

# A Comparative Study of Edward Albee and Oneil's Plays in Perspective of Karma

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## Abstract

As far as the works of O'Neil is concerned his conception of Karma and god was bit different and also presented in different forms as compared to other play writers. His speculation of God and the universe was rational in nature and romantic in orientation, his most of the plays were based on speculation rather than realities (situation were real) keeping in mind that the action of the cosmos or god cannot be depicted in advance, they come in random manner. In case of Albee, situations were the main characters i.e. difference in good and evil, difference in ethical and non-ethical, good and bad deeds, awakening of characters in terms of life events and also the notation of human soul was in the core of presentation. This present study will evaluate this system of belief and thought process of the two play writers and try to state the social beliefs and acceptance of god by the people in the time period when these two play writers had prevailed. Orientation of the study is exploratory i.e. based on secondary data evaluation is done on the basis of common components in the work of both play writers.

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## Keywords

Edward Albee, Eugene O'Neil, Karma, Perspectives, Beliefs.

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## Edward Albee

As far as Edward Albee is concerned he is denoted as the pioneer of American theatre and his major form was 'Absurd', looking at the work of Albee he was the most promising and creative (*experimental*) writer in the history of American theatre. His writings were more authentic and realistic as compared to the dramatist of his period like Adamov, Lonesco, Beckett, etc. although he has taken inspiration from these great people but still kept an originality of his own. As Albee states:

"The health of a nation, a society can be determined by the art it demands."

## (Albee; p. 173)

He also defined the theatre of the absurd as he understands it, as stated below:

The theatre of the absurd is an absorption in art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do in the main with man's attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense - which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has created to "illusion" himself have collapsed."

## (Albee; p. 172)

The period of Albee revolves around the different dimensions of society in the prevailing period then on the other hand the developments in science and technology also played its part and the drama community was also affected by the same. Then as per the period related developments theatre was also improving or it can be said it is developing. This was the time when Albee focused in the absurd form of drama, rather in the beginning it was considered as negative form and against the ethics and values of prevailing theatric practices. The society has already faced two world wars and the flames of these wars had exerted serious impact on the processing of theatre and drama as well. This impact was not only exerted in America rather whole world was affected by the same.

In the plays of Albee, language was a character in itself, like in case of *The Zoo Story* and in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* Communication and impossibility of the same was a key feature and whole structure of the situations was based in few words and intensity of the same. There was an important scene in the play where the character of Martha and George hold the situation for the other two character Nick and Honey who did not get the language and the communication in real terms. Then in another play *the Play about the Baby*, was in general based on semantic forms rather than language also the insistence played a vital role. Then on the other hand in *Tiny Alice* communication suffered a lot on the grounds of semantics.

Then again in the same sense Edward Albee presented few instance in his plays of *The Zoo Story*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *An American Dream* and *The Sandbox*. These plays presented the influence of European drama, like Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Lonesco, etc. Albee was not of the opinion that his work should be classified or attain any formal classification. This was also the time when Gay theatre started to take the stride in main stream and Albee along with William Inge, Tennessee Williams, etc. who have contributed a lot in the post war theatrics. Albee also declared himself as a play writer who was gay. He stated:

"A writer who happens to be gay or lesbian must be able to transcend self. I am not a gay writer. I am a writer who happens to be gay"

The primary directions of works of analysis and criticism on the plays of Edward Albee are Existentialism – along with associated psychological and emotional facets of the human condition – and

Social criticism with regards to both postwar American society and humanity in general. A large number of works on Albee and his plays can thus be categorized within an amalgamation of these two fields.

## Eugene O' Neil

Eugene Gladstone O'Neil was basically an actor in the theatres of New York. He spends the early days in his home town, went out for a few random jobs and then again returned to New York, by this time he was committed that either he will become an artist or nothing. He remained a scholar with professor George Pierce Baker and worked on playwriting. His first production was in the New York itself i.e. *The Long Voyage Home*, then came *Lie, In The Zone, The Moon of the Carribbees* and other one act drama that established him as a successful play writer. Building on the success of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*, he dominates the American stage with celebrated expressionistic and experimental works: *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), *Desire under the Elms* (1924), *The Fountain* (1925), *The Great God Brown* (1926), *Macro Millions* (1927), and *Lazarus Laughed* (1928). *Strange Interlude* (1928) wins him a third Pulitzer Prizb. *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, the last play produced during his lifetime, opens in Columbus, Ohio, but closes before its scheduled arrival in New York.

