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## Despair in Modern Drama: A Study of Edward Albee and John Osborne

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### **Abstract:**

The modernist works of John Osborne and Edward Albee subvert the ideals of Enlightenment embodied in the various institutions of the capitalist world and its ideologies of rational and scientific advance, individualism and the autonomy of human beings. While privileging subjectivity and emphasizing difference, these writers from different geographical terrains register their suspicion of established values in their respective ways. Their works reflect the consequent psychological and material devastation and reveal thereof the despair that looms large in the lives of western individuals as well as the political and the social circumstances that shaped them. The paper shall aim to explore the anguish of these twentieth century writers who made avant-garde attempts in providing alternative definitions of reality. More specifically, the texts shall be examined to analyse the various representations of the theme of despair and also the ways in which these works contribute to our understanding of the modern man's struggle between conforming to society and asserting his own identity.

**Keywords:** Despair, isolation, communication, family, social institutions, class-conflict.

Modernism attempts to record the shifts and displacements of sensibility that occurred in the art and literature in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries and took us beyond familiar reality. While it is believed to have started with the movements like Imagism and Symbolism, its end is disputed about. Frank Kermode uses the term "neo-modernism" to suggest its continuity in the post-war art. The modernist literature is, in most critical usage, reckoned to be the literature of what Harold Hasenborg calls "the tradition of the new". The task of such literature is its own self-realisation which is both outside and beyond established orders, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form.

Many practitioners rejected traditional realism and experimented with both the form and the content. This has meant though, not only a radical remaking of form, but also, as Frank Kermode says, the tendency to bring it closer to chaos, thus, producing a sense of 'formal desperation'. Indeed, Modernism would seem to be the point at which the idea of the radical and innovating arts reaches formal crisis. While some literature participated in the ideological implications of this conflict, much writing retreated into a longer-term contextualisation of the confrontation as futile and resting on debased values.

The stylistic plurality of twentieth-century art - a plurality that Andre Malraux calls the 'imaginary museum' of stylistic heterodoxy in *The Voices of Silence*, leaves it open to

various interpretations by writers as well as commentators. However, disposed to the apocalyptic view of history, the most remarkable feature of the age is its pessimism and despair. The modernist writer occupied a world that was often perceived as fragmented, where the old bourgeois ideologies of rationality, science, progress and civilisation had been somewhat discredited.

Modern European playwrights with a strong aversion to the theatrical status quo made the most important innovations motivated by radical social questionings. Beckett proposed a ‘literature of the un-word’; Ionesco designated his works as ‘anti-plays’; and Genet disliked the frivolity of theatre and hoped to achieve the abolition of characters in favour of signs. English playwrights have not been immune to the influence of the European innovators. To name a few, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Arnold Wesker and Robert Bolt are strikingly insistent in their refusal to define or specify.

Osborne’s works have been considered seminal in ushering in a new era of dramatic practice. He primarily wrote the plays of political and social rebellion that labelled him as the first of the ‘angry young men’. His twisting anguish reflected the anxieties of the age and broke up the mask of loftiness that disguised the dramatic substance. In *Look Back in Anger* and *Inadmissible Evidence*, he deals with the theme of anger and fear as an expression of frustration, lack of communication, alienation, political disillusion and search for compassion and love.

A corresponding approach was taken by modern American dramatists in their consistent violation of the theatrical convention. Edward Albee explored new kinds of fluidity and made the audience assume the chaos informing his plays as a figurative expression. He focuses his gaze on the American family, which might, however, be taken as the metaphor for the American nation. In *The Zoo Story* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Albee attempts to awaken not only his characters on the stage from their illusory conceptions of reality but the audience as well. These works question the institutions which are prioritized to the exclusion of individual values and desires.

Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) marks the beginning of a revolution in the British theatre by expressing the mood of its time in a conventional yet revolutionary style. The disillusion with the hitherto promising Labour Government, the unfulfilled dream of a ‘Socialist utopia’, the support extended by the English Church to the nuclear arms and the ever widening gap between the social classes resulted in the despair and anguish of the England’s youth who had pinned their hopes on the political development for good. The dissatisfaction with the contemporary scene is embraced in its entirety by John Osborne in *Look Back in Anger* which offers a passive resistance against the social and educational systems that have shaped its hero, Jimmy Porter.

