

THE CONCEPT OF CRUELTY IN THREE EDWARD ALBEE'S PLAYS¹

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Abstract. *The main purpose of this paper is to analyze the ways in which cruelty is used in the selected three plays by Edward Albee. All of the ways examined can ultimately be connected to the central purpose of the Theatre of Cruelty by Antonin Artaud, which is to reveal what is real, or, as Albee claims, to put up “an accurate mirror of reality” (Amacher 1969: 22). The first part of the paper covers definitions of cruelty and the Theatre of Cruelty, and also connects Edward Albee to Antonin Artaud. The following three sections provide the analysis of the plays by Edward Albee - “The Zoo Story” (1959), “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” (1962), and “The Death of Bessie Smith” (1960). There are different ways in which characters in these plays use cruelty; in “The Zoo Story” cruelty is combined with kindness in the shape of teaching emotion; in “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” the characters use cruelty to annihilate the illusion and perform catharsis and exorcism; and, finally, in “The Death of Bessie Smith”, cruelty is presented in the form of psychological and verbal abuse.*

Key words: Albee, Artaud, cruelty, drama, theater, theater of cruelty

1. INTRODUCTION

Edward Albee is usually associated with the European Absurdist, since, as Ruby Cohn (Cohn 1969: 6) explains, he is concerned with dramatizing “the reality of man’s condition”. However, unlike Beckett, Camus, and Genet, the prominent Absurdist notable for the way they present that reality in all its irrational absurdity, Albee focuses on illusions that screen man from reality (Cohn 1969: 6). His endeavor is to bring forward the reality behind illusions which people create in order to survive. Unfortunately, that which is genuine lies deep under the layers of self-imposed illusions

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of his characters, and those illusions can only be crushed with something fundamentally shocking – cruelty.

In this paper we will focus on the ways Albee uses cruelty in his plays, which ultimately connect him to the Theatre of Cruelty and its essential goal of revealing the real image of the world, or, as Albee calls it, to put up “an accurate mirror of reality” (Amacher 1969: 22). All of those ways are supposed to present the world as it is and eventually contribute to a change in the characters and the audience as well. This paper is divided into the following sections. First of all, definitions of cruelty and the Theatre of Cruelty are provided as a theoretical background of this paper. The three subsequent sections are focused on analyzing the three different ways in which Edward Albee uses cruelty in his plays. The first way is used in his debut play, *The Zoo Story*, in which cruelty is combined with kindness in the form of teaching emotion, used to shatter the walls of the self-imposed mental enclosures in which people choose to live. The second usage is present in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the play which is also connected to Aristotle’s concept of bringing about catharsis as a purpose of plays. In this play, the main role of cruelty is to destroy the illusions which connect a married couple and, eventually, bring about catharsis and exorcism. Finally, cruelty is used in the form of psychological and verbal abuse in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, as a way of screening oneself out from fear and self-loathing. All of the final remarks relate to the ways Albee uses cruelty to the main objectives of the Theatre of Cruelty.

2. CRUELTY AND THE THEATRE OF CRUELTY

Aristotle outlines the importance of tragedy in his *Poetics*. The role of tragedy is to rebalance the soul through catharsis, and to expose individuals to the incidents which are serious, and those which arouse pity and fear, in order for them to be cleansed of negative emotions (Aristotle, Bywater 1909: 17). Throughout the years, many theorists have been validating Aristotle’s notion of importance of catharsis by creating new forms of theatre which are focused on achieving catharsis. A notable new form of theatre is Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, which is focused on initiating a change in the audience through catharsis most effectively by portraying cruelty. Before explaining the purpose of his theatre, we shall provide definitions of cruelty.

When explaining the concept of cruelty, the appropriate term is ‘empathy erosion’. At the moment of committing a cruel act, a special circuit in the brain connected to empathy goes down (Baron-Cohen 2011). This means that cruelty is any deliberate action motivated by the desire to produce physical or psychological suffering; those actions result in indifference and pleasure in other people’s distress (Mayes 2009: 14). This definition specifies cruelty as a predominantly destructive drive that exists within people, which is usually aimed at inflicting either mental or physical pain on others. However, destructive as it may be, cruelty is perceived rather favorably in the context of theatre, particularly, in the context of bringing theatre closer to the audience and inciting a change in them. The following section is dedicated to explaining Antonin Artaud’s viewpoint on the bond between the theatre and cruelty.