O'Neil views life in a mature manner and the same is presented in his work as where he considered the major issues of life with a different approach. In his opinion any twisted form of knowledge limits the intellectual power of an individual and this limitation tells us about our limitation in decisions we take in life. Here it is important to mention that O'Neil's concept of god and religion was related to the very existence of human being. His plays have very prominently presented the struggle of a man with the calamities of universe. While dealing with the delineation of a modern world, O'Neil projected the structure of the suffering of a man and that too in situations where it is difficult for a man to reconcile himself. In terms of O'Neil, the universe where we live in is a complex place and is very dynamic in nature, keeping this in mind his conception of God keep on changing in his every next play. It can be stated that he strongly believed on Karma of a human being and the resultant of the same from the cosmos. As shown in

one of his plays *Days Without End* the protagonist finds different types of cosmologies and as the play proceeds the event occur purposive at times and illogical at different times.

He was a supporter of the new life of a modern man and that too in a new cosmos and he called it as a 'modern cosmos' his form of God took the form of Socialism, Syndicalism, Anarchism and got influenced by Roman Catholicism. In his period of theatre he was the only play writer who experimented with the figure and ideas of god as a superpower. In the initial phase of life he had the same belief as millions of people who believed that all the changing, shifting and vanishing of events in both the positive and negative forms.

Nevertheless, O'Neill's depiction of man in his relation to the physical world is based on his conception of man as a free and determined being, in a universe which seems to be indifferent and even inimical and cruel as far as human beings are concerned. In the subsequent plays of O'Neill, God is dead and the cosmos, whose mysteries once haunted his plays, dims and fades away, while man as man occupies the whole stage, absorbs all meanings and embodies all mysteries and complexities; henceforth, man is to be the measure of all.

This present study will evaluate and compare the work of Edward Albee and Eugene O'Neill in the perspective of Karma i.e. relation of a man to god and the resultant of a person's deeds as the nature of modern cosmos.

## The depictions and Notations of O'Neil in Terms of Karma

As far as the works of O'Neil is concerned his conception of Karma and god was bit different and also presented in different forms as compared to other play writers. His speculation of God and the universe was rational in nature and romantic in orientation, his most of the plays were based on speculation rather than realities (situation were real) keeping in mind that the action of the cosmos or god cannot be depicted in advance, they come in random manner. All of his plays leave the audience and critics with a number of questions related to Karma and returns of the cosmos to normal human beings.

The theatric presentations of O'Neil and his

orientation of god was much similar to that of Albert Einstein, O'Neil presents the figure of god and religion and in his plays parallel to the views of Einstein. O'Neil has presented a changing and shifting concept of god and the universe, as stated in the introduction part he was a god seeker first and then became a play writer. He presented both the literary and scientific form of cosmos in his works, as can be seen in *Dynamo* which was more scientific in nature and the *Days Without End* where the overall orientation was religious in presentation i.e. a Christian god. Then on the other hand in plays like *Marco Millions* the structure of god was different i.e. the god was not presented in a physical personality rather it is presented in a governing form from Olympian heights and is similar to the concept of god as a superpower. This was also clear from the play *Marco Millions* where the character of Kublai Khan states that:

"My hideous suspicion is that, God is an infinite insane energy which creates and destroys without other purpose than to pass eternity in avoiding thought. Then, the stupid man becomes the perfect incarnation of omnipotence and fools are true children of God!"

### (Vol. 11, MM 426)

Then some of the critics also presented their views on the O'Neil's concept of god, as stated below of the critic states that:

"I have tried to respond to your question as simply as I could. Here is my answer: scientific research is based on the idea that everything that takes place is determined by the laws of Nature, and therefore this holds good for the actions of people. For this reason, a research scientist will hardly be inclined to believe that events could be influenced by a prayer, i.e., by a wish addressed to a Supernatural Being"

### (Aster, P. 21)

Then in O'Neil's *The fountain*, staged in 1921 almost same form of god and cosmos were presented, one character i.e. Juan stated that:

"This is a strange world with many wonders still undiscovered"

### (Vol. 111, The Fountain 417)

On another occasion/in the same play Juan speaks to Luis:

"I believe in Nature. Nature is part of God. She can perform miracles; since this land was discovered, have we not found wonders undreamed of before?"