Jimmy Porter, “a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice, of tenderness and freebooting cruelty” (*Look Back in Anger*, 53), is a highly complex personality at odds with the world. He emerges as a psycho-neurotic character, a misfit among the well-disposed people, who is caught between a desire to withdraw and a longing for recognition. His aspirations for power and status that has been denied him by his circumstances has turned him into a cruel and morbid character who is, paradoxically, also a warm-hearted idealist. Jimmy’s anger has in it elements of sincerity and a desire for an idealism where men should be more alive and human than they usually are. His detachment does not leave him unconcerned with all that he criticizes. He is dissatisfied with the inaction that has seeped into the lives of people: “Nobody thinks, nobody cares, No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm” (*Look Back in Anger*, 61). But the heroic qualities in him are contradicted by his cruelty, his inhuman violence and a dread of responsibilities. Jimmy articulates the modern man’s disillusionment with the traditional morality, the Church and the politicians in his tirades and invectives that he hurls

incessantly at various characters representing these. Alison, his wife, is a representative of the secure middle-class he is at war with. Though his marriage with her provides him an entry into the upper class, Jimmy remains on the surface and instead takes her ‘hostage’. Even as he corrupts the values Alison upholds, he assaults her verbally and enjoys the pain inflicted on her. Jimmy’s belief in suffering as a means for the ennoblement of soul leads him to foreshadow that Alison “could have a child, and it would die” (81). Alison’s silent endurance is representative of both her love and her class snobbery. She tolerates Jimmy’s insulting remarks to bring some respectability into his life. On the other hand, she finds it below her dignity to stoop to Jimmy’s level which is, however, mocked by Jimmy’s condemnation of her detachment and apathy.

Jimmy’s atrocious behaviour has often been attributed by critics to his pent-up human energy which he cannot use in the sweet stall. However, he is a typical modern hero who does not strive to better himself. He chooses a life of inaction for the fear that the entire world is against him. His persecution complex extends into his marital relation when he considers Alison’s correspondence with her family as a betrayal. Trapped in a world of meaningless codes and customs, he chooses a sinful life with Helena after Alison leaves him. His spiritual barbarism is contrasted by Helena’s fastidious morality who leaves him in the end because she believes that her affair with Jimmy is ‘terribly wrong’ and Alison has ‘all the rights’. “Whereas Jimmy lives at war with the conventions, and believes that sincerity alone can govern human relationships, Helena is equally sure that the ‘book of rules’ is necessary to sanity” (“General Editor’s Comments”. *John Osborne: Look Back in Anger*, 28).

Jimmy, thus, responds to the despair that overwhelms his life without working towards a practical solution. He finds himself lost in the world and his whole life resembles one long Sunday evening with endless reading of newspapers: “Always the same ritual. Reading the papers, drinking tea, ironing. A few more hours, and another week gone” (*Look Back in Anger*, 59). In order to escape the mundane existence, he withdraws into the world of games and role playing. Confronted with Alison’s predicament after losing the child, Jimmy is awakened to his ruthlessness and returns to the refuge of their “bear and squirrel” game that provides him a partial sanity in a world that denies love and warmth.

*Inadmissible Evidence* (1964) is considered as the most impressive play of John Osborne which presents a painful picture of Bill Maitland, a middle-aged solicitor, whose life is a frantic search for identity. John Heilpern calls it Osborne’s “most personal play” and strengthens this statement by providing an entry from the author’s confessional notebooks. He writes:

Even after life had turned sweet for Osborne after *Look Back in Anger*, he made this startling entry in a notebook dated July, 1959: “I am governed by fear every day of my life. Sometimes it is the first sensation I have on waking ... Fear in love. Fear of being deserted, fear of being involved ... I am afraid of the dark hole and the pain that grips me every day. It is fear and I cannot rid myself of it. It numbs me, it sterilises me, and I am empty, dumb, ignorant and afraid.

The author translated his anguish on the stage and created a dramatic persona with whom he shared a sense of loss and desolation. While *Look Back in Anger* was written within the confines of the conventional well-made plays, *Inadmissible Evidence* opens with an expressionistic dream sequence and incorporates many stylistic innovations. Bill’s failure to figure out a place in the world makes him escape into the world of illusions and fantasies. The play opens with Bill’s nightmare, a dream trial, which reflects his inner

fears. Bill lives in constant apprehension of being judged by the Law Society and an exposure of his inadequacies and incompetence. He tells the judge that he is “incapable of making decisions”. Despite his quick mind, he fails to retain anything. He depends on his clerks, Hudson and Mr. Jones, for solving cases:

I have to confess that: that I have depended almost entirely on other people's efforts. Anything else would have been impossible for me, and I always knew in my own heart that only that it was that kept me alive and functioning at all, let alone making decisions or being quick minded ...

