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IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

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TRAGEDY IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA: THE  
PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND ABSURDIST  
CONDITIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Robert Royce Miller

A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
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TRAGEDY IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA: THE  
PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND ABSURDIST  
CONDITIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

### TRAGEDY IN MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND ABSURDIST CONDITIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by Robert Royce Miller

An important achievement of major modern American playwrights is the literary quality of their work. Drama is principally written for the theater audience, but the novelistic and poetic qualities of major twentieth-century plays directs these plays to readers as well. As an historical essay, this dissertation treats modern American drama as literature and offers an analysis of major dramatic statements, which carry the same important concerns that are expressed in modern fiction and poetry. The discussions are for the student of American literature who wishes to find in his dramatic literature significant statements about modern life and art.

As part of an historical essay, each chapter provides a study of the meaning of a playwright's work in its relationship to the major concerns of twentieth-century literature. In the chapters on Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee, there is one play which is the basis for the discussion. These plays are O'Neill's

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The Emperor Jones, Williams' The Glass Menagerie, Miller's Death of a Salesman, and Albee's The American Dream.

Chapter one describes modern American drama and provides a context for the ideas and technical experiments of the major playwrights. These playwrights strive for realism of content, but use naturalistic, symbolic, and absurdist techniques. The most important concern of these playwrights is the mechanicalism of the modern age, which threatens man's spiritual identity. In the works of these writers, despair leads to tragedy and absurdity, conditions which remain unrelieved.

Chapter two offers a contrast to the major writers with its emphasis on Lillian Hellman, William Inge, and Thornton Wilder. Hellman stands against evils in modern society, mainly the evils of greed and selfishness caused, she thinks, by materialism and the spirit of capitalism. Inge portrays psychotic characters whose emotional problems cause deep frustrations. Thornton Wilder's work is surprisingly optimistic in its expansive vision of human life and history. These three playwrights are not discussed as fully as the others, but their inclusion helps define the tradition of modern American drama.

Chapter three studies the problem of self-identification in the unrelieved tragic experiences of the hero in O'Neill's The Emperor Jones. Chapter four explores the effects of the

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world on the individual who is unable to take what he wants from it. Laura in Williams' The Glass Menagerie is physically deformed, but her real problem, like that of other characters in modern tragedy, is that she is crippled emotionally. In chapter five Miller's interest in the tragic experiences of the common man is discussed in relation to his and others' ideas of tragedy. Chapter six examines Albee's The American Dream as an absurdist portrayal of characters whose lives are lived without meaning. Their problem of identity is tragic because they are not aware of the problem; but it is not blissful ignorance.

The interest of these writers is to find out what and how the individual feels and thinks in the modern world. They portray the meaninglessness of the individual's life as an obstacle to fulfillment and identity. They write tragic drama which isolates men as in some way responsible for what they do. The plays of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller raise the important questions--Who am I? Where am I going?--but without resolving them. Frustration characterizes the lives of the heroes of modern tragedy. Going beyond frustration and despair, Albee epitomizes in absurdity the meaninglessness of characters' lives in modern tragedy.

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## PREFACE

An important achievement of major modern American playwrights is the literary quality of their work. Drama is written principally for the theater audience, but the novelistic and poetic qualities of major American twentieth-century plays direct these plays to readers as well. As an historical essay, this dissertation treats modern drama as literature and offers an analysis of major dramatic statements which carry the same important concerns that are expressed in modern fiction and poetry. The discussions are for the student of American literature who wishes to find in his dramatic literature significant statements of modern life and art. As part of an historical essay, each chapter provides a study of the meaning of a playwright's work in its relationship to the major concerns of twentieth-century literature. In the chapters on Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee, there is one play which is directly or indirectly the basis for the discussion. These plays are O'Neill's The Emperor Jones, Williams' The Glass Menagerie, Miller's Death of a Salesman, and Albee's The American Dream.

The force of twentieth-century American drama is best witnessed in these four playwrights. Their moral vision pervades their works. Behind these works stands a universe in which good and evil are polarized. The works of these writers reflect the great themes of drama, eternal themes which suggest man's struggles against himself, against other men and society, and against God. These struggles go on within the mind, as Arthur Miller says of Willy Loman (Death of a Salesman), "We are inside the head."<sup>1</sup> This interest in finding out what and how the individual feels and thinks in the modern world is the goal of these playwrights. They portray the individual, the common man, as one whose life is without meaning. The tragedy of his life is that his struggle ends in failure as he tries to find himself among his masks, among others of his society, and among the forces of the universe--whether these forces be divinely ordered or not.

It is hard to assess accurately one's own age, but one thing seems certain. The first half of the twentieth century is, in light of its major literary statements, an age of despair. But the condition of despair contradicts what major playwrights practice as artists. They do not write in despair; they search for a thread of meaning, no matter how difficult it may be for them to detect it. It is the age

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Haymon, ed., Arthur Miller (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972), p. 21.

itself, "virtually emptied of meaning by a century of scientific and sociological thought,"<sup>2</sup> as John Gassner calls it, which accounts for the problems these playwrights have experienced in their fight to find what all men in any age want of life: order, harmony, and meaning. Williams, Miller, and Albee are in the tradition of despair which, as Louis Broussard says, "originates in the plays of O'Neill."<sup>3</sup>

Given the message of despair, one must look to something other than the pessimism of that in modern drama to find a recommendation of life. One looks to the enduring quality of artist. It does not matter whether the play is pleasant; what does matter is that it provide a meaningful experience of life in its portrayal of the individual and his problems.

O'Neill views society, as Williams does, as destructive; but he was so concerned with the psychological effects on the individual that the larger social conditions are somewhat obscured. Miller's concern for the individual is certainly no less, but his perspective induces the larger society of men, and raises some disturbing questions about it. Albee goes even further: society is so "bad" that it has produced nearly lifeless and senseless individuals, who are set in an

<sup>2</sup> Eugene O'Neill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> American Drama: Contemporary Allegory from Eugene O'Neill to Tennessee Williams (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 105.

absurdist social context. The order in which these writers appear suggests that tragedy is expressed in despair and finally absurdity. O'Neill's characters struggle in their quest for self-identity and die in the despair failure brings. In his early experiments of absurdist drama, Albee's characters do not despair; they are beyond despair. But they have no meaningful existence, nor do they seem capable of finding one. The plays of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller are the same in one respect: the individual's tragic experience is frustrating and ongoing. Albee sets his tragedies of the individual in the arena of the absurd, but the conditions for it are the same as for O'Neill's or Miller's. It is tragedy without divine interpretation, and nothing is resolved.

Chapter one describes the characteristics of modern American drama and provides a context for the ideas and technical experiments of the major playwrights. These playwrights strive for realism of content while using naturalistic, symbolic, and absurdist techniques. Verse as a technique in the works of Maxwell Anderson, Archibald MacLeish, and T. S. Eliot did not appeal to audiences as did the prose closely resembling ordinary speech in the works of O'Neill, Williams, Miller, and Albee. Anderson and MacLeish account for the lesser appeal verse has to modern audiences by suggesting that we live in a "prose age," and that our ears are not tuned to the metaphors of action comprised in

verse. They also imply that the mechanicalism of the modern age makes it difficult for a poet-dramatist to function fruitfully. But this is not to say that modern drama is not poetic, for in quality it is. The language and action of the works of O'Neill, Miller, Williams, and Albee carry the metaphorical and symbolic portrayal of truth as they see it.

Chapter two explores three of these writers--Lillian Hellman, William Inge, and Thornton Wilder. Hellman and Inge are moral writers who dramatize the individual as a victim of external and internal forces. Hellman shows how greed destroys those who practice it and those who are victims of those who do. Inge's work reveals a patient and understanding tone for the unfortunate victims of their own emotional maladjustments. In contrast, Thornton Wilder's work is characterized by a renaissance optimism. Wilder does not express the sense of despair which pervades so much of modern literature. His work stands alone; but to ignore it is to ignore part of the complexity of modern experience, for its contradistinction helps clarify the voices of despair which so overwhelm it. These three writers are perhaps heard from less than the others, but they are an important part of the history of modern American drama.

The O'Neill chapter stresses the idea of tragedy without the gods' presence. O'Neill believes that man must discover the meaning of life without recourse to a traditional God.

The tragedy of O'Neill's characters is that they die without finding the peace in life they sought. O'Neill portrays man apart from God; but he wants to approximate in a psychological sense the condition of fate.

Williams' work is psychological in its treatment of individuals. The tragic experiences of his characters are similar to O'Neill's: they fail to live up to the dreams they possess. The frustration which results from such failure prevents these individuals from finding the self-identity they want or think they want. Illusions become for them an attractive alternative to brutal reality.

Miller's characters suffer doubts about self-identity. Miller views their tragic experiences as significant: it is the common man in a socially oppressive society who is alienated by the very society he depends upon for identity and meaning. Miller's judgment of both society and man is not without sympathy. Miller firmly believes that the worth of any man is measured by his capacity to suffer, and that experiences of loneliness, frustration, and death are a necessary condition of life. The world of men may be unjust; but justice and order lie at the heart of Miller's work. Without that there could be no meaningful interpretation of life. In Miller's work man is a social creature whose tragic experiences stem from forces external and internal.

The last chapter examines Albee's The American Dream as an absurdist portrayal of characters whose lives are without meaning. Their self-identity problem is tragic in the sense that they are no longer aware of the problem. Their only identity lies in the roles they play--Mommy, Daddy, and Young Man. They are without significant spiritual or social identity, and their actions and language betray the absurdity of life.

The major statements of twentieth-century American life are found in the modern tragedies of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller. Tragic drama seeks to define men as individuals who are in some way responsible for what they do. The plays of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller raise the important questions--Who am I? Where am I going?--but without resolving them. Frustration characterizes the lives of the heroes in modern tragedy. Going beyond frustration and despair, Albee's The American Dream epitomizes in absurdity the meaninglessness of modern tragedy. The apparent emptiness of life reflected in these plays should not obscure the playwrights' voices. They are voices of protest. They demand our attention to the corners of reality they illuminate.

## Chapter I

### BACKGROUND OF MODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

There is a large chorus of twentieth-century playwrights in America, but only a few of them--Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee--have established themselves as significant voices of American literature. It is a curious fact, however, that the study of drama is often overlooked in the study of American literature. Perhaps this is because drama, unlike poetry and fiction, depends upon performance for real appreciation. On this assumption, Bamber Gascoigne believes that "the American dramatist is far from equalling the novelist in modern literature."<sup>1</sup>

One useful way to read literature is to read it as a moral, ideological, or philosophical statement. My purpose is to undertake a reading of certain plays which I think mirror the concerns of other serious pieces of literature. I do not mean that I shall compare drama to other literary forms. These discussions are intended to help the American student who would find in his literature, dramatic or otherwise, the philosophical and moral tenor of the twentieth

<sup>1</sup> Twentieth-Century Drama (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1963), p. 326.



century. My concern is with playwrights as literary artists. Though they may be read less than, say, novelists, the purpose of this study is to show that when they are read, their statements are as important as what the poets and novelists say.

There are observable differences in the techniques of Elmer Rice and Edward Albee, or Williams and Lillian Hellman, or O'Neill and Maxwell Anderson. Differences in technique show the "uniqueness of an individual artist's attitude to the world and to his experience."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the world the artist imagines is conveyed as the "real" world. O'Neill and Williams emphasize the maladjustments of the personality who exists in a world he cannot understand or control. Miller's and Albee's plays project a large and impersonal social order whose values have become blurred and confusing to the individual. To some degree, these views reflect the writer's own experiences; and in other cases, the experiences he believes to be representative of those of modern man. Using different methods, each writer cuts through surfaces and illusions so that the essential facts of life may be confronted as he sees them.

Because this study is limited to drama, it will help to review briefly the background, development, and characteristics of modern and contemporary American drama. Such a

<sup>2</sup> Gascoigne, p. 12.

review will suggest how major writers share attitudes toward and concerns with art and life. It is necessary to point out differences among the writers, but it is important to recognize the continuity in the dramatic tradition.

Despite their differences in techniques and attitudes, they are all, as Walter Meserve says, "searching for the same meaningful interpretation of life."<sup>3</sup> This is not a new search. Sophocles sought meaning in life. Chaucer sought it. Milton went so far as to "justify the ways of God to man." The difficulty for modern writers in the pursuit of meaning is complicated by the powers man has unleashed upon himself. Modern man does not live in the same world of metaphysics, philosophy, and theology that the ancients and medievalists constructed. He searches for these "truths," but he is confused by industry, science, materialism, capitalism, and their capacity to destroy man as a physical, spiritual, and moral being. Catchwords for twentieth-century life are despair, frustration, alienation, and fear. It is not unusual for an editor of a literary anthology to group selections from the modern era under "doubt." Such a label implies that man is still ignorant of essential truths despite his advanced knowledge. It would seem that modern man is ignorant despite human experience. Arthur Miller's

<sup>3</sup> An Outline History of American Drama (Totowa: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1965), p. xiii.

Willy Loman dies believing the very illusions which destroy him. His experiences tell him that he has lived by deluding himself, but his experiences have so controlled him that he is unable to find a way out.

Finding meaning in a world in which God or some sense of divine providence no longer prevails has resulted in a new kind of tragedy. It is a tragedy which goes on and on, suggesting that the human condition is a contradictory and unresolvable matter. Without gods or God, there is no firm conception of justice and order which most men can be expected to concede. Instead, modern man establishes himself as the measure of all things. The effect is that "truth" has become relative. This may be seen in O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, a tragedy without divine intervention, or in Miller's Death of a Salesman, a tragedy of a man who tries to "justify" the waste of his life by taking it.

In a letter to George Jean Nathan, O'Neill wrote that the "playwright of today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it--the death of the old God and the failure of science to give any satisfactory new one for the surviving religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with."<sup>4</sup> Whatever O'Neill means by the "old God" is not clear. But what is

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918 (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 92.

clear, I think, is his sense of a lost order. In Sophoclean tragedy, for example, there is no question of who is in charge, and that fact, pleasant or not, determines what a man's life shall be: what God (gods, fate) has decreed will pattern man's life. But left to his own resources, modern man, O'Neill feels, must find for himself the order and meaning of his life. Failure to do this ends in futile and pessimistic tragedy for the "heroes" of modern tragedy, such as Yank in O'Neill's The Hairy Ape or Loman in Death of a Salesman.

The common man, Arthur Miller asserts, "is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were."<sup>5</sup> Miller makes a "king" of the modern American man. His plays, Frederic Lumley says, are "committed in the fullest sense to a twentieth-century tragedy, the tragedy of the common man."<sup>6</sup> Miller's commitment is based on his belief that what really constitutes tragedy is a man's displacement from the society he tries to belong to. Just as Oedipus loses his place in society, modern man loses his. Two cases will illustrate what Miller believes. In Sophocles' play, Oedipus searches for the man upon whom blame can be laid. When he finds he

<sup>5</sup> "Tragedy and the Common Man" in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> New Trends in 20th Century Drama: A Survey Since Ibsen and Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 194.

is the man, he submits to his own edicts, edicts which fulfill divine justice. In Miller's play, Loman searches for values which would justify his life. He dies hoping that through his death the success he sought will be realized in his son, a son to whom he wants also to justify his errors by giving his life. Miller would argue that whether the hero be a Greek monarch or an American traveling salesman, his action is equally tragic because it represents his "total compulsion to evaluate himself justly."<sup>7</sup>

It is clear enough that modern drama can be truly tragic. But what is not so clear is the significance of modern tragedy. For Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare, meaningful resolutions are the goals of the plays. The plots are based on the assumption that the cosmos is orderly and harmoniously governed, even though there are times when things seem to go askew, for men--and for gods. The important point is that death is ultimately a victory in tragedy when outside forces (gods) shape it. Order and peace are once again restored. Mysteries, such as the suffering of the innocent who are in some way connected to the tragic hero, are left as mysteries with some divine and ultimate purpose. Death in tragedy in which there is no understood sense of a higher justice appears to be a defeat. Thus, modern tragedy is basically without meaningful resolution. It raises

<sup>7</sup> Miller, p. 80.

questions without accepting divine mystery as an answer. It shows man's frustration as something which goes on. It leads to death without hope.

Modern tragedy reveals how difficult it has become for man to discover meaning for his life. Science removes his god, industrialism changes the value of his efforts, and the massive and impersonal social organization of city and state strips away his personal dignity and contributes to his sense of non-entity. O'Neill's, Williams', Miller's, and Albee's plays portray the tragic casualties of this environment. In Albee's plays, however, there is a sense of movement beyond the tragic, to the absurd. Although Albee's recent plays, such as The American Dream and All Over, show a return to a naturalism like O'Neill's, several of his plays have elements of absurd drama.

Absurd drama portrays a universe without any gods. This fact suggests an irrational universe because, as Albert Camus says, "the absurd man catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness."<sup>8</sup> In this universe man's major problem is his freedom. All thought and action fall upon himself and upon his own resources; no other wisdom or power obtains.

<sup>8</sup> "The Myth of Sisyphus" in The Odyssey Reader: Ideas and Style, ed. Newman P. Birk and Genevieve B. Birk (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968), p. 317.

The Theater of the Absurd forces man to confront his essential self in an unexplainable universe. Absurdity is taken as the "true" condition of man, a condition beyond despair. The significance of the absurd lies in its action, action neither pessimistically nor optimistically viewed. The absurd playwright does not speculate or philosophize; he dramatizes the phenomenon of existence.

A lengthy discussion of absurd drama may be found in Martin Esslin's The Theatre of the Absurd. Absurd drama is based on assumptions which oppose a rationally conceived world. The world "is seen as a hall of reflecting mirrors, and reality merges imperceptibly into fantasy."<sup>9</sup> This view denies that there are universal realities which all men might observe. The only "real" world is the one each man shapes by his own thought and action, just as the only "real" hell is, as Sartre says, "other people." In other words, we "make" our own world. There is no purpose in organizing in time and space an orderly and logical world, or in discovering principles of good and evil. They simply do not exist in pre-arranged and pre-determined form.

Form in art is always related to meaning in art. Esslin believes the relationship between form and idea is especially important in absurd drama, because what one sees is the

<sup>9</sup> The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), p. 289.

"message." Absurd works "are essentially concerned with conveying their author's sense of mystery, bewilderment, and anxiety when confronted with the human condition, and his despair at being unable to find a meaning in existence."<sup>10</sup> Unable to "find" meaning and philosophically to interpret it, the absurd writer depends on form--in this case, the illogic of action--to communicate the idea. The prominence of such action connects absurd drama to old traditions--clowning, fooling, verbal nonsense, mad scenes, myth allegory, and dream.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, absurd drama is a "return" to the phenomenon of one's existence expressed through his action on the great stage, the globe itself.

All attempts to explain the meaning of the absurd lead to paradox. The reason for this is obvious. Absurd drama renders the world as irrational. On the other hand, language tries to rationalize an irrational universe. Language is "useful" in absurd drama if it shows itself uncertain and illusive. In this sense, language functions as a riddle to reveal the riddle of life itself. Edward Albee manipulates language in The American Dream with his frequent use of clichés and illogical conversation. Presumably, when one "hears" the absurdity of conversation, he will be able to

<sup>10</sup> Esslin, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> See the chapter in Esslin, "The Tradition of the Absurd," pp. 320-53.



"know" that life is equally absurd. Can absurd plays be understood this way? Esslin demonstrates they can, pointing out that the prisoners at San Quentin watched in studied attention at an absurd play. Perhaps they sensed that here was a play, written from someone on the "outside," which revealed an irrational world rather than one in which justice and injustice, good and evil, and order and meaning were clearly defined.

The influence of English and European absurdist playwrights, among them Ionesco, Pinter, and Beckett, can be seen in Albee's plays. Jack Richardson and Jack Gelber have also written absurd drama in America, but their works have not received the acclaim that Albee's have. Albee's plays are not absurd in the same way Ionesco's or Beckett's are. Walter Meserve goes so far as to say that America has not produced a significantly absurd drama. "In America the followers of Beckett and Ionesco," he says, "have so abused their dramatic innovations as to produce contrived pieces of showmanship that have no meaningful relationship with life, absurd or not."<sup>12</sup> There is some truth in this judgment, but it does little to explain the nature and importance of Albee's work. Others take a different view. Morris Freedman, for example, sees the ultimate significance of absurd drama as a moral force, and therefore he finds Albee's

<sup>12</sup> Meserve, p. 357.

work as important as the works of Genet, Beckett, or Ionesco.<sup>13</sup> Also, Esslin is among those who find Albee's use of language as effective as that of other absurdist playwrights. Albee is a significant absurd playwright, but his social concerns--man as a victim of a false and deceptive society--restrict his vision in comparison to the largeness of vision one finds in European absurdist. Albee finds American life an illusion while Beckett finds life an illusion. Curiously enough, Esslin admits Albee into the "category of the absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism."<sup>14</sup> Albee's social conscience in what is otherwise an absurd play connects his work to that of Hellman, Miller, Williams, and O'Neill. His technique may separate him from these four, but his vision is just as clearly American as theirs.

Style and technique in the development of American drama "has been so diverse that most of the experiments," Gascoigne says, "are soon forgotten."<sup>15</sup> Techniques which persist, or which are most important, are naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, and absurdism. Writers whose careers have spanned much of the first half of the twentieth century have

<sup>13</sup> The Moral Impulse: Modern Drama from Ibsen to the Present (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> Esslin, p. 225.

<sup>15</sup> Gascoigne, p. 13.

not written all their plays in one mode. O'Neill, for instance, wrote expressionistic and naturalistic plays. Williams' plays are highly symbolic, yet his dialogue is, like Hellman's, Miller's, and Wilder's, naturalistic. Miller in Death of a Salesman dramatizes the past as an ever-present ingredient of the now. O'Neill is innovative in Strange Interlude with "secondary" dialogue intended to convey the actual, though ordinarily unspoken, thoughts of the characters. Wilder uses naturalistic dialogue and at the same time experiments with time and place, with stage sets, and with directly addressing the audience as in The Skin of Our Teeth and Our Town. And Albee confuses the audience with illogical dialogue and action in The American Dream. In each case the playwright tries, through different means, to find what is truly significant in life.

American drama of the twentieth century has been influenced by English and European plays and playwrights. O'Neill's debt to Strindberg has been stressed by the critics and by himself. Strindberg's naturalistic techniques in A Dream Play influenced O'Neill to portray inner consciousness, as in The Emperor Jones. Influences from abroad have been reflected in less specific ways than similarities of technique. The evolutionary social visions of Ibsen and Shaw must also be taken into account. Miller's plays dramatize the individual in and against society, an idea which

interested Ibsen in An Enemy of the People, an idea of battle and rejection. More recently, existential thought in Sartre, Camus, and Beckett is found, though modified, in Albee's absurd drama. American playwrights, despite the influences of English and European dramatists, do what they want to do without servile imitation. American playwrights choose and modify various techniques which best serve their own interests, those of revealing how Americans think and feel. Their plays suggest universal implications of man's struggle against destructive forces, but the struggle is always viewed in peculiarly American terms. O'Neill's Jones is more American than Jones realizes, and has no other home than America despite his denial and attempt to escape. Arthur Miller's salesman is an American "everyman," who in capitalistic America must "sell" himself to survive. Williams' characters are disenchanting southerners, Inge's are midwestern non-entities whose lives are dull and uneventful, Hellman's are greedy entrepreneurs who are unloving and unloved, and Albee's are cosmopolitan Americans whose lives are boring to the point of absurdity.

