

Edward Albee: The Poet of Loss

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*Edward Albee:
The Poet of Loss*

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For Nienke Begemann and Guy Chapman

“All poets and heroes are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep.”

Henry David Thoreau, Walden

“Those whose desires are limited to man and his humble yet formidable love, should enter, if only now and again, into their reward.”

Albert Camus, The Plague

“We do not have to live unless we wish to; the greatest sin in living is doing it badly ... stupidly, or as if you were not alive.”

Edward Albee, Listening

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Introduction

Recently C.W.E. Bigsby observed that, "Few playwrights can have been so frequently and mischievously misunderstood, misrepresented, overpraised, denigrated and precipitately dismissed as Edward Albee".¹ Because of the misunderstanding and misrepresentation evident in the criticism of the work of Albee,² there is a need to re-examine his aims, especially with respect to the motivation and behavior of his characters – not only as they occur in each separate play but as they relate to a body of work which has been developing over a period of almost twenty years.

In this interpretive study of the original stage plays by Edward Albee³ I have not compared the author's work with that of other playwrights, nor have I related it to movements in modern drama.⁴ There are three approaches to Albee's dramaturgy which are particularly distorting: the tendency to try to pigeon-hole the creative efforts of a living artist who may be described as relatively young and still developing as a playwright; the tendency to approach a given play according to previous expectations rather than to accept it on its own terms; and the overall tendency to interpret his work with literal-mindedness. After an intense study of the text⁵ and an extensive reading of the relevant Albee literature – including reviews and observations about the New York premier productions, as well as statements by the author – I have tried to clarify the meaning of each play in the light of descriptions of the original performance. Edward Albee has had the advantage of working co-operatively for many years with a director whose attitude is that a playwright should have it the way he wants it the first time.⁶ In fact the author collaborated in the final say about every one of his New York openings and he has directed revivals as well as his most recent projects himself. Attempting to understand Albee's intentions as they emerge in each drama and, much as possible, striving to avoid labeling, I have considered the plays on their own merits and related the themes of the individual works to the oeuvre as a whole.⁷ I have

written about the plays in such a way as to be useful to directors and actors in the initial talks about characterization and meaning which precede the problems of production and performance. I hope these discussions will also be helpful to the non-professional playgoer and reader-of-plays who would like to come a little closer to what the most important contemporary American playwright has to say.

From the beginning of his career Albee has been called a defeatist and a pessimist. He is not sentimental, surely, but neither is he a nihilist. On the contrary, he is a stern moralist who believes that there are right values and wrong values. Deliberately, his purpose is to shock, to offend and to disturb. Yet he too uses the technique of kindness and cruelty which so many of his characters apply to their particular situations in his plays. As a spokesman for the ambiguity and mystery in human experience, Albee leaves many questions unanswered but there is no question of unequivocal hopelessness in his work. A pattern of confrontation and violence precedes an awakening from a death-in-life situation in his characters. At the end of his plays there is at least one person who is a little wiser.

After undergoing the dramatic events a spectator should be shaken into a state of heightened awareness and insight as well. Since Albee subtly develops the exposition of his plays right to the end, one is in fact required to listen very hard and to reconstruct for himself the background of the characters and their conflicts. Even though it may be painful, the playgoer is expected to participate fully in the theatrical experience, to concentrate critically upon each scene and, at the same time, to respond directly with his emotions. Wittingly, the author makes enormous demands on his audience.

