according to Albee's notions about violence. As a theme and

technique, violence for Albee is the vicious yield of the horrible events that erupted by the end of the fifties and gave birth to counter culture doctrines. Albee noticed that the influence of such events fan violence in the community and urge the middle-class people to lock themselves within a hard shell of complacency. Albee makes of his dramas an act of aggression with which he attempts to reach people so as to rescue them from the deteriorated aspects in the social system. He does that through shocking his audience with the reality; he displays bleak images about deteriorated relationships to give them 'consciousness in pain.' His are confrontational dramas which defy the deteriorated human bonds and level rigorous aggression against egoism, materialism, anti-intellectualism and the faulty application of religion.

Albee emphasizes that all his predecessors influence him. Yet, this does not mean that he imitates them. He rather selects whatever aspects he considers convenient to his dramatic approach. In respect of violence, Albee's violent mode explores the darker side of the soul, in consistence with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Like Artaud, he seeks to make of his theatre a therapy to the social diseases. The notions of the Theatre of the Absurd add to Albee's social criticism clarifying the nonsensicalness of the chaotic modern world. Humour is a tool to accentuate terror and, hence, to intensify the feeling of a defective social system. In his social criticism, Albee retains the relentless protests of the Angry Young Men and the wilderness of the Beat Generation who resorts to violence to win the attention of a society which almost ignores their existence.

Albee tackles violence on three levels, physical, verbal and psychological. They are, in turn, divided into both benign and malignant violence. In each of his plays, violence assumes a different function to pinpoint the defects in the social system. The themes of Albee are derived from the actual social circumstances that are deformed by loss, despair, failure, isolation, egoism, materialism and

sterility; these aspects are the same motives leading to violence. The examples quoted from *Death of Bessie Smith* (1959), *Tiny Alice* (1964), *Listening* (1975) and *The Lady From Dubuque* (1979) create an evidence of Albee's notions on violence.

Each of the following three chapters examines one of the following plays: *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They are handled in terms of plot, characterization, themes, pattern, language, dialogue, monologue, imagery and symbolism. Violence is examined at its three levels highlighting the difference between the benign and the malignant violence. It is worthy to note that violence, itself, is not the target of Albee's castigation. It is employed to pinpoint the ills defecting in the social system. Further, in each one of these three plays, violence is mainly employed at one of its levels and assumes a different function. The common feature binding all these functions is that they are a means of intensifying Albee's vitriol against the social system.

Chapter Two, *The Zoo Story*, exposes a savage physical violence discharged by Jerry, the representative of the lost and oppressed generation, against Peter, the middle-class conformist. Jerry, the Beat Generation figure, tries to break from isolation imposed upon him and to assert his existence in a world ignoring him. He is a hipster whose violence is mainly physical because it is a desperate action to achieve communication between the two faces of the American society: the almost forgotten desperate poor class and the successful middle-class that repulses communication with the categories that cannot emulate its success.

Albee portrays a zoo-like world where each person turns into a ferocious animal seeking an opportunity through which he may perform his violence upon the others. However, it is through violence that a genuine contact is established among the two different faces of a single society; without which each one may remain separated and

isolated within the cage of the self. Jerry's scheme is to stir the long hidden animal within the conformist Peter by means of benign violence so as to extract a moment of real understanding.

Chapter Three, *The American Dream*, penetrates into the world of inanities and trivialities of the middle-class people, the builders of society, who are the main subject of Albee's castigation. The play breaks the bright and perfect facades behind which they hide. They have almost secluded themselves from each other, as it seems enough for them to be imprisoned within their egoistic desires. The practices of this class distort the supreme dogmas of the American Dream replacing them by others of pure materialism, egoism and sterility.

Albee pours pungent castigation on the middle-class through depicting the relationships in one of the families belonging to this category. Theirs are relationships of sadomasochism, hatred, indifference and ingratitude. They are actuated by a materialist nature motivating them to make of everything a commodity that their money can buy. The violence of this class is fundamentally verbal and psychological. Humour in the play intensifies a feeling of a collapsing world in which hideous premeditated acts of violence are committed to satisfy a materialist sense and to pacify a voracious violence they breed against everyone; even if they belong to their class. Theirs is a malicious violence.

Chapter Four, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is a journey into the lives of the theorists designing the machination of the social system. It strips them of the hallowed allegations with which they surround themselves revealing that such a super class suffers from the same ailments and flaws of the savage poor class and the materialist middle-class. Albee attacks the category of the anti-intellectualists; in other words, the pragmatic-intellectualists, who seek to draw benefit of whatever they have almost ignoring their primary task; which is the work for the social welfare so as to promote the dogmas of the

American Dream; instead, they distort it. To a great extent, they target serving individual ends. Their violence is malicious and works on the psychological level, in cohesion with their intellectual nature.

On the other hand, Albee refutes the vacuous allegations of social perfection through examining the distortions and the flaws of the marital relationships. There is a fragile marriage of convenience; and on other hand there is an extremely eccentric conjugal relationship between a university professor and his harpy wife. The marital life of the latter couple consists of interminable bickering with which they try to reach one another instead of relapsing into a state of isolation. Through their highly violent games which each plays to please the other, Albee decries materialism, religious solace and the distorted nature of the anti-intellectualists which deform the principles of the American Dream. He also defies the illusions which people create to escape from the harshness of reality. The violence of such bickering is benign, because it is a tool used to destroy the factors marring sane communication.

The conclusion is an assessment of the whole study clarifying Albee's notions on violence by shedding light upon the points of similarity among the plots, the characters, the themes and the techniques of *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It asserts that it is by means of honest benign violence aiming at confronting the reality the ailments that deform the social machination can be combated.