Each of these writers regards his work as a realistic description of problems in American life. The confusion which results from labeling plays as "realistic," "naturalistic," "absurd" or others is caused by using such terms to mean at one time a technique and at another an attitude or philosophy

the writer expresses. With respect to drama, the most useful distinction is of "realism" as the writer's concern with the truth of experience conveyed by the play. In this sense a "realistic" writer is one who directly confronts in descriptive terms those problems he thinks significant. He sees his work as a reflection of society's conscience. He uses various techniques to reveal his truths. Thus naturalism is a means by which a playwright makes dialogue, setting, and character seem lifelike. Expressionism is a means by which a playwright distorts reality in order to reflect the inner life of characters. Expressionistic technique operates in Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine or in the "Little Formless Fears" of O'Neill's The Emperor Jones. Playwrights who use absurd techniques deliberately confuse action and character, so that events seem unconnected and characters seem confused. Despite differences in techniques, American playwrights see themselves as facing the problems of our times as realists. Each attempts to cut through surface appearances in some way or another to face as honestly as he knows how the problems of the human heart: love, despair, selfishness, pride, alienation, and fear of death.

Technical experiment is an important and interesting phenomenon of modern American drama. In the 1920's O'Neill almost singlehandedly rescued drama from the sentimental stage and made it respectable and literary. His experiments

in naturalistic and expressionistic staging brought recognition to the Provincetown Players. Following O'Neill's success, the Little Theater Movements began to revitalize American drama by introducing new writers, such as Elmer Rice and Clifford Odets. Organizations like the Chicago Little Theater, the Toy Theater, and Stuart Walker's Portmanteau Theater became, in the words of Walter Meserve, "lighthouses for serious and experimental drama."<sup>16</sup>

One of the forms of experimental drama which fared badly is the verse drama of T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, and Maxwell Anderson. These writers have tried to explain why Americans do not respond positively to verse drama. MacLeish says that a modern audience does not expect "an actual couple in an actual bar" to address each other in verse.<sup>17</sup> This disturbs him. He notes that an audience accepts certain conventions of the theater, but some they deem "unnatural" which occur within the play, such as the use of verse. MacLeish argues that "an audience which will accept the convention of its own absence from the theater where it sits will accept anything."<sup>18</sup> This idea is similar to Samuel Johnson's criticism of the normative and restrictive French

<sup>16</sup> Meserve, p. 324.

<sup>17</sup> "The Poet as Playwright" in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> MacLeish, p. 109.

stage which precluded, to use Coleridge's phrase, the "willing suspension of disbelief" and the active participation of the imagination. But since modern Americans are not taken with verse plays, perhaps a jaded imagination is to blame. "What poetry has lost," MacLeish goes on to say, "is the power to imitate action. It has become inward and reflective to such a point that the great metaphors of action, which are the true figures of the poetic stage, are beyond its competence. Until it can people the stage again with actions which are at once poetry and drama, poetic drama will not exist."<sup>19</sup> This is a dismal judgment of modern drama, for it faults both the narrowness of the playwright's vision and the inability of the public to recognize "the great metaphors of action." The anguish, despair, and absurdity of life have found expression in other types of drama which are apparently more capable of "shocking" people to think and feel again. It is odd that Americans (perhaps they have become untuned to the ornament of verse in bald modern life) are able to find Miller's Death of a Salesman affective, despite its imaginative requirements with respect to place and time, but are unable to maintain interest in the verse of Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral. The modern age seems to be a prose age, and if this is so, no poet is powerful enough to change it. Maxwell Anderson may be right when he says the

<sup>19</sup> MacLeish, p. 111.

modern age needs "the touch of a great poet,"<sup>20</sup> but the nature of the age apparently precludes his presence, for where is he?

But all this is not to say that poetry is dying. Perhaps verse is, but not poetry. In fact, there is a great deal of poetry in modern drama, but it is not being written in verse. Anderson offers a useful distinction between poetry and prose, that "prose is the language of information and poetry the language of emotion." This is not to say that prose is incapable of eliciting an emotional response, or that anything emotional is therefore poetry. The distinctions drawn here are meant to suggest that poetry is a quality which becomes apparent in symbol and metaphor, and also to suggest that this quality is sought in prose rather than in verse in modern drama. Thus poetry can exist without the agency of verse. Anderson goes on to say that "under the strain of an emotion the ordinary prose on our stage breaks down into inarticulateness, just as it does in life."<sup>21</sup> Thus prose which is understatement performs an essentially poetic function. The prose of Williams' plays becomes poetic, for it is the language of emotion. Similarly, Arthur Miller

<sup>20</sup> "Poetry in the Theater" in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, p. 18.



makes ordinary conversation poetic by compressing it so that it becomes a symbolic vehicle.

Not only have certain playwrights used prose to poetic effect, but some poeticize their plays in other ways. Williams, for instance, uses symbols and relates them in a play much as a poet might. How much he depends on symbols shows in The Glass Menagerie, in which the very title absorbs several of the play's symbolic intentions. And in Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth the whole of man's history resides metaphorically in the actions of one family. One might say that if verse has failed (or has been avoided), poetry in its more general sense has not. In his "Preface" to Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker, Thornton Wilder calls for a modern American drama which can find new ways "to express how men and women think and feel in our time."<sup>22</sup> Modern playwrights who compress prose, create staccato dialogue, and experiment with word play make language poetic. Audiences can sense the emotional language of the play and feel the symbolic truth which it conveys.

The content of modern American drama exemplifies what is typically American. But beyond the American problems of race, depression, economics, and politics lies the persisting problem of the human condition. Modern American dramatists

<sup>22</sup> Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker (New York: Bantam Books, 1957), p. xiii.

are writing in a world recently rearranged by two world wars, the materialistic values of communism and capitalism, and the conflict of well-armed ideologies. Add to this the force of existential thought following World War Two, and one finds escape no longer possible in theology, politics, philosophy, or any other "illusions" man might indulge to blind himself to his aloneness and nakedness in an unguided universe. It is no wonder, then, that American playwrights are concerned about the individual and how to understand (as opposed to describe) what he is and the world he lives in. As Horst Frenz remarks, "the interest in psychology is perhaps the most important phenomenon of contemporary American drama, and it reflects the intellectual confusion of the last decades."<sup>23</sup>

O'Neill once raised this interesting proposition: what are the psychological implications of action set in a world "possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution?"<sup>24</sup> An answer might be found in his play Mourning Becomes Electra in which the horrors of the past must go on and on in the tormented mind of Lavinia. Of this play O'Neill wrote, "there is the feeling of fate in it, or I am a fool--a psychological modern approximation of the fate in the Greek tragedies on this theme--attained without the

<sup>23</sup> Ed., American Playwrights on Drama (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. xi.

<sup>24</sup> From O'Neill's "Working Notes for Mourning Becomes Electra" in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 3.

benefit of the supernatural."<sup>25</sup> O'Neill's dramatic techniques are not absurdist, yet he views the world as absurd in the sense that it is without divine order and direction. It is possible to see in Albee's works a working out of what Freedman calls "the domestic horrors implicit in O'Neill."<sup>26</sup> In The American Dream Albee portrays a family whose members are non-spiritual, emotionally sterile, and deluded by their own illusions of reality. Like some of Inge's, Rice's, Miller's, and Williams' characters, they are psychologically debilitated, cut off from belief in something which can make their lives truly meaningful. The psychological climate of the modern world has made the common man a tragic victim of its forces. Despite their different techniques, O'Neill, Williams, Miller, Albee and others share a universal and spiritual concern that man will not ultimately be a victim of the nothingness of his life and the fears which attend it.

In many twentieth-century American plays, the "prevailing tone is not so much pessimism as disillusionment, despair, and even disgust."<sup>27</sup> Elmer Rice made that statement in 1955. It might seem that the message of many serious modern plays denies hope in its preoccupation with despair and defeat.

<sup>25</sup> O'Neill, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Freedman, p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> Elmer Rice, "American Theatre and the Human Spirit" in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 117.

Art, however, persists. And as long as playwrights are willing to commit themselves in their work, hope remains. After all, annihilation and death need no expression. They need not the power of words to recommend them. And there are writers, nevertheless, whose works are more obviously committed to the idea that man will prevail. Thornton Wilder's The Skin of Our Teeth implies that in the long run no difficulty is as bad as it seems immediately. This play, with its expansive and positive approach to the human condition, offers a vision which is capable of accommodating even the absurd. Art and life, so closely intertwined, are both persistent and ongoing concerns.

In the chapters which follow, playwrights are discussed in light of those plays of theirs which reflect various techniques and make major statements about American life and about the human condition. Playwrights whose plays have less prominence are discussed first. The plays of Hellman, Inge, and Wilder are grouped in one chapter, not because their literary successes are smaller, but because their reputations are. Separate chapters are devoted to O'Neill, Williams, Miller, and Albee. These are the major dramatic voices of our times. O'Neill and Williams draw attention to conflicts within the individual. Miller's and Albee's interests in the individual are no less, but their larger and more persisting social concerns focus one's attention on causes more than on

results. Wilder is a notable exception to the general view held by other modern American dramatists who regard modern life as essentially a tragic experience shaped by frustration, meaninglessness, and finally absurdity. Perhaps those who hold this view commit a major fault, one which Wilder's work implies: they fail to see themselves as part of history and not its end. Trapped by the modern age, they seem to struggle almost as confusedly as the characters they create. Their hope, however, lies in their ability to write. They are enduring artists.

## Chapter II

### LILLIAN HELLMAN, WILLIAM INGE, AND THORNTON WILDER: CONDITIONS OF PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM

The diversity of Hellman, Inge, and Wilder offers some interesting insights into the nature of American life. Hellman's drama is shaped by "problems" political, economic, and psychological. Inge's plays are in the main studies of human loneliness. Wilder's are distinctly optimistic. Instead of becoming depressed about the human condition, Wilder finds life full of successes along with failures, happiness along with sadness, comedy along with tragedy. These opposites balance out, and life goes on as a various and mysteriously wondrous enterprise.

The plan of this chapter is to discuss separately the general characteristics of these three writers' plays. This plan emphasizes the nature of each playwright's work rather than its relation to the other writers' works. The works of Hellman, Inge, and Wilder are assumed to be independently useful parts of modern American drama, an age still too close to us to be seen as integral and delimited.

## LILLIAN HELLMAN

Jordan Y. Miller says that there is a great difference between the problem of a play and a play about a problem. "In the first instance," he says, "matters of revenge, love, indecision, or hate may create problems, but their function is to help establish the pattern of dramatic conflict and character development or to further the discussion of certain moral or philosophical principles. In the second instance, however, the play exists for the sake of presenting and analyzing a specific problem that relates directly to the existing social, political, or moral climates of opinion."<sup>1</sup> Hellman's plays are curious. They are "problem plays" which treat economic, political, or ideological problems in society at the same time that they allow the force of these problems to shape and define characters and their conflicts. For example, Watch on the Rhine treats the threat of German Nazism in the 1940's, but uses this problem as a force which motivates several of the play's characters, notably Count Teck de Brancovis.

Watch on the Rhine is obviously a political problem play. Even if the Nazi threat is no longer vital, the play remains so, for in it Hellman attends to perennially important conflicts. The play is set in the home of a

<sup>1</sup> American Dramatic Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961), p. 77.

wealthy widow, Fanny Farrelly. Her son David and her resident guests, Count Teck de Brancovis and his American-born wife, Marthe, share her home. Mrs. Farrelly's daughter Sara has been living in Germany with Kurt Muller, an underground anti-Nazi agent to whom she has been married twenty years. As the play opens, Mrs. Farrelly is awaiting the arrival of her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren. After their arrival, Mrs. Farrelly begins to understand some of the difficulties of this family's experiences. The real conflict within the play begins when Count Teck de Brancovis, seeing a chance to get Muller's money, reports him to the German embassy in Washington. As a result several of Muller's friends in Europe are arrested. Muller is now at the mercy of the Count, who then demands \$10,000 from him. If Muller complies, the Count promises to send him back to Germany so he can try to get his friends out of prison. Muller, however, does not trust the Count, so he kills him. Muller abandons the body in an automobile, boards a plane, and returns to Germany without his family.

David and Mrs. Farrelly come to understand Muller's work and offer what assistance they can. In their new found awareness of the dangers of Nazism, they are willing to let Muller get on with his work while they stay at home to work out with the police the difficulties of the Count's death. The problem--Nazism--around which this play is built changes



the complacent attitudes of David and Mrs. Farrelly to zealous attitudes.

Another play, The Searching Wind, is also shaped by a political problem. Three other plays are based on social problems. They are The Little Foxes, Days to Come, and Another Part of the Forest. One play, The Children's Hour, deals with lesbianism. It is about children, but not for them. Two other plays deal with personal maladjustments caused by growing older without finding or getting what one wants. These two are Autumn Garden and Toys in the Attic.

Her first play, The Children's Hour, shows what happens when a schoolgirl spreads a "lie" about the relationship of two teachers who teach at a girls' school. Eventually the teachers, Karen and Marthe, are charged to be lesbians, and they lose a court case in which they try to vindicate themselves. Karen's fiancé cannot be convinced the charge is untrue, so he refuses to marry her. Marthe's fate is even worse, for she begins to feel guilty, confesses her secret love for Karen, and shoots herself in despair.

In a 1952 interview reported in The New York Times, Hellman says she based the play on a story she had read about a girl who suggested malicious rumors of her school teachers. "When I read that story," Hellman says, "I thought of this child as neurotic, sly, but not the utterly malignant creature which playgoers see in her. I never see characters

as monstrously as the audiences do--in her case I saw her as a bad character but never outside life. It's the results of her lie that make her so dreadful."<sup>2</sup> Hellman tries to emphasize the harm to society by a lie, saying the lie is far worse than the lesbianism. The child starts the malicious rumor; but, when adults get hold of it, repression, cruel treatment, and tragedy result. In Miller's The Crucible there is a similar indictment of the repressive nature of unjust and misinformed authority.

In contrast to something which happens in The Children's Hour, nothing really happens in The Autumn Garden. Assembled here is a group of idle people of middle years bored with themselves and others. They are vacationing in an old tourist home when Denery, an egotistical artist who cannot stay out of other people's business, upsets their placid boredom. Because of his bluntness, the others talk about themselves. But what they say is uninteresting. They all complain that they are bored with their lives, that they are victims of their pasts and therefore do not want to take responsibility for what they are. There is only one character who seems to want to do something. She is Sophie, a refugee who wants to go back to Europe. She is the only one who has a vision. What Hellman seems to be saying, if one

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Harry Gilroy, "The Bigger the Lie," The New York Times, December 14, 1952, Section II, p. 3.

listens long enough, is that American people are shifting and unsettled in their search for happiness. With its group of bored people, the play implies that most Americans have given up.

Hellman takes an ironic view of life in Toys in the Attic. This play tells how a young man's life is wrecked by his sisters and his foolish wife. Julian is married to a wealthy widow's daughter, and he has tried and failed many times to make a fortune. Finally he thinks that by working out arrangements with another wealthy woman he can obtain the money he seeks. The plan seems foolproof enough, but because he confides in his wife and sisters the plan falls apart. His wife talks too much. The other wealthy woman senses she is being used. The result is misery for everyone. The wealthy woman cannot be free of her husband. Julian's sisters, who wanted some of his money to go to Europe, sorrow in self-pity. Julian sees himself again a failure. His wife, Lily, feels trapped by the poverty of her life. She cries to her mother: "I was beloved, Mama, and I flourished. Now I'm frightened. Help me." The irony is that everyone's fear of failure proves true, despite the best chances for plans carefully laid.

Hellman's most interesting and most successful play is The Little Foxes. The characters are more convincing than Kurt Muller in Watch on the Rhine, the suicidal Marthe in

The Children's Hour, or almost any character in The Autumn Garden. Kurt Muller is too noble to be an ordinary person, and in The Autumn Garden the characters are too unmotivated to hold the audience's interest. In The Little Foxes the characters are more clearly ordinary people whose ordinari-ness becomes significant, just as Willy Loman is a signifi-cant, though common, man in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman.

The Little Foxes centers on three members of the Hubbard family. These are two brothers, Ben and Oscar, and their sister, Regina. Oscar is an ineffective person, but Ben is a shrewd manipulator of other people. Regina, married to an apparently honest and unambitious banker, wants more than she has and more than her husband could ever earn. The Hubbard family is wealthy, and Ben, in the tradition of his father, discovers a way to make the family even wealthier. He deals with a Chicago businessman who can help the Hubbards put up a cotton mill. The Chicago businessman, William Marshall, and the three Hubbard children are hopelessly greedy. Each sees how much money might be made with the project, even though its success depends on exploiting the South's cheap labor market. Hellman wishes to show that where economics is concerned human values are not. The only problem for the Hubbards--Ben, Oscar, and Regina--is that each must raise \$75,000 to get the project started.

Ben and Oscar can put up their share, but Regina cannot. Her husband, Horace Giddens, is in a Baltimore hospital receiving treatment for a weak heart. Regina begs him to return, pretending that she misses him. What she really wants are his bonds worth \$80,000. When he comes home, she fails to convince him to let her have them to invest in the project. Fearing the project will collapse, Ben persuades Oscar's son, Leo, to steal the bonds from his uncle Horace's bank, where he works. For a while the theft is undiscovered, but when Regina finds out about it she demands that she be given the larger share in the partnership.

In the meantime Regina's husband dies in want of medicine which she makes no effort to give him. He is then out of the way, and Ben and Oscar can give in to Regina's demands to be made part owner of the cotton mill. The ruthlessness of those with money is vividly portrayed, so much so that the play seems, as Gerald Weales says, to possess an "implicit anticapitalism."<sup>3</sup> The encroachment of money and industry in the South destroys the "virtues" made of its genteel life-style. The Hubbards' materialistic values contrast sharply the humanitarian values exhibited by the Bagtrys, a plantation family whose daughter Oscar married.

<sup>3</sup> American Drama Since World War II (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1962), p. 88.

Another Part of the Forest reveals more of the Bagtry family than does The Little Foxes. Ben, Oscar, and Regina are still at home with their parents in Another Part of the Forest. The differences between the Hubbards and Bagtrys show again the evils of capitalism when human life is sacrificed for it. The Bagtrys own rich cotton lands, and the many workers they have are apparently happy and well provided for. After Bagtry dies, Mrs. Bagtry and her daughter, Birdie, are left with the problem of management. Oscar Hubbard offers to help by offering them a loan. Actually, Oscar sees this as a chance to obtain the property for himself. Birdie knows so little about finance she practically gives the land to Oscar. The Bagtrys' maid expresses what Hellman wishes to say, that the ruthless principles of the Hubbards are shameful. They take advantage of others without any sense of the injustice of their actions. The only law they seem to know is the purely economic law that wealth makes right.

The maid in The Little Foxes expresses the protest Hellman records elsewhere in similar terms against all those like the Hubbards: "there are people who eat the earth and eat the people on it like in the Bible with the locusts. Then there are people who stand around and watch them eat

it."<sup>4</sup> Human greed becomes in Hellman's plays a socio-economic problem, making victims of everyone, both those who destroy and those who are destroyed.

Anyone who reads Hellman's plays is likely to discover what she is against, but less likely to discover what she wants. She attacks hypocrisy, cheating, lying, greed, and at times capitalism and Nazism. She is clearly a moral writer, but all is not clear. As John Gassner says, "like the old-fashioned preacher, she was against sin . . . but what was she for?"<sup>5</sup> To further complicate the matter, Hellman wrote in her autobiography, An Unfinished Woman (1969), something of her own confusion. "I do regret," she says, "that I have spent too much of my life trying to find what I called 'truth,' trying to find what I called 'sense.' I never knew what I meant by truth, never made the sense I hoped for."<sup>6</sup> Hellman's disappointment with how she has spent her time should not, however, obscure the significance of the plays themselves. The problems around which the plays are written make them primarily social plays, but this is not a weakness of them. The Little Foxes belongs in the tradition

<sup>4</sup> Six Plays by Lillian Hellman (New York: The Modern Library, 1960), p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> Theatre at the Crossroads: Plays and Playwrights of the Mid-Century American Stage (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> An Unfinished Woman (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), p. 280.

of southern American literature which takes its stand against gross materialism. Set in the microcosmic world of the South, this play alone gives Hellman an important voice in the literature.

#### WILLIAM INGE

When one attempts to find the larger concerns which shape William Inge's dramatic world, he is confronted by two obstacles: (1) Inge frequently fails to focus clearly on a single issue in a given play; (2) sub-plots and counter plots involve an orchestra of characters in which the lead player is hard to hear. Despite these obstacles, one can understand what Inge is trying to say. In the discussion below, brief summaries of some of his plays show what general conclusions might be drawn about his work.

Inge's plays seem conventional in the sense that they have beginnings, middles, and ends which all appear to have logical causes. Even though he wrote his plays in the 1950's, he did not use absurdist techniques which were then becoming known by American playwrights, techniques found in Edward Albee's plays in which characters are not always certain of their identities and action is frequently illogical. If one expects to go to the theater to see a stage as a duplicate of surface reality, he will be quite comfortable with Inge's plays. What he might not be so comfortable with is what happens and what is said.



For the most part, his plays belong to the American midwest of the thirties and forties. To some extent the plays record his own memories of growing up on that soil. He sets his characters in a number of conflicts: against society, against other people, and against their own psychological maladjustments, or just "sicknesses." His greatest talent lies in the development of character. But this is also his temptation to weakness, for he becomes sometimes so involved with minor characters that they compete with the character to which the play really belongs.

Between 1950 and 1958 Inge wrote four plays, Come Back, Little Sheba; Picnic; Bus Stop; and The Dark at the Top of the Stairs. These plays were successful on Broadway, but short-lived. Between 1959 and 1962 the performances of two additional plays, A Loss of Roses and Natural Affection, met with short runs and harsh critical reviews. Inge seems to have been wounded by these "failures." He always felt that a part of himself was in what he wrote, and he accepted criticism of his plays as a judgment of himself as a man. "If the writing is honest," he said, "it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it."<sup>7</sup> This might be true for any artist, but Inge apparently took the relationship so seriously it worked against him. His plays seem to be self-parody.

<sup>7</sup> "Preface" to The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (New York: Random House, 1958), p. vii.

The major obstacle in Inge's drama is one of focus. Sub-plots and well-developed minor characters distort the main action and character. This fact can be illustrated in Bus Stop, a play in which many characters reveal equally complicated personalities in interaction. As in other plays, Inge seems more intent here on recording a variety of experiences than in clearly calling attention to one. If there is a virtue in this, it is the depiction of the sense of loneliness and spiritual isolation common to them all. Inge wants us to see that it is important for every character, no matter how minor, to find what he searches for. And it is suggested that happiness can be found in unselfish relationships with others. These characters talk with one another, almost as if in a group session, and the temporary truce to their conflicts is a hopeful sign, but not entirely believable. Bus Stop, like his other plays, provides some answers to the questions it raises, but changes of heart are often sudden and tenuous-seeming. They are solutions which we would want, because they appear to solve the characters' immediate problems, but it is hard to believe that the rest of their lives will really be altered from what they have been.

Come Back, Little Sheba illustrates what I mean. In this play Lola has been married for twenty years to Doc, a chiropractor who wanted to be a real physician. Although

Lola's pregnancy forced their marriage, they were never to have any children. In compensation, Lola acquires Sheba, a pet dog which she has recently lost when this play begins.

Doc and Lola rent a room to Marie, a vivacious young art student. She becomes a kind of daughter to them, and she represents virginal purity for Doc. Marie is not "pure," for she entertains an athlete, Turk, who Doc assumes is posing for Marie's sketches. Lola knows, however, what is going on, and she encourages the love-making between the two as a means of vicarious fulfillment.