One of the crucial changes which took place after World War I is the altered mindset of the people, particularly, the awakening of the interest in the subconscious. This is the era when notable scientific explorations of Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung contributed to the

understanding of the subconscious. Their observations of the subconscious prove to be an inspiration for the realm of art, especially for Antonin Artaud. Artaud's stance is that subconscious is the source of truth, which is why he creates the Theatre of Cruelty, which is meant to restore the convulsive and passionate conception of life in the theatre; cruelty applied in this kind of theatre is bloody when necessary, and can be identified with 'severe moral purity' which is not afraid to pay life the price it must be paid (Arto 1992: 161). In his book *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), Artaud points out that the double of the theatre is life, the metaphysical reality which Western society has lost contact with (Arto 1992: 162). In the same book, in his *First Manifesto*, he outlines the important details of such kind of theatre: the spectacle, the language, the cries, musical instruments, gestures, lightning, costumes, mannequins, masks, and, of course, cruelty. All of the mentioned factors are to be used as a means of shock, in order to include the spectator in the fundamental cruelty of life. The purpose of cruelty in theatre is to destroy the illusions imposed by the society and show the real picture of the world. In his book *Understanding Edward Albee* (1987), Matthew C. Roudané quoted Albee's observation that he does not like his audience as a passive spectator, but rather as a participant and that, because of it, he agrees with Artaud that blood needs to be drawn sometimes (Roudané 1987: 12). What makes Albee the leading proponent of using cruelty as a means to effect a sense of catharsis, and that which connects him to Artaud and Aristotle, is his insistence on including his audience as much as possible in what is happening on stage. Artaud's influence on Albee can be seen in terms of physical, psychological, and metaphysical violence which is shown on stage (Roudané 1987: 13). Albee's ultimate goal is to use cruelty in order to create a chance for contact and conversation, through which the protagonists will be stripped of illusions, allowing them to engage in communication which will make them more honest with both their inner and outer world (Roudané 1987: 23).

In this paper we examine three ways of using cruelty in the plays of Edward Albee. First, we analyze the play *The Zoo Story* and show how Albee uses cruelty for the purpose of teaching emotion. Second, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* demonstrates how cruel behavior is used in order to bring about catharsis and exorcism. Third, we analyze cruelty through psychological and verbal abuse in the play *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

2.1. Teaching emotion in *The Zoo Story*

The Zoo Story, Albee's debut play, represents the encounter between the two ways of life in America in the 1950s. At the same time, through the characters of Jerry and Peter, it allows the author to make remarks about the current social problems, by pointing out the illusions people create to cope with life, the alienation of the individual from the other human beings, and the loneliness people experience (Amacher 1969: 309). As Bigsby (1984: 257) indicates, the play is an encounter between two men: "Peter, who has accommodated too much to life, to his society, to his environment, who has made too many final choices too soon; and a younger man called Jerry who in the course of the play tries to transfer a sense of all the anguish and joy of being alive to Peter. In order to accomplish this transference, he must precipitate an act of extraordinary violence". However, the cruelty Jerry must apply is not used only for the sake of violence. Albee tries to go deeper and to elicit a response in Peter through the character of Jerry by using cruelty combined with love, in the shape of teaching emotion, since neither love nor cruelty on their own have any effect (Nastić 1995: 70). The character of Jerry enlightens us about life using teaching emotion. He explains that neither kindness nor cruelty on

their own create any effect beyond themselves, but that both of them used at the same time, create teaching emotion (Albee 1959: 9).

