

Modern Drama and Criticism

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Preface

The aim of the book is to represent the best of thirty books and articles on modern drama. The works selected make possible a study in depth of the diverse achievements by the major English and American playwrights. The students are provided with most reliable texts, some articles that are informative enough to eliminate any immediate need for supplementary books on the plays. All the plays are annotated by the editor to expedite understanding and appreciation of the plays. No in-text citation is provided for the notes since they are chosen, amalgamated and applied to different parts of the plays by the editor.

In accomplishing the undertaking I am grateful to Professor Abjadian, Professor Pourgive, Professor Ghasemi, Professor Anooshiravani and the late Professor Kamyabee. I am also grateful to Nazila Afrasiyabi, my sister Leila Noroozi, my Cousin Farnaz Fazilat Moadeli and above all to my mother for her patience and sacrifices.

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MODERN DRAMA AN INTRODUCTION

The first important advances in modern drama and theatre were made in direction variously known as realism and naturalism. Up to the eighteen-seventies, most of the plays clung to the conventions of a decadent romanticism, even when they dealt with contemporary characters and problems. Alert and earnest men of the theatre could not fail to realize that a wide rift had occurred between these conventions and the realities of the nineteenth century.

Adapting the drama to reality was more difficult than attuning the novel to modern times, because a playwright is dependent upon the stage for which he is writing. No matter how strongly the playwright tries to make his play conform to life, he has to provide effective exits and entrances, convincing time-covering scenes, and act endings that will bring the audience back into the theatre after the intermission. He must also telescope events that the novelist would present in separate chapters, and intermingle characters whom a novelist would keep separate. Nevertheless, playwrights began to infuse their work with the breath of life and to give their art a great degree of verisimilitude than earlier dramatists had usually attained or had considered necessary.

Playwrights began to introduce detailed stage directions into their work in order to authenticate the background and behavior of their characters as well as to voice opinions they could no longer relegate to declaration by the actor as in the more artificially written earlier drama. The dramatist began to document his work, to present his material

objectively, and to pay close attention to the role of instinct and milieu in human behavior. The study of so-called instinct gave rise to modern psychological drama, the study of background to modern social drama.

No one familiar with the drama since Sophocles would maintain that "psychological drama" was invented by realists and naturalists. Not even in the clinical sense of the term was psychology unknown in the theatre until the advent of modern playwrights such as Strindberg and O'Neill. The intuitions of Sophocles, Euripides, and Shakespeare were just as valid and penetrating as O'Neill's schematizations, if not indeed more so. As Freud himself pointed out the world's artists had discovered the "unconscious" long before clinicians. But realistic dramatists were the first to represent psychological deviations or complexities directly rather than suggestively or symbolically and to locate them in familiar, contemporary backgrounds rather than to imply them in the context of myth or history.

The modernists who called themselves naturalists were dedicated to the cause of evolving a "natural science" of human behavior and considered themselves "determinists." Men, the writers tended to imply, behave as they must: that is, their hereditary traits and their instincts shape and determine their character and frequently overpower their reason or moral scruples. For a dramatist to register disapproval of a person who succumbs to his sexual or criminal drives would be as absurd as for a physician to upbraid a patient for developing a cancer.

As important as the growth of psychological and clinical studies, finally, was the advent of modern social drama, and here too the scientific attitude of the age of Darwin and Marx played a part.

Enthusiasts of naturalistic doctrine proposed to study man as a creature inexorably determined by his social situation, or milieu. The earlier romantic playwrights had introduced "local color" into the drama. The realists went one great step further and introduced environment. Writers regarded society as a reality interesting and important in its own right. If the idea that character is to a great degree a product of social factors already existed in European thought, it was still new in the theatre. The problem play that maintain a thesis directly and the drama of social agitation that openly promotes a cause won more and more adherents in the modern theatre.

In an increasingly number of instances, moreover, social drama no longer presented an individual as the central character. From such early plays as Hauptmann's *The Weavers* and Gorki's *The Lower Depth* to such comparative recent examples as Rice's *Street Scenes* and Odets' *Waiting For Lofty*, one can trace a trend toward representing a collective character or "mass hero"—a group of weavers, sailors, taxicab drivers, and the like. If "the proper study of mankind is man," is he better understood or more meaningfully presented as a singular individual or as a collective entity?