When Doc becomes suspicious of Turk, he wants him out of the house. Turk threatens his illusion of Marie's innocence. He cannot understand why his wife wants him around. These circumstances are the beginning of the conflict Inge portrays. Doc responds in the form of an escape from reality: he gets roaring drunk and later is hospitalized.

Meanwhile, Marie's fiancé from out of state comes to visit her. If she has any problems, they are not dramatized. She is removed from the play as she goes back home with her fiancé. Lola is left alone, which is Inge's purpose, and she makes a futile attempt to go back to her mother. Loneliness is apparently the theme of this play.

Doc and Lola's loneliness is noticed as the play begins, but the seriousness of it becomes apparent, as Winfred Dusenbury says, in "the opposing attitudes toward Marie and

her lover."<sup>8</sup> Neither Doc nor Lola has what he wants, and when Marie and Turk are gone they are thrown back on their own pitifully small resources. In her emptiness, Lola wants her little Sheba back, but she is in such despair she dares not even hope for her pet to return.

Doc and Lola do not see in each other's eyes what they would like to see, and at the end of the play they are forced by their loss to recognize the ugliness of that fact. But despite this, Inge offers a "change of heart" as the play concludes. Doc has just come home from the hospital here.

Doc (Now loses control of his feelings; Tears in his eyes, he all but lunges at her, gripping her arms, drilling his head into her bosom): Honey, don't ever leave me. Please don't ever leave me. If you do, they'd have to keep me down at that place all the time. I don't know what I said to you or what I did, I can't remember anything. But please forgive me . . . please. . . . And I'll try to make everything up.

Lola (There is surprise on her face and new contentment. She becomes almost angelic in demeanor. Tenderly she places a soft hand on his head): Daddy! Why, of course I'll never leave you. (A smile of satisfaction.) You're all I've got. You're all I ever had. (Very tenderly he kisses her.)

Doc (Collecting himself now. Lola sits beside Doc): I . . . feel better . . . already.

<sup>8</sup> "Personal Failure" in The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), p. 11.

Lola (Almost gay): So do I. Have you had your breakfast?<sup>9</sup>

Although Lola has not fixed Doc's breakfast in years, she proceeds to prepare it. This hopeful conclusion sounds like a wonderful solution to twenty years of unhappiness, but can the future be happily secured by two people who, because they have nothing, cling to each other in desperation? The change of heart and the new outlook upon which the play ends is probably what could help, but Inge fails to make the reversal wholly effective. He desperately wants love to be a force equal to any problem, but the desperation of his desire and hope works against their credibility as solutions to the long-standing problems the audience has been made to understand.

Love born of desperation is again used to solve problems in Picnic. Five women living in a small Kansas town lead humdrum lives until Hal wanders in and disrupts their lives. Mrs. Potts and Rosemary, Mrs. Owens and her two daughters, Madge and Millie, are affected by his presence in some way. Mrs. Potts, whose marriage was never consummated, promptly puts him to work around her house, seeing in him all that she missed in her unsuccessful marriage. Her neighbor, Mrs. Owens, sees Hal as a threat. She remembers that a similar

<sup>9</sup> William Inge, Four Plays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 67. All subsequent quotations from plays named in the text are from this edition.

wandering man charmed her, married her, and left her. She worries for her daughter's sake. Madge, one of the daughters, finds in him a love she has never before felt. Madge is "supposed" to marry Alan, a promising son of a successful businessman, but she loses all interest in him when Hal arrives. Millie cannot have Hal, for she is not beautiful like Madge. She has always felt inferior to Madge, and in compensation has become a diligent and apparently bright student. But she retreats to her own private world, saying "I'll be so great and famous--I'll never have to fall in love" (p. 146). She can console herself by planning someday to write novels about love, and in the meantime reading them. Rosemary's reaction to Hal is pathetically humorous. As an old maid schoolteacher who boards with the Owenses, she is determined to get sex before it is too late. Not with Hal, of course, but with Howard, her unexciting long-time friend. Her marriage to Howard is a desperate act which she insists will make them happy. Hal's presence so overwhelms her desires to find happiness that she forces herself and Howard into a marriage which turns out, despite their lengthy friendship, to be sudden.

The play strongly suggests that love will solve all of Hal's and Madge's problems, once they are married. Even if Inge wants us to think it will, he has left us with a number of other problems. There is little hope that the other

characters will overcome their loneliness. Rosemary marries Howard as a substitute for Hal; Alan returns to college realizing Madge rejected him; and Millie has only her books to love. If any of these conditions will provide happiness, Inge fails to show it. As in Come Back, Little Sheba, love should be the answer, but it creates more problems than it solves.

In Bus Stop Inge further probes the problems of love and its several varieties. The result is a play with several characters threatening to become the main one. The characters try to establish meaningful relationships with one another, but their loneliness seems unrelieved. The bus, which is detained by a snowstorm, is symbolic of the uncertain and varied destinies of man, and the storm represents the obstacles which impede man in his life's journey.

While waiting out the storm in a cafe, the passengers talk about their lives. Among them is a wandering professor who admits his life has been so self-centered that he was never able to love anyone else. Between drinks and babblings on Kittredge, he tries to rationalize his loneliness by calling it "freedom." Another character, Bo, is a Montana rancher in pursuit of Cherie, a cheap show girl he once had an affair with. He took the affair seriously, but she did not. She, too, is on the bus, and is trying to get away from him. Although she is cold and hostile to Bo, there is

indication that she will break down and marry him. This is another of Inge's marriage-as-salvation solutions, but, as in other plays, not made even a dramatically credible solution. The lives of these characters seem already too set for any sudden and simple change. At one point Bo says, "A long time ago, I gave up romancin' and decided I was just gonna take bein' lonesome for granted" (p. 183). To be sure, life without love is lonely, but life with the kind of love Inge's characters find does not seem to offer much improvement.

When the storm subsides, the bus leaves with everyone aboard except Virgil. His comments to Grace, the cafe waitress, conclude the play. They underscore the personal failure, futility, and sense of loneliness which pervades this play.

Grace: We're closing now, mister.

Virgil:(Coming center): Any place warm I could stay till eight o'clock?

Grace: Now that the p'lice station's closed, I don't know where you could go, unless you wanted to take a chance of wakin' up the man that runs the hotel.

Virgil: No--I wouldn't wanta be any trouble.

Grace: There'll be a bus to Kanz City in a few minutes. I'll put the sign out and they'll stop.

Virgil: No, thanks. No point a goin' back there.



Grace: Then I'm sorry, mister, but you're just left out in the cold. (She carries a can of garbage out the rear door, leaving Virgil alone for the moment.)

Virgil (To himself): Well . . . that's what happens to some people.

(p. 219)

In the concluding stage directions, Inge directs Virgil to leave while Grace is momentarily out. When she returns, she looks over the deserted establishment in a way that emphasizes the deserted atmosphere. She exits an empty stage as the curtain falls. The end stresses that men's lives, like the stage, are empty and deserted.

Inge crowds many things into his plays. In The Dark at the Top of the Stairs several matters interpose themselves, obscuring somewhat the main theme of Rubin and Cora's marriage. Their son, because of the father's absence as a traveling salesman, has developed an unnatural affection for his mother, and she has not checked it. Renee, their daughter, is so emotionally insecure that she vomits just before her first date. She goes on her date with Sammy, but at the party she leaves him, after which he commits suicide. Add to this Cora's sister's problems of marriage without sex and it becomes indeed difficult to focus on the central conflict. Rubin has lost his job and is now home, but lost. He does not understand the ways the world is changing (it no longer needs the horse and buggy products he sells), and he

has not been able to bring up his children to comprehend reality either. He says, "How can I feel I've got anything to give to my children when the world's as strange to me as it is to them?" (p. 298). He is, like his children, lonely and cut off from the world. The only real contact the children have with the outside world is through the movies.

Rubin and Cora's marriage seems based only on physical attraction. They are spiritually alienated, and after seventeen years of this, one more night in bed is hardly the answer. Still, Inge ends this play with Rubin calling his wife upstairs, projecting again the idea of love (sex?) as a solution. But if one recalls the problems--the children's emotional traumas, Sammy's suicide, and the sister's obsession with sex because she never gets any--the expression of love at the end seems far too simple a solution for anything.

In Natural Affection Inge crowds even more psychological and sexual maladjustments onto the stage. This play is filled with sick people. Walter Kerr's description of these people is instructive, even if meant to amuse. In a few square feet of stage space Inge manages to put:

(a) the mother who neglects her child while rolling around on the apartment house bed with an insecure ex-bartender who won't marry her; (b) the son who develops an incestuous longing for his casual mother, molests a girl in the park, does a stretch on a work farm where he is whiplashed by sadistic guards, and ends his visit home by putting a carving

knife through an appetizing blond stranger; (c) the woman across the hall who prowls the building's corridors in succulent pink pajamas waiting to leap at any man who will interrupt her obligations to her truly loathsome husband; (d) the loathsome husband who is either showing himself dirty movies or getting sodden drunk, and who spends Christmas Eve proving he is not a "faggot" by undressing himself, and attempting to undress his wife, in public.<sup>10</sup>

And if one takes a close look at this play, one senses that all these problems are due to loneliness and lack of love. Without going into detail, Natural Affection, which affection ought to be called unnatural, deals with what Walter Kerr calls "pathological" problems. Problems as serious as these, he says, require "treatment and understanding, but not necessarily our presence during the therapy."<sup>11</sup> The Oedipal problem in A Loss of Roses is equally pathological.

Inge's dramatic solutions are epitomized by Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach."

. . . the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain.

The solution to such a world is found, or suggested, in these terms: "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" Curiously, Inge's characters are set in a world of problems,

<sup>10</sup> "The Sound of Self-Parody" in Thirty Plays Hath November (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> "As It Were" in The Theatre in Spite of Itself (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 242.

and he offers the same solution: love. In trying to account for Inge's view of life and his solution to its problems, one must look to what Inge himself once said of A Loss of Roses: "I have been able to make clearer than in any of my other plays an existential view I have come to adopt during the last ten years, that man can only hope for individual peace in the world."<sup>12</sup> One must confront the essential loneliness of his own soul and experience the anguish of that loneliness before he can begin to share his life with another human being.

Inge's comments about his plays may be a useful guide to them. "I have never sought to write plays that primarily tell a story," he says; "nor have I sought deliberately to create new forms. I have been most concerned with dramatizing something of the dynamism I myself find in human motivations and behavior. I regard a play as a composition rather than a story, as a distillation of life rather than a narration of it. . . . I try to explore some of man's hidden fear in facing life and to show something of the hidden fears that motivate us all."<sup>13</sup> If the plays seem a little out of focus because of their numerous and maladjusted characters and plots and sub-plots, one thing is still clear: he dramatizes alienation as no other modern writer has. One might be

<sup>12</sup> "Preface" to A Loss of Roses (New York: Random House, 1960), no page number.

<sup>13</sup> "Preface" to Four Plays, pp. vii, ix.

repelled by what happens in the plays, and even made uncomfortable by them; but one can be drawn by the pity, sympathy, and insight their author reveals.

#### THORNTON WILDER

The psychological concern of modern poetry, fiction, and drama might be accounted by an excess of romantic introversion. In much contemporary literature the artist himself is hero. Three examples of this are the works of William Carlos Williams, Philip Roth, and Luigi Pirandello.

These writers and many others do not accept external reality as consistent and observable facts which are the same for everyone. The individual wanders about in his own ego to determine what is actually real, and what is external has only private significance. This wandering about in one's own ego is related to, if not indeed caused by, existentialism or existential dispositions against philosophic systems. As the writings of Camus and Sartre assert, the only authority is the individual who operates within the operationally unrestricted freedom of his own mind and experience. But in this state the individual is deprived of the support of traditions, theology, philosophy, or any other system which structures reality for him.

Although the characters of most modern and contemporary works are too inept, blind, or stupid--or simply too naive--to realize the existential nature of their struggles, their

authors have hit upon the notion that modern man is in some sort of dilemma, existential as William Inge thinks. Other writers like O'Neill, Hemingway, Stevens, and Albee set their characters in a world where order and meaning do not exist. They are expected to develop their own conception of reality. If they fail (and they almost always do), they collapse in tragedy without divine guidance or in the senseless and illogically connected actions of absurdity. Among the characters who survive frustration, anguish, and despair, there are few who overcome the forces which bring the others to death and even suicide. It is no wonder that modern literature is psychological: it is peopled with troubled characters.

When average people (and even that term is suspect now) are confused by reading Pound's poetry, William Burrough's jumbled words called novels, or by viewing abstract art, or by listening to the interplay of electronically produced sounds and a performer's keyboard acrobatics (and in some instances to just sit and listen to a performer play nothing), they are told that it is the audience's confusion and not the artist's which precludes an answer to the question (irrelevant, of course): What does it mean? Adept critics who can make black white and white black can no longer find any standards for these works; all is relative, and even more so if one happens to be intelligent and educated (beyond common

sense?). There is a great amount of overwhelming criticism around which discovers a certain design in the ingenuity to all the patterns and shapes of current art, but it rarely suggests such art was created by designers. No. All these items called art were made by artists.

It will be obvious to future historians (if indeed history survives the current assault on intelligence) that most of what was done in the twentieth century (which will be renamed the Age of Confusion) was the result of misguided talents who were hailed by their contemporaries as geniuses. It will seem that man in that age tried to kill God, creation, order, and belief in meaning by separating his subjectivity from everything but itself. Existential thought, which was not new but finally became popular, will not be seen at all as having liberated man. Its demands were too great and men were too weak to meet them. Few will be remembered for having lived on the far side of despair.

Except one, Thornton Wilder. His voice in literature is unique, and it is surprising to hear it against the chorus of non-belief. His work stands in sharp contrast to the loneliness, despair, and futility which characterize other works. The foregoing judgments of the nature of the twentieth century are stated in somewhat ironic terms, but they are the background against which Wilder's work stands apart. If I exaggerate, it is only in the interest of making Wilder's obliqueness to other writers more apparent. Wilder not only

stands apart from his contemporaries; he stands apart from other playwrights who restrict their characters to time and place. Wilder has no salesmen who believe in the American dream; nor are there any northern capitalists who exploit and destroy the South; and neither are there frightened little people who live in Nebraska, Mississippi, or New York City. Any one of his characters can be all these and more.

Wilder's characters embody the consciousness of civilization. In the Skin of Our Teeth Mr. Antrobus lives in New Jersey; but he is thousands of years old and indestructible. He has lived through the Ice Age, the Flood, and all the ignorance and superstition the world has ever known, and he has not the slightest doubt about surviving the future. Wilder's message is simple and clear: man will prevail. And this is not the puny and uncertain claim to survival which characterizes Faulkner's work. Wilder's work is so accessible to an uninformed reader that he has never had to tell us what was always obvious. The maid, Sabine, announces to the audience that the Antrobuses are inexhaustibly active and productive, saying their "heads are full of plans and they're as confident as the first day they began."<sup>14</sup>

In Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth the words "hundreds," "thousands," and "millions" are repeatedly used. In

<sup>14</sup> Thornton Wilder, Three Plays: Our Town, The Skin of Our Teeth, The Matchmaker (New York: Bantam Books, 1957), p. 137. All subsequent quotations from these plays are from this edition.



Our Town we read the following: "Babylon once had two million people in it, and all we know about 'em is the names of the kings and some copies of wheat contracts" (p. 21). In The Skin of Our Teeth we find this assertion: "nothing matters! It'll all be the same in a hundred years" (p. 73). Both of these express the timelessness and insignificance of individual people and things. They are swallowed up in eternity. In the face of that what can be important about the individual? His own actions and thoughts, for they occur only once and are his alone. Sabine says, "my advice to you is not to inquire into why or whither, but just enjoy your ice cream while it's on your plate" (p. 72). When Mr. Antrobus is elected President of The Ancient and Honorable Order of Mammals, the watchword of his acceptance speech is "enjoy yourselves" (p. 96). These statements sound irresponsible, but they are not in light of the confidence the play displays in man's future. Man has survived, Antrobus explains, his primitive and barbaric phases, disasters of all sorts, and now that he is reasonably civilized the future seems more assured than it ever was. Instead of worrying about problems, the individual should take hold of the moments that are his and look upon these as happy ones. Eventually the individual will take his place among the stars of eternity, but in the meantime he ought to live each of his own moments as if nothing else mattered or

were more important. In both plays Wilder impresses the audience with the magnitude of humanity, space, and time, and in both there is a perspective afforded beyond the zones which bound earthly life. In Our Town, Act Three, Wilder casts a look back on earth through those who have died. In The Skin of Our Teeth Wilder looks upon men in the twentieth century through the ages of the past and the eternal verities of those ages as they are represented in stars, molded into eternity. From these vantage points Wilder would have us see the futility of our fears, frustrations, and agonies, and in short, anything which blinds us from participating joyously in the humblest and most common facts of everyday life.

Wilder's view of life is that it is cyclical, a divinely designed scheme in which men are permitted to take part. In his "Preface" to Three Plays, Wilder says that "every action which has taken place--every thought, every emotion--has taken place only once, at one moment in time and place. 'I love you,' 'I rejoice,' 'I suffer,' have been said and felt many billions of times, and never twice the same" (pp. ix-x). Paradoxically, the one person who feels and thinks among the millions of all time is not rendered unimportant. The individual's moments will be nothing, however, if his experiences are lost to him. But Wilder wants us to see the opposite potential, that these experiences are everything if the person is one on whom nothing is lost. Wilder says it

this way: "the more one is aware of this individuality in experience (innumerable! innumerable!) the more one becomes attentive to what these disparate moments have in common, to repetitive patterns" (p. x).

Wilder views "repetitive patterns" not as meaningless absurdities but as man's participation in a divine order. In this sense his work is Christian in the large meaning that all men are a brotherhood. The Skin of Our Teeth is a tour de force of human history which begins in New Jersey, goes back to the dawn of human history, and comes forward to the present again. Wilder stresses the continuity of life. Once back to the present, Sabine addresses the audience which has viewed the panorama. "This is where you came in," she says, and "we have to go on for ages and ages yet" (p. 136). The whole of man's history and future depends on one thing: throwing off despair. "'The good estate of the mind possessing its object in energy we call divine'" (p. 136), Ivy says [emphasis added]. An individual acts for himself, but he acts for all men as well and toward the ultimate good toward which divine energy, perfectly realized in God and partially in man, drives. Thus Wilder's vision contains God, man, and creation within a productive and infinite purpose.

Wilder's comprehensive vision has two effects. In the first place it minimizes the problems of the twentieth century. Set against eternity and infinity, the sense of doom

which accompanies much of modern literature is all out of proportion. The characters in the works of Dreiser, Faulkner, Eliot, O'Neill, and others are frequently victims of themselves and their environments. They live and die in agony and despair. Their problems--economical, psychological, spiritual, or what not--overwhelm them. But Wilder's characters do not collapse. They renew themselves; they are optimistic and energetic; they have no doubt about surviving, no matter how bleak things might be temporarily.

In the second place Wilder values the individual soul, despite its oneness among billions, because it is eternal. The stage manager impresses this value on the audience in Our Town.

'Now there are some things we all know, but we don't take'm out and look at'm very often. We all know that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars . . . everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.'

(p. 52)

The underlying premise of Wilder's work is the fact of the eternal soul: it is something he insists we "know." Working up from there, Wilder constructs a massive universe in which men play the key roles in a divine plan. The key role is everyman's. The key facts are his individual moments of joy,

love, happiness, sadness--in short, everything which one can feel only once and "never the same" again. Wilder says that Our Town "is an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life" (p. xi). Amidst hundreds, thousands, and millions, "each individual's assertion to an absolute reality can only be inner, very inner" (p. xi). Like other playwrights, Wilder's interest is psychological in its concern with the inner consciousness, but his psychology is based on the harmony of God, man, and creation, not on antagonism, or life without God as one finds in O'Neill. Thus in his search for meaning, Wilder encounters no problems too difficult or insurmountable in his quiet, though assertive, Christian optimism.

There are elements in Wilder's plays which connect them to the tradition of modern American drama. They are peopled with Americans who live in American places and, like other playwrights, he has experimented with stage setting and character roles. But the "renaissance" man that Wilder was prevented him from following the problems of modern Americans to pessimistic solutions. His work rests on the foundations of classicism, humanism, and Christianity, a base unlike that which the major plays of this century rest upon. The quality of his work is self-evident, but set against the times, that quality becomes even more noticeable.

## Chapter III

### TRAGEDY IN THE HAUNTED WORLD OF EUGENE O'NEILL

O'Neill's dramatic and literary achievements rank him among the major writers of the twentieth century. I wish to discuss in this chapter some elements of his work in general and one play, The Emperor Jones, more particularly as expressionistic drama. O'Neill's work comprises ideas which reflect the same interest in the conflict of good and evil and its consequence upon the individual that one finds in other modern writers.

The details of O'Neill's life are well known. However, O'Neill's life and his plays are so entwined that it is worthwhile to rehearse a few biographical facts that condition the world of his plays. O'Neill's own troubled life perhaps accounts for the psychological nature of his plays which emphasize character more than action.

Most of O'Neill's plays grew out of his personal experiences. For example, Yank's sense of not "belonging" in The Hairy Ape is a thin disguise of O'Neill's feeling of homelessness. The neurotic family in Long Day's Journey Into Night is modeled after the tragic House of O'Neill.

The unnatural affections and their consequences in Desire Under The Elms suggest the frustrations of O'Neill's relations with his father and mother. And with the appearance of The Iceman Cometh late in his writing career, O'Neill portrayed life sustained by illusion as the only solution to frustrations. The characters in this play failed to match the dreams of their lives with reality; to compensate they continue their existence by "enjoying" the illusion of their pipe-dreams. Life which has meaning only in illusion is the final horror of O'Neill's work. This play parallels O'Neill's own deluded life.

O'Neill's first successfully produced play was not written autobiographically. Curiously enough, however, Jones in The Emperor Jones behaves in a way which foreshadows O'Neill's fruitless search for peace and happiness. Jones's escape from his primitive island was circular--which was no escape at all. Similarly, O'Neill's quest for spiritual serenity was never completed, except in the sense that he resigned himself to failure. The failures of Jones and O'Neill are similar because both failed to realize their dreams in life. Jones is an American Negro with no home, and he dies on his island without finding one. Born in a hotel and dying in one, O'Neill seems equally homeless. Like Jones's short and troubled life, O'Neill's was a life of conflict: an individual tries to reconcile a romantic ideal, or

dream, with actuality. The struggle is futile. On the whole, O'Neill's plays record his personal hopes and fears.

The Emperor Jones might be, Frederic Carpenter thinks, "one of the least autobiographical plays in literature."<sup>1</sup> But even so, it has an uncanny resemblance to the life of O'Neill. Written at the outset of his career in 1921, the play charts the success and failure of Jones, a self-made emperor, who never gains control over his own passions and destiny.

Eugene O'Neill was born to the American stage. His father was James O'Neill, the famous actor who toured the country as the romantic Count of Monte Cristo. He became so absorbed by his role that it was hard for him to distinguish illusion and reality. Such a distorted romantic ideal was to haunt the son all his life. Eugene's mother, who became a dope addict, also allowed him to view the effects of a life of frustration. The illusions of his parents' lives led him in his formative years to conceive an ideal and imaginary world. As he grew older, he began to see that his ideal world was out of touch with reality and that he could never hope to realize it in actuality. I believe this knowledge accounts for the sense of despair in his plays among characters whose dreams never materialize. O'Neill

<sup>1</sup> Eugene O'Neill (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964), p. 43.



was never able to throw away an ideal dream for a more practical one. The ideal was always to disquiet him.

O'Neill's entrance into the American theater signalled an end to romantic and sentimental drama. He had seen enough of the sentimental theater that his father's role characterized. The clap-trap of it all obscured what he considered the depth and significance of human conflict. He objected to melodrama for melodrama's sake, an emotional kind of entertainment which O'Neill thought incapable of disturbing.

