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The Everyman Motif in Edward Albee's Plays

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In the medieval morality play *Everyman*, the main character Everyman encounters Death and finally prepares for his imminent demise by turning to the character Good Works and by developing an attitude of penitence after he finds that the other allegorical characters—Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Riches—cannot help him prepare for the end of existence on earth (Potter 135-6). In contrast, the postmodern version of Everyman in Edward Albee's plays is not only preoccupied with death but with facticity in general. He (or she) has to contend with aging, disease, infertility, and other limitations in life.

Facticity ordinarily means the “quality or state of being a fact,” but I mean it more in the sense of “reality,” “limitation,” or the “limitations of existence,” similar to Heidegger's *Faktizität*, “the imperative ‘thereness’ of the world into which we find ourselves thrown” (Steiner 88). We can distinguish between three kinds of facticity: psychological or mental limitations, physical limitations, and those caused by one's situation or the random nature of events in life. It should be noted here that the importance of one's limitations often depends on the perception of the afflicted and of those in his or her environment.

This paper will focus on four plays by Albee, *The Sandbox*, *The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *Three Tall Women*, and refer to two others, *The Zoo Story* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*. There are five different kinds of Everyman or Everywoman in the plays under discussion. The mother, or would-be mother in the case of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, has to encounter aging, infer-

tility, insanity, and death, not to mention an unhappy marriage. The father, or quasi-father, has to deal with infertility or with an unsatisfying job or marriage. Another Everyman, or Everywoman, is the grandmother, who is one of the most dynamic characters in these plays; she encounters death, aging, and rejection by her own family. One other Everyman is the son; he often does not even exist and in one such case, the very notion that he exists is finally revealed to be a fantasy. One additional Everyman is the outcast; his or her limitations are psychological or are caused by society.

Let us first examine the figure of the Grandmother. She is in the process of being abandoned by her children, Daddy and Mommy, in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*. The motivation for Daddy's and Mommy's acts are clearer in *The American Dream*; Daddy and Mommy view Grandma as a nuisance because she seems old and useless to them. Grandma deals with the reality of her situation in both plays by being rebellious or mischievous. She even acts childishly in *The Sandbox* while Daddy and Mommy are in the process of burying her in sand; she bangs her shovel against her pail and shovels sand over herself.¹

The events in these two plays, as well as some of Albee's other plays, could be seen as an ironic version of the sacrament of extreme unction. A character in the two plays under discussion performs the last rites in the process of orchestrating his or her own death. (George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* performs the rites for the other characters, as will be discussed later.) That is to say, the person on the verge of death arranges the way he or she dies. In *The Sandbox* there is an actual ceremony to accompany Grandma's death: a character called the Musician plays a tune and another called the Young Man turns out to be the Angel of Death. Grandma gives instructions to the Musician and encourages the Young Man when he delivers his lines in his role as angel. At the end of the play they have this exchange:

GRANDMA: [. . .] Well. . .that was very nice, dear. . . .

YOUNG MAN: [. . .] Shhhhhh. . .be still. . . .

GRANDMA: What I meant was. . .you did that very well, dear. . . .

YOUNG MAN: (*Blushing*). . .oh. . .

GRANDMA: No; I mean it. You've got that. . .you've got a quality.

YOUNG MAN: (*With his endearing smile*) Oh. . .thank you, thank you very much. . .ma'am.

GRANDMA: [. . .] You're. . .you're welcome. . .dear.

(Albee, *The Sandbox* 42-43)

Since she has to die anyway, she has chosen to leave this world in a way to her liking, so she has the ceremony done correctly. She also enjoys herself by alternately flirting with the Young Man and acting in a maternal way towards him.

Whereas *The Sandbox* is short and very simple in style like a medieval play and is reminiscent of *Everyman*, *The American Dream* is a more elaborate version of the same situation. Daddy and Mommy are planning to have Grandma taken away by the "van man"; her apparent destination is a nursing home, but her children may be planning to have her abandoned or killed. What began as a sacrificial rite to restore equilibrium in the family ends as a playful act of self-sacrifice. Grandma assumes the role of the director or stage manager and pretends to go away in the van. She talks the Young Man into playing Daddy's and Mommy's son and advises him from the wings.

In her final monologue she addresses the audience:

GRANDMA: [. . .] Well, I guess that just about wraps it up. I mean, for better or worse, this is a comedy, and I don't think we'd better go any further. No, definitely not. So, let's leave things as they are right now. . .while everybody's happy. . .while everybody's got what he wants. . .or everybody's got what he thinks he wants. Good night, dears.

(Albee, *The American Dream* 125)

The intended victim, Grandma, defies destiny by disappearing. She becomes an invisible but guiding force on stage as an alternative to death or abandonment.²

The mother-figure is one of the more captivating characters in Albee's plays. She is a central figure in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and in the more recent *Three Tall Women*, which was first produced in 1991.³ In the latter play, the mother is divided into three selves called A, B, and C (they are three separate characters in Act I and represent the same person in Act II). A is this woman in her old age, B is her middle-aged self, and C is her young version. A reminisces about her past as B and C listen and react to her. As they discuss the present and past, we can see that A has had to face the reality of a faithless husband and is about to contemplate the meaning of her life now that she is on her deathbed. In addition to all this, she has trouble with her memory and cannot keep her age straight. This is evident from the beginning:

A: [. . .] I'm ninety-one.