**(Vol. 111, The Fountain 421)**

Also some different concept of god were presented in the plays of O'Neil like *Chillun Got Wings* where the character of Ella states that:

"Will god forgive me, Jim?, to which the husband replies as "May be god can forgive what you have done to me; and maybe he can forgive what I have done to you. But I don't see how he is going to forgive himself".

**(Vol. II, AGCGW, 341)**

Now it can be differentiated between the two thoughts of god i.e. either god is human who is looking for avenues to seek forgiveness or is inhuman who can forgive all the sins of people just on the note that a given person is seeking for forgiveness. The conceptualization of god is different, random, cruel and even inexorable in many terms; also the cosmos is considered as a thing without any purpose or humanitarian point of view. The question was that either the god will act as a superpower or give punishment to the wrong doer of will attempt to pass a judgment on his own.

Then in his play *Strange Interlude* the god figure is mentioned many a times and as per the character of Marsden "God is contemptuous of man" i.e. everything is life is so contemptuously accidental"

**(Vol. II, SI 41)**

His own reaction to the positive ending at the altar of "an old church"--a final scene, which recalled the theme of Lazarus Laughed--was typical of his mental attitude of agonizing about past decisions, of attempting to pursue two opposing logics at the same time, and of then feeling guilty for the logic he chose.

"Gene would walk up and down the beach, painfully wrestling with the problem. He couldn't make up his mind whether or not to have the man go back to the Church. At one point he thought of, having him shoot himself at the Church altar, and he discussed the idea with the Jesuit priests and they persuaded him not to use it. He finally ended with the man going back to the Church?"

**(Aurthur et al; 764)**

It can be viewed in the play of O'Neil *Days Without End*, many of the different forms of universe and cosmologies are presented, it is not so that all of them were of same stature, rather it can be said that all of them were not purposeful, but then again, according to O'Neil god is a superpower and may be present or may not be present in reality and the same concept goes on with the rule of god over the universe. In the work of O'Neil god is presented as random set of attributes and these attributes are superior to that of the normal human beings.

Then in *Beyond the Horizon* the protagonist is having different forms of god, out of which one is a traditional figure of god from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in England and this form of god is paradoxical in nature; also believes in punishing the doer of wrong deeds. Then there is another form that is going hand in hand with the deeds of human beings, and finally a god that is seeking forgiveness as last resort. Even at some place the god was portrayed to be in collation with people or the character while committing any wrong doing.

**On the play of O'Neil, Roger Asselineau stated that**

"The desire which flows through the elms and drips from them and pervades everything under then is God--though the word is never used. It is not, however, the God of the Christians, but rather a dynamic, impersonal, pantheistic or panpsychistic deity present in all things, whether animate or inanimate, breaking barriers between individuals as in the case of Eben and Abbie, dissolving their lonesomeness and making them feel one."

**(Roger; P.64)**

Then in *The fountain*, O'Neil presented that a man gains immortality and as the play proceeds the character got "Sick with years" and prays that:

"O, son of God . . . show me Thy miracle--a sign--a word--a second's vision crf what I am that I should have lived and died!" (Vol. 111, The Fountain 438). "I have striven for what the hand can grasp. What is left when Death makes the hand powerless? O Mighty Relaxer of hands, have you no vision for the graspers of earth?"

**(Vol. 111, The Fountain 441)**

So the details given above about the concept of god as stated by O'Neil is a bit random but is very near to the

modern form of god. The description of cosmos, universe and punishment for wrong deeds stated that yes there is some power that is present to look after the balance of the universe and if any entity tried to create a disequilibrium will be penalized accordingly. The play of O’Neil also stated that if a human gets the status of god then it will be impossible for him or her to deal with the endless life and balancing the cosmos in real terms.