O'Neill wrote melodrama, but not melodrama as it is normally understood. What he wrote is truly melodramatic, Eric Bentley says: murder, violence, incest, and sex--these abound.<sup>2</sup> With these O'Neill meant to disturb his audience, not to entertain them lightly. With these O'Neill meant to create a significant tragedy of human conflict. Carrying melodramatic elements to the extreme, O'Neill gave to individual tragedy the scope of universal suffering in the modern world.

O'Neill's success can be measured in at least one way: quantitatively. Most of his plays have been printed, and anthologies of American literature usually include at least

<sup>2</sup> "O'Neill" in Major Writers of America, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), II, 561.

one of his plays. The sheer volume of O'Neill's work forces critics to deal with it. To be sure, O'Neill arrived at a strategic time in the history of American drama. His innovations--masks, interior monologues, choruses, symbolic figures, and expressionist staging--brought new life into the theater. No one doubts that without O'Neill American drama would not be what it is. In O'Neill's work, John Gassner says, "there is a veritable summa of the modern theater's aspirations and achievements."<sup>3</sup> The large presence of O'Neill in American drama is an historical fact difficult to ignore. And he was first to innovate, which always helps.

But no one pleases everyone all the time. Eric Bentley is outspoken about O'Neill's faults and remains unreconciled to the popular notion that he is America's greatest dramatist. Bentley's criticism is no exercise in self-praise in which the critic masterfully reveals the genius of the artist in such a way that some of the greatness will accrue to himself for his own performance. Bentley qualifies almost all of O'Neill's achievements by saying he does not like them. O'Neill, he says, was a writer in control of very little and whose reputation has far exceeded his talents. In his introduction to O'Neill in Major Writers of America, Bentley accuses O'Neill of writing incredible stories, of personal

<sup>3</sup> Eugene O'Neill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 6.

irresponsibility (married three times, unable to manage children, suspended from Princeton as a student), of artificial language, of half-baked thinking from poor reading of Jung and Freud, and of making suicide a solution to whatever problem he chose. Worst of all, O'Neill has none of the "liberating ideas" that one finds in the plays of Aeschylus. Instead, O'Neill portrays characters infected with the modern psychologies: the whole point a diagnosis and summing up of one's life and the lives of others. Bentley says that this is not what the theater is for (and in one instance tried to "improve" Strange Interlude by revising and editing dialogue and interior monologues when he directed it). "The drama," he says, "should provide an image of experience and character such as might be analyzed later. To begin with analysis is to put the cart before the horse--with the same result: immobility."<sup>4</sup> All this self-analysis going on in his plays leads not to light but to exhaustion and darkness, asserts Bentley. In O'Neill's world "life equals murder and suicide."<sup>5</sup> Bentley's criticism gives one the feeling that Bentley's ideas are more important than O'Neill's. Nevertheless, Bentley's lively remarks draw attention to the confusion which forms such a large part of O'Neill's mind and art.

<sup>4</sup> Bentley, p. 566.

<sup>5</sup> Bentley, p. 574.

O'Neill's plays center on problems common to many other modern American writers. Faulkner and Twain have called attention to racial problems. O'Neill has also done this. Two obvious examples are the auction block scene in The Emperor Jones and the social misfit Yank in The Hairy Ape. In his book The Plays of Eugene O'Neill, John Raleigh investigates at some length O'Neill's place among writers such as Melville, Emerson, Twain, Eliot, Hemingway, and Faulkner. O'Neill, like these writers, possesses a metaphorical imagination. Consider, for instance, O'Neill's stage directions in Desire Under The Elms. The elm trees on each side of the house "bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption."<sup>6</sup> The description of the elms as brooding and maternal illustrates O'Neill's literary and metaphorical approach, and this instance is characteristic of his work rather than isolated in it. Much of the value of O'Neill's work derives from one's reading it as literature.

Like Faulkner, O'Neill experimented with the interior monologue as a way to reveal what really goes on in the mind of a character. Although O'Neill's interior monologues, as in The Emperor Jones and Strange Interlude, are dramatically

<sup>6</sup> Eugene O'Neill, Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 2.

much more organized than Faulkner's stream-of-consciousness monologues in As I Lay Dying, for example, both writers use similar techniques to show inner, associative thought.

Placing O'Neill in the tradition of American literature, Carpenter says his plays are a "continuing search for salvation,"<sup>7</sup> a quest one also finds in Melville and Hawthorne. The dark, complex, and ambiguous side of human experience betrays a world of dualities, of conflicts, and of good and evil. These polarities are worked out in the individual. The individual who senses the inner conflicts of good and evil is the key character, whether it is in an O'Neill play or in a story by Hawthorne or Melville.

The forests in The Emperor Jones and in Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown have similar symbolic functions: they are evil traps. In both cases the protagonists find confirmation of their greatest fears. Both find because of their experiences forces within themselves that they were unaware of. Both sense deep guilt, and both struggle to free themselves of it. The settings in The Emperor Jones objectify Jones's past fears. He is made to "see" them, and as symbols they have more practical force than reality itself. Hawthorne, too, gives objects in the natural world symbolic meanings to reveal truth to both character and reader.

<sup>7</sup> Carpenter, p. 170.

Examples might be dreams and visions in such stories as "The Celestial Railroad" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux."

What these few comparisons point to is the fruitfulness of comparative studies of O'Neill and other major American writers. Not only is O'Neill concerned with many of the same issues, but he possesses a similar poetic and literary sense.

The protagonists in O'Neill's plays are victims of themselves, of their own fears of themselves. These fears arise from the sense that something both outside and within themselves will destroy them. In Desire Under The Elms Cabot fears the house and his family in it. He drives himself to loneliness as he tries to run from fears within himself. The barn becomes his place of escape. He goes there when he feels he is losing his hold on things. Speaking to his wife, Abbie, he says: "Ye give me the chills sometimes. (He shivers.) It's cold in this house. It's uneasy. They's thin's pokin' about in the dark--in the corners."<sup>8</sup>

Intangible fears crowd out his reason, and he feels destroyed by them. In The Hairy Ape Yank's desperate hope to belong is thwarted at every turn. Not fitting into society, he finally ends up in a cage with an ape. But even in the zoo he senses he does not belong. As the ape crushes him, Yank cries out,

<sup>8</sup> O'Neill, Three Plays, p. 32.

"He got me, aw right."<sup>9</sup> He succumbs to force and power he cannot understand or control. Not even the ape accepted him. In The Emperor Jones the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious within Jones's mind leads to a nightmare of violence and tragedy. In these three plays the tragic experiences of the protagonists fail to yield meaning for them. They are hopeless victims of their own fears and frustrations. In Desire Under The Elms Cabot wants control, he wants the land, he wants to perpetuate himself. But the simple question, the same one raised by Emerson in his "Hamatreya," is how can man control when he is controlled? The only solution lies in a mystical resignation of one's private self to a universal oneness. Ultimately the individual must be diminished in the face of the universe. The tragedy of the protagonist in O'Neill's plays results from his inability to accept these conditions. He spins out his life in a frustrated pursuit of selfish and private dreams.

In her interesting study of the tragic heroes of O'Neill's plays, Doris Falk in Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension notes that his plays repeatedly dramatize a "hopeless

<sup>9</sup> Eugene O'Neill, The Hairy Ape in The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Sculley Bradley et al., 3rd ed. (shorter) (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1965), p. 1498.

search for self."<sup>10</sup> The failure in the quest is itself the tragedy. Another critic, Robert Heilman, says the tragic heroes are "victims of themselves; what happens to them comes out of character, not out of misfortune or irrational event."<sup>11</sup> The dividedness of character--one with inner conflicts about self--is destructive to O'Neill's protagonists. The Emperor Jones is, on the whole, a character whose psychological conflicts prevent his escape from his "kingdom" island. He never finds his dream fulfilled. His doubts about who he really is so overwhelm him he becomes incapable of sound judgment. The inevitable consequence is death brought about by the force of those unconscious fears he himself brings to light. Like Yank's in The Hairy Ape, Jones's death is a tragedy without meaning, though he seeks meaning in it. Frederic Carpenter thinks that Jones's death, because it is without meaning for him, resolves nothing. "The primitive 'emperor,'" he says, "never comprehends his own tragedy, and can never transcend it. He dies as he has lived, the confused victim of his own past."<sup>12</sup> These comments draw attention to the kind of unresolved tragedy

<sup>10</sup> Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension: An Interpretive Study of the Plays (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> The Iceman, The Arsonist, and The Troubled Agent (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> Carpenter, p. 93.



O'Neill portrays in his plays. The significance of this will be discussed later.

The Emperor Jones marks O'Neill's first attempt to write expressionist drama. In what John Gassner calls "a succession of scenes of panic,"<sup>13</sup> Jones talks himself into believing his fears are real. They are, of course, and they become real enough to destroy him. These fears are objectified in expressionist staging in which the inner consciousness of Jones is portrayed in memory scenes. His past comes back to haunt him.

"From stowaway to Emperor in two years! Dat's goin' some!"<sup>14</sup> This boast by Jones rings of success, but in light of what happens in the play, the remark proves to expose failure. In two years Jones reverts from civilized behavior to superstitious primitivism. When he confronts the dark, fearsome side of his nature, he does not understand it. He becomes a victim of it and dies in a dark jungle of his island kingdom. That jungle objectifies the confused jungle of his mind. The fears of his life attend his death.

Every line in scene one of this tightly made play emphasizes the illusions Jones has about himself. As the play progresses, Jones's fears loom larger and larger and

<sup>13</sup> Gassner, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene O'Neill, The Emperor Jones. Masters of Modern Drama, ed. Haskell M. Block and Robert G. Shedd (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 577. All subsequent quotations from this play are from this text.

stand in distinct contrast to his proud and haughty spirit portrayed in scene one. As the play develops, Jones's experiences, from the height of success to the depths of defeat, are almost felt by the audience. Paralleling and reinforcing the change in Jones's attitude is the brightness of day when Jones begins and the darkness of night when he ends his quest for freedom. Jones's escape route proves to be circular, and he ends where he began. Likewise, the daylight in which the play began returns when the natives catch Jones at the edge of the forest after a night of war rituals.

In each scene there is a quickening of the tom-tom drum, which begins in scene one. The beating begins "at a rate exactly corresponding to normal pulse beat--72 to the minute" (p. 579). The tempo of the beat is increased each time Jones confronts his fears which O'Neill objectifies; and every time a memory of his past looms before him, Jones fires his gun. The scenes of his past disappear, but the sound of his own gun increases his fears, and as the play progresses he finds the past more and more difficult to dismiss from his mind.

The contrast of light and dark in this play draws attention to the confusion in Jones's mind. Scene one begins in late afternoon, but the sun still blazes brightly. In this opening scene Jones appears to be a confident, self-made man. No one can stop him or control his moves. The brightness of this setting suggests Jones's glory and power. In the light

of the day, Jones effortlessly dismisses the charges Smithers, a conniving trader, brings up about his past. Jones boasts that he is a powerful man who has mastered the violence of his past life. It is ironic that his boast also implies that he is what he is because of his past, and that his experiences have enabled him to outwit the natives. He thinks he knows all the tricks of deception, how to manipulate people to obey his will. He pretends to play along on the natives' terms, not knowing that he will die by them. In scene one his position as "Emperor" makes him superior, and he has become "Emperor" because he believes himself to be advanced beyond superstition. He depends, he thinks, on what American civilization has taught him. A man is what he thinks he is; it is his talk which makes him "big." These words are true enough, but it will prove to be his belief in his weakness which destroys him rather than his belief in his strength.

Jones's positive thinking in the first scene is a dramatic portrayal of the art of self-deception. His assertions are a denial that his past will ever "catch up" with him--that is, the murders and jailbreaking. He has put "Jesus on de shelf for de time bein'" (p. 579); he has gone from "stowaway to Emperor in two years" (p. 577). He has built up himself in the eyes of the natives as a god they cannot destroy. Only he can take his life, and only with a silver bullet. Jones invents that superstition, and the

natives take it seriously enough to fashion silver bullets and eventually kill him. Jones denies the power of superstition; yet it is responsible partly for his death. The silver bullet, he tells Smithers, is just part of his "bluff," his way of keeping the natives under control. After all, he says, he has made himself Emperor by turning "de heads o' de low-flung bush niggers dat's here" (p. 577).

Smithers envies the manner in which Jones carries things off. Wanting to find his weak spot, Smithers announces that all the natives have gone to the hills to make war dances. Not believing him, Jones rings the bell, expecting the natives, as usual, to rush into his presence. But they have gone to the hills, and no one responds. Smithers supposes Jones will panic, but instead Jones asserts that he has been expecting this day. It may have arrived a little sooner than he calculated, but he is not surprised. He has stored food along an escape route in the forest, so there is no cause for alarm. He can leave immediately, taking only the "mighty big bank roll" he has conned off the natives. After passing through the forest, he will catch a French gunboat on the coast to take him to freedom. Knowing the natives better than Jones does, Smithers remains unimpressed with Jones's plans. Even though Smithers claims the natives are working up their courage for a chase, and in the meantime casting spells on Jones, the "Emperor" saunters off the stage confidently and almost carelessly as the scene ends.

Scene two begins at the edge of the "Great Forest." Instead of the light of the previous scene, darkness prevails. The forest appears as a wall of darkness, a gloomy atmosphere intrudes, a "brooding, implacable silence" ensues (p. 580). The contrast of this scene and the first scene objectifies Jones's change from inner confidence to doubt. Unlike impressionism, which renders the effect of reality on the individual, expressionist technique in this scene attempts to alter reality in such a way that it conforms to the self. The shadows and mists which play at Jones's feet in this scene are identified as "Little Formless Fears." These express the confusion of Jones's inner consciousness.

In this scene Jones's fears are vague and general. O'Neill leads into the past memories which in time become sharply defined. Jones divides himself into two characters, addressing himself as "we." The conflict has begun, and the enemy will prove to be himself. No outside forces will obtain. The "Little Formless Fears" take shape in following scenes; each past act of violence is objectified on the stage. The power of these scenes breaks down Jones's ability to cope with them. The past grows larger and stronger, threatening his presence of mind. Finally he resigns to it in defeat. What Jones has taken two years to accomplish as "Emperor" is undone in one night in the "Great Forest." The fact is, of course, Jones cannot make any determinations

with his life. He only thinks he has or can. Like Yank in The Hairy Ape, Jones has no reign in his destiny; he does not understand the forces which propel him toward destiny.

The moon rises in scene three, and with it Jones's confidence. "Now you sees whar yo'se gwine," he says. "So cheer up! From now on you has a snap" (p. 581). But suddenly Jeff appears out of nowhere. At first Jones is frightened; then he is comforted with seeing someone he knows. His comfort is quickly changed to horror, however, for Jeff should be dead from the razor cut Jones gave him. This scene, like others, confuses the past and the present in Jones's mind, and in his confusion, Jones fires his gun. When the smoke rises, Jeff is gone, and Jones shocks himself back to his present plight. As this scene fades, the tom-tom drum is heard to be nearer and faster.

Scene four records these directions: "A wide dirt road runs diagonally from the right front to the left rear. Rising sheer on both sides, the forest walls it in." So far, this description seems mechanical and ordinary, as stage direction normally sounds. But O'Neill goes on with this description: "The moon is now up. Under its light the road glimmers ghastly and unreal. It is as if the forest had stood aside momentarily to let the road pass through and accomplish its veiled purpose. This done, the forest will fold in upon itself again and the road will be no

more" (p. 582). The "veiled purpose" of the forest is likely to be more apparent to the imagination of the readers of the stage directions than to the eye of the theater audience. What is characteristic of his later works--his literary approach to stage and character delineations--is already apparent in this early work.

As in other scenes, scene four shows Jones trying to identify his fears with things external to himself. For example, he removes his spurs, saying, "To hell wid dese high-fangled spurs. Dey're what's been a'trippin' me up an' breakin' my neck" (p. 582). Little by little Jones casts off his clothes until only a ragged loincloth remains. Instead of helping, civilization gets in his way as he reverts to his basic, primitive self. Doubts about his identity begin to plague him in this scene. He wonders why the Baptist church, for all its teachings about salvation, seems to be of so little comfort now. After all, is not the church going to land all the heathen in hell, he thought, and surely he is not heathen! "Is you civilized, or is you like dese ign'rent black niggers heah?" (p. 582), he questions.

Not sure any more about who he is, he tries to blame his uncertainty on hunger, which has made his mind foggy. Just as soon as he consoles himself about the things he has recently seen and thought, he stumbles upon another objectified fear. This time it is a group of fellow prisoners who

are working as a road crew. Jones sees the guard, imagines himself back in prison, and re-enacts killing the guard. Not finding a shovel in his hand, he fires his gun. As the smoke clears, the forest walls close in, Jones regains control of himself, and the sound of the drum becomes nearer and faster.

At the beginning of scene five, Jones recalls with an intensified memory the violence of his past. He has been able for two years to keep it submerged while he played "Emperor" to the natives, but now in attempting to escape, the past comes back to destroy all his future plans. Everything begins to fall apart. At this point he finds himself in a small clearing. Pausing for a moment, he begins to lament the two murders he has committed. Then he feels guilt for deceiving the natives on this island he fled to. "Down heah," he cries, "whar dese fool bush niggers raises me up to de seat o' de mighty, I steals all I could grab. Lawd, I done wrong! I knows it!" (p. 583). There is no relief for his guilt. His imminent death holds no meaning for him. He never knows why he must be destroyed, though in his awareness of guilt he must. As he looks up from the clearing, he notices he is in the center of a slave auction. Trying to move away from yet another objectified fear, he instead jumps up on the block and finds himself the object of bidding. As the silent motions of trade go on, he sees himself as a machine whose worth is only mechanical. Without spiritual



importance, his sense of identity is further confused. On the auction block he is just another member of a race which has no home in America--its members are bought and sold by others. Instead of the independent, self-made, and powerful "Emperor" of scene one, scene five portrays a weak and humbled character at the mercy of others. Realizing his impotence, he shouts in shock and anger to the buying crowd: "And you sells me? And you buys me? I shows you I'se a free nigger, damn yo' souls!" (p. 584). So how does he show his freedom? By firing his gun at the crowd (his fears). This act shows that he is trapped by his mind, not free of his past life which it recalls. Instead of showing his freedom, he shows his entrapment. This scene exposes a greatly changed "Emperor." The arrogant, confident, and proud "Emperor" has become the spectacle of an angry, confused, and frightened savage who, like a caged animal, senses the trap he is in and his helplessness to do anything about it.

In scene six Jones momentarily resigns himself to defeat. "I gotta lie down a' rest. I don't care if dem niggers does cotch me. I gotta rest" (p. 584). This statement is particularly telling, for the sense of it echoes through most of O'Neill's later plays. It is the idea of resignation. Tragedy in O'Neill's plays documents a continuing struggle and unresolved conflict. The forces which create tragedy go on and on. One finally gives in. A

memorable example of tragic defeat is in The Iceman Cometh. This play is filled with characters who have found a kind of peace in giving up. It is a peace in resignation, not victory. There is an end to striving for the dream. The dream remains, but forever unreachable. Only illusion has value. And it is hinted that the greatest illusion would be to believe that life could be lived without illusion. So man is trapped no matter which way he turns, with or without illusions. For a time Jones refused to believe he held to illusions. This proves to be his downfall, for when he is stripped of his illusions, he has no other choice but to collapse in defeat. He finds himself playing a game whose rules are beyond his comprehension.

As one scene passes into another, Jones becomes increasingly incoherent. Monologue is reduced in the last few scenes to mainly "Mercy! Lawd! Mercy!" His actions become impulsive. He stumbles and crawls his way through scene six, meets the witch doctor in scene seven, and through the doctor's motions senses that he himself is responsible for what has and is happening. Remembering that he still has his silver bullet, he fires it at the crocodile crawling toward him. On one hand Jones prays, and on the other he depends on the silver bullet to save him. In killing the crocodile with the silver bullet, Jones symbolically kills himself. The meeting with the crocodile is his meeting with

his most basic and ignorant self. The crocodile forces him to see himself as he really is, and in his fear and confusion, he kills it. Symbolically, self-destruction is thus complete.

Scene eight draws the parts of this well-made play to conclusion. The edge of the forest is again in view. It is now apparent that Jones's escape route has been circular. Without the slightest difficulty, the war party "catches" Jones. He is shot by the silver bullets they had been making all night long. All the events which lead to his death show clearly that Jones had no control, but was controlled from the very beginning by those he thought he had deceived. The deception is really of himself, and it is this which really defeats him.

When the dead body of Jones is brought into the clearing, Smithers is again on hand. "Well," he says, "they did for yer right enough, Jonesy me lad! Dead as a 'herring! (Mockingly.) Where's yer 'igh and mighty airs now, yer bloomin' majesty? (Then with a grin.) Silver Bullets! Gawd Blimey, but yer died in the 'eight o' style, any'ow!" (p. 586). The play ends where it began. Jones dies as pompously (Smithers implies) as he has lived. From light to darkness to light, the true nature of Jones is unmasked; his behavior is consistent with his delusions in life and in

death. The past, present, and future of Jones is all of a piece: confined and having no exit, as a circle.

Jones is a tragic character whose experience is an American one. Like Yank's in The Hairy Ape, Jones's tragedy stems from an identity crisis. Who he is and where he fits in are never revealed to him. He is an American Negro who cannot find his place in American life, but because he is an American, he cannot find his place on his primitive island "Kingdom" either.

Jones feels he is part of a socially inferior race when he is on the auction block. Cultural alienation in O'Neill's play is typical of the tragic spirit in modern American literature. Theodore Dreiser, for example, documents in An American Tragedy the social misfits and the tragic consequences of suicide. Not knowing one's true place leads to doubt and fear. Pushing these to extremes, the logical conclusion is self-annihilation. Unresolved inner conflicts transform doubt to fear to destruction and death.

The Emperor Jones clearly shows this progression, but does not propose that any significant meaning lies in it. Jones, who has "shelved" his Jesus for the coin, tries in vain to find forgiveness and mercy. Though he deeply senses his guilt, nowhere does he seem relieved of it. And in other plays O'Neill never seems to get further than this. In his late play The Iceman Cometh the same sense of doom prevails.

Believing that modern man cannot know himself, O'Neill "provides no answers to anything, but states insoluble problems."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps if O'Neill had found the meaning of life he himself searched for, his characters might have been more successful.

In summing up, I want to offer a few additional and general comments. One matter is O'Neill's concept of tragedy in modern life. Eric Bentley, as has already been pointed out, sees O'Neill's tragedies as limited achievements and unsatisfying. The Iceman Cometh, for example, produces what he calls a "negative catharsis." He says "the expenditure of emotion leads not to a new beginning but to the admission of exhaustion."<sup>16</sup> This criticism raises an interesting proposition. What is the purpose of tragedy? In recent times is it to relieve emotions through pity and fear because resolution is possible? What if resolution is not believed possible? In O'Neill's case, resolution seems impossible or not apparently so, and therefore frustration results. If O'Neill believes that man is necessarily doomed to defeat in a world devoid of meaning (and it would be hard to think otherwise in light of what he has written), is it not reasonable to permit him to write tragedy which precludes

<sup>15</sup> John Henry Raleigh, The Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> Bentley, p. 573.

meaningful resolution? Why should resolution be expected when he believes there is none in life? If the self is never found "among the masks," to use Doris Falk's phrase, how can one expect, as Bentley does, to find the "liberating ideas" of Aeschylean tragedy in the modern and spiritually void world?