B: (*Pause*) Is that so?

A: (*Pause*) Yes.

C: (*Small smile*) You're ninety-two.

A: (*Longer pause; none too pleasant*) Be that as it may.

B: (*To C*) Is that so?

C: (*Shrugs; indicates papers*) Says so here.

B: [. . .] Well. . . what does it matter?

C: Vanity is amazing.

B: So's forgetting. (Albee, *Three Tall Women* 3)

Her body is in even worse condition than her mind. She is so weak that she stays in bed most of the time; it is also an ordeal just to go to the bathroom because one arm is in a sling and she needs a walker even to go such a short distance.

Later on in the play, after falling into a coma from a stroke, A (or her conscious self) continues to discuss her life with B and C. Near the end of the play, A finds the possibility of death to be a relief:

The happiest moment of all? [. . .] Coming to the end of it, I think, when all the waves cause the greatest woes to subside, leaving breathing space, time to concentrate on the greatest woe of all—that blessed one—the end of it. Going through the whole thing and coming out. . .not out beyond it, of course but sort of to. . .one side. None of that “furthermore” nonsense, but to the point where you can think about yourself in the third person without being crazy. (Albee, *Three Tall Women* 109)

The prospect of her demise has given her a new sense of objectivity, if not a greater awareness.

Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has to cope with infertility and the vicissitudes of marriage. She is married to George, who is a forty-year-old history professor, frustrated that he has not yet become chairman of the History Department. They are continually fighting and exchanging sarcastic barbs with each other. Martha's overbearing father is president of the university, and even though she seems to respect him, George says that her father “really doesn't give a damn whether she lives or dies” (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 225). Moreover, Martha also wanted a child and when she could not conceive, she apparently began to fantasize that she had a son to the point of delusion.

As in *The Sandbox*, the events in this play are a kind of extreme unction. This time the last rites are both for the imaginary son and Martha's sense of identity. George originally participated in her fantasy about the son, perhaps to cushion her from reality, but by the end he dismantles the role of mother that Martha has created. At the end George and Martha are left with the prospect, however dim, of reconstructing Martha's self and redefining their relationship:

MARTHA: [. . .] Did you. . .did you. . .have to?

GEORGE: (*Pause*) Yes.

[. . .]

GEORGE: [. . .] It will be better.

MARTHA: [. . .] I don't. . .know.

GEORGE: It will be. . .maybe.

MARTHA: I'm. . .not. . .sure.

GEORGE: No.

MARTHA: Just. . .us?

GEORGE: Yes.

MARTHA: I don't suppose, maybe, we could. . . .

GEORGE: No, Martha.

MARTHA: Yes. No.

GEORGE: Are you all right?

MARTHA: Yes. No.

GEORGE: (*Puts his hand gently on her shoulder; she puts her head back, and he sings to her very softly*)

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf,

MARTHA: I. . .am. . .George. . . .

GEORGE: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf. . . .

MARTHA: I. . .am. . .George. . .I. . .am. . . .

(Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 239-242)

Either they will have a more realistic life together or a new game will commence in the future.

Sometimes fathers in Albee's plays can be imperious as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Death of Bessie Smith*, or they can be callous but comical characters as in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*. In contrast, the fathers in *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* take on the role of Everyman. Both George and Peter have problems conceiving children. George is infertile, just as Albee's adoptive father was, and Peter seems to have wanted a son but could not have one. We do not know enough about Peter's life to tell if he is dissatisfied with it

or not, but Jerry taunts Peter enough about it that Peter feels compelled to threaten Jerry with a knife (although he is also afraid that Jerry is about to become violent). Jerry gets Peter really agitated in this part of the play:

JERRY: [. . .] You fight, you miserable bastard, fight for that bench; fight for your parakeets; fight for your cats; fight for your two daughters; fight for your wife; fight for your manhood, you pathetic little vegetable [. . .] You couldn't even get your wife with a male child.

PETER: [. . .] It's a matter of genetics, not manhood, you. . .you monster.

(Albee, *The Zoo Story* 29)

Peter feels insecure enough about his "genetics" and his all-too-ordinary "vegetable"-like life to let Jerry get his proverbial goat.

In George's case, he cannot be a real father, but he plays at being one. Apparently, he has done so to humor Martha, but he finally cannot tolerate her delusion about the son and their tempestuous married life, so he decides to end the game, this charade that they have a son:

GEORGE: Martha. . . . (*Long pause*) . . .Our son is. . .dead.

(*Silence*)

He was. . .killed. . .late in the afternoon.

(*Silence*)

(*A tiny chuckle*) On a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a. . . .

MARTHA: (*Rigid fury*) YOU. . .CAN'T. . .