Edward Albee has described his work as stylized naturalism.⁸ While most of his characters are highly individualized and psychologically motivated, they also function symbolically. The stylization is reinforced by the author's use of extreme situations, heightened language, long operatic monologues, and the conscious visual effect of the staging. From play to play the degree of realism varies. Since Albee keeps adapting his form to suit his content, no two works resemble each other very much externally. However, there are unmistakable internal similarities: the musicality of the structure; the ritual quality of much of the action; and the sharp ironic humor. These points I have not discussed — except in passing — but they are important devices in the plays which keep an audience at a critical remove from the action. I have been particularly

interested in examining another technique that the author uses to keep his audience at a distance. For the most part he has no clearcut villains and heroes in his plays. It follows that one of the chief causes for misunderstanding and distortion of his overall intention is the fact that it is disturbing for a spectator not to be able to pick a real winner or loser. With compassion and sympathetic insight Albee depicts a group of men and women who are unenviable people. To find oneself identifying with almost any one of them is embarrassing. Thus, it is much easier to accuse them of being unrecognizable human beings than it is to empathize with them. Yet Albee has frequently stated he has no desire to reinforce human complacency. "I've always thought that it was one of the responsibilities of playwrights to show people how they are and what their time is like in the hope that perhaps they'll change it."⁹

Repeatedly in the Albee literature one encounters a readiness, almost a determination on the part of critics and scholars to interpret the author's women as evil forces. With apparent relish and a sense of self-righteousness, so many have decided that Albee is a woman hater before objectively considering each female character as she is presented in the context of a particular play. As a matter of fact, Albee is as painstakingly critical of the males in his plays as he is of the females. Half of the human population, after all, is composed of women and half of the marriage partners are men. Edward Albee is concerned about the nature of the bond between husband and wife and he explores the potentially destructive forces which can operate on all the members of a family, whether male or female. His main areas of inquiry are failures in human relationships in whatever combination they occur.

In spite of his grim warning finger, however, Albee chooses the path of sympathy. Too much criticism has been devoted to discussions about the significance of the allusions and symbols with which his work abounds. Consistently, almost stubbornly, the author's intense preoccupation with the ways people waste their lives has been overlooked. Albee focuses on the twisted human relationships which can evolve within the establishment, on the results of materialism and parasitism, and on the deceptive nature of ambition. He points out the evils brought about by the misuse and misunderstanding of modern institutions. Characteristically, he brings into relief the problems of mature men and women. Since there are few human connections of any real depth and complexity outside a family situation, the author frequently uses marriage to demonstrate the emotional

insufficiency of the individual as well as to indicate the destructive pressures which distort his response to life. Albee has said that his plays should not have had to be written. "If you don't like what you see, change it."¹⁰

Notes

1. "Introduction," *Edward Albee: Twentieth Century Views*, ed. Maynard Mack (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 1.
2. Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928 in Washington, D.C. Adopted at the age of two weeks by Reed Albee (owner of the chain of Keith-Albee vaudeville theaters) and his second wife, Frances, Albee grew up in Larchmont, New York. He attended Lawrenceville School, Valley Forge Military Academy and Choate, and he matriculated at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut for roughly a year and a half. After a decade of living in Greenwich Village and doing a variety of odd jobs, on the eve of his thirtieth birthday Albee wrote *The Zoo Story* and began his career as playwright. He is a bachelor.
3. Although thematically relevant and certainly interesting in their own right, I have not included discussions of Albee's adaptations, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, *Malcolm* and *Everything in the Garden* because of their essentially experimental nature.
4. Edward Albee's indebtedness to his European and American heritage — historical, philosophical and dramaturgical — has been discussed in several monographs. See the work of Gilbert Debusscher, C.W.E. Bigsby, Michael E. Rutenberg, and Anne Paolucci.
5. In this study page references to editions in the case of quotations from Albee's plays have been omitted. Systematically applied, they are a nuisance to the reader. For those who actually have the play in hand, the quotations are not difficult to find.
6. John E. Booth, "Albee and Schneider Observe: 'Something Stirring!'" *Theater Arts*, March 1961, pp. 78-9.
7. The research for this study was terminated in the Spring of 1975.
8. William Flanagan, "An Interview with Edward Albee," *The Paris Review*, 10, No. 39 (Fall 1966), 110-12.
9. R.C. Stewart, "John Gielgud and Edward Albee Talk About the Theater," *Atlantic Monthly*, 215, No. 4 (April 1965), 62.
10. Digby Diehl, "Edward Albee Interviewed," *Transatlantic Review*, No. 13 (Summer 1963), 72.