Resolution in O'Neill's plays lies not within them but beyond them. Carpenter says that by "dramatizing man's romantic dreams and acting out their inevitable defeat, O'Neill was able to remove his tragedy from the realm of realistic description to that of transcendent art."<sup>17</sup> Such a view requires a mystical vision, a certain distancing of oneself from the play. In the final analysis, the individual who asserts his humanity in a world he cannot understand must at last resign himself to losing the struggle. This sort of thing certainly does not have the egoism of victory in it, but these are O'Neill's terms. One may not like them, as Bentley clearly does not, but one's subjective likes and dislikes should not stand in the way of one's appreciation of O'Neill's achievements worked out for his own purposes. O'Neill has plainly confronted modern man with what appears to be man's own tragedy, that of a life acted out on the great stage without ever knowing the meaning of

<sup>17</sup> Carpenter, p. 79.

the play. Of course, everyone must decide for himself how important or right it is to put that in art. In any case, the plays of O'Neill form such a large part of American drama that anyone, whether he likes them or not, would be amiss to ignore them in his reading of twentieth-century literature.

## Chapter IV

### TRAGEDY IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORLD OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

This chapter has essentially two aims. The first is to discuss generally Williams as a writer. I wish to examine briefly his relationship to other writers in his use of language, characters, and ideas. I wish also to describe the expressionistic and symbolic aspects of his work. The second aim is to offer an analysis of The Glass Menagerie. This analysis stresses Williams' ideas and the means by which he conveys them.

American literary drama begins with O'Neill and includes most importantly Williams, Miller, and Albee. The original and distinctive dialogue in the works of these writers sets them apart from the works of other dramatists. In Dialogue in American Drama, Ruby Cohn says that most American modern dramatists, including Anderson, Hellman, Howard, Odets, Rice, and Sherwood, write "genteel, anonymous English."<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Williams' dialogue is idiomatic language. Regardless of theme or material, the language unmistakably produces the

<sup>1</sup> Dialogue in American Drama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 5.



sounds of everyday conversation. Any kind of language for the stage, whether it be verse or prose, is artificially constructed and therefore "unnatural." But language in Williams' plays seems to obscure completely the artificer's hand. It seems to arise spontaneously from the characters themselves. Evidence of this lies in reading or listening to the plays, and not merely in a few lines here or there. Signi Falk, like other critics, has noted the unique achievements of Williams' style and believes that his greatest contribution to American drama is in "his handling of speech."<sup>2</sup>

Experimentation with language reflects the interest playwrights are taking in their work as literature. Williams, for example, writes plays which are highly poetic expressions shaped in conversational prose. He attends to both a reading and viewing audience. In his production notes for The Glass Menagerie he talks about the screen device on which legends or images are placed during the course of the play. In the original production this screen was omitted, but in the published version of the play, he includes it, saying, "I think it may be interesting to some readers to see how this device

<sup>2</sup> Tennessee Williams (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 181.

was conceived."<sup>3</sup> The phrase I want to stress is "to some readers," for it indicates Williams' literary consciousness.

Williams' place in American literature is with those writers whose works initiated a "Southern Renaissance." For them the South represents a microcosm of the world. The South is the stage upon which man is portrayed as a victim of change--the death of an old order and the birth of a new. Traditional values are threatened and destroyed by harsh economic realities. Amanda Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie reflects upon the stately mansions, the peaceful Sunday afternoons, and the genteel experiences of her youth. The rented apartment in the crowded city where she lives lacks all those qualities of life she remembers. In "The Bear" Faulkner laments the mercantile encroachment upon an unspoiled, natural environment. A host of other writers has created a myth about the South. Warren, Porter, Jarrell, Wolfe, Ransom, Tate, McCullers, O'Conner, Welty, Wright, and Ellison--all these have, in various ways, contributed to the "Southern Renaissance." The myth is one of which all men everywhere in the modern world partake: there are those who destroy and those who are destroyed. The Little Foxes, perhaps Lillian Hellman's best play, treats intensely this idea.

<sup>3</sup> The Glass Menagerie. Interpreting Literature, ed. K. L. Knickerbocker and H. Willard Reninger, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 570.

John Gassner says that Williams' "interest was primarily in individuals rather than in social conditions."<sup>4</sup> This is to say that his work stresses the frustrations and failures of his characters rather than the causes of those problems. Williams does not ignore causes; the 1930's depression is recorded in The Glass Menagerie and its social horrors of poverty implied. But Williams' first aim is to explore his characters as victims of circumstances. He wants to dramatize the psychological effects of frustration and failure. Consequently, his work does not project a social order in the sense that Faulkner invents "Yoknapatawpha County" as a background for his characters.

Like Faulkner, Williams is another southern writer who has received much acclaim and honor. He won several New York Critics' Circle Awards and Pulitzer Prizes, as well as the Sidney Howard Memorial Award. He was elected in 1952 to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.<sup>5</sup> The Glass Menagerie itself has an impressive record. Opening in 1945, it ran 561

<sup>4</sup> Theatre at the Crossroads: Plays and Playwrights of the Mid-Century American Stage (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Sy Khan, "Through the Glass Menagerie Darkly: The World of Tennessee Williams" in Modern American Drama: Essays in Criticism, ed. William E. Taylor (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1968), p. 74.

performances, won the New York Critics' Circle Award and the Catholic Monthly Award.<sup>6</sup>

Like the works of many other writers, Williams' works carry the theme of loneliness, common in twentieth-century American literature. Stephen Crane expresses this feeling of loneliness in the following brief poem.

A Man said to the universe:  
"Sir, I exist!"  
"However," replied the universe,  
"The fact has not created in me  
A sense of obligation."<sup>7</sup>

Man is lonely, Crane implies, because he senses the universe's indifference to his desires and purposes. He imagines his predicament as a trap. In the following lines from Williams' poem "Lament for Moths," the fragile individual (a moth) is cut off from the world of men and is trapped and lonely on the outside.

Give them, O mother of moths and mother of men,  
strength to enter the heavy world again,  
for delicate were the moths and badly wanted  
here in a world by mammoth figures haunted!<sup>8</sup>

Neither Crane nor Williams is much remembered for his poetry, yet it reveals the problem of the individual's loneliness in

<sup>6</sup> Falk, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> "A Man Said to the Universe" in The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Sculley Bradley et al., 4th ed. (New York: Norton and Company, 1974), II, 712.

<sup>8</sup> Tennessee Williams, The Winter of Cities (Norfolk: New Directions, 1956), p. 31.

an uncomprehending universe, the subject which engages their larger works.

Williams has been compared to a number of writers--D. H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, and the French Symbolists. I should like to point out a comparison that, so far as I know, has not been made. Stephen Crane in The Red Badge of Courage affirms, no matter how ambiguous the novel's ending might seem, that art gives meaning to life. Crane dramatically portrays Henry Fleming in conflict with a universe indifferent yet seemingly malevolent. As the story progresses, Henry becomes increasingly aware that he is trapped and that he is lonely. At the same time, Crane the artist, not wishing to be equally trapped and victimized by the actual world, writes an impressionistic work of art which suggests transcendence and which gives meaning to his own life as an artist. Crane found himself as a writer, an artist. For Williams, art provides a similar "salvation." His work enabled him to find meaning by writing, though he believed the world in which it was shaped apparently had none. Both writers treated realistic content with imaginative techniques. Their realism was the truth which lay behind the surfaces of life. In penetrating the depths of human awareness, Crane and Williams dared to disturb the universe. No matter how indifferent it was, nor how mechanical it had become, the individual is found, after all, to be

supremely important. The individual's feelings and impressions constitute the only useful reality in their work.

In an essay entitled "On a Streetcar Named Desire," Williams reflects on the life of man in that play. Man was made, he says, "for the purpose of conflict."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, "once you fully apprehend the vacuity of life without struggle you are equipped with the basic means of salvation" (p. 66). Williams viewed his function as an artist as a struggle. His work implicitly raises obvious questions about life: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? To raise these questions is not to answer them. They are, as Signi Falk says, "safe philosophic and meaningless generalities."<sup>10</sup> At best, Williams' answers are found in characters who, having sensed the questions, seek to answer them in their own lives. Their search proves usually not to answer very much. At any rate, Williams marks the conflict that presumably makes, as he says, salvation ultimately possible.

In The Glass Menagerie Tom Wingfield, one expects, will eventually find himself--a "salvation" experience--as a writer. If so, perhaps his action will "save" him from the entrapment of his family and environment. But he is hardly

<sup>9</sup> American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Falk, p. 167.

"saved" by his choice to leave home, as he himself admits at the end of the play. "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!"<sup>11</sup> If not even Tom can find "salvation" in escape, how can the others who remain behind find it? They do not or cannot thrust themselves into situations in which the choice becomes possible. The world in which these characters move is indeed bleak. They are profound in the sense that they deeply feel, but not in the sense that they are really able to do something about their fears, frustrations, hopes, and dreams. They know life's questions, but they cannot find the answers for them.

Tom is a highly sensitive young man whose only purpose in life is to escape from a boring job and become a writer. He jeopardizes his factory job by writing poems on shoebox covers. Unable to reconcile his dreams and ambitions with his boring circumstances, he finally leaves home. His behavior is patterned after Williams'--he despised his home, his job at a shoe factory, and finally left home to roam the country.<sup>12</sup>

As a youth, Williams was plagued by frail health, shyness, and an extremely sensitive nature. In his loneliness

<sup>11</sup> Interpreting Literature, p. 604. All subsequent quotations from The Glass Menagerie are from this text.

<sup>12</sup> Falk, p. 164.

his artistic tendencies were nurtured and developed. The introspection of his early poetry and fiction recurs in his later and more mature work. It is due, apparently, to his own introverted nature. Romantically oriented, Williams places a good deal more emphasis on character than on action. An interest in character studies, and not action, is what holds his plays together for his audience. They lack any Aristotelian emphasis on plot and probability, stressing instead emotional crises.

Many interesting comments have been made about Williams' characters. Sy Khan, for instance, says they "break up like glass as they are thrown against the iron walls of ordinary reality. To the hard eye of the world they are the ridiculous and ridiculed outcasts, kept at a safe distance, starved to submission and death."<sup>13</sup> At best, these individuals have only brief and tragic lives. They glow for a few seconds when touched by an illuminating hope, but then go out into despair and darkness. Their world is limited by their own troubled minds. Unable to adjust to the demands of the world around her, Laura in The Glass Menagerie says, "I'm--crippled!" She wishes to draw attention to her deformed leg, but her remark reminds us that her problem, like that of other characters, is more serious: she is emotionally crippled.

<sup>13</sup> Khan, p. 77.



Williams is fascinated by the troubled minds of his characters; they live in a dark and shadowy corner of reality. His emphasis on the abnormal may seem extreme, but it enables him to provide a perspective otherwise impossible to achieve. Comparing Williams to Shakespeare, Alan Lewis shows the world Williams' characters live in as narrow and individual rather than general and universal. "The basic conflict of all major drama is good and evil, as it is in life," he says, and while "Shakespeare gave it the scope of all human existence, Tennessee Williams carves out one corner of a vast problem and explores it in depth, a corner that is . . . peopled by the hurt and the haunted, surrounded by evil in ugly forms. The victims do not rise in splendid opposition, but retreat more deeply into their aberrations."<sup>14</sup>

This is an interesting observation, for it suggests what I believe to be true not only of Williams' plays but of other modern plays as well: they are psychological studies of peculiar people. William Inge's characters are so tormented by emotional problems that one would expect them to be under psychiatric care rather than in plays for public observation. The world individuals live in today, with the threat of annihilation greater than it has ever been, is psychologically debilitating. The result may be seen in the emotionally

<sup>14</sup> American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965), p. 64.

disturbed individuals writers portray in their works. Literature which isolates the individual and his own peculiar problems seems to "number the streaks of the tulip," but by doing that it aims at what it believes to be a universal condition of modern man. In this sense Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman is "everyman"; Laura in The Glass Menagerie represents all the troubled and disturbed individuals; Mr. and Mrs. Zero in The Adding Machine and Mommy and Daddy in The American Dream are so "universal" they do not even have names: they represent us all. No matter how diverse American drama seems to be, it reveals a persistent concern for the individual whose environment is a trap, a destructive confinement which prevents him from finding his place and purpose. To summarize at this point: Williams' plays are about people who suffer dislocations in a mechanical and monstrous world.

Sexual preoccupation is so prominent in Williams' plays one is tempted to suppose it symbolizes something transcendent about man's nature. Perhaps it has something to do with the search for self, or with his salvation. I am not convinced, however, that sex in Williams' work does anything more than perpetuate frustration in the lives of his characters. It may be that there are brief moments when characters think (these moments, however, are not marked by thinking--they are moments of feeling) sexuality is the answer to life's most

profound questions, but when the pleasures end, little is changed.

Williams is not unique as a modern writer in his emphasis of sex. T. S. Eliot, for example, equates modern man's apparently meaningless sexual experiences with his spiritual vacuity. The sexual instinct is as mysterious as the spirit of man, and they are related mysteries. The loss of one marks the loss of the other. Ancient drama comprised religion and sex, both symbolic of the life force. Eliot despairs that modern man has lost the capacity for a combined sexual and spiritual wholeness. The automated man of the "Wasteland" poem practices sex, but since science is his god, he has lost his spiritual vitality. He is neither religious nor sexual: he is mechanical.

D. H. Lawrence apparently believed that man's spiritual connection to the universe is dependent upon sexuality. For him sex was the ultimate mystery in which the mystery of life itself would best be witnessed. For both Eliot and Lawrence sex is a profound mystery, but Williams' treatment of human sexuality seems less profound. He was by no means the first to use sex in comprehensive and symbolic terms. But if he succeeded in no more than bringing humans together to copulate, there are limits to the mythic significance of his work. The only Williams play which pretends to solve problems without benefit of the bed is The Glass Menagerie.

This play, however, is sexual in an ironic way: nobody can have any.

Williams is often compared with Lawrence. In Norman Fedder's book-length study of the influence of Lawrence on Williams, he says that from "similar roots can be traced the intense reactions against bourgeois civilization and Christian puritanism as well as the characteristic representation of sensual males and spiritual females."<sup>15</sup> Both writers were in disagreement with society, and both expressed their rebellion by exploiting repressed human sexuality. Both viewed the middle class with suspicion, considering its "virtues" of conformity as stifling.

It appears that both writers had similar backgrounds and reacted in similar ways to the life around them. But their fictional worlds are not the same. There are some readers for whom Lawrence's work is not meaningful. Perhaps his complicated (or merely endless?) series of sexual relations and relationships between woman-woman, man-man, and man-woman is nothing more than a disguise, or defense, of his own sexual maladjustment. Nevertheless, Lawrence's work as a whole has something Williams' lacks: coherence.

Fedder reports that Williams was profoundly affected by Lawrence's ideas, but that (and I agree) Williams "fails in

<sup>15</sup> The Influence of D. H. Lawrence on Tennessee Williams (London: Mouton and Co., 1966), p. 12.

his work to envision that state of organic wholeness-- individual, natural, cosmic--which Lawrence approaches in his major fiction."<sup>16</sup> Williams concentrates on the abnormal while Lawrence attempts to discover a comprehensive philosophy for normal life--or, at least, life as it seems to be.

The simple fact about Williams' work is that "whatever philosophic pattern underlies these curious expressions [psychological and sexual] is not readily apparent."<sup>17</sup> I do not wish to pursue further Williams' relationship to other writers, but even the limited comparisons made here allow his work to be seen with greater clarity. Awareness of his limitations is as important as awareness of his strengths.

The question of literary criticism seems to me especially important in relation to Williams' work. Criticism is inescapably moral, but literary censure is usually an unsatisfactory and limited moral criticism. "The true function of the critic," Sy Khan says, "is to serve the artist and his work by making it more accessible to an audience, not to use it or him to demonstrate his hostility and ire."<sup>18</sup> One's private morality ought not to obscure the value literature has as a reflection of society. If the artist perceives more clearly than most men what is important,

<sup>16</sup> Fedder, p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> Falk, p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Khan, p. 72.

the critic has a responsibility to demonstrate the success and failure of the artist in his illumination of life. One's private morality might call Williams' work "bad" because of its preoccupation with sex. Such a limited criticism precludes the literary significance of the work. On the other hand, Williams' work might indeed be bad if it fails to reflect life accurately in its violent, sexual, obsessed, and frustrated characters. If it is bad in this sense, it is morally bad in the largest meaning of the word, because Williams failed in his responsibility as an artist to tell the truth about life. I think, however, that Williams' plays will show that he has taken his responsibility seriously, and that his plays possess a quality, literary in nature, which raises them beyond the reach of a confining and censoring morality.

Williams' work is an artistic participation in the mystery of life. For an hour or two, Williams transforms an empty stage into a world of images and illusions. But as an artist, he is no deceiver; behind the illusions is a truth more true than the surface realities of which it is made. Because art calls to remembrance what is known but seldom thought, it affords an aesthetic experience through its dramatic illusions. The revelation of truth by illusion is the process that "makes art, and particularly the drama, the

cathartic, cleansing, illuminating agent it can be."<sup>19</sup>

Samuel Johnson wrote that a good artist is one who "holds up to his readers a faithful mirroure of manners and of life."<sup>20</sup>

He also wrote that "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better" (p. 212). These statements seem paradoxical, for if the artist carefully mirrors an evil world, how can that make the world better? The answer should be obvious, for if true knowledge is sometimes unpleasant, it is certainly better than no knowledge, or lies. Life is not all poetic justice, and Williams' work clearly shows a part of the world which, by his illumination, makes it more understandable.

Williams' departure from realistic techniques indicates his concern to reveal the truth about life as he saw it. Williams says that "everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance."<sup>21</sup> In his attempt to cut through surface appearances, Williams uses special

<sup>19</sup> Khan, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> "Preface to Shakespeare" in Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 208.

<sup>21</sup> Interpreting Literature, p. 570.

lighting effects, music, symbols, images, and characters as narrators. He frequently explains their purpose in the play. In The Glass Menagerie Tom, as narrator, explains something about the character he is to play: "He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from."<sup>22</sup> One might expect a remark like this in a critical essay, but here, it seems, Williams is the critic. In fact, he says, if one cannot connect the events of the play, it is because one is not alert, not because the play is poorly constructed. With all his explaining, Williams apparently wants to disarm the critic. Tom even describes his symbolic function: "since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for" (p. 572). Tom is many things in this play. He is narrator and character, and as a character he is an individual who symbolizes a species. His feelings are personal, but he represents what we all feel. Or at least that is Williams' intention.

In comparison to other writers, Williams seems to "add on" his symbols rather than allow them to emerge from the play itself. In Chekhov's The Seagull symbols seem woven into the fabric of the entire play. Or, to take another

<sup>22</sup> Interpreting Literature, p. 572.



literary genre, Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises does not so much use symbols as it suggests them. In other words, the symbols operate in the work; the work does not operate because of the symbols. Williams, it may be noticed, very obviously calls attention to objects he wishes us to see as symbols. In The Glass Menagerie Tom, we are told, is a symbol. There are other symbols: the father's commanding portrait, Laura's records, her menagerie, and Amanda's talk of her former "gentleman caller." As a memory play, The Glass Menagerie is built around these symbols which imply what has been lost in the past as well as the control these things have of the present lives of the characters.

The prominence of symbolic objects in Williams' work can be traced to his essentially poetic disposition. The quality of his plays is poetic; he renders in symbolic terms certain truths he wishes us to recognize. For instance, Laura's unicorn is odd among the other animals in her collection, just as her own life is oddly set apart from others. Titles often reflect the importance of certain objects with the plays, as in The Glass Menagerie, Streetcar Named Desire, or The Rose Tattoo. Williams' penchant for symbols derives from his fondness for poetry in general, and in particular his admiration of Hart Crane and the French Symbolists.

Williams' plays carry a number of themes, and frequently several are explored in one play. The most common theme is

sex as salvation, as order, as escape, or as something! Human sexuality is the controlling theme under which the other themes operate, themes such as the fear of non-being, or of human isolation. One of the strange facts about Williams' plays is that none of them seems to develop a single theme fully, or to sustain only one. Signi Falk blames this on his expressionistic tendencies, believing that "his rejection of the realistic mode has apparently freed him for responsibility of making logical relationships between disparate themes in one play. Unable, apparently to develop one theme, he scatters his energy among several."<sup>23</sup> Many themes come to light in the dark and shadowy world of The Glass Menagerie: the conflict of reality and illusion, the destruction of the sensitive romantic by the insensitive practicalist, the sense of lost opportunities as time rapidly passes, the search for beauty in an ugly world, and the pain of non-conformity.

The conflict between illusion and reality is obvious in Amanda's and Laura's dreams. Amanda married a telephone man who "fell in love with long distances" (p. 572), and who deserted her long ago. She lives on memories of her grand past, replete with "gentlemen callers." Laura is an incurable romantic who is destroyed by the news that her "gentleman caller" is engaged. Furthermore, he comes from a

<sup>23</sup> Falk, p. 175.

practical world which offers no place for Laura's fragile nature. Her illusions cannot bear up under the harsh realities of the life around her. As a "memory play," The Glass Menagerie recalls opportunities which once seemed possible but now are beyond reach. The speed with which time passes causes Tom to act desperately: he had better get into the world and find his poet's life before it is too late. On the other hand, Laura is already lost, and like her mother, can live only on fragments of the past. The setting of the play is the ugly world, and the description of this in scene one, unless provided in program notes, would lose somewhat its symbolic significance, for it is aimed toward the reader. "The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism" (p. 571). The world of Eliot's "Waste-land" is here the kind of world in which Williams' characters are placed. It is a world of insensitive robots who live in semi-consciousness in overcrowded "cellular living units." Inside the Wingfield apartment an attempt to add a little beauty to the bleakness fails. When the electric power goes

off (because Tom did not pay the bill), the new lamp purchased to beautify the place for Laura's "gentleman caller" becomes useless. The inside of this apartment and its bleak surroundings illustrate how futile the search for beauty is in an ugly world. The theme of non-conformity is also dramatized. Tom cannot exist in a factory world, so he takes up the Bohemian life. Laura, because she is slightly crippled, has coddled herself in a little reclusive world of her own making, thus crippling herself emotionally and becoming too weak to take on any responsibility.

All these themes crowd into The Glass Menagerie. Nevertheless, one central fact comes to light in the sequence of scenes. One of two things happens to the individual who tries to come to terms with his environment. Either his life will glow for a moment, and then be dimmed forever, or it will be hardened by the insensitive American wasteland of machines, factories, and junk. The play dramatizes an idea common in Matthew Arnold's poetry. The "furnace of the world" either hardens or breaks the lives of men who become its victims. The play focuses on the life of Laura, but its complications seem to be as universal as the dismal world Arnold speaks about.

Francis Donahue says that Williams' plays reflect the "modern spirit of unrelieved failure or disaster."<sup>24</sup> They are tragedies of lost souls whose suffering is not relieved, for the conditions which exist when the play begins continue when it concludes. Laura, for example, is as frustrated at the end of The Glass Menagerie as she is at the beginning and a little more disenchanted. She is unsuccessful in her bid for happiness. She seems to have no control over her destiny nor the power to exert control if she had the choice. She remains as she began, out of place in the contemporary world.

"For nonconformity," Emerson says, "the world whips you with its displeasure."<sup>25</sup> The stigma of nonconformity is felt deeply by Laura. Tom, as well, senses that he is at odds with society and, as a poet, feels cut off from others. By their natures they are nonconformists; but they are too weak to take strength from themselves to support themselves. Tom remains haunted by his memories of Laura's broken life, and Laura withdraws ever more into her private world.