## The depictions and Notations of Edward Albee in Terms of Karma

As an author and play writer, Albee believed that the life of a human being is a long story of events and incidents and this continues for the time he stays on earth. His notion of predicament always stipulated the ‘*Absurdities and inequalities*’ of the life faced by him and by all other human beings. He always kept his suffering related to that of a common man and presented them in the same manner. Family, society, beliefs and experiences of a human being charged him to write the unforgettable plays. It seems that he has experienced life in real terms and his presentations never demanded further explanations. The gems created by Albee, like *The Zoo story*, *The American Dream* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* Were some plays that state that a person living in self is taking circles in a loop or experiencing a paradox; gradually this paradox becomes the life of the person. His plays were landmark in explaining the way of life as a honest one and the value of the same in the eyes of the others. Like in case of *the American Dream* the character of Peter faced his real self when Jerry dies, even Martha and her husband accepting the sterility in their life. The protagonist accepted that his own self is having an empty soul and is only handsome and good looking from outside. Albee advocated the need of authentic living and experiencing life in a positive manner.

In plays like *All over*, *Seascape* and *Lady from Dubuque*, he stressed on the working of conscious and unconscious; here comes the notion and god with karma of a person that goes along with him or her and result in good or bad experiences of life. In *All Over* a person on the death bed motivates others to look within and realize the reality of life, this sort of confrontation states the acceptance of a power as a judge and that power is god.

Albee never really presented the direct or indirect form of god in his plays but situation were created where the presence of God can be felt. As a matter of fact the apprehensions are present in literal sense but then again the actual form of god cannot be determined. Excessive social pressure and conflict define the human relationship but still there is some space present for acceptance of good or bad in the plays. Death is presented as a shadow of various events and at times the same is presented as a character that remained dejected throughout the play.

Then in case of *Seascape*, the author presented the humanoids in an ugly form and they present the conflict between conscious and unconscious psyche of a person rather the dark side of the human mind. The evolution of human mind was one factor but the right and wrong deeds were shown as the part of one’s fate and also the presence of a superpower behind the same and this superpower is not necessarily a god or an imitation of the same. This thing relates to the personification of god and the related imitations of the same, but still it is not clearly mentioned in the work of Albee. As far as the characters of *Seascape* are concerned, the characters of Nancy and Charlie use to confront the unconscious representation of the events by Leslie and Sarah. Actually they address to a humanoid lizard and explain the same to Nancy and Charlie, so that they can confront the related unconscious formation of the same, now this unconscious form is related to presence to some supernatural power that is governing both the conscious and unconscious formation of human minds. In further progressions the nature and attitude of the character is changing and the same is associated to the occurrence of events at different time intervals. All the four characters consider is as human intervention but then again hand of god is not denied in the play.

Then came the *Lady from Dubuque*, where the character of Jo and his mother are in conflict with their roles and contradictions in taking some corrective actions thereof. Obviously they didn’t pray to any god but then again the intervention of some superpower cannot be denied in the process. The knowledge of Jo regarding the truth of events occurred stranded him in the final moments of his life and he finds a super natural power responsible for the same i.e. in his terms any human may not present such inclinations, might be this was the part when the hand of god is present to differentiate between the good and bad deeds of a person. Then on the other hand the relationship of Jo and Sam was the result of different events at different

times and the responses of the two are limited to certain level, this limitation might have been broken in the recent past but it didn't happened, was this the act of god who stopped the events to occur or limit the incidences to a certain level, this was the question that was left behind by the author for the audience and critics. In the play of Albee, psychological confrontations were very common and arguments between the characters denoted the same with highest level of supremacy even in some of the cases they resulted in undesired confrontation, but then again characters may not present the stature in true form i.e. many of them called it as a hand of fortune and relevant submersion of the events occurred in the past.

In the same novel as given above, the stature of the mother of Jo was at question i.e. various decisions were taken on behalf of unconscious fatalism given that the resultants were not as desired or wanted but then again the decision were either in favor of characters or against the same. The character of Jo was aware of the consequences and appearance of events in his final moments but then again in his unconscious he was reluctant to question the same. As a result the relationship of Jo and Sam was revealed in front of the guests i.e. they never wanted the events to occur in this manner. Hand of some superpower, awakening of sprit and opportunity to state the truth was left at the will of some superpower, may be god.

Then in case of *The Zoo Story* the number of relationships were knitted in one aspect i.e. the chance of occurrence and the recognition of the same by the remaining character of the play. Every time something bas is going to happen to the character events postpone the occurrence to the next level and at the end it is left to the discretion of the character to either accept or reject the same. The choice of the characters is denoted as the choice of some superpower and decision are taken thereof. The transformation of peter in the name of Jerry and the accrued sacrifice is the evidence that the author had some or the other supernatural power assimilated with the same. Then in another case of *The American Dream* the character of Granny finds that getting old in the present society is like a curse i.e. there is no one to take care of and even the final moments of life are dependent on the will of other family members. Fight of the character with present social values was again a dilemma that stands in the way of salvation and related values of the same.