Ever since their first and final encounter, Jerry uses different means of applying teaching emotion. Using a mixture of cruel and kind words at first, he is trying to incite a conversation with Peter. He is mocking the fact that Peter has no son, the fact that he belongs to a higher middle class. Even though Jerry sounds harsh at times, Peter is drawn to him thanks to Jerry's usage of the paradoxical combination between kindness and cruelty (Parker 1987: 115). As Parker (1987: 111) claims, kindness comes from spiritual nature, cruelty from animal nature, and indifference stems from social conditioning which reduces one to the level of a vegetable; Jerry is using teaching emotion to harmonize the split between the body and the soul of a man. He notices that Peter is almost complacent, seemingly satisfied with the life which he is leading, but Jerry is quite aware that no one can be completely happy with such a lifestyle. He wants to inform Peter of other ways to live one's life, and that life is not as perfect as Peter makes himself believe. Jerry tries to paint a cruel picture and tells Peter of his life in a rooming-house, with a crying woman, a guy in a kimono, and a Puerto-Rican family (Albee 1959: 4); not everyone is leading a satisfactory life. Rather, as the name of the play suggests, everyone is occupied solely with their own existence, separated by bars, living in their own enclosure. There is a failure of communication and a lack of understanding in the modern world since people tend to be concerned only with what is happening to them. Albee realizes that this is not a right way to lead a life, which is why he introduces the character of Jerry who must apply teaching emotion. Therefore, Jerry first uses cruelty to dismantle the socially constructed walls, and then offers kindness to prove that humanity still exists within people.

The story of a dog told by Jerry during their conversation is a miniature of the play, a story within a story. Jerry lives in a rooming-house, owned by a landlady whose pet is a horrible, huge, black dog with bloodshot eyes. Ever since their first encounter, the dog attacks Jerry, but only upon his entrance to the rooming-house. Jerry decides to, first, kill the dog with kindness, and if that does not work, to simply kill him. He uses poisoned burgers which he offers to the dog; eventually, the dog does not attack him one day, since he is, as his owner informs Jerry, sick. At that moment, Jerry realizes that he wants the dog to survive, in order to see what can be a result of their encounter. They do come across one another, but nothing happens. They share a look and proceed with their lives. In the end, what is gained is loss; Jerry and the dog neither love nor hate each other since they are not trying to reach one another anymore (Nastić 1995: 70). Jerry finally comprehends that the situation is not so beneficial, and that it can actually be applied to the human contact which he experiences every day as well – indifference is detrimental to humanity, and everyone has become completely unsympathetic. This story is another way to awake the sleeping consciousness of Peter, the complacent one.

Peter fails to understand the story and fails to obtain teaching emotion, so Jerry has to resort to doing the same thing with Peter as he did with the dog. But, he tries once again to bring him to his senses and tells him that he realized, in the zoo he visited prior to their encounter, that everyone is separated by bars from everyone else (Albee 1959: 11). Bars which need to be eliminated using teaching emotion in the modern society are the bars of education, language, religion, social status. Those cages function only as psychological dividers between people, which prevent meaningful interactions (Roudané 1987: 39). Jerry then proceeds to push Peter, trying to dispose him of his bench, he shoves him off, hoping that this would awake the animal side to his personality which is the only one that can save Peter's individuality. He keeps on trying to make him react and to make a

contact with him; since everything fails, he takes out a knife, throws it in front of Peter and orders him to pick the knife and fight for his bench, for his self-respect (Albee 1959: 12). He continues with the insults and punches, and when Peter finally takes the knife, Jerry impales himself, and both of them scream, and share the ritualistic nature of the Theatre of Cruelty. Death is the ultimate cruelty which is necessary to bring down Peter's walls and educate him, making the teaching emotion worthwhile (Roudané 1987: 42). Jerry finally manages to make contact with someone.