As an inevitable consequence of the new social outlook, it was the common man who came to hold "stage center"—not merely in comedies of intrigue and sentimental pieces, but in tragedy and serious plays concerned with his problem. The "little man," who had been usually presented in the older drama as the roguish servant, the lumpish peasant, or the upstart and absurd bourgeois, acquired dignity and importance in the new democratic theatre. The lonely hero was apt to be

found more and more in working class circles and among the peasantry rather in middle-class circumstances.

Among the pioneers of realistic drama are Eugene Scribe (1791-1861) and Henric Ibsen (1828-1906). Scribes characters belonged to this workday world, even if they only went through the motions of life as their author dangled from the strings of artificial plots. Scribe, however, managed to create the illusion of reality on the stage with surface effects, and he taught a generation how to hold audiences with any kind of material. He did so by spinning out intrigues, by tangling up and then unwinding situations, and by producing discoveries and unexpected twists of circumstance. He turned playwriting into a virtuoso performance like tightrope-walking and sword- swallowing. The artificial pattern he evolved has been aptly named "the well-made play," for it was made rather than lived, and it was made well in the sense that it "worked" on the playgoer by keeping him on emotional tenterhooks. The Scribian technique of surprise discoveries and turns of intrigue appeared in Ibsen's work as late as 1877, when he composed his social drama *The Pillars of Society*. Ibsen's plays analyzed the social and moral prejudices of small-town life and the frustrations they imposed on men and women of spirit and integrity.

The most celebrated dramatist of the 1890s was Oscar Wilde whose comedies bound in polished with and epigram that compel the reader with the work of Sheridan 100 years earlier. But wild unlike Sheridan, does not satirize hypocrisy and selfishness, foible and eccentricity, against a background of implicit respect for moral values and social pieties. Thus Wilde's masterpiece, *The Importance of Being*

Earnest is the product of sheer virtuosity in the exploitation of farcical situations and of vivid characters whose entertaining vagaries make no concessions to psychological subtlety or seriousness. But the glitter with, with its characteristic exploration of amoral paradox, keeps the play alive from beginning to end.

The other prominent figure of the 1890s is George Bernard Shaw who strongly influenced twentieth century drama. From the start his plays tackled social problems – slum- landlordism in *Widowers Houses*, the false glamorization of War in *Arms and the Man* and living indirectly on the profits of prostitution in *Mrs Warren's Profession*. Shaw was a great humorist rather than a profound teacher. His social thinking is important because it provides such a fine basis for the interplay of human relationships, such excellent material for thoughtful and witty conversation.

No sooner had naturalistic art triumphed after the eighteenthies than it was challenged by new romantic playwrights such as Materlinck. Scene designers denounced the realistic stage picture and became oracles of imaginative stage craft. Then followed the vogue of “expressionism,” “formalism,” “theatricalism,” “constructivism,” “futurism,” “surrealism,” “epic realism,” and other anti-naturalistic styles, although none of these ever quiet displaced realism as the dominant mode of the theatre. The least extreme changes in dramatic style occurred when naturalism was modified and writers, scene designers, and directors achieved verisimilitude with selective realism.

Among the plays that manifest a departure from realism are Materlinck's *The Intruder*, Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, and Lorca's

Blood Wedding. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* also represents a departure from naturalism in spite of its realistic content. O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* is both symbolic and expressionistic. Brecht's play *The Private Life of the Master Race* typifies so-called epic realism. Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is representative of a "grotesque" school of theatre in Italy and of frank "theatricalism." It cuts the realistic theatre into shreds, presenting a play in rehearsal and then showing the author's characters asserting their independence by enacting scenes not as he wrote them but as they experienced them in "real life." Thornton Wilder not only combines a real and, in the last part, fantasied world in *Our Town* but adopts Chinese theatricalism for his account of ordinary life in a New England town. There is much overlapping of styles in these and other plays that exemplify a reaction against naturalism. Playgoers and critics have had to adjust their sights continually in trying to make scenes of the progressive modern theatre as it has moved from style to style, often with a set of well-publicized if not always clearly defined or conclusively demonstrated principles.