When Tom as narrator introduces the play, he strains the audience's ability to suspend its disbelief, for he must be

<sup>24</sup> The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1964), p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> "Self-Reliance" in Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Prose and Poetry, ed. Reginald L. Cook, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 77.

seen as both inside and outside the play, as character and as narrator. He sets the background for the play in his role as narrator, alluding not only to the social conditions of the 1930's, but to a revolution in Spain and to contemporary world leaders. The social conditions themselves are not important; what is important are the implications they have for the lives of the individuals in the play. The isolated and private lives these characters live is part of a complicated world whose sinister powers are apparently beyond anyone's control. Economic upheavals and political revolutions unexplainably occur, making victims of individuals caught in those forces.

In his production notes, Williams makes clear that The Glass Menagerie is not a "realistic" play. Special music and lighting effects are designed to enhance the moods of the characters. One song in particular, "The Glass Menagerie" theme song, is to be heard at strategic points in the play to suggest Laura's fragile life. The haunting and recurrent tune of the "memory play" reminds one of "the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow" (p. 571). Williams calls upon music to suggest what words cannot. When it weaves "in and out of your preoccupied consciousness, then it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest" (pp. 570-71). In addition to music, light is used to contrast characters, to isolate them from their surroundings, or to reflect moods with

various degrees of brightness. For example, what little light remains at the end of the play as a candle burns is snuffed out, representing the darkness of Laura's life. O'Neill, it will be recalled, also used lighting to parallel Jones's fears in The Emperor Jones. In both Williams and O'Neill the manipulation of lighting seems to be an expressionistic technique intended to reveal the inner lives of their characters more clearly to the audience.

The structure of The Glass Menagerie is episodic. The sequence of scenes is similar to that of O'Neill's The Emperor Jones. Little by little, a composite "picture" is formed. There is no conventional plot to the play. Events generate from Tom's memory, and the experiences of the past come to light. The scenes are intended to focus primarily on Laura's experiences. If one stretches the meaning of plot to include the structure of this play, the "action" may be organized as follows. In "Part I: Preparation for a Gentleman Caller," Amanda Wingfield persuades her son, Tom, to find a suitable "gentleman caller" for her daughter, Laura. As preparations are undertaken, glimpses into Amanda's past are given, as well as into Laura's. Tom's desire for freedom becomes evident as he argues with his mother about why he spends half the night in movie houses. The question Amanda asks him is, why can't he take more responsibility for his sister? In "Part II: The Gentleman Calls," Jim arrives with

Tom and turns out to be the boy Laura secretly loved during their high school days. To be confronted with his actual presence after six years is a great shock for Laura who, shy anyway, suddenly becomes sick and cannot eat dinner with the family and guest. After dinner, however, Jim's charms break down Laura's shyness and resistance. While reminiscing, Laura begins to sense that something might still be made of her life. Jim's kindness gives her a confidence she never before felt. As they begin to dance by candlelight, Jim accidentally breaks Laura's unicorn. But by now Laura has gained a degree of control over her life, and she brushes the accident aside, almost glad of it; for now the unicorn, without its horn, is like the rest of the animals in her menagerie, normal. Symbolically, the broken unicorn is a life broken, not restored. Laura realizes this unfortunate fact when she discovers that Jim is already engaged, and that he must return to the practical and unfeeling world outside. He is so shaped by the world that he seems insensitive to Laura's feelings and the pain he causes her. Williams describes Laura in his notes as "like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf" (p. 571). When she is touched by Jim's life, she glows for a moment and then dims, just as the unicorn is broken when it is removed from its collection.



At the end of the play the spotlight focuses on Tom who has, meanwhile, been sitting on the fire escape. Here again he assumes the role of narrator. He tells us that he has traveled around, but that he has always been overshadowed by the memory of his sister. "I reach for a cigarette," he says, "I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger--anything that can blow your candle out!" (p. 604). At this point Laura, who has been left alone in the last scene, blows out the candle. Williams merges Laura's final act with the narrator's closing comments, "nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow your candles, Laura--and so goodbye" (p. 604). Certainly Williams wrote here a memorable last curtain. As the narration and dramatization of Laura's life are woven together, we see that Laura's life, like the broken unicorn, is lost in darkness just when it might have been saved by Jim. The world Jim comes from, unfortunately for Laura, is "lit by lightning," and Laura cannot bear that monstrous power.

For the most part the interest in the play lies not in its action but in its ideas suggested by the lives of the characters. Williams portrays a family whose southern and aristocratic heritage is dead or dying. The principal characters--Tom, Laura, and Amanda--are each in some way victimized by these circumstances. They see themselves as

out of time, and out of place in the actual world. They are as dissociated from reality as Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy." They have an historical and chronological identity crisis. The psychological effect of all this is portrayed in Tom's Bohemian life, Laura's reclusive life, and Amanda's deluded life.

The building in which this family lives has a fire escape which is included as an important part of the set. Its presence implies the need of escape, both of physical and emotional problems. Williams makes the symbolic meaning of the fire escape very clear. "The apartment," he says in his production notes, "faces an alley and is entered by a fire escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation" (p. 572). Such a view toward his materials suggests again the poetic quality of his work. It is a vivid portrayal of Matthew Arnold's thought; the "furnace" of the world entombs men and they desperately seek escape.

Tom voices a plaint often heard in modern literature. The industrial age has made men operants of machines, and the mechanicalism transfers to themselves. They become automated like the equipment they operate. When Amanda accuses Tom of irresponsibility on his job, he shouts back in anger.

"Listen! You think I'm crazy about the warehouse? You think

I'm in love with the Continental Shoemaker? You think I want to spend fifty-five years down there in that celotex interior! with--fluorescent--tubes! Look! I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains--than go back mornings!" (p. 579). The automated nature of his life is more than he can bear while he can still think about it. He resolves to cut himself free of it. The fire escape symbolizes his struggle to escape, but his mind, crippled as it is by its environment, is too weak to make the attempt successful.

To take the conditions of The Glass Menagerie a step further, they lead to the absurd condition. Less than twenty years after this play was produced, Edward Albee in The American Dream was to portray members of a family who have entirely lost their ability to discriminate between illusion and reality. They do not have even the common sense to ask why they exist. They are beyond any philosophical effort to structure their lives and to give action purpose. In The American Dream the illusion is taken to be the real. There is a passage in The Glass Menagerie which illustrates man's desire to accept illusion. Tom describes to his mother and sister what happened to him one evening at the theater.

And, oh, I forgot! There was a big stage show! The headliner on this stage show was Malvolio the Magician. He performed wonderful tricks, many of them, such as pouring water back and forth between pitchers. First it turned to wine and then it

turned to beer and then it turned to whiskey. I know it was whiskey it finally turned into because he needed somebody to come up out of the audience to help him, and I came up--both shows! It was Kentucky Straight Bourbon. A very generous fellow, he gave souvenirs. He gave me this. This is his magic scarf. You wave it over a canary cage and you get a bowl of gold-fish. You wave it over the gold-fish bowl and they fly away canaries. . . . But the wonderfulest trick of all was the coffin trick. We nailed him into a coffin and he got out of the coffin without removing one nail. There is a trick that would come in handy for me--get me out of this 2 by 4 situation.

(p. 580)

The difference between the Wingfields of Williams' play and Mommy and Daddy of Albee's is what has happened in America between the 1940's and the 1960's. Real life is so ugly that the magician's illusions are attractive. But Tom is not confused: he knows he dreams. Mommy and Daddy, on the other hand, believe that the image of their dream in the Young Man is real; they do not know they dream. The horrors in the worlds of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller are finally transported to the arena of the absurd in Albee where philosophical questioning is no longer relevant to man's struggle to survive.

Tom asserts that "man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse" (p. 582). The wholeness of man's nature depends on sustaining these instincts, Tom feels. Tom senses that he is losing them. He cries, "I'm starting to boil inside. I know I seem dreamy, but inside--well, I'm

boiling!--Whenever I pick up a shoe, I shudder a little thinking how short life is and what I am doing!" (p. 592). He feels that self-awareness and self-fulfillment are never to be his as his life slips away at the factory. As a symbol Williams says he is "the something that we live for."

Perhaps Tom, because he is an artist, can somehow find himself in his work. His work, presumably, is to be his life and his life is to be his work. Laura, however, is a dismal failure. Her life is broken beyond repair. She is too fragile, too sensitive, and too weak to take what she wants. Since he stresses these elements of Laura's nature, Williams apparently thinks there are many "Laura's" in the world, and that her feelings are universally felt. Unfortunately for them, the actual world destroys them forever when it comes into contact with them.

The Glass Menagerie is a metaphor of life as Williams sees it. The play shows the tragedy of a lost soul, of one whose quest transforms the protagonist from conqueror to victim. The play suggests that life is unhappy, but not that it should, therefore, be terminated. What matters is not that the play treats unpleasant content but that it offers an awareness of what lies behind surface realities. Williams magnifies the individual in order to suggest the largeness, the universality, of his condition, Man does not live as a "universal," unless he wishes to see himself only in books

rather than in his own experiences. Williams' characters live as individuals, but their lives he believes represent many people, though no such thing as a "universal" man.

Williams' plays are replete with ideas dramatized so as to make us think about ourselves and about the human condition in our times. Williams may carve out a small corner of reality, but it is nonetheless real. Williams reflects accurately what he believes to be a significant problem of our times, that of individual frustration and despair in an apparently hostile environment. I am inclined to agree with Sy Khan who believes that "Williams is the most important playwright writing in America today, and that when a final assessment is made of American dramatic literature of the 20th Century, he and Eugene O'Neill will stand as our most powerful playwrights."<sup>26</sup>

Maladjustments and tragic experiences abound in Williams' work, and one might conclude that these are due to his own frustrated experiences, unchecked, and that it was wrong for him to magnify them as common experiences. But since Williams saw his work as his life, he cannot be extricated from it. "A perfect judge," Pope wrote, "will read each work of wit / With the same spirit that its author

<sup>26</sup> Khan, p. 71.

writ."<sup>27</sup> Williams' criticism ought to begin with this premise. Williams' treatment of sex has made him a controversial writer, but the fact remains that his work is not hopelessly frustrating and negative, leading always to individual collapse and death. If that were always the case in life, art would have no useful function nor aesthetic pleasure.

<sup>27</sup> "An Essay on Criticism" in Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 176.

## Chapter V

### TRAGEDY IN THE SOCIAL WORLD

#### OF ARTHUR MILLER

The main purpose of this chapter is to examine the nature of tragedy in Arthur Miller's plays. But the discussion is not restricted to this alone; the latter part of the chapter deals with the social significance of his work and Miller's stated purposes as a serious literary artist. His Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, and A View from the Bridge are the works to which I shall refer in my general remarks about Miller.

Miller uses his plays to tell us what is wrong with American society. For one thing, it causes suicide: Larry Keller, Willy Loman, John Proctor, and Eddie Carbone take their own lives or allow them to be taken. They are victims of an unjust society and of their own failures, called to account for themselves. They condemn themselves, seeing death as the only available alternative to lives of guilt. As Miller says of Willy, "he gave his life, or sold it, in order to justify the waste of it."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The 'Salesman' Has a Birthday" in Death of a Salesman: Text and Criticism, ed. Gerald Weales (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 150.



Miller condemns the false gods of modern society, money and success. In Death of a Salesman, Willy passes these "values" on to his sons, because everyone he sees around him--Ben, Charlie, Howard--seems to have found happiness with them. The fact is, however, Willy is unhappy in his pursuit of money and success. Charlie says at Willy's funeral that "no man needs a little salary."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Willy never knew this.

Pursuit of the American dream of bigness, of success, and of wealth leaves Willy and his sons miserable. Happy says, "I don't know what the hell I'm working for. Sometimes I sit in my apartment--all alone. And I think of the rent I'm paying. And it's crazy. But then, it's what I always wanted. My own apartment, a car, and plenty of women. And still, goddammit, I'm lonely" (p. 23). Obviously, more money, larger houses, and more cars are not the answer Happy seeks, but he works for those as if once getting them his life will make sense. Biff is equally disillusioned, saying, "To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation. . . . And always have to get ahead of the next fellow. And still . . . that's

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman (New York: The Viking Press, 1958), p. 138. All subsequent quotations from this play are from this edition.

how you build a future" (p. 22). Trapped and blinded by their society, none of the Lomans can think apart from the "values" it has instilled within them. It is a terrible future, but "that's how you build" it.

When Willy's failures--he cannot sell anymore, especially his hypocritical self to his sons--become more than he can bear, he takes his own life. In death as in life he follows the American dream, that money can buy happiness. It matters not that Biff tells him he is a fake; nor does it matter that Biff confesses that, like his father, he too has followed illusory hopes. Willy is aware of the falseness of his values, but he must cling to them because he has nothing else. Although there is no change in his behavior, there is his painful awareness which Miller calls his tragedy. "Had Willy been unaware of his separation from values that endure," Miller argues, "he would have died contentedly while polishing his car, probably on a Sunday afternoon with the ball game coming over the radio. But he was agonized by his awareness of being in a false position, so constantly haunted by the hollowness of all he had placed his faith in, so aware, in short, that he must somehow be filled in his spirit or fly apart, that he staked his life on the ultimate assertion."<sup>3</sup> Willy could no more change

<sup>3</sup> "Introduction to Collected Plays" in Death, ed. Weales, p. 168.

the way his life has been lived than Oedipus could undo his incestuous acts. Oedipus' life is determined by divine decree; Willy's, by false ideas. Willy remains, as Harold Clurman says, "to the very end . . . a devout believer in the ideology that destroys him."<sup>4</sup>

Eddie Carbone in A View from the Bridge cries, "I want my respect."<sup>5</sup> This is what all Miller's protagonists want but cannot get. They are too small and unimportant in a large and corrosive society which cares only for those who succeed. "A man who rides up on a great machine, this man is responsible, this man exists," Rodolpho says in A View from the Bridge (p. 280). And he, like the others, believes it. For that they are to be pitied, Miller thinks, for their tragedy is the failure they see in themselves. Linda Loman betrays, in Death of a Salesman, Miller's emphasis on the little man who fails. Speaking of Willy, she says that "his name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid" (p. 56). And a little later she says "a small man can be

<sup>4</sup> "The Success Dream on the American Stage" in Death, ed. Weales, p. 214.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Miller, A View from the Bridge in Modern Drama, ed. Anthony Caputi (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 328. All subsequent quotations from A View from the Bridge are from this text.

just as exhausted as a great man" (p. 56). "Attention must be paid," Miller's spokesman says, to the small, common man because he is lost!

How far can one go in identifying himself with Miller's characters? John Gassner says that "audiences would have dismissed Willy as simply an untragic, merely pathetic, dolt if he had not been so much like themselves."<sup>6</sup> It has often been said that Willy Loman is everybody--"low man." But Ruby Cohn challenges this assumption. Willy is so familiar and so endearing that it is easy, she says, "to pity and even love Willy, who is our father, brother, cousin, friend. But never me."<sup>7</sup> The reason Willy is like someone we know but not really ourselves is because he "falls short of us, but within touching distance."<sup>8</sup> In effect, we feel smarter and superior to him.

Cohn's fine distinction is in one sense right. If we are to enjoy the play it could be no other way. Willy is not us, for we are not all killing ourselves as he does. The fact is, most people ("everyman" in the sense of Willy's life) go on living no matter what happens. But in the

<sup>6</sup> "Aristotelian Literary Criticism" in Dramatic Soundings (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> Dialogue in American Drama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Cohn, p. 79.

figurative sense we must say that Willy is me. Miller expects us to see and understand by aesthetic distance the message which lies within the whole play. In a symbolic way, Willy's futile death portrays our own deaths which end our banal lives. Anyone, to think in Cohn's terms, who can exclude himself from what he sees is not getting Miller's message, or else he does not need it--nor is the play written for him. Without an aesthetic distance whereby we can include ourselves, catharsis in tragedy--our pity for Willy's tragedy and our fear of our own potential for disaster--would not be the cleansing agent it is.

Miller views society as a force which wears down the individual. Notwithstanding this, he "still saw the establishment of a social morality as the way out of the impasse of studies of individual disintegration."<sup>9</sup> The problem for Miller is to find a balance of control and freedom which will serve the interests of individual justice. However imperfect, the exercise of justice is a social necessity. Carried to its repressive extreme in The Crucible, "justice" becomes the terror of injustice, disguised as morality for the total society's good. Miller would have us believe that a society capable of injustice on an individual basis is not a just society as a whole. For example, Willy's tragedy is as much

<sup>9</sup> Robert G. Hogan, Arthur Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 33.

a personal failure as it is a failure of the society which makes his tragedy possible. Miller's plays do not condemn man only; they condemn his society as well. But the condemnation of the society is a double condemnation of man, for man is responsible for the social order he perpetrates upon himself. For this he is also to be pitied. Ancient tragedy might find a way out of man's dilemma through divine providence. But Miller's plays are so bound by the social forces which shape them they fail to attain religious significance. But does this failure prevent them from being important tragedies?

There are many critics who do not think Miller wrote significant tragedies of the highest order, meaning that his protagonists' experiences are not truly tragic. Yet Miller's plays might be as tragic, if not more tragic, than ancient drama. Whatever might be said, the fundamental premise of tragedy remains the same: the individual, somehow, must recognize and accept the consequences of his own action. He must see that his catastrophe is related to what he does. His understanding does not materially alter what happens. Death is death. We want, however, death to have meaning, as it has in some ancient tragedies when the protagonist uncovers his "flaw" and eventually is reconciled to divine justice. This is all very curious, for what begins in hopeless and irremediable despair (apparently) ends in restored

peace and order by providential decree. For example, Oedipus is unable to thwart what the gods have decreed, nor can his parents. But when he finally understands who he is and what he has done, and repents and acknowledges divine authority, the curse upon his city is lifted and prosperity returns. At this point, Oedipus's death is not tragic; it is a necessitous act of the gods. From a cosmic viewpoint, it is useless to speak of tragedy (as Chaucer's Troilus learns), unless one wishes to restrict God's (or the gods') power and wisdom. That, of course, would be heretical to some, but it would certainly make tragedy more believable.

In Miller's plays, death, as in ancient tragedy, is the usual consequence of action which violates some principle or order; but for Miller's characters there is no spiritual enlightenment, no reconciliation. They die and do not know why. Death which occurs without meaning carries more unfortunate--"tragic"--effects than death which solves major problems for everyone concerned.

Discussions can be carried on endlessly as to the size of a writer's vision. It may be thought, for example, that Miller's is "small," his understanding of life more limited than Sophocles' or Shakespeare's vision. But how can believing this, true or not, make Miller's plays more accessible to the audiences he wrote them for? Miller's plays are written for modern audiences, not ancient. Sophocles wrote

for Athenians and Shakespeare wrote for Elizabethans. Presumably Sophocles "moved" his audiences; we know Miller's plays have "moved" audiences. If a play's effect is to be valued, then Miller's plays are significant tragedies for modern audiences.

At the end of Oedipus Tyrannus the chorus sings:

Look at Oedipus--  
 proof that none of us mortals  
 can truly be thought of as happy  
 until he is granted deliverance from life,  
 and must suffer no more.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of Death of a Salesman these words are spoken by Linda: "Forgive me, dear. I can't cry. I don't know what it is, but I can't cry. I don't understand it. Why did you ever do that [commit suicide]? Help me, Willy, I can't cry. It seems to me that you're just on another trip" (p. 139). For those around Oedipus, death is painful but not without meaning and necessity. It brings rest and peace, not frustration. But for those around Willy, death is a painful and apparently futile thing--even more futile than painful, and not understood. If Miller is right in believing that modern man cannot understand his life, then Willy's death is as profoundly tragic to modern audiences as Oedipus's painful recognition of his misjudgments was to ancient audiences.

<sup>10</sup> Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannus, trans. Luci Berkowitz and Theodore F. Brunner, in World Masterpieces, ed. Maynard Mack et al., 3rd ed. I (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1973), 372.



As John Gassner says, "Willy pursues truth and struggles against it within his personal and social limits no less arduously and catastrophically than Oedipus. Thus Miller's protagonist brings not only personal and social meanness into the play, but also personal stature and heroism."<sup>11</sup>

Critical perplexity in the face of Miller's plays is due to a problem that no one seems able to solve. Put simply it is, What is tragedy? No one tries to answer that question without Aristotle's help. Aristotle's discussion of tragedy either allows for the kind of tragedy Miller writes or it does not. Those who feel that Aristotle's notions about tragedy are relevant to Miller's plays judge these plays equal to ancient drama; and those who feel that Aristotle's descriptions of tragedy cannot apply to Miller's plays judge them, no matter how excellently made, inferior to ancient drama. Criticism of this sort is so lively that even Miller has been drawn into it on more than one occasion. But, as Henry James says, the author is just another critic, probably knowing neither more nor less than other critics.

The difficulty which presents itself is that Aristotle said so little about tragedy. "Tragedy is the imitation of a good action, which is complete and of a certain length, by means of language made pleasing for each part separately; it relies in its various elements not on narrative but on acting;

<sup>11</sup> Gassner, p. 139.

through pity and fear it achieves the purgation (catharsis) of such emotions."<sup>12</sup> Terms which trouble those who wish to know what Aristotle means are a "good action" and, especially, "catharsis." Even though Aristotle allows more latitude than is generally thought, his own qualifications often go unnoticed in criticism which seeks to define tragedy. Some remarks of his are too important to ignore, and Miller's defense of his own plays as significant tragedies is justifiable in light of them. Aristotle very plainly says that "it is not our purpose here to inquire whether or not tragedy is now fully developed in its various parts, or indeed whether it is to be judged in itself or in relation to its audience. That is another question."<sup>13</sup> And elsewhere: "We allow the poet many modifications of language. What is right for a politician is not right for a poet; indeed, what is right for a poet is not the same as for any other craftsman."<sup>14</sup> In view of these discriminations, Miller's plays might be significant tragedies, and even within Aristotle's sanction.

Allen A. Stambusky goes to great length to set Miller's plays against Aristotelian canons. To Stambusky, Miller

<sup>12</sup> On Poetry and Style, trans. G. M. A. Grube (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, p. 55.

falls generally so far short of the mark of high tragedy that one feels it would have been better if Stambusky had written Miller's plays for him, always bearing in mind while writing them what Aristotle requires of tragedy. Stambusky's major charge against Miller is that his protagonists are too ordinary to be tragic figures because Miller has confused Aristotle's discussion of rank with the real issue of a man's moral capacity. Willy Loman, for example, thinks and feels on a level which prevents his action from assuming a truly tragic proportion. "Sophocles and Shakespeare," he says, "dealt with noble minds and hearts which raised the actions of their heroes above the ordinary."<sup>15</sup> Is a noble mind and noble action real or imaginary? Samuel Johnson's sane and commonsensical comments throw light on this matter.

Shakespeare always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions superinduced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men. He knew that Rome, like every other city, had men of all dispositions; and wanting a buffoon, he went into the senate-house for that which the senate-house would certainly have afforded him. He was inclined to show an usurper and a murderer not only odious but despicable, he therefore added drunkenness to his other qualities, knowing

<sup>15</sup> "Arthur Miller: Aristotelian Canons in the Twentieth Century Drama" in Modern American Drama: Essays in Criticism, ed. William E. Taylor (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1968), p. 99.

that kings love wine like other men, and that wine exerts its natural power upon kings.<sup>16</sup>

If these Romans in Shakespeare's plays are the "noble minds" so wanting in Miller's play, then in truth such a distinction between the morality of kings and of commons is hard to discover. Men are men. Shakespeare is frequently called into the argument between Miller and the ancients, but it seems, as in this case, Shakespeare helps more than damages Miller's case, even though the opposite point is often made by the arguers.