(*Inadmissible Evidence*, 19)

Bill articulates his personal and professional fears in a series of monologues that reveal his mental breakdown. He depends on pills and alcohol to numb his senses and achieve a relief from his frustrations. His anguish eats him up and unlike Jimmy Porter, he has no one to share his feelings with. The suspicion that he arouses in others, his mistrust of people and his perverse dependence on women slowly leads to his isolation. His realisation of his failure and rejection leads to his despair and in order to avoid loneliness he makes frequent telephone calls to his mistress, Liz, who is the only person who has not abandoned him.

Bill Maitland's fantasies extend into his external reality which results in the distortion of communication with his clients, friends and family. The action of the play is, thus, often witnessed through Bill's consciousness. While dealing with the three women clients, he losses focus and all the women are seen by the audience as one. Bill identifies with the husbands of the three women while they read their divorce petitions and voices the husbands' concerns which are taken to be his own. So, when the women pity their husbands, it is seen as Bill's self-pity; when they ridicule them, it is Bill's self-criticism; and when they talk about their rejection by their family and children, we see an entirely isolated Bill Maitland.

Bill suffers and expects from people when he is himself incapable of giving anything. In the course of the play, his alienation is complete and he is seen as making long conversations on telephone with his wife, Anne and his mistress, Liz but the audience is uncertain as to whether or not anyone is listening to him on the other side of the line.

Post-war American drama stridently attacked social problems and Edward Albee became the spokesman for the American conscience. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin includes Albee into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd primarily because he “attacks the very foundations of American optimism”. Delving into the depths of despair, Albee's plays represent the isolation, alienation and the morbid condition of modern man. Albee's plays examined a sterile world lacking in morals, compassion and love and reflect his desire to rebel against the decadent culture of modern society. Albee believes that the theatre must force audience to ask questions. In an interview to Patricia De La Fuente, Albee said, “All serious art, not just plays, is an attempt to modify and change people's perception of themselves, to bring them into larger contact with the fact of being alive”.

In his first play, *The Zoo Story*, Albee depicts an encounter between two men, Jerry and Peter, belonging to different social classes. Jerry tries to make contact with Peter who is sitting on a bench in central park of New York reading a book. As soon as the conversation starts between the two, the differences in their socioeconomic backgrounds which were only hinted at by their physical appearance become more apparent. We come to know that Peter belongs to upper middle class society and is living a life full of comfort and luxury. Jerry questions Peter about his family, job and even his salary to highlight the

privileges Peter enjoys. Jerry aims to awake Peter and make him aware of the realities of life by shaking off the illusory mask of civilized society and exposing the amoral world that lies beneath.

Albee seems to be uncomfortable with Peter's lifestyle which represents the shady side of American Dream; a mask to cover the hollow interior. Peter, handicapped by social etiquettes, keeps a calm poise in spite of his dislike for Jerry's unsettling queries. On listening to Jerry's story, Peter becomes uneasy as Jerry does not fit in the middle-class respectability. Jerry's list of his possessions reveal his loneliness. The empty picture frames that Jerry keeps are significant as they symbolize the emptiness in his life. Moreover, Jerry's story about his landlady's dog reveal much about his approach to social interaction. Jerry observes a parallel between humans' relationship with animals and their relationship with each other. "If you can't deal with people", Jerry explains, "you have to make a start somewhere. With animals" (*The Zoo Story*, n.p.). When Jerry fails to develop a connection with the dog, he tries to kill it. But the worse happens; the dog survives and refuses to acknowledge Jerry. Thus, Jerry's revelations help us to understand the motives behind his attempts of communicating with Peter. Jerry approaches Peter in order to find intimacy and compassion. He tells Peter that he sometimes wants to "get to know somebody, know all about him" (*The Zoo Story*, n.p).

Albee's assault on the life of modern urban society is evident in Jerry's account of his visit to the zoo where he had gone to observe the interaction between animals and humans. Jerry comments that he could not get an accurate understanding of how animals interact as "...everyone [was] separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals" (*The Zoo Story*, n.p).