The first departure from realism took the form of revived romanticism and of symbolism. When romanticism returned creditably it tended, however, to be more disciplined and temperate than in the work of early nineteenth century romanticists such as Hugo and Schiller. Symbolism was a variant form of romanticism. It arose as a poetic and somewhat vaguely defined movement, strongly influenced by the philosophical idealism of Bergson, the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and Verlaine, the painting style of the impressionists, and the music of Wagner. For a symbolist playwright such as Maeterlinck, Andreyev, or

Yeats, the world was full of wonders, and "correspondences" could be found between actual reality and indefinable spiritual undercurrent. In some plays, the symbolism was simply an extended and elusive metaphor: in the others the symbol was obtrusive, with figures like Death or Hunger appearing on the stage-as in Andreyer's plays. The personification of abstractions, indeed, has persisted to some degree ever since the vogue of symbolism between 1890 and 1914. We may cite Paul Osborn's *On Borrowed Time*, in which Death, or Mr. Brink, wears a bowler hat, and Philip Barry's *Here Come The Clowns* in which the devil is a vaudeville illusionist.

Notable after the poetic and spectacular ventures of the symbolists was the work of the expressionists. Expressionism was foreshadowed by the dramatic experiments of Strindberg and Wedekind and become full blown after the first World War, especially in Central Europe. The new style promised to effect a challenging transvaluation of dramatic and theatrical values. Expressionistic techniques were employed by playwrights such as Strindberg and O'Neill who endeavored to express personal tensions and problems they considered representative of modern man's alienation in materialistic society. Believing that poetic feeling alone was ineffectual and that realism could project neither inner experience nor the external world as it presented itself to the troubled spirit, they restored to a fragmentary constantly dissolving picture. They regarded the inner self not as a fairly orderly organism that moved more or less toward well-defined, attainable ends such as winning a girl in marriage or getting on in business, but as a highly unstable compound of promptings and confusions.

Such dramatists as Strindberg and O'Neill concerned themselves with the inner fact of psychological division. The form of plays such as *The Dream Play*, *The Spook Sonata*, *Emperor Jones*, and *The Hairy Ape* therefore became a whirl of fragmentary events in short scenes. And since the external world is the world formed by the perceiver, it fragmented itself, too. It appeared dislocated, turned out of shape, and exaggerated by the character's state of mind as well as, of course by the author, who intended to give us his view of the world as distressingly disordered and of the times as wholly out of joint. Strindberg, for example, made life on this planet took like a nightmare in *The Dream Play*, in support of his more or less Buddhist view in the play that all life was a delusion and a meaningless suffering. Supplementary characters changed their identity again and again or acquired abnormal attributes in Strindberg's expressionist plays. O'Neill's burly stoker in *The Hairy Ape* hurls himself at well-dressed citizens coming out of church only to rebound from them because they represent a society to which he cannot belong.

Making a subjective world out of an objective one ordered by conventional perceptions, playwrights even abolished the conventions of time and place. The Officer in *The Dream play* changes from youth to middle age to old age with uncanny rapidity. Past and present time mingled freely in expressionist drama; memory scenes intruded into a present situation and not only dominated but altered it. Strindberg's officer goes back to his childhood school as a teacher only to find himself a pupil again, unable to do simple arithmetic. O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* is assailed by memories of his past as he tries to escape from his enemies-

memories of life on the chain gang in the United States, which he had experienced personally, and “racial” fears of ghosts and of the auction blocks of the slave traffic.

Expressionists, then found uses not merely for conventional fantasy as old as the theatre but for dream formations and for explosions of the Freudian and Jungian “unconscious.” The playwrights’ inventions appeared not in the context of stable, everyday consciousness but in the elusive context of an altered field of consciousness. The significant element in expressionism was the “psychological,” by which is meant neither the ordinary probing into the motivations of characters in realistic drama nor the simple, mechanistic psychology of the nineteenth century before the work of Charcot and other forerunners of Freud. Expressionism presented processes of exaggeration, condensation, and distortion that defy Aristotelian logic or have a subconscious logic of their own. The theatre began to play host to the phenomena of “free association,” the “stream of consciousness,” depersonalization, strange recurrences, “split” personality, schizophrenic behavior and mental telepathy. By comparison with the explorations undertaken by expressionist playwrights, Arthur miller’s imaginative treatment of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is elementary.