Another defect of Miller's plays, Stambusky says, is their preoccupation with social protest. This "defect" prevents the breadth of vision required in tragedy, which must produce an appealing and lasting catharsis. The other side of this argument is obvious: without social protest, a man has no arena in which to act. There is, of course, the conflict of man and God, but man's external action is, nevertheless, social. It is the society which embodies the law, be it divine or human, and it is in society that man plays out his life. If Miller's play is defective because of its social concerns, then one may fault Antigone on similar grounds. Antigone violates Creon's orders, or the will of the gods enacted through man's social institutions.

<sup>16</sup> "Preface to Shakespeare" in Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952), p. 210.

In Death of a Salesman, Robert Hogan says, "Willy's story is larger than one man's. Like even the great tragic figures of Sophocles and Shakespeare, Miller's Willy is both an individual and a broadly relevant type."<sup>17</sup> Without a social awareness, a type could not exist or be employed to dramatize an idea. There could be no framework for it. The conditions of societies change, but the characteristics of man as a social creature do not. It is easy to say that Miller never goes beyond the petty issues of our society. Even though life is no trifle, it is made of trifles, and this has always been so. Athenians saw many more of their "trifles" in their plays than we see in them; time has so removed us from them we cannot see what they saw. Miller tells us so much about what we know and live with that we limit his vision by our own.

At best, Stambusky argues, Willy is a pathetic, but not tragic, figure. "He dies without ever being able to cope with his obsession--an unlikely condition for the hero of high tragedy."<sup>18</sup> What is missing is a sense of spiritual insight. Without that, Stambusky believes, significant tragedy is impossible. It is true that Willy lacks spiritual values; but to say, therefore, that Willy is an unfit tragic protagonist is a tenuous judgment. Aristotle says very little about the spiritual conditions which must attend

<sup>17</sup> Hogan, p. 20.

<sup>18</sup> Stambusky, p. 102.

tragedy. Miller says that "so long as the hero may be said to have had alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life, it seems to me that in this respect at least, he cannot be debarred from the heroic role."<sup>19</sup> But this is an equally tenuous judgment. Aristotle says very little about a "heroic role."

On the positive side Stambusky notes that Miller's belief in the dignity and worth of the common man brings him "closer to the ancient tragic concept than any of his leading contemporaries."<sup>20</sup> But this assessment is based on comparison. No one seems content simply to call Miller's plays tragedies. They must be high tragedies or equal to, better than, or worse than, ancient tragedies. Gerald Weales takes a position which he thinks would be more useful than a position which compares, for better or worse, Miller's plays to other tragedies. "We come closer to the essential plays," he says, "if we call one Death of a Salesman and the other Hamlet than if we call one tragedy and the other non-tragedy."<sup>21</sup> Defining tragedy by degrees obscures what Miller calls a major consideration. "I believe for myself," Miller says, "that the lasting appeal of tragedy is due to

<sup>19</sup> "Introduction to Collected Plays" in Death, ed. Weales, p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Stambusky, p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> "Preface" to Death, p. xv.

our need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life."<sup>22</sup>

In his "Introduction to Collected Plays," Miller asserts that his purpose in writing the essay was "to point out a historical fact which must be taken into account in any consideration of tragedy, and it is the sharp alteration in the meaning of rank in society between the present time and the distant past. More important to me," he goes on to say, "is the fact that this particular kind of argument obscures much more relevant considerations."<sup>23</sup> A more "relevant consideration" is knowledge of one's self, of who and what one is. In this respect, Miller believes, there is no difference between men of any rank or of any time. He says of Oedipus, for instance: "How can we respect a man who goes to such extremities over something he could in no way help or prevent? The answer . . . is not that we respect the man, but that we respect the Law he has so completely broken, wittingly or not, for it is that Law which, we believe, defines us as men."<sup>24</sup> The principle of the "Law" makes any man a potential tragic figure. The argument between rank and tragic effect is a useless one, Miller would have us

<sup>22</sup> "Introduction to Collected Plays" in Death, ed. Weales, p. 166.

<sup>23</sup> Death, ed. Weales, p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> Death, ed. Weales, p. 169.

believe. In his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" he asserts flatly that "the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were."<sup>25</sup> The capacity to feel is not based on the role one plays in society. The important condition of any play which lays claim to tragedy is that its protagonist anticipates a loss of position. Tragedy depends "on the fear of being displaced," Miller says, "the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world."<sup>26</sup> It is the common man who senses this threat as fully as anyone ever did. Why, Miller pleads, is it so difficult for us to admit him as a tragic figure of the highest order? After all, "the tragic right is a condition of life" having no respect of persons.<sup>27</sup>

Tragedy opposes the possible and the impossible; it considers causes and effects so that neither the individual nor the society can escape untouched by blame; it is a statement of hope no matter how unhappy the circumstances. A belief in injustice cannot exist without a belief in justice.

Miller sees something wrong in the world, and he intends to find out what it is. "We ought to be struggling," he

<sup>25</sup> American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> American Playwrights, ed. Frenz, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> American Playwrights, ed. Frenz, p. 81.



says, "for a world in which it will be possible to lay blame. Only then will the great tragedies be written, for where no order is believed in, no order can be breached, and thus all disasters of man strive vainly for moral meaning."<sup>28</sup> The assumption at work in the plays of Miller is that the meaning of a man's life is rooted in his sense of order, past and present. There is a cause and effect relation of the past and the present, and the meaning of a man's life depends upon what he was, what he is, and what he will be. These relations are not at work in certain contemporary plays, such as Beckett's, Pinter's, Pirandello's, or Chekhov's. "Neither Beckett nor Pinter," Ronald Haymon notes, believes in "resurrecting the past. It no longer exists."<sup>29</sup> If this denial (without which Miller believes there is no meaningful order), were carried to its logical end, Joseph Wood Krutch suggests there would be no plays in the future, for, he says, "Chekhov gets rid of action and Pirandello gets rid of character."<sup>30</sup> The sense of the nothingness of life which this denial implies is ardently refused by Miller. Miller does not view life as a nothingness. What becomes profound

<sup>28</sup> "The 'Salesman' Has a Birthday" in Death, ed. Weales, p. 150.

<sup>29</sup> Ed., Arthur Miller (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972), p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> "Pirandello and the Dissolution of Ego" in Modern Drama, ed. Anthony Caputi (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 492.

in Miller's work is man's search for guilt and for justice, possible only if one believes in order. As Henry Popkin points out, Miller's plays "argue cases; they prove points. Each play is constructed to expose a pattern of guilt, to find out who is guilty and to impose the penalty of death."<sup>31</sup> Such responsibility requires an underlying order to events.

Miller's inquiry into order, justice, and meaning is made with reference to a society, which must play a large part in what a man is and what he does. Even though man is alienated by an unjust society, he fights to belong to it, just as a child has no place to go but home, no matter how cruel his parents might be. In his prefacing remarks to The Crucible, Miller discusses the specific problems in this play in relation to general and universal problems man faces. The play exposes the villainy of a horrifying period in American history, the Salem Witchcraft Trials, but its implications go far beyond that. It is still impossible, Miller says, "for man to organize his social life without repressions, and the balance has yet to be struck between order and freedom."<sup>32</sup> This statement implies the persistent concern of Miller's work: the individual in and against society.

<sup>31</sup> "Arthur Miller: The Strange Encounter" in American Drama and Its Critics, ed. Alan S. Downer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 223.

<sup>32</sup> College English: The First Year, ed. John C. Hodges, 5th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968), p. 507.

Indeed, society is the framework within which the individual's tragic experience takes form. Society is complex, at once external and internal to the man. Political, economic, and moral forces work to enlarge the importance of society and to diminish that of the individual, making him a victim of both the impersonal largeness of society and the apparent smallness and weakness of himself. In Death of a Salesman Willy's dream is not his own invention; he absorbed it from the American society which led him to think that hard work brings money and success. Blinded by the dream, he cannot examine his values as particularly his own. Willy wants to succeed in a "big way," and to him this means material success that he and others can see and touch. He measures life in quantities. The "virtues" of his society--hard work and diligence--are his undoing. His tragedy is his dislocation in a society whose prescriptions for success he believed in to the very end. At Loman's death, Biff says "the man didn't know who he was" (p. 138). Miller shows here that tragedy depends upon the protagonist's dislocation in society. A society which makes victims of its members cannot be a just society. Miller's ideal society would be one in which a balance between freedom and order exists, but his plays do not discover that utopia.

Nevertheless, Miller's vision is sympathetic in its condemnation of man and society. He understands man's desire

to belong and how that desire can or might conflict with his quest for identity. Miller's work does not deny the significance of the past, as do Pirandello's plays, or order, as does Beckett's Waiting for Godot. For Miller, the past is always an important part of the present; and furthermore, there is order and meaning in the universe. Miller believes these are facts men ought to discover and admit, not suspect and deny.

Miller does not think that art, itself a medium of order, can convincingly dramatize disorder as the only truth, or that the universe is incomprehensible. "The very impulse to write," he states, "springs from an inner chaos crying for order, for meaning."<sup>33</sup> In Miller's view, it would seem illogical for art to counter the forces which govern its creation, or for art to be brought into existence only to deny order and meaning. Miller wants order. He believes it exists, and it is man's responsibility to discover it and pattern his society upon it. When society acts unjustly, as it does in The Crucible, the individual becomes a victim of its injustice. As a victim, the individual's experience becomes tragic, for he is stripped of position and power whereby he can assert his individual freedom.

Miller sees modern man as lonely and alienated from society. In his essay "The 'Salesman' Has a Birthday," he

<sup>33</sup> "Introduction to Collected Plays" in Death, ed. Weales, p. 171.

says, "we must be a terribly lonely people, cut off from each other by such massive pretense of self-sufficiency, machined down so fine we hardly touch anymore."<sup>34</sup> In Death of a Salesman Willy's boss, Howard, is more interested in the tape recorder's mechanical reproduction of his daughter's voice than in Willy's plea for understanding. Willy wants to be taken off the road and given a clerk position in the store, but Howard no longer has any use for Willy. Willy tries to tell Howard things used to be different. "There was respect, and comradeship, and gratitude in it [selling]. Today it's all cut and dried, and there's no chance for bringing friendship to bear--or personality. You see what I mean? They don't know me anymore" (p. 81). Howard is unmoved by Willy's plea for help. Howard makes Willy feel useless, and Willy is too proud to admit failure to Charlie, a friend who wants to help him. Thus Willy becomes lonely and cut off from the society around him, because of what it is and because of what he is.

There is no question that Miller's plays are social in significance. He believes that a man's identity is rooted in his work, in his function in society, and in his relations with other men. "You can't talk five minutes with anybody without talking sociology,"<sup>35</sup> he says. We are, essentially,

<sup>34</sup> Death, ed. Weales, p. 148.

<sup>35</sup> Haymon, p. 9.

the roles we play. Loman is a salesman. Parris is a minister. Carbone is a longshoreman. The conflicts in their lives are due to conflicts of good and evil in the social order, and these, in turn, witness to the polarity of good and evil forces in the universe. The individual must find his place in society against these conditions. Miller believes that the twentieth century is a complex and confusing era, making it almost impossible for the individual to order his life meaningfully.

Miller suggests this confusion of the age affects not only the individual, but also the writer. "Maybe that's why," he says, "it's so difficult to arrive at a satisfactory dramatic form now, because society is so contradictory that the vocabulary can't socialize experience any more."<sup>36</sup>

Miller tries to make his plays reflect the social nature of man. "In the structural sense," he says, "I aimed to make a play with the veritable countenance of life. To make one the many, as in life, so that 'society' is a power and a mystery of custom and inside the man and surrounding him, as the fish is in the sea and the sea inside the fish, his birthplace and burial ground, promise and threat."<sup>37</sup> Man is nothing without society, yet he is constantly threatened by it. Society is a force capable of dislocating one's place

<sup>36</sup> Haymon, p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> "Introduction to Collected Plays" in Death, ed. Weales, pp. 163-64.

in it, or it is hostile to one who attempts to "fit in," as the case turns out for Willy, and as Williams shows in Laura's situation in The Glass Menagerie. Miller uses Willy as his spokesman: "Funny, y'know? After all the highways, and the trains, and the appointments, and the years, you end up worth more dead than alive" (p. 98). Willy struggles in society all his life, but when the end comes the fight can seem to have been more destructive than beneficial.

Henrik Ibsen's plays make statements about society and the problems men have living as social creatures. Miller says he is indebted to Ibsen, but in a very general way. "He was a strong influence on my early youth," he recalls, "but I have no debt to him in the sense that one is insisting upon recreating him all the time. What he gave me in the beginning was a sense of the past and a sense of the rootedness of everything that happens."<sup>38</sup> It follows that Miller's plays reveal a protagonist (like Dr. Stockmann in Ibsen's Enemy of the People) who must take his stand, and take it alone. Like Ibsen, Miller uses drama as a weapon to make significant remarks about social evils. It seems unfair, for instance, for Willy in Death of a Salesman to work hard all his life only to be rejected near retirement age by his employer. The employer's concern is more for business, a

<sup>38</sup> Haymon, p. 6.

concern the American society imposes upon him, than for honoring his father's promise made by the father to Willy in a humanitarian gesture of friendship and integrity.

In his "Introduction to Collected Plays," Miller's discussion of Death of a Salesman reveals his ceaseless concern, like that of Ibsen's, that a play say something. Looking back on this play, he connects its form to its message. "Its form seems the form of a confession, for that is how it is told, now speaking of what happened yesterday, then suddenly following some connection to a time twenty years ago, then leaping even further back and then returning to the present and even speculating about the future."<sup>39</sup> The present, Miller believes, is understood only as the accumulation of one's whole life begins to force itself upon the now. The meaning of events lies in their connection with other events. Miller dramatizes Willy's past life in the play, but without set changes. He says "there are no flashbacks . . . only a mobile concurrency of past and present."<sup>40</sup> One place serves all time periods in Willy's life as characters move into and out of the past as they might move through an imaginary wall and at other times through a real doorway. By connecting the past to the present in an immediate sense, Miller's play says that man

<sup>39</sup> Death, ed. Weales, p. 156.

<sup>40</sup> Death, ed. Weales, pp. 158-59.



has a cumulative and responsible personality, and there is a social and moral order to which he must account. Man has no escape from himself. It is ever with him. His past is his present.

Dialogue in Miller's plays runs close to the sound of ordinary conversation. But as natural as it may sound, it is carefully constructed. There is no such thing, of course, as natural prose. Even the language of ordinary life is adjusted to make it appropriate for various occasions. Prose on the stage must attend to the conventions of drama; at best it can only remind us of the rhythm and sound of everyday language. As it must work in the drama, it is a highly compressed speech. In Miller's plays it has two purposes: it must connect the language of the play and the meaning of the play, since language is part of the total play as a work of art; and at the same time it must be so natural to the play so that for a moment the artificiality of it will be unobserved.

"I've been writing verse for years," Miller says, "but for primarily as an exercise, to contract and squeeze the language and clear the mind."<sup>41</sup> He never wanted to be a professional poet, but as a writer he wanted to let an audience "feel that they're getting a packed, a dense speech

<sup>41</sup> Haymon, p. 9.

without their taking note of the fact that it's at all odd." He adds to this: "Basically what I'm after is the compression of the psychological and social into forward-moving speech with the requisite consciousness."<sup>42</sup> The more his dialogue sounds spontaneous, the less likely it was spontaneously composed. Miller does not write by accident.

Miller's language serves the ends of the play as a whole more than merely the formation of characters who must sound like real people. Miller's prose is no more natural than is Wordsworth's. Wordsworth tried to rescue language from those he believed used it as artificial ornamentation by "refining" and "purifying" it to resemble our true language. Miller compresses language to make it more "true." For both of them, language is a tool. It is difficult to rightly assess a contemporary writer, but the artifice of Miller's language might be more apparent to future readers than it is to us. We now recognize a distinctive "poetic diction" in Wordsworth's poetry, though he viewed his own work as free of such artificiality.

No painstaking artist, as Miller surely is, can create a perfect naturalness; if he could, we would not like it anyway. The more Miller works on a play, the less natural it becomes, until finally it is an objet d'art. On this

<sup>42</sup> Haymon, p. 9.

level it is not natural at all. A perfect duplication of life in art would not be art. The terms of its removal from life would not be apparent. One should think of language in Death of a Salesman as one should think of elements of Michelangelo's David. To extract language from Miller's play in order to show how much it sounds like our everyday speech seems about as useful as locating all the angles on David's body to discuss how interesting they are as mathematical proportions. In either case the interest of the part should be subsumed by an interest in the whole. An experience of the whole is impossible to convey in criticism, but it should not be therefore ignored.

In the concluding paragraphs of this general discussion of Miller, I want to summarize the significant facts of Miller's plays. In the first place, his characters have an abundant capacity for suffering. He tries to show that through suffering man attains unto dignity. The protagonists are unheroic victims, but the magnitude of their dislocations in society forces them to fall, in their own eyes, as far as any "noble mind" can fall. As Henry Popkin says, "from day to day they live their placid, apparently meaningless lives, and suddenly the eternal intrudes, thunder sounds, and the trumpet blows, and these startled mediocrities are whisked off to the bar of justice. In the midst of banality, guilt

appears."<sup>43</sup> They are relentlessly driven to their own deaths without ever finding what they sought in life. Alfieri voices this problem when he speaks of Eddie's death at the conclusion of A View from the Bridge: "The truth is holy, and even as I know how wrong he was, and his death useless, I tremble" (p. 313). Because Miller believes that truth and justice reside somewhere in the universe, not even a death which seems useless and meaningless can deny its profoundness.

Miller's concern is for a truth which transcends the commonplace lives that men lead. He tries in his plays to project the significance of the common man's pursuit of a consistent moral and social order. Miller wants balance. The repressive social order in The Crucible, and the breakdown of order in the contradictory twentieth-century wasteland of false gods in Death of a Salesman, are extreme conditions destructive on the individual caught in them. Miller uses the family as a microcosm of the society of all men. One may say that Miller's dramatic world is clearly structured: the individual, the family, the society, and the nation. Since he assumes that these connect in important and causative ways, Miller expects his protagonists to reflect accurately the consciousness of twentieth-century man. Edward Albee, like Miller, possesses a social

<sup>43</sup> Popkin, p. 218.

consciousness he imparts to his plays. But Albee carries the individual's hopes and fears a step further than Miller by viewing them in an absurd mode. In Albee's most recent play, All Over, which probes the landscape of broken dreams, the final words are spoken by the Wife (otherwise nameless, for she is any wife): "BECAUSE . . . I'M . . . UNHAPPY."<sup>44</sup> And that is why she cries, inconsolably, irremediably. Likewise, Miller's characters are unhappy and search in vain to find out why. They want to know their places and who they are. How else can they be happy? They want to belong, but the society in which they try to find a happy and successful place stays confusing and contradictory. Miller's characters die in frustrated emptiness; Albee's die in absurdity.

Despair is not Miller's solution to anything, even though his plays appear to lead in that direction and to end in pessimism. If a play is a work of art, it must be seen as more than the sum of its parts. A play, Miller believes, can reveal the human condition as it really is. He believes the theater is the undying expression of man's most basic condition. He says that "underneath our shiny fronts of stone, our fascination with gadgets and new toys that can blow the earth into a million stars, we are still outside the doorway through which the great answers wait. Not all the

<sup>44</sup> All Over (New York: Pocket Books, 1974), p. 127.

cameras in Christendom nor all the tricky lights will move us one step closer to a better understanding of ourselves, but only, as it always was, the truly written word, the profoundly felt gesture, the naked and direct contemplation of man which is the enduring glamour of the stage."<sup>45</sup> The truth man seeks lies buried deeply within himself; through drama it occasionally surfaces and brief glimpses of it are afforded those who participate.

Miller's insight is curiously like the Absurd dramatists who followed him. The Absurd dramatists wished to show the everyday man--stripped of all supports of language, customs, traditions, and any illusions--acting, not watching, his life. In that alone is man significant. And any man who thinks while he acts can be a tragic protagonist, whether he wears robes or shirts. Miller would have us believe, putting aside rank, that the man who has the capacity to suffer and reflect on his condition is one whose experiences can be significantly tragic.

<sup>45</sup> "The American Theater" in Death, ed. Weales, p. 155.

## Chapter VI

### TRAGEDY IN THE ABSURD WORLD OF EDWARD ALBEE

Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones, Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman have one thing in common. In each there is a protagonist who is unable to find a useful and meaningful place in his society. O'Neill's Jones is destroyed by the natives of a primitive society, because he fails to understand how that society really works. Williams' Laura, a highly sensitive character, is destroyed by a harsh and competitive world which shatters her fragile nature. Miller's Loman, like O'Neill's Jones, is destroyed by his own illusions and, finally, by his fear of failure.

These characters struggle in and against a world which they see as both constructive and destructive. Even though they lose their private little wars, their struggle seems to impart some value to their lives. In Albee's plays the battle is already over. The social dislocations of individuals, their broken dreams, and their fearful sense of non-entity are expressed against a background of absurdity. Albee's plays, such as The Zoo Story, The Sandbox, Tiny Alice,

A Delicate Balance, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, and All Over, explore the effects on the individual of contemporary society's contradictory values and its images of success. Albee's characters are of all kinds. They are professional people and everyday people. They are mothers, fathers, and children. Their own experiences are nonsensical and confusing. Frightened and numbed, they seem pathetic, unhappy, and lost. One play I would like to single out for discussion is The American Dream. In this play Albee shows us the horror of getting what we want, something which has no spiritual value. Albee implies that Americans have allowed materialistic values to supersede spiritual ones. Willy Loman's life is tragic because he can think about what he has lost. But Albee's characters in The American Dream cannot even think connectedly anymore. They cannot think responsibly of their past and their future. Albee portrays in absurdity the bewildered and victimized characters O'Neill, Williams, and Miller portray in tragedy. Albee shows how absurd they are by dramatizing their lives with some of the experimental techniques of the Theater of the Absurd.

In his preface to The American Dream, Albee says the play "has something to do with the anguish of us all."<sup>1</sup> By

<sup>1</sup> The American Dream and The Zoo Story (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 54. All subsequent quotations from The American Dream are from this edition.



"us" Albee means specifically Americans, and his purpose in writing the play was to expose the thinness and emptiness of the contemporary human condition. In his words, "the play is 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 vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen" (p. 54). Albee never explains what "real values" might be, but his feelings, I think, can be understood. He does not like the way women have emasculated men (Mommy in The American Dream); he does not like the jungle and nightmare of large cities (Jerry in the Zoo Story); he does not like the disrespect people have for one another and the dying (All Over). When one adds up the experiences of these plays, protest is part of the answer. Albee protests a world of ambiguous ethics and morality (Tiny Alice); if his plays do not make clear what has been lost and what needs to be regained, perhaps it is because he does not know. Albee was a privileged child in the sense that he always had what he wanted. Yet his plays show that happiness is an illusive dream, and maybe so because something vital--spiritual?--is missing in his own life. Something of what he feels is expressed through his characters, and he apparently sees these as representing most of us. Whether or not we agree, he still feels that on the "American scene" all is not "peachy-keen."

The American Dream is a "social play," but it is not the usual social realism in which characters talk sensibly to one another about a problem. Ann Paolucci remarks that "Albee's daring techniques and novel language go beyond social commentary to the disease of contemporary life. He has probed deeper than most other American playwrights for the implications of our moral and spiritual exhaustion; and if his originality has not been properly appreciated, it is because American audiences have not been properly trained to recognize either the new idiom or the pessimistic conclusion it tries to articulate."<sup>2</sup> The "new idiom" is the Theater of the Absurd, but its conclusions are not necessarily pessimistic. Absurdity itself is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. If Albee's The American Dream seems pessimistic, it is because of its social indictment. In the strictest sense of the absurd, Albee's plays are not equal to Pinter's or Beckett's. Albee's plays are not, though they exhibit techniques related to the Theater of the Absurd, examples of a universe rendered completely random and unordered. Albee's social protest provides a point of focus for an otherwise chaotic world. He does not express a large metaphysical basis that one senses in other so-called absurdist dramatists.