Albee uses cruelty in this play to prove that communication is not possible unless the walls imposed by the society are shattered. Two different men with two different lifestyles cannot fully comprehend one another unless ultimate brutality is used. Peter fails to understand that it is not moral to live your own life with disregard for other people. Even though Albee is accused of being pessimistic with Jerry's death, he claims that death was the only way Jerry could educate Peter. Death is necessary because Peter refuses to understand and shows disdain for Jerry's attempts at teaching. Therefore, Jerry decides to sacrifice himself in order to transfer some meaning onto Peter, thus making death the ultimate means of communication (Roudané 1987: 32). This can be connected to the purpose of the Theatre of Cruelty, since teaching emotion discloses the authentic state of the society after World War II. The reality is even more cruel than the means used to reveal it because people do not communicate, they are alienated, they live in illusions and loneliness, unaware of the pain which is needed to be fully alive; Jerry feels the urge to combat this cruel isolation aggressively, to the death (Amacher 1969:30)

2.2. Exorcism and Catharsis in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Exorcism, despite its religious purpose of eradicating demons within people, has an important role in psychotherapy as well; in its essence an act of eliminating demons, when it comes to psychotherapy, it is supposed to destroy the metaphorical 'demons', such as mental, psychological and emotional traumas (Diamond 2008), which can strongly affect a person's psyche and their life as well. Prior to that definite act of annihilation of the trauma-shaped demons, people have to go through another process called catharsis, which represents the cleansing of tension and emotional conflicts by living through mostly hidden emotions (Krstić 1989: 250). The importance of catharsis is emphasized by Aristotle, who points out that fear and compassion should be incited in the audience in order to force out the irrational through tears and laughter, and purify the emotions of the audience through the process of catharsis (Aristotle, Bywater 1909: 17).

Cruelty is vital to bringing about catharsis and exorcism; it is essential to show violence on stage in order to reveal the true picture of the world, to achieve catharsis and exorcism through fear and cruelty instead of fear and pity (Arto 1992: 23). Albee decides to place a married couple in a situation in which they have to undergo such a process. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play in which Albee strips his protagonists of illusions and guides them through a process of profoundly altering their attitude towards reality (Roudané 1987: 23). Performed for the first time in 1962, it offers an insight into the lives of the Americans after the 1950s. The play suffers a lot of criticism, and it is described as a sick play for sick people (Weber 2016).

Albee uses the characters of Martha and George, a married couple, in order to attract and appall the audience at the same time, due to the characters' relationship which is a mixture of love and hate (Roudané 1987: 71). From the very beginning of the play, it is obvious that their marriage is quite dysfunctional. When another married couple comes to

their house, it becomes even more obvious that their relationship is based on a never-ending line of cruel, verbal games. Albee's effort in this play is to show that beneath all the cruelty, a string of love connects Martha and George (Roudané 1987: 71). However, their predispositions render them unable to admit that they deeply care about each other (Amacher 1969: 86). The ritualistic games of 'peeling labels' are supposed to remove the emotional attachments to the myth which permeates and destroys the couples' life, and to allow the purification of negative emotions and exorcism or the destruction of the demons (Roudané 1987: 80). The demons that are supposed to be cruelly destroyed are the threads of illusions carefully wrapped around the central illusion which keeps the two of them together – their imaginary son.

The first act, *Fun and Games*, initiates a ritual or, rather, sadistic verbal duels between Martha and George. A seemingly normal conversation escalates into Martha's remark that George is 'a zero', that he makes her want to puke, whereas George retorts that it is sickening to see Martha in a drunken state, with her skirt up over her head, which is a comment on her sexual encounters with other people (Albee 1962: 18). Those duels have always been present in their relationship, and they are actually their attempts at communication. As soon as the guests arrive, their ritual is appropriated in order to include the guests as well; Martha is seducing Nick, the young professor, while his wife, Honey, is apparently unaware of that. George, on the other hand, sees right through his wife's intention and lets her have her own way. However, when Martha mentions their imaginary son to Honey, he realizes that the boundaries between the real and the illusionary are no longer there for his wife. Therefore, he decides to destroy that illusion in order to save their lives and sanity. Unflattering facts of both married couples come to surface through harsh exchanges of words and offences. Through cruel comments, the truth behind the marriage of Nick and Honey is revealed; the reason they are married is not because they are in love, but because Honey was experiencing hysterical pregnancy and Nick was forced to marry her. George points that out harshly and makes the young married couple face the reality of their life.