Up to 1950 England enjoyed some sixty years of modern drama, a good part of it contributed by Irish born writers. By 1950 England appeared to be on the eve of a renovation. In this Period T.S. Eliot had finally succeeded in writing a modern poetic drama, *The Cocktail Party*.

Eliot’s plays have been, directly or indirectly, on religious themes. *Murder In The Cathedral* deals with the murder of Archbishop

Thomas a' Becket in an appropriately ritual manner, with much use of a chorus and with the central speech in the form of a sermon by the archbishop in his cathedral shortly before his murder. *The Family Reunion* deals with the problem of guilt and redemption in a modern upper-class English family; it makes a deliberate attempt to combine choric devices from Greek tragedy with a poetic idiom subdued to the accents of drawing-room conversation. In his three later plays, all written in the 1950's *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*, and *The Elder Statesman*, he achieved popular success by casting a serious theme in the form of a sophisticated modern social comedy, using a verse that is so conversational in movement that when spoken in the theatre it does not sound like verse at all.

It was John Osborn who dealt the final death blow to the short lived revival of poetic drama. His *Look Back In Anger* written in 1956 marked the beginning of a theatrical era. In the hero, Jimmy Porter, he projected the "Angry Young Man" whose rebelliousness and disillusionment shout themselves hoarse with more fluency than cogency. With a university education behind him, Jimmy is running a sweet-stall. He has married the daughter of a well-to-do army officer whose class he volubly condemns. The theme of irrational alienation and estrangement assumed by young beneficiaries of post-war social and educational advance touched a sore nerve and at the same time won sympathetic applause.

With the emergence of the theatre of the absurd in Europe the theatrical balance had seemed temporarily to tilt towards Europe in the fifties. Beckett, Ionesco, Adamove and, more tangentially, Pinter, seemed

to be placing the conventions of theatre under pressure, to be issuing a challenge to a drama rooted in psychology and sociology. The plays of Ionesco, Adamov, Pinter and Becket caused bewilderment. They have not yet been generally understood. As Esslin argues these plays have no story or plot to speak of, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets. These plays often have neither a beginning nor an end, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares and unlike the previous plays these often consist of incoherent babblings. These plays must be judged by the standards of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Each of these dramatists is an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world. Each has his own personal approach to both subject matter and form; his own roots, sources, and background. If they also have a good deal in common, it is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and their anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western World. The Theatre of the Absurd can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our own time. The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus tried to diagnose the human situation in a world of shattered beliefs:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.¹

In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined absurd as “that which is devoid of purpose. ...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”² This sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter and the others.

Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. The theatre of the absurd is trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed. The theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the word spoken by the characters.

The major star in the constellation of twentieth century playwrights is Samuel Beckett. He confessed his special concern with human impotence. Beckett takes away man's property, family, place in society, function in society, and then begins to strip him of the normal human equipment (legs and mobility, for instance). Estragon and Vladimir, the two tramps in *Waiting For Godot* have no home and no locale; but they seem unaware that they have no home and locale. They do not expect the normally expectable. Life, to which we are condemned by birth as Beckett so often reminds us, is a perpetual movement through time and space. But the opposed metaphors of 'pursuit and flight' and 'wandering' suggest two contrasting ways of coping with the situation—the ways of Pozzo and Estragon and Vladimir and his other characters.

Man's inability, his limitations and his place in the universe are at issue in Beckett's plays. In *Happy Days* written in 1961 we find a woman, Winnie, buried waist-deep in sand against a background that suggests the aftermath of an atomic holocaust. Her companion, Willie, is barely visible behind the mound. The conversation of the two is outrageously out of keeping with their situation. Our familiar postures and verbal habits, the standard poses of human wisdom and consolation, are subjected to a ruthless scrutiny in being adopted by the half-buried woman. The counters of contemporary discourse—pretentious and unpretentious—are employed in a situation of impotence and near total negation in which they bear the weight of sheer tragedy and comedy at the same time.

Endgame written in 1958 continues the same preoccupations, with Nagg and Nell in dustbins and their blind son chair-bound. Against

paralysis and powerlessness of this kind Beckett brilliantly deploys a dialogue that is at once tragically and farcically at loggerheads with the immediate. It moves to tears and laughter, yet compassion persists through nightmares of negation and absurdity.

