

## Albee's Plays in the Light of Psychological Theories

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### Abstract

Albee's plays are known for highlighting the daily suffering of American individuals and the material pressures exerted upon them by the "American dream" project, which pushes them into choosing between fulfilling their material requirements in exchange for the supreme human values and social relations that bind their community and refusing to face their reality in favor of retreating to a world of illusion. Albee's plays have also touched upon the themes of suicide, departure, anxiety, insanity, fear of death, and fear of the unknown. Many critics and analysts have linked the premises in his plays with psychoanalytical theories that analyze the behavior and the relationship of individuals to their communities. This paper will attempt to focus on certain psychological theories that can explain the state of anxiety and sense of loss experienced by the theatrical characters created by Albee in three of his prominent plays.

**Keywords:** psychoanalytical theories, Albee's plays, loss, conflict, death

### 1. The Zoo Story

In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry's sense of loss and despair, which drove him into committing suicide, can be ascribed to many psychological factors. The first factor is his lack of sense of belonging in his own environment. Apart from his despair, hopelessness, and frustration, Jerry lived an isolated life devoid of any social or emotional relations with others. Such feeling of isolation drove him into ending his own life.

Joiner's theory of interpersonal-psychological relationships suggests that avoiding harm and danger is innate to all living things, not just human beings. "People are not born with the innate capacity to damage themselves" (Joiner, 2002). Therefore, before one can commit suicide, he must overcome his instincts and accept the influence of external factors that make him separate himself from his world and seek a life in another world. "The ability to beat back this pressing urge toward self-preservation. Once they do...they are at high risk for suicide" (22).

Theories that explore the psychological motives behind suicide have attributed one's inclination to take his own life to three main factors: "A sense of thwarted belongings, a perception of functioning as a burden to others, and the acquired capability for suicide" (35). With regard to the first factor, Jerry was frustrated by his lack of belongingness in his materialistic American society because he did not have any family or friends and had no social or emotional relations of any kind. "The sense that one does not belong to or feel disconnected with a valued group or relationship" (Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Jerry's feeling of loss and lack of belonging can be clearly observed from the start of his conversation with Peter, specifically after he mentioned that he did not experience the tenderness and care of a family because he was raised in a disjointed family that included an adulteress mother who ran away with her lover and an alcoholic father who died in a traffic accident. He then spent his adolescent years with his harsh uncle.

Jerry's frustration, loss, and lack of belonging resulted from his failure to communicate with others, even with animals. At 30 years old, Jerry was unmarried, living all by himself, had no emotional partners or friends, and did not have anyone to talk except for his landlady, who only saw him as a man who could satisfy her sexual desires. According to Neal and Collas, "the human being is compelled to exchange simple requests, sentences or phrases with many strangers every single day" (114).

The second factor that can drive a man into committing suicide is the feeling that he will impose a burden upon others by continuing his life. However, these two aforementioned factors are not strong enough to push an individual into killing himself; one must also be able to overcome his fear of death. In other words, the third psychological factor is the product of the first and second factors, which influence the psychological processing of the individual and remove his proclivity to avoid harm. The third factor makes an individual unconsciously believe that death will give him a greater sense of satisfaction compared with his instinct of staying away from harm.

Joiner argued that “it is difficult to overcome the most basic instinct of all; that is to say, self-preservation” (46). Therefore, for a man to overcome such instinct, he needs to endure repeated experiences of pain, frustration, failure, and loss of life. An individual can transform these tortuous experiences into an extraordinary ability that can help him overcome his instinct of self-preservation and eventually drive him into committing suicide.

Freud argued that the instinct of life, or the so-called Eros drive, represents man’s natural inclination to protect himself from harm and pain similar to the instincts of eating, drinking, and loving. Meanwhile, the activation of one’s desire to die, or the so-called Thanatos drive, requires an individual to experience multiple shocks that give him a strong motive to die instead of continuing living. In this sense, Jerry’s suicide was preceded by a harsh, painful life filled with many tragedies and trauma that destroyed all his desire to live. All these pressures pushed him into a difficult psychological state that made him brave enough to face his own death (116-123).