DO. . .THAT!

GEORGE: . . .large tree.

MARTHA: YOU CANNOT DO THAT!

(Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 231)

George is “killing” the son here because he would like to have a marriage based on reality, not illusion.

Another type of Everyman is the son, who is a recurrent figure in Albee’s plays. This character is often imaginary or non-existent, as in *The Zoo Story* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. In *Three Tall Women* he is a kind of prodigal son who has been simply missing for a long time. He has not even been born in the *The Zoo Story*, and even though he is an imaginary figure in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, he has to “die” as a sacrificial victim for the potential resurrection of Martha’s psyche, even though the outlook for its revival is less than promising at the end.⁴

One other kind of Everyman or Everywoman in Albee’s works is the outcast. Many of Albee’s characters are outcasts, but the most isolated characters have to deal with their own mental condition and with death. One such outcast is Bessie in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, which is set in Memphis in the thirties; she is an African-American blues singer in decline who is so depressed that she never even speaks in the play. Eventually, she is in a traffic accident and dies after being refused admittance to a “whites-only” hospital. Later her manager, Jack, explains what happened:

JACK: I said. . .this is an emergency. . .there has been an accident. . .YOU WAIT! You just sit down and wait. . .I told them. . .I told them it was an emergency. . .I said. . .this woman is badly hurt. . . .YOU COOL YOUR HEELS!. . .I said, Ma’am, I got Bessie Smith out in that car there. . .I DON’T CARE WHO YOU GOT OUT THERE, NIGGER. . .YOU COOL YOUR HEELS!. . .I couldn’t wait there. . .her in the car. . .so I left there. . .I drove on. . . .

(Albee, *The Death of Bessie Smith* 80)

An outcast from white society, Bessie has to endure racial discrimination and the tragic, random nature of events in life. Sadly enough, the color of her skin is more important than her fame or talent.

Another outcast, Jerry in *The Zoo Story*, lives apart from everyone and seems so mentally unbalanced that he gets Peter, a stranger that he has met in a park, to help

him die. Jerry apparently wanted to die in the first place. Jerry lives alone in “a four-story brownstone rooming-house on the upper West Side between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West” in New York (Albee, *The Zoo Story* 9). His mother and father are dead, and as for women, he says, “I never see the pretty little ladies more than once, and most of them wouldn't be caught in the same room with a camera” (Albee, *The Zoo Story* 11). Jerry is tired of what he regards as a meaningless, solitary existence, so he fights with his new acquaintance and then commits suicide by impaling himself on the knife that Peter holds out at him.⁵

In conclusion, the characters in Albee's plays that accept their fate in life, including the prospect of death, fare the best. Those who try to escape reality and deny their limitations only worsen their situation. This is true of Martha, who denies the facticity of her situation, in particular her infertility, and falls victim to her own delusion that she has a son. Grandma, in contrast, accepts the prospect of death or abandonment only to ironically defy it by directing or guiding the actions on stage in *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*. As for the character A in *Three Tall Women*, she seems out of touch with reality and appears to be lost in the past, but gradually becomes aware of her situation, especially after the end of existence draws near.

Whereas the protagonist of the medieval play *Everyman* finds redemption through penitence when he encounters death, the characters in Albee's plays learn to accept death or their limitations in life through awareness of the tragic side of human existence and a sense of irony (Potter 135-6). Since death cannot be escaped, Albee offers us stark honesty and a sublime form of gallows humor as an alternative to the denial of our fate.

Notes

This paper is a revised version of my presentation at the 47th Convention of the Kyushu American Literature Society, which was held at Fukuoka University, Fukuoka, May 12, 2001.

¹ The Grandma character was inspired by Albee's feisty maternal grandmother, the relative to whom he felt the closest; the author saw her as an "outlaw like me" (Gussow 33).

² There is also an allegorical dimension to *The American Dream*. Grandma could be seen as the older, humanistic version of the American Dream, whereas the Young Man is the newer materialistic version of the American Dream (Beck screens 2-7). However, the contrast between the young and the old is parallel to that between the old and new. That is, Albee is implying that materialistic thinking, contemporary trends, and the younger generation eventually tend to replace humanism and the older generation.

³ This figure of the mother in *Three Tall Women* closely resembles that of Albee's adoptive mother, Frances Albee, whom he found to be cold and overbearing. A friend of Edward's also commented that she wanted to be a "perfect Republican aristocrat" (Gussow 40).

⁴ The fact that Albee was an adopted child is closely connected to the presence in his plays of a son who is imaginary or missing. For example, the Young Man in *The American Dream* is also an orphan. See *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey* by Niel Gussow and my essay, "The Imaginary Son in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Other Plays," for more details.

⁵ Jerry is an outcast but he is also similar to the figure of the son in Albee's plays inasmuch as his parents are both dead. Likewise, the Young Man in *The American Dream* never met his father and his mother died after giving birth to him. The son in Albee's plays often feels cut off from others or, as was stated before, is completely imaginary and does not belong to this world.

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