Another significant of the new voices in the theater of the late 1950's turned out to be that of Harold Pinter. *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and the one act plays such as *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Room* quickly established him as a master of a new conversational tonality in which the phrases and rhythm of day-to-day talk are produced with uncanny fidelity: yet so planted that their very ordinariness, their reiteration and their illogicality carry overtones of menace mingled with humor. The label 'comedy of menace' has been used to categorize Pinter's work. It does justice to the suggestively oppressive uncertainties that overhang his sojourners in tenements and basements. In *Birthday party*, when two hearty guests descend upon the seaside boarding-house to victimize poor Stanley, the audience is not sure how deep in criminality, brutality or insanity various characters may be, what sinister recoil from the past or what threat from the future it is that shadows the acridly comic celebrations and cross-examinations. The basis of menace and humor alike is the inadequacy of communication, captured in many a deft inconsequentiality.

Even though Pinter's plays often seem bizarre and rather mysterious, they are nevertheless overtly realistic in their mood and movements. His characters, for example, are clearly upper, middle, or working-class types although that is not to say that they are typological or allegorical. Even though the problems of only single character may be

paradigmatic, they are also distinctly individual. In Pinter one never discovers what any character's personality was. They are open and incomplete as all men are open and incomplete.

Pinter's theater is consequently given to psychological realism rather than to social realism. His preoccupation is with the isolated individual and not the machinations of mace or miter or suffering masses. But he is, paradoxically, more the realist than the realists. He cuts his "slice of life" thinner and thereby makes it more nearly translucent. Though he may portray a mad society, the basic commitment of the realist is to reason the reasoned analysis, the reasoned solution. Pinter has no necessary obligation to reason, for his province is the psyche where there are things unaccountable to latiocinative man.

Pinter employs language to describe the failure of language. Language is obviously important in Pinter's effort to get across to us, but we must also recognize the many occasions when it is through silence that he communicates. There are many ways in which Pinter uses silence articulate, but the first, and perhaps most common, is simply the pause. The pause occurs when the character has said what he has to say and is waiting for a response from the other side, or it occurs when he cannot find the words to say what he wants to say. In either case he has attempted to span the chasm that exist between him and those around him. He is caught up short: he has reached the limits of language and now waits in silence for something to happen.

In Pinter's plays dramatic irony emerges from the disparity between expectation and result. But Pinter's irony goes beyond "dramatic" or "Sophoclean" irony; it is existential irony. Pinter's plays

may be ironic at many levels but their most pervasive irony arises from our confrontation with the world we actually live in but do not recognize. Thus the deepest ironic intent in Pinter's work is to make strange that which is familiar and to make familiar that which is strange.

Among the themes which preoccupy Pinter are the room as a haven from the threatening world outside, the search for the truth, the quest for identity, and the struggle for possession. The room is suggestive of the encapsulated environment of modern man, but may also suggest something of his regressive aversion to the hostile world outside. In the play *The Room* what is the focus of Pinter is the character's psychological peril rather than their social deprivation. Thus the social environment is supplanted by their psychological environment and the psychological environment is the product of the needs and weaknesses of those characters. For Pinter, there is no contradiction between the desire for realism and the basic absurdity of the situations that inspire him. Like Ionesco, he regards life in its absurdity as basically funny up to a point. To Pinter life is funny because it is arbitrary, based on illusion and self-deceptions.

America was anyway ill-suited to the absurd in a number of respects. Nonetheless, 1959 did turn out to be a significant year for the American theatre. Miller's and Williams' plays had opened on Broadway while the production of Albee's *The Zoo Story* suggested the emergence of a major new talent.

As the American dramatist is often torn between a desire for the apparent security of realism and the temptation to experiment, so in Edward Albee's work, we see a tension between realism and the theatre

of the absurd. *The Death Of Bessie Smith* is a purely realistic play, and *Whose Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* is, for all its showiness, no more than a cross between sick drawing-room comedy and naturalistic tragedy. *The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream* are, on the face of it, absurd plays, and yet, if one compares them with the work of Beckett, Ionesco or Pinter, they all retreat from the full implications of the absurd when a certain point is reached.