<sup>2</sup> From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), p. 5.

The American Dream uses a number of techniques associated with Theater of the Absurd. It would be wise, first, to find out just what Absurd Theater is. It should be remembered, though, that Albee's social vision places him in a somewhat oblique relation to purely absurdist drama in which only images of non-reason apply.

One of the main purposes of absurd drama, Martin Esslin says, is to bring the spectators "face to face with the irrational side of their existence."<sup>3</sup> The notion that life is logical, orderly, and therefore meaningful, has no place here. "The absurd and fantastic goings-on of the Theatre of the Absurd will, in the end, be found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure" (p. 188). This theater denies order by constructing an apparently unordered action and irrational character.

The Theater of the Absurd requires the spectator's critical attention. What he hears and sees must have a meaning, but it is left to him to figure it out. Dialogue and action appear unrelated and puzzling. The play, taken as a whole, "will always confront the spectator with a genuine intellectual problem, a philosophical paradox, which

<sup>3</sup> "The Theatre of the Absurd" in Perspectives on Drama, ed. James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 189.

he will have to try to solve even if he knows that it is most probably insoluble" (p. 200).

Esslin believes that "it is in its attitude toward language that the Theatre of the Absurd is most revolutionary" (p. 194). Language is itself an arbitrary and conventional thing, a mask for reality. What is real lies behind language, beneath the surface of words, in action. Albee's use of clichés, for example, emphasizes the devaluation of language in ordinary life. The effect is that language obscures reality, real emotions, real understanding, real communication among people.

Albee defines the Theater of the Absurd as "an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense-- which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political, and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed."<sup>4</sup> As he sees it, absurd drama forces man to face senselessness and in the end to accept it. Social protest and satire do not accept the human condition as it is found, for they exist ostensibly to correct the condition.

<sup>4</sup> "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 170.

Absurdism, on the other hand, involves social protest and satirical comment to the degree that they are informative. However, an absurd play, ultimately, does not try to correct social inequities and dislocations. Instead, the play confronts the irrationality of society and tries to come to terms with it by facing up to it, not by changing it, or even trying to.

Nelvin Vos explains absurd drama as that which portrays "the disparity in man between his dream and his demarcation."<sup>5</sup> Man's condition is meaningless "because he is born without asking to be born and dies without seeking death" (p. 7). Like Albee, Vos connects the existential philosophy of man's anguish and loneliness to absurd drama. Man is "thrust into life, armed with his senses, will, and reason," and "feels himself to be a potent being. Yet his senses give lie to his thoughts and his thought defies his senses. He never perceives anything completely. He is permitted to entertain only one perspective of any object, fact, or situation: his own. At every level, man feels himself hemmed in" (p. 7). If man can face up to the condition in which he finds himself, a condition which refuses logical and meaningful explanation, he can then, and only then, "liberate" himself. Otherwise, man remains a victim either of his ignorance or of the

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee: A Critical Study (Grand Rapids: W. B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 1968), p. 7.

illusions he erects to obscure his ignorance. The purpose of the absurd play is to confront man with a paradox. The universe is at once nothing and everything. As so conceived, if one might add another paradox, it is absolutely irrational.

In an ordinary play, if one may speak of such a thing, one expects to find "characters with fixed identities; events which have a definite meaning; plots which assume the validity of cause and effect; denouements which offer themselves as complete resolutions of the questions raised by the play; and language which claims to mean what it says."<sup>6</sup> In The American Dream these expectations are not satisfied. To discuss Albee's social concerns, we must view them not as ideas which may stand alone, but as ideas which are shaped through absurd techniques which are not at all ordinary by the conventional standards of a "well-made play."

The American Dream departs from tradition in many ways. It does not provide apparent motive for action; there is no apparent sequential connection of events which lead to a climax. Furthermore, what is said conversationally is so ordinary that it does not invite us to see how Albee might be using it to set forth an idea. What the characters say to one another does not seem directed toward any purpose.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Way, "Albee and the Absurd: The American Dream and The Zoo Story" in American Theater (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 194.

Albee is using language for a purpose, of course, but it takes our studied attention to discover what it is. The characters are named Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, Mrs. Barker, and Young Man. There is no individualization, just description in these names. They are roles--the roles Americans play--which are presumably supposed to connect the real people in the audience to the players on the stage. Mrs. Barker, the only character with what appears to be a real name, turns out to be an insensible, empty-headed "mouth" who "barks" nonsense.

The play fails to yield information about the significance of its action. If the spectator is confused about the meaning of events, his confusion is similar to the character's confusion about events. No one seems to know what is going on. No one, that is, except Grandma. Albee uses her to embody something of the past, though even she is out of touch with it, and she tries to "resurrect" it now and then. She is hushed into silence and appears to Mommy and Daddy as being out of place and out of time.

The problem for everyone watching the play is to try to understand not what is happening but why it happens. For example, Mommy and Daddy are waiting, as the play begins, for someone to arrive, but they do not know who is coming or why, yet they feel they have asked someone to come. And when someone does arrive, as Mrs. Barker does, she is no help, for she cannot say why she has come, nor can Mommy and Daddy

recall asking her to come, though they must have. A little later the Young Man enters as confused as the others.

The only character who seems to know what is going on is Grandma, but her every attempt to explain things is aborted by uninterested listeners(?). It appears that she holds the key to the puzzling circumstances, but is not permitted to reveal anything. Consequently, the audience is left in the dark, frustration beginning to replace confusion. Grandma's only effective move occurs at the end of the play, and while the audience can by now understand what she knows and is doing, the other characters remain, as ever, in their illusions and fantasies.

The confusing action in this absurd drama cannot be conveyed in summary, for there is no way to convey the impressions one gets from the chatter of dialogue and the illogical events which, taken together, illustrate the irrationality of the society. But it is possible, I think, to summarize some of the elements of this strange plot in order to convey the disconnectedness of events, the banality of experience, and the grotesqueness of figurative concepts translated into literal reality. What follows are some of the aspects of The American Dream which show its social concerns as well as absurd techniques.

As the play begins, Mommy and Daddy are seated in two armchairs, waiting for someone to come. They are complaining



that no one can get "satisfaction" anymore. The stuffy apartment is in need of repairs, but no one will come to make repairs. As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that Mommy is talking to herself, not to Daddy. Daddy responds only when prompted by Mommy. The implication is that Mommy has emasculated Daddy and become boss. Other people exist only to perpetuate her illusions of grandeur. Her idea of satisfaction is to demand and get the attention and respect of other people. Of course, no one really cares about her, but she is too blind to notice.

Grandma enters the room, loaded down with neatly wrapped large and small boxes. Dropping these at Daddy's feet, she says that what is in them is nobody's business. The audience now endures the spectacle of a room full of boxes and a zany conversation carried on by Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma. Right in the middle of all this, Mrs. Barker walks in, and at Mommy's suggestion, takes off her dress to make herself more comfortable.

Seeing the boxes, Mrs. Barker thinks they might have something to do with why she has come. Grandma just moments ago refused to tell Mommy and Daddy the contents of the boxes, but now she suddenly becomes willing to tell what they are! She is cut off, however, and we do not find out that Grandma has packed her belongings in the boxes and intends to move out of the apartment until the end of the play. The purpose

of Grandma, I think, is that she represents a source of real information, but that is precisely what Mommy, Daddy, and Mrs. Barker do not want to hear. They each have their own little world to live in, completely isolated and insulated from reality.

As far as Mommy and Daddy are concerned, Grandma is nothing more than a nuisance and a threat to their way of life. Mommy fears that Grandma gets too much information from television, so she sends Daddy off to ruin her set. But Daddy cannot find any of Grandma's things when he goes in obedience to Mommy's demand. He comes back to report to Mommy, saying that he cannot find any water in the apartment either. Albee apparently includes Daddy's discovery as an example of illogic, as Ionesco has a clock strike seventeen times in The Bald Soprano, for as soon as we learn there is no water, Mommy goes off to get a drink for Mrs. Barker. Albee wants us to see that nothing makes sense in the lives of people, or even in the world for that matter.

About this time Grandma and Mrs. Barker are left alone on stage, during which time Grandma tells her all about Mommy and Daddy when they were much younger. It seems they had wanted a child, but could not have one, so they adopted one. The lady who brought the child looked very much like Mrs. Barker (and was, in fact). But the baby turned out to be a disappointment, and finally died. Mommy and Daddy never had

any more children, and in time they lost interest in each other. While Grandma talks to Mrs. Barker, the doorbell rings, even though it is reported at the beginning of the play that it is not working. This contradiction is another of Albee's attempts to render the irrationality of existence. But at least someone has come (unlike doorbells which ring in The Bald Soprano when no one is there to ring them!). The Young Man enters, and Grandma promptly devises a plan whereby both she and Mrs. Barker can use him. Indeed, that is all, we discover, he is good for: to be used by other people, yet never to feel useful to himself. Grandma has him help her move her boxes out, and then she tells Mrs. Barker to present him to Mommy and Daddy as a replacement for their first child. As these events bring the play to a close, Grandma steps outside of the room and addresses the audience. The play ought to end now, she says, when "everybody's got what he thinks he wants" (p. 127). Mommy and Daddy will again have the child they always wanted, and Mrs. Barker, by presenting him to them, will once again feel "useful" and understand why she happens to have come to see Mommy and Daddy on this particular day. Perhaps these few comments convey what is happening, but also that there seems to be no logical connection between events which occur and that no one seems to have any control. Perhaps Grandma does have control, but Albee, I think, is using her to emphasize the empty and ridiculous lives of the others.

Albee is a critic of American society, and Grandma functions primarily as his mouthpiece. This can be demonstrated in a number of instances. For example, Grandma endures the difficulty of not fitting into society. Like old people in general, Albee must think, she is simply in the way and totally useless to the economy. Mommy and Daddy are always threatening to get rid of her, to have the "Van man" come and take her away. I think Albee is indicating this attitude toward old citizens in our society.

In other instances, Grandma speaks of the insensitive treatment she receives, saying to Daddy: "You don't have any feelings, that's what's wrong with you. Old people make all sorts of noises, half of them they can't help. Old people whimper, and cry, and belch, and make great hollow rumbling sounds at the table; old people wake up in the middle of the night screaming, and find out they haven't even been asleep, and when old people are asleep, they try to wake up, and they can't . . . not for longest time" (pp. 68-69). When a little attention is shown to Grandma, a little interest in what she has to say, she is overwhelmed. Mrs. Barker implores Grandma to tell her about Mommy and Daddy, and Grandma responds by saying, "Oh my; that feels good. It's been so long since anybody implored me. Do it again. Implore me some more" (p. 95). Albee's criticism is obvious here. People live together, as Mommy and Daddy have with Grandma, but they do

not show in what they say to one another any love or concern. There is much criticism which says no one communicates anymore. So much, in fact, that the idea has become a cliché. What it means is that contemporary writers feel that people are no longer capable of using language as a means of establishing any emotional or spiritual bond with other people, perhaps because they have become themselves jaded and insensitive to everything around them.

It is not hard to find the things Albee singles out for criticism. Among them are women who are busy in one club or another, but get nothing done. Mrs. Barker is this type of women. "I'm knee-deep in work these days," she says; "there's the Ladies' Auxiliary Air Raid Committee, for one thing; how do you feel about air raids?" (p. 91). Or there is the worship of images, as in the Young Man's abstract description of himself: "Clean-cut, midwest farm boy type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful smile" (p. 107). This description is an ideal notion, and it sounds here more like directions for play-casting than a real person. America wants its images, Albee seems to be saying, more than what is human, which is to say, something imperfect. The Young Man will do anything "if there's money in it" (p. 110), an indication that material values have replaced spiritual ones. The Young Man is a dehumanized "thing." He has no emotions.

"I have been drained, torn asunder . . . disemboweled," he says. "I have, now, only my person . . . my body, my face" (p. 115). (The ellipses are pauses in thought, not my editing.) And this is the person who comes as the "American Dream," the image of our illusions. His description of himself is, presumably, Albee's criticism of American vacuity.

I use what I have . . . I let people love me . . .  
 I accept the syntax around me, for while I know I  
 cannot relate . . . I know I must be related to.  
 I let people love me . . . I let people touch me  
 . . . I let them draw pleasure from my groin . . .  
 from my presence . . . from the fact of me. . . .  
 But, that is all it comes to. As I told you, I  
 am incomplete . . . I can feel nothing. I can  
 feel nothing. And so . . . here I am . . . as  
 you see me. I am . . . but this . . . what you  
 see. And it will always be thus.

(p. 115)

If this is Albee's social statement, if this is as far as he can see, it is clearly pessimistic. "It will always be thus"! The Young Man cannot love, cannot feel, and is not complete. But he is appealing to others; his artificiality has been so well manufactured that it deceives even those who made him. They are, then, as spiritually withered as he is. Consequently, the image subsumes what is vital; illusion engulfs reality. The Young Man is the embodiment, literally, of Mommy's and Daddy's dreams. His presence is proof that they have destroyed the real person he once was by dismembering him earlier.

The original child adopted by Mommy and Daddy died because they had no use for it. Grandma explains to Mrs.

Barker that things did not turn out very well. I am quoting a lengthy passage in order to illustrate criticism in an absurd context. The absurdity of this passage arises from the fact that Albee makes Grandma and Mrs. Barker treat the metaphor as literal fact.

GRANDMA

Weeeeellll . . . in the first place, it turned out the bumble didn't look like either one of its parents. That was enough of a blow, but things got worse. One night, it cried its heart out, if you can imagine such a thing.

MRS. BARKER

Cried its heart out! Well!

GRANDMA

But that was only the beginning. Then it turned out it had eyes only for its Daddy.

MRS. BARKER

For its Daddy! Why, any self-respecting woman would have gouged those eyes right out of its head.

GRANDMA

Well, she did. That's exactly what she did. But then, it kept its nose up in the air.

MRS. BARKER

Ufghh! How disgusting!

GRANDMA

That's what they thought. But then, it began to develop an interest in its you-know-what.

MRS. BARKER

In its you-know-what! Well! I hope they cut its hands off at the wrists!

GRANDMA

Well, yes, they did that eventually. But first, they cut off its you-know-what.

MRS. BARKER

A much better idea!

GRANDMA

That's what they thought. But after they cut off its you-know-what, it still put its hands under the covers, looking for its you-know-what. So, finally, they had to cut off its hands at the wrists.

MRS. BARKER

Naturally!

GRANDMA

And it was such a resentful bumble. Why, one day it called its Mommy a dirty name.

MRS. BARKER

Well, I hope they cut its tongue out!

GRANDMA

Of course. And then, as it got bigger, they found out all sorts of terrible things about it, like: it didn't have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay . . . just dreadful things.

MRS. BARKER

Dreadful!

GRANDMA

So you can understand how they became discouraged.

MRS. BARKER

I certainly can! And what did they do?



## GRANDMA

What did they do? Well, for the last straw, it finally up and died; and you can imagine how that made them feel, their having paid for it, and all. So, they called up the lady who sold them the bumble in the first place and told her to come right over to their apartment. They wanted satisfaction; they wanted their money back. That's what they wanted.

(pp. 99-101)

Since the adopted child would not do what its Mommy and Daddy wanted it to do, they dismembered it, little by little, until it was completely destroyed. They remove its sexual parts, its hands, its tongue, and then find that it is without other body members as well, such as its head. This grotesque literal accounting suggests how serious America's problem is. America has no spiritual vitality (I think Albee equates loss of sexuality with that), and nothing to feel, say, or think.

The whole account seems a little familiar to Mrs. Barker. It should, for she is the one who gave Mommy and Daddy the "bumble" Grandma is talking about. But the point Albee makes with Mrs. Barker's confusion is that life has become so mixed up and confusing that no one knows anything any more. Identities are lost. Mrs. Barker's response to Grandma's story shows just how absurd our existence has become. Grandma wonders if her story has helped Mrs. Barker remember who she is and why she is there. Mrs. Barker answers, and

again I quote the full passage to illustrate the illogic of things as Albee sees them.

I can't tell, yet. I'll have to . . . what is the word I want? . . . I'll have to relate it . . . that's it . . . I'll have to relate it to certain things that I know, and . . . draw . . . conclusions. . . . What I'll really have to do is to see if it applies to anything. I mean, after all, I do do volunteer work for an adoption service, but it isn't very much like the Bye-Bye Adoption Service . . . it is the Bye-Bye Adoption Service . . . and while I can remember Mommy and Daddy coming to see me, oh, about twenty years ago, about buying a bumble, I can't quite remember anyone very much like Mommy and Daddy coming to see me about buying a bumble. Don't you see? It really presents quite a problem. . . . I'll have to think about it . . . mull it . . . but at any rate, it was truly first-class of you to try to help me. Oh, will you still be here after I've had my drink of water?

(pp. 104-05)

One of the facts of this crazy story ought to be stated here. It turns out that the Young Man had a twin brother who died at an early age. Since the twins were separated when they were infants, Albee intends for us to recognize the "bumble" that Grandma describes and that they destroyed as the Young Man's twin. Thus, when the Young Man describes himself as having lost all feeling, love, and meaningful relationships with other people, it must be assumed that he sympathetically experienced his brother's dismemberment. The Young Man says, "I don't know what became of my brother . . . to the rest of myself . . . except that, from time to time, in the years that have passed, I have suffered losses . . . that I can't explain. A fall from grace . . . a

departure of innocence . . . loss . . . loss" (p. 114). These losses correspond to the literal destruction of the "bumble." Albee is suggesting here, I think, a spiritual loss, "a fall from grace." But by destroying the "bumble" and getting a replacement in the person, or body, of the Young Man, Mommy and Daddy get just what they think they want: the American Dream. Mommy says, "Yes, sir! Yes, siree! Now this is more like it. Now this is a great deal more like it! Daddy! Come see if this isn't a great deal more like it" (p. 124). The irony is obvious. They accept the image as something more real than the real thing. The play's conclusion says Americans want, demand, and get illusions, and accept them, monsters of their own creation, as ideally perfect and real.

Part of Albee's technique is to carry things to an extreme. When he does, he renders the world as absurd as it seems to him to be. In the use of language, for example, Mrs. Barker in particular uses irrelevant associations and stock responses to carry on conversation. Mommy suggests that Mrs. Barker remove her dress in order to be more comfortable. Mrs. Barker says, "I don't mind if I do," a phrase she uses over and over for any situation. The absurdity of the phrase derives from its translation into literal action; Mrs. Barker takes off her dress.

Albee constantly uses worn out phrases to show us that language has broken down. Mommy uses them to talk to herself,

and Daddy uses them only to appease Mommy. The question is one of communication: what, if anything, is actually communicated?

GRANDMA

Now listen.

MRS. BARKER

Yes, Grandma. Yes.

GRANDMA

Now listen carefully. You got this dilemma here with Mommy and Daddy . . .

MRS. BARKER

Yes! I wonder where they've gone to?

GRANDMA

They'll be back in. Now, LISTEN!

There is nothing unusual about a playwright who employs the non-sense of trivial conversation, but here the clichés reveal the uselessness of language. These conversations reflect not only the ordinariness of daily life, but also its absurdity. As Grandma tells her story to Mrs. Barker, a story which Mrs. Barker accepts literally, Mrs. Barker's response invites the audience to accept the story in an equally literal way. Her phrases "How enthralling!" "How spellbinding!" "How engrossing!" and later "How disgusting!" and "Dreadful!" help the audience translate the metaphorical concepts to actuality. Albee's stage is absurd, and such a

manipulation of language brings the audience into the absurd arena. This illustrates one of the ways in which an absurd play requires its audience to confront an irrational world. It destroys the language as a reliable symbol, in the way it is used, of order and harmony. By cutting through the emptiness of ordinary language, Albee portrays the American Dream for what it really is, a sterile illusion. Albee will not let language function as an obscuring prop; the sophistry of our language is shown to hide the fact that things are senseless and illogically connected.

Absurd plays do not offer solutions; they present situations which are beyond resolution. They are based on the assumption that man's condition is enigmatic and hopelessly paradoxical. What appears to be a conclusion in The American Dream is not a conclusion at all. It is a continuation of the ever-present irrational side of our natures. The only thing which "changes" is the fulfillment of the dream in a person, the Young Man. That is Albee's indictment of Mommy and Daddy, though they cannot know that. And that makes it even worse. The play does not lead to a conclusion; Albee arbitrarily ends it just at the point when everyone thinks he is happy, has what he wants, and is "satisfied." Albee's criticism in closing the play like this is obvious, for Mommy and Daddy are "happy" with precisely the things Albee has attacked as superficial, "the substitution of artificial for

real values in our society." His conclusion, one notes, offers no remedy for the problem; what it does is reduce to the level of absurd what he calls "the anguish of us all."

Albee sees the Theater of the Absurd as the "realistic theatre." Explaining what he means, he says, "I would submit that the Theatre of the Absurd, in the sense that it is truly the contemporary theatre, facing as it does man's condition as it is, is the Realistic theatre of our time; and that the supposed Realistic theatre--the term used here to mean most of what is done on Broadway--in the sense that it panders to the public need for self-congratulation and reassurance and presents a false picture of ourselves to ourselves, is, with an occasional very lovely exception, really and truly The Theatre of the Absurd."<sup>7</sup> Albee uses the term "realistic" to mean that which corresponds to how really absurd the world is, and "absurd" to mean how foolish it is of people to think the world is really logical and orderly. This play on terms here indicates an important distinction between the two modes of thought, realism and absurdism. The former has traditionally meant that the correspondence of art and life is based upon the assumption that the actual world is logical, orderly, and meaningful. The latter term has come to refute the former notion. Absurdism says the world is without meaning,

<sup>7</sup> "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" p. 172.

order, and purpose, almost as if it were maliciously designed that way. The absurd theater tries to present the absurdity of the world, employing characters without identities, action without motive, language without meaning, and the whole without moral or spiritual significance. The absurd artist simply forces man to confront and to accept such conditions as factual and unchangeable. Whatever happens in The American Dream happens because Albee wants it to happen; thus, we are forced to feel the absurdity of Mommy's and Daddy's existence. They want "satisfaction," but instead they get a "bumble of joy," an interesting word-play on bundle. What they really get is a literal perpetuation of an illusion which ought to be seen, Albee says, as "anguish."

Albee does not seem particularly interested in identifying himself with the Theater of the Absurd, except that through it he might be able, along with others, to make people take a really "realistic" look at the condition of man. Speaking for contemporary dramatists, he says "we will experiment, and we will expect your attention."<sup>8</sup> He gets our attention with some of the techniques of the absurd, but he wants our attention so that he can tell us something, and this is what makes Albee's plays social and American-oriented.

<sup>8</sup> "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" p. 174.

Like Elmer Rice, Arthur Miller, and Lillian Hellman, Albee is a social critic. And also like them, he uses a technique and a mode which he feels is best suited to carrying his message. In all of them that message seems to be that something is deeply wrong with America and its people. If they are right, history may never be able to vindicate them, for the future seems rather bleak in their works. On the other hand, history may prove them wrong, and that it was unwise of them to perpetuate their own uncertainties, frustrations, failures, fears, and identity crises on such a large audience. Each reader must judge for himself; the drama itself can widen his base of judgment. It can make each person more responsible for the world that he constructs for himself. If Albee's play, along with many others, can get our attention, then our understanding of the world he envisions and the one we imagine to exist shall be enlarged. Albee seems to be saying, as does Grandma, "Listen!"



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