Jerry tried to force Peter into participating in his suicide by challenging him in a fight where Jerry could be beaten and hurt. According to the Joiner’s theory, during their final moments, some suicidal people want to be reminded of all the tragedies and pains that they have experienced. In other words, they need a motive that reminds them of their state of loss and makes them feel strong in the face of death. Such motive must also liberate them from regrets related to their past lives. “...abuse habituates people to pain and provocation and thus lowers their resistance to self-injury” (65).

Although Jerry decided to commit suicide because he lost the sense of life’s pleasure, he wanted his death to compensate for everything he had missed in his miserable past. In other words, Jerry wanted his death to be a meaningful substitute for his meaningless life. He decided to kill himself in a public place, such as the Central Park, to attract media attention. In this way, his death would attract the same kind of attention that he had been yearning for throughout his life. Siefker argued that “Jerry’s death resembling a murder would provide more narrative to the media than just reporting a suicide” (69). According to the Joiner’s theory of interpersonal–psychological relationships, Jerry’s psychological conditions, bitter experiences, and feeling of loss represent the three factors that move him away from the normal human behavior of holding on to life and avoiding harm (life instincts) to the desire of committing suicide (self-destruction).

## **2. Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**

Similar to Jerry The Zoo Story, Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Experienced a very chaotic childhood that negatively affected her behavior as an adult. After losing her mother at an early age, Martha became devoid of any paternal care or attention as her father became preoccupied with his second marriage and his profession as a university dean. Therefore, as a child, Martha lacked self-confidence and was unable to face her reality. “Martha suffers from a strong lack of self-confidence; she does not have the capacity to face a real-life situation” (Stenz 52).

Similar to any other child, Martha was born into this world without knowing anything about her life. She was filled with questions and fears and needed her parents to provide her guidance and attention to help her live her life with confidence and without illusion. In his book *Families and How to Survive*, the psychologist Skynner described the consequences that a child must face in his later life if he has not received adequate care from his parents. He wrote that “...his parents could not understand how they had produced a child who was full of fears, unable to cope with reality, who escaped into dreams and solitary interests” (69). In this case, Martha’s future behavior, specifically her desire to have a husband who can satisfy her ambitions and make her feel an important woman in the eyes of other people, was mainly the product of the lack of attention she received from her parents during her childhood. In a way, her behavior as an adult was an attempt to compensate for the shortcomings that she had experienced during her childhood. “...later, her major concern was an association with a husband who would make her appear interesting and important in the eyes of other people” (Stenz, 1978).

The refusal of Martha’s father for her to marry the son of their gardener was an important event that directed Martha toward a life of illusion. In other words, her father’s refusal instilled in Martha a firm belief that she must marry a man of her own level because she is the daughter of the university dean. She found in George a socially acceptable identity of a professor working in the same college. Skynner explained that “we are attracted to

someone at a very deep, psychological level, as, basically, they are like us” (16). She believed that George could achieve her aspirations and fill the void in her life. However, George’s inability to achieve such aspirations gave Martha the biggest disappointment of her life that fueled her psychological struggle. Skynner compared those women who are trying to find a man with those orphaned children who are looking for their lost parents and siblings. In a sense, Martha was only looking for a husband who could compensate for what she had missed in life; naturally, she was shocked upon learning that George could not achieve the goals she had set for him (73-74).

In addition to the psychological trauma that she had experienced in her childhood, Martha was also a victim of the American capitalist society, which pushed her further into a world of illusion. Martha was trying to satisfy the demands of her materialistic society in every way as can be seen in her attempts to force George into succeeding her father as the university dean. These attempts not only bring her comfort, but also satisfy her deficiency complex because successfully fulfilling such ambition will improve her status in society by building her reputation as the wife of a university dean.

Martha and George’s disillusionment filled their marital life with indignation and accusations. Although aware of his wife’s aspirations and disappointments, George still refused to follow Martha’s personal ambitions for him. He was very patient with her and continued to uphold his principles by refusing to fight for a position that would require him to stomp on others just to give Martha an important status in society. When George noticed that Martha was beginning to lose her control in front of their guests, he decided to pull her out from her world of illusion, restore her senses, and force her to face the reality that she had escaped from for a long time. “George knows that the situation has reached the point where it must change if they are to endure the future” (Stenz 48).