Albee has attracted to the theatre of the absurd mainly because of the kind of social criticism he is engaged in. Both *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* are savage attacks on the American Way Of Life. The techniques of the theatre of the absurd, which is itself preoccupied with the devaluation of language and of images, and with the deceptive nature of appearances, are so ideally suited to the kind of social criticism Albee intends. It is for this reason, too, that he has felt able to use the techniques of the theatre of the absurd. It is possible to see the absurd character of certain social situations without believing that the whole life is absurd. In Albee's case, however, this has meant a restriction of scope, and his plays do not have the poetic quality or imaginative range of *Waiting For Godot*, or *The Caretaker*, or *Rhinoceros*.

The absurdist habit of mind is overwhelmingly intellectualist, metaphysical even. It constantly asks the question "What is the meaning of life?" and finds as an answer, "There is no meaning," or, "We do not know," a discovery which may be horrifying or comic, or both. For the playwright who accepts that he is living in an absurd universe, the loss of faith in reason which is at the heart of this vision and the conviction that the rational exploration of experience is a form of self-deception, imply a

rejection of those theatrical conventions which reflect a belief in reason. Characters with fixed identities; events which have a definite meaning; plots which assume the vitality 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—none of these can be said to be appropriate means for expressing the dislocated nature of experience, then, the theatre of the absurd represents a search for images of non-reason. Albee used these images of non-reason in his attack on the American way of life. He uses these techniques but stops short of the metaphysics which makes the techniques completely meaningful.

Edward Albee, in *The Zoo Story*, seems to partake of some of the characteristics of absurdism. The language is apparently inconsequential at times; the relationships are unsure or inexplicable; motivations both for speech and action seem governed less by rational processes than by a meaningless spontaneous reflex, the 'meaning' is elusive and, like so many absurd plays, there is 'no beginning, no middle, no end.' Gareth Lloyd Evans argues that there are two main reasons for placing doubt on the claim for Albee's absurdity. The first is the absence of characteristic absurd vision. This is absent from all of his plays, including the chief candidate for acceptance—*The Zoo Story*. In that play the frenzy, the change of mood, the menace, seem to be less an attribute of character than an exercise of quixotic theatricality. Apart from this, we find ourselves eventually wondering whether this sort of episode happens often in Central Park— in other words the play is less an image than a brilliant

piece of quasi-naturalistic guignol. The second arises from the degree of 'naturalism' which is present in Albee's play and which, finally, separates him from the absurdists. Both the degree and its extent is rooted in Albee's sensitive, almost nervy feeling for contemporary American society. He is a superb demonstrator and explicator of certain aspects of Americanism. In order to align him with Pinter we should have to say that in Pinter we find the best mirror of certain aspects of British society today- and nothing else. It is Albee's commitment to a surgical analysis of certain aspects of American society which debars him from acceptance as a complete and pure absurd dramatist. Some details of attitude that he takes up toward his society are reminiscent of the typical absurdist vision. *The American Dream*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, *The Zoo Story*, in particular exhibit the meaninglessness of certain habits of behavior, speech, mores, cults, myths. Again, all three plays, to a degree, brilliantly dissect certain sterile usage of speech. *The Zoo Story*, especially, is redolent of Pinter's concern with human isolation and the dark wastes of non or partial communication.

It must be said that Albee's apparent preoccupation with an inability to beget children (in *The American Dream* and *Virginia Woolf* as an image of sterile futility is, in itself, an 'absurdist, point of view. But, in all this, there is not the characteristically absurdist miasma of menace, sometimes terror, the sense of unfathomable contexts behind the immediate world of the play, the implacable atmosphere of amorality, the curiously paradoxical use of language in a 'poetic' fashion to demonstrate, often, the futility of language itself. Indeed it is in the use of language that we can find the distance from European absurdism and the

closeness to Americanism. In Albee, too, is perhaps the clearest proof, if not the deepest, that the American language is not the same thing as the English language.

Notes:

1-Alber Camus, *Le Myth de Sisyphe* (paris: Gallimard, 1942), p. 18.

2- Eugène Ionesco, 'Dans les Armes de la Ville', *Cahiers de la compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault*, Paris, No.20, October,1957.