In George's announcement of the final game, Albee's comment on the Theatre of Cruelty can be seen. George declares that: "We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs [...] When you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone... the marrow... and that's what you gotta get at" (Albee 1962: 124). Cruelty is applied here to initiate the long and painful process of exorcism, which will eventually overcome and destroy layers of lies and illusions. George and Martha have cemented their marriage with the 'son-myth' (Cohn 1969: 18). However, the myth has started to obliterate the boundaries between what is real and what is imaginary, and George realizes that it has to be exorcised, since it is the illusion at the marrow of their relationship (Roudané 1987: 81). George announces the death of their son, and in the moment of catharsis, Martha screams out, cleanses her soul of the harmful emotions and eventually, exorcism, or the death of a demon son, is performed. The killing is the ultimate cruelty necessary to bring about catharsis and exorcism. Honey and Nick prove not to be merely passive observers; by eventually claiming that she wants a child, Honey shows that her words have a cathartic influence, and that what they have been through together with Martha and George helps them destroy their illusions as well (Roudané 1987: 79).

The point that Albee is trying to make here is that illusions are not the real life. By showing that George and Martha were probably happier while living with the myth of

their son, he is trying to warn his audience of the negative effects the imaginary may have on them. Martha and George, who are too immersed in their illusion, lose sight of the objective reality and live a distorted life, without obvious boundaries between the real and the imaginary, which is detrimental to their psyche (Roudané 1987: 70). People should be aware of the unfavorable circumstances of their lives instead of disregarding them. That kind of life can eventually be detrimental to one's mental health, so Albee uses cruelty in order to terminate the toxic illusions and make both his characters and the audience aware that illusions are not a right choice in life. Once again, this connects him to the Theatre of Cruelty – cruelty helps his characters reveal what is real and embrace it, together with the suffering it brings.

2.3. Psychological and Verbal Abuse in *The Death of Bessie Smith*

Bessie Smith was a black blues-singer who died in 1937, after being denied access to a whites-only hospital, due to the injuries sustained in a car crash. Albee decides to write a play about this incident, and he makes a comment at the same time about the ongoing cruelty in the South due to the racial tensions. The play appeared at a time when the civil rights movement was at its height, and, as Bigsby (1984: 261) states, it presents racism as a symptom rather than as a disease, since the inhumanity which is involved in the callous treatment of Bessie Smith is merely the extension of a process which goes beyond the question of prejudice. To portray that time and the inhumanity more effectively, Albee uses cruelty in the shape of psychological and verbal abuse. Those types of abuse are actually failures at communication. Racism is at the root of the problems in this play, and it is nothing else but a cruel disregard and refusal to accept another one's humanity only because of the color of their skin. Cruelty is also present due to the hierarchy in the hospital, which, once again, brings forward unjustified discrimination.

Psychological abuse causes mental anguish by means of threats, humiliation, fear, manipulation, or other cruel conduct (Eckroth-Bucher 2018). The most typical form of psychological abuse is the verbal abuse, in which the abuser uses language or behavior which seeks to coerce its victim to doubt their perceptions or their abilities and subjugate themselves to the abuser (Holly 2016). In the following section, we will analyze how the characters in the play *The Death of Bessie Smith* use cruelty in order to perform psychological and verbal abuse.

To add to the realism of the play, Albee gives the exact time and place of the play, setting it in Memphis, Tennessee, on September 26., 1937. Ironically, the place where cruelty is most evident is the institution dedicated to providing help – the hospital (Amacher 1969: 51). The person who spreads abuse is the Nurse. She is the only coherent character in this play, and it might as well be because she is the cruelest one; she uses her words to display scorn and conformity (Cohn 1969: 15). Malice is something she is used to in her home as well. The beginning of the play shows what kind of a relationship she has with her father; both of them are trying to degrade one another. She ridicules him for participating in political matters and he makes comments about her chastity. It is obvious that the hate is mutual – they want to hurt each other to the utmost, by using cruel words (Amacher 1969: 50). She proceeds with the verbal abuse, which has psychological effects, at her workplace with the Orderly, who is a light-skinned black man. Since he is more educated than she is and is using complicated words, she is cruelly mocking his attempts to blend in with the white people, but failing to do so, since he is “the inhabitant of no-man's land, on the one side shunned and disowned by your brethren, and on the

other an object of contempt and derision to your betters” (Albee 1960: 59). Her racism and her verbal abuse are evident in her vicious comments when she accuses him of bleaching his skin.