Again, when Peter refuses to fight for the seat on the bench, Jerry impales himself on his own knife held by Peter. By doing so, Jerry shakes Peter out of his numbness to awareness. Throughout the play, Jerry considers Peter a 'vegetable', but Jerry allows Peter to be raised to the standard of an animal after Peter has stabbed him. By allowing Peter to fight for his bench and wound him fatally, Jerry saves Peter from the stagnant life which he had been living. In other words, we can say Albee intends to make the audience aware of the effects of inaction and indifference to the cause of others. In the same manner as Bill Maitland of *Inadmissible Evidence*, Jerry stresses the need for a man to make contact with his fellowmen. While Bill's fear of losing people takes him into the world of illusions where the most he can do is make futile calls to his friends, Jerry shakes himself and Peter out of inaction and tries to strike a bond with his fellows, although very absurdly.

While alienation and communication are the major themes in *The Zoo Story*, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), Albee deals with the theme of marriage and family. He makes an attempt to scrutinize the family which can be taken as a metaphor for American society. In the essay "Albee and World Theatre," Esslin says:

His work attacks the ideals of progress, optimism, and faith in the national mission, and pours scorn on the sentimental ideals of family life, togetherness, and physical fitness; the euphemistic language and unwillingness to face the ultimate facts of the human condition that in America, even more than in Europe, represent the essence of bourgeois assumptions and attitudes. (Kolin, 63)

The play is set on the campus of New England University. It opens with the main characters, George and Martha coming home from a faculty party. From the very beginning George and Martha fight and insult each other which continues even after the visit of guests. They, like Osborne's Jimmy Porter and Alison resort to both verbal and

physical violence. George, the Professor of History, has failed to advance in life which has caused disappointment to Martha because she wished to live through his experience. She says:

“ ... this Bog, in the History Department ... Who’s married to the President’s daughter, who’s expected to be somebody, ... he can’t make anything out of himself, somebody without the guts to make anybody proud of him ... ” (*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 167)

Martha and George are dysfunctional couple who try to bring each other down and to fulfil this purpose they play nasty games like ‘Humiliate the Host’, “Get the Guests”, “Hump the Hostess” et cetera. The fact that George and Martha are named after the first President of America and his wife is highly significant. Albee seems to extend his portrayal of this faulty marriage to the institution of the marriage and family in general. It becomes explicit when the relationship of Nick and Honey is exposed as a sham. George attacks Honey and Nick and forces them to tell their dirty secrets that is quite reminiscent of Jerry’s ways. While playing the game of “Get the Guests”, it is revealed that Honey deceived Nick into marriage with a hysterical pregnancy and Nick was tempted to marry her because of her money. The knowledge that Nick, the representative of the American Dream, is living an illusory life is shocking and is meant to wake up audience from lethargy and to force them to ask probing questions.

The “Exorcism” reaches its culmination in the last act when George leads Martha into the game of “Bringing up Baby” and kills the imaginary son. Deprived of their disguises, the two couples shed off their illusory masks and are prepared to make a fresh start. However, they are aware of the difficulties involved. That is why when George asks “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf ?” (which according to Albee means “Who is afraid of living a life without false illusion?”) in the end, Martha replies, “I...am...George...I...am...” (*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, 201).

The literary representations of the mood of despair that had engulfed the modern man in the works of John Osborne and Edward Albee engage with the question of identity which is not structured by nationality and culture alone. Osborne and Albee, in their plays, portray characters from different nations and cross-sections of society who respond to the conservative establishments and crippling norms that hinder individual progress. While Osborne’s plays are social tragedies grounded in the dominant realistic tradition of the first half of the twentieth century, Edward Albee drew on different theatrical models to create a very different kind of tragedy. Their characters, however, resemble in their refusal to take a stand on the issues that concern them and their struggle to escape from the pursuit of wholeness. Moreover, while both Osborne and Albee grapple with disillusion throughout the course of their plays, their approach to the world is different towards the end. Osborne presents a problem without offering a solution. Instead, his characters prefer a world of illusion over the reality that could have made them feel more human. On the other hand, in spite of the overwhelming despair, Albee offers a hope. C.W.E. Bigsby argues that though Albee has adopted the style of European absurdist, his belief in the possibility of human communion and in man’s capacity for self-improvement distinguishes him from his European counterparts. This view is supported by Anita Stenz. She asserts that Albee’s plays while making enormous demands on his audience, can offer solution to many problems.

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