The conception of god and the universe is not real for Albee but the presence of the same cannot be denied in his play i.e. the characters use to state their present stature in the name of some supernatural power i.e. death, separation, love, recognition, etc. are the act of the same. May be this is the outcome of abrupt incidents but then again it cannot be denied that the occurrence of such events is having a long lasting effect on the lives of the characters.

It can be state that the version of god or the presence of some supernatural power was there in the work of Albee but this was never presented in the real form. Although this has to be elaborated that in various play of Albee what was the real form of god and the presented cosmos in the world and how does it works in relation to the deeds of human beings, maybe it is positive in nature or may be negative in nature. Though all the positive and negative forms of this supernatural power are presented in absurd form and the same absurdity is shown in the plays of Albee. At times all the components were found to be related to a single component of fatalism and presence of some superpower that is liable to maintain the course of time and space, may be a god figure, but in the plays of Albee it was apparent that this power is maintaining the balance and the characters are acting accordingly. Then the factor of change in the plays of Albee cannot be denied i.e. every play start and finish at different time horizons, these changes were never definite i.e. situation and chances use to differentiate them at different levels.

In case of *The Zoo Story* the character of Peter changed a lot after the death of Jerry, the moments of Jerry's death changed his opinion about everything and finally his complacent behavior converted to normal one. At this moment he got the message of leading a meaningful life and relationship in society. Here death can be explained as an act of god or a superpower that is having the capability to change the course of life of a person. Then in case of *The American Dream*, the character of grandma wants to differentiate between ethical and non ethical deeds of a person and reflection of the same on the society, as she believed that a person should behave ethically and this states the thin line between good and bad states of life i.e. the wish of god to behave positively in life and show ethical behavior.

In the plays of Albee the role of Karma was shown in instant form, in many of the plays the characters get

motivated by the fate of others and also learned a number of things as a result of their own deeds. Change in time and space is another form of the presence of some super power that is dealing with the positivity and negativity of change. It can also be observed that the absurdity shown in plays of Albee was a differentiated form of Karma i.e. no one can change the course of life this will move in its own stride. Also the stature of Albee as a gay and a world renowned play writer was an uncommon combination, Albee stated this stature in many of his plays and also taken the advantage of the same in his real life as well.

The presence of karma in the plays of O’Neil was direct and in an understandable manner while on the other hand the form of Karma shown in the plays of Albee was indirect and leaves a question for the audience and critics that did karma actually exist and did it play its role at right time and place.

## Conclusion

Creative people all over the world are having a twisted taste and thought process but in a number of cases it has been found that a given person cannot avoid his basic instinct of life and its related prodigies. As far as the field of drama and theatre is concerned instant decisions and role plays are the key concepts but still there are number of component related to thought process of a play writer and the director. At times the audience and critics are not able to differentiate between the thought process of the play writer and the scenes played over stage. Edward Albee and O’Neil were the pioneers in their fields and they do have a twisted taste of presentations. Like in case of O’Neil, the presence of god, overall cosmos and external universe were the main components; in case of Albee situation present the presence of some super natural power that is controlling everything. Although the critics have evaluate both of them in a different manner but then again role of instinct and personal apprehensions cannot be avoided.

The plays of Albee were generally recognized in his name and people were eager to know that what a gay play writer (*or play writer who is gay*) can offer, on the other hand the difference of time and space, use of scenery to present different horizons and states of life in a single play were the USPs of O’Neil and on the other

hand prediction and presentation of Albee in terms of stated situation force the presence of some supernatural power in the world. Difference can be stated clearly but then again both the play writers were able to give a meaning to their work in terms of god, super natural power, control mechanism of the world, difference in good-bad-evil, change of personality and mind. Both the play writers presented a particular form of drama that was very closely related to the mentality of a common man and that of the critics as well. in the present times, many of the schools of drama and theatre still include the work of Albee and O’Neil in their curriculum along with Shakespeare and Aristotle. Then again this can be a point of discussion that all the four performers were from the same school of thought or they follow their own system of presenting aspects of life.

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