Not only is she cruel with the Orderly, but also with the Intern, the man she occasionally engages in sexual encounters with. Even though her attraction to him is quite evident, she plays cruel games with him, humbles him because of his salary, tells him that there is nothing that he can offer to her. It is quite clear that even though she abuses the two men she works with, she is also a victim of the society she lives in. The only thing that she can do is being cruel to others instead of experiencing cruelty on her own skin. Her attacks are actually a way of defending herself, a way of hiding her attraction to the Intern, and, quite possibly, to the Orderly. At the same time, in another hospital, Bessie Smith is ruthlessly denied access to the all-whites hospital after a car crash.

In the meantime, cruelty is clear in the verbal games the Nurse is playing with the Intern, in expressing her desires about what she wishes would happen to him. But when she screams out that she is tired of her skin and that she wants out, it becomes quite obvious that hostility has devastated her as well, damaged her, hurt her. She suffers from an ‘ontological sickness’, a world-weariness which precipitates her violent attack; all the individuals in this play are victims, unable to accept personal and social responsibilities of being human (Roudané 1987: 18). It is not in the human nature to be vicious to each other, but the societal circumstances which have the cruelty at their base, force us to act in a certain way. Nevertheless, the benign, the affectionate part in the people occasionally rebels, and gets out of the imposed confines.

In the end, Jack, the companion of Bessie Smith enters their hospital as well, all bloodied and drunk. The Intern manages to remove the shackles of his society and tries to help Bessie Smith but, to no avail. She is already dead, and so is the culture in which people are not only alienated from one another, but also from themselves (Bigsby 1984: 262). People who display racist behavior are actually the ones who are also vulnerable. They tend to hurt other people out of fear, because it gives them a semblance of superiority, and creates an illusion that they are untouchable. However, they are not. Such behavior merely creates an impression of supremacy, which is what racism is based on. Albee’s usage of cruelty once again proves that the purpose of the Theatre of Cruelty is to show that, no matter how cruelly a person may deride others, that person cannot hide their own vulnerability.

3. CONCLUSION

As the previous analysis has indicated, Albee’s plays possess characteristics which connect them to the Theatre of Cruelty. The three plays analyzed in this paper exhibit an endeavor to show what is the reality of the human condition. They start with the characters living their lives as they are used to live, unaware of the humanity of others, unaware that they are losing their sense of individuality. Albee finds a way for them to participate in life as fully as possible, to make them fully conscious – he uses cruelty to help them make a choice between two possibilities – to live dangerously but fully or to continue with the illusions (Roudané 1987: 20).

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POJAM SUROVOSTI U TRI DRAME EDVARDA OLBIIJA

Glavni cilj ovog rada je da analiziramo načine upotrebe surovosti u tri odabrane drame Edvarda Olbija. Svi analizirani načini upotrebe surovosti mogu biti povezani sa glavnom ulogom teatra surovosti Antonena Artoa, koja se ogleda u otkrivanju onog stvarnog, ili po rečima Olbija, u podizanju „ogledala stvarnosti” (Amacher 1969: 22). Prvi deo rada je posvećen definisanju surovosti i teatra surovosti, kao i vezi između Edvarda Olbija i Antonena Artoa. Tri odeljka koja slede se sastoje iz analize sledećih drama Edvarda Olbija: „Zoološka priča” (1959), „Ko se boji Virdžinije Vulf?” (1962), i „Smrt Besi Smit” (1960). U ovim dramama su prikazani različiti načini upotrebe surovost. U „Zoološkoj priči”, surovost je upotrebljena s nežnošću da bi postala poučna emocija. U „Ko se boji Virdžinije Vulf”, iluzije su uništene i katarza i egzorcizam izvršeni zahvaljujući upotrebi surovosti. Na kraju, u „Smrt Besi Smit”, surovost se koristi u obliku psihološkog i verbalnog nasilja.

Ključne reči: Olbi, Arto, surovost, drama, teatar, teatar surovosti