The disappointments and trauma that Martha experienced throughout her life made her live in a virtual world in which she could avoid confronting her reality. In this world, she lived with an imaginary child that compensated for the repeated failures in her marriage. This child was her biggest life secret that she chose not to disclose to anyone in the world, except George. Therefore, to pull Martha back to her senses, George announced the death of their imaginary child to their guests.

At that point, George realized that he should save his marriage with Martha because living in a world of illusion did not contribute at all to their marital life. Skynner examined this situation from a psychological perspective by saying “But if we miss out a stage and don’t go through a substitute experience, the emotions that we haven’t learned to handle will feel very awkward to us” (33).

George also preserved his ideals by refusing to be manipulated by Martha and her father for their personal gain. Although many believe that the main problem of Martha and George lies in their inability to have a child, some critics argue that even if they bear a child, George and Martha may not find the emotional stability that they seek because they are facing much greater problems. Stenz claimed that “there is no evidence she would have found peace if she had borne six children, or if George had become head of the History Department, president of the college or president of the country” (52).

### **3. A Delicate Balance**

Jerry in *The Zoo Story*, and Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Are victims of a troubled childhood and a harsh materialistic American society that only bring them psychological suffering and fuel their aggressive behavior. By contrast, the problems of Tobias and Agnes in *A Delicate Balance* are not caused by these two factors, but by a terrible incident that occurred in their marital life. The death of his son, Teddy, marked a turning point in Tobias’s life that disintegrated the ties among his family and resulted in his sense of loss.

The death of Teddy negatively affected Tobias’s psychological state by making him unwilling to have another child because he was afraid of going through another experience of loss. He had also cut himself off from his wife, Agnes, by sleeping in a separate room. He destroyed his marital relationship with Agnes at a time when she was in desperate need of psychological comfort after losing her son. Teddy’s death also made Tobias stop communicating with his daughter, Julia, and giving her the attention that a father ought to provide for his child. Such neglect was among the most important reasons why all of Julia’s four marriages ended in divorce. Stenz argued that “It is impossible to discuss the effect of the death of Teddy on Julia without examining Julia’s relationship with her parents” (76).

Julia’s habit of seeking asylum in her parents’ home after each unsuccessful marriage can be attributed to her yearning for the sense of safety and care that her parents did not provide her during her childhood. Such yearning also prevented Julia from leaving her parents’ house and living her life independently. Skynner explained this situation by saying “You cannot move on to something new unless you let go of something old” (150).

Tobias and his family hid their state of conflict in order to maintain the balance of their family. Each of them felt that they needed one another, but they all suffered from the fear of relying on themselves in overcoming their internal conflicts. Therefore, they avoided talking about their miseries in order to preserve their family's balance.

Teddy's death was a huge loss for Tobias that affected how he saw others and himself. Freud and many other psychologists argued that ego reflects a person's vision of himself, his social status, and his interactions with others. However, the ego can also cause serious psychological problems when the loss of a family member is involved.

Some people associate their feelings, personalities, and roles in their families or communities with a certain person; in such cases, the death of this person can result in the loss of all these qualities (Miner, 2002). In *A Delicate Balance*, Tobias devoted all his feelings and sense of fatherhood to his son, thereby leading to his depression, anxiety, and excessive sense of loss after the death of Teddy. This painful experience also made him give up his role as a husband and father to his family.

#### 4. Conclusion

Albee's plays represent a sense of loss in various directions and forms, such as loss of beloved, loss of values and ideals, loss of a relationship that lasted for many years, loss of sense of surroundings, loss of sense of motherhood, loss of sense of belonging, and loss in many other aspects that Albee captured in his plays. Also, this study concluded that the periods of childhood and adolescence and the problems of the present, which activate the memories of conflict in the past, can motivate an individual to take proactive action in response to certain hazards, which in turn may lead to false positive reactions. However, the individual may also prevent the occurrence of serious accidents, thereby explaining why people with anxiety do not die in natural accidents. Therefore, anxiety is a preventive mechanism that is designed to prevent an individual from engaging in potentially harmful behaviors.

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