

## EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE SANDBOX* IN THE LIGHT OF NEW HISTORICISM

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### **Abstract**

History is an important part of human being's life in that it plays an important role in shaping our private, public, and political viewpoints. It serves as a mirror to life because it connects past events with present ones and may at times affect the future as well. Likewise, history enables us to ponder about the reason behind some past events and their influence on the individuals' present lives. The wide range of history and its broad coverage of different causes and effects of life events are the two focal issues that open the readers' eyes to the inherent features of the New Historicists' examinations of various works of literature. With this critical standpoint in mind, the present paper intends to study Edward Albee's play *The Sandbox* to reveal the existing factors that link the play with the previous historical events present in the American history of the time. By choosing New Historicism as the main model, the paper will shed light on such issues as power, resistance, and subversion put forward by such leading figures of this critical approach as Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt.

**Key Words:** New Historicism; History; Edward Albee; Power; *The Sandbox*

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New Historicism is a critical approach to literature based on the assumption that a work of art is the product of its historical, social, and cultural background that cannot be analyzed as an autonomous literary work. This new approach emerged in the late 1970s and the early 1980s and found its roots in the reaction to the New Critics who “focus the interpretive process on the text itself rather than on historical, authorial, or reader concerns” (Bressler, 1999, p. 212); therefore New Historicists maintain that literature and history are inseparable. Their main argument highlights their emphasis on the interrelationship between literature and history, meaning “In literature can be found history and in history, much literature” (p. 214).

The seeds of New Historicism are believed to have been terminated with the publication of Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and Louis Montrose’s essay “Eliza, Queene of Shepheardes”. Such leading New Historicist critics claim that we should read literature “in relation to culture, history, society, and other factors” to reach “a text’s meaning” (p. 215). They also argue that the New Critics could not provide the reader with a clear-cut definition of “what the term *literature* really means” (p. 217). Hence, in an effort to break with the previous modes of thought that argued “texts had some universal significance and essential historical influence to impart, ”New Historicists tried to “break down the simplistic distinction between literature and history and open up a complex dialogue between them” (Brannigan, 1998p. 3).

The influences on the afore-mentioned critics were the result of the efforts of such key figures as Michel Foucault on the one part and Marxist scholars-Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, and others- on the other part. They shared the same viewpoint with Foucault by “questioning the nature of literature, history, culture, and society ... they refused to accept the traditional, well-worn answers” (Bressler , 1999, p.217). Marxist critics, also, taught them the notion of “interconnectedness of all life” and that “history is shaped by the people who live it” (p. 217). Thus, we can infer that New Historicism is a reconstruction of the past with a present perspective. As Veeseer asserts, “New Historicists have evolved a method of describing the culture in action (1994, p. xi).

In his essay, “Professing the Renaissance,” Louis A. Montrose concedes that New Historicism is concerned with “*the historicity of texts*” and “*the textuality of history*” (as cited in Booker, 1996, p.136). He defines “the historicity of texts” as “the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing” and by “textuality of history” he means “we can have no access to a full and authentic past” (p. 136). The two notions express the need for a fresh examination of the literary works in the historical and cultural milieus in order to uncover the inherent historical and culture-bound meanings and their interrelationships. That is why it is always said that New Historicism eschews “those methods and materials that gave old-fashioned literary study its immense interpretive authority” (Veeseer, 1994, p. xii). Therefore, the New Historicists’ tendency to put forward “the *parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts” is the main reason for

the application of this approach to Albee's "The Sandbox" within this short research paper (Barry, 2009, p.116).

As the product of the American playwright, Edward Franklin Albee (1928-2016), *The Sandbox* (1959) is a modern one-act play that opens with a bright day the Young Man is doing calisthenics near a sandbox at the beach. Mommy and Daddy have brought Grandma to the beach and placed her in the sandbox, waiting for her imminent death. The other player in the play, the Musician, is presented playing on and off as the other players command him. While, throughout the play, Mommy and Daddy do not pay attention to Grandma and treat her in a cold manner, the Young Man treats her well and he is the one who smiles on her. As time passes and the deepest night is around the corner, Mommy and Daddy acknowledge that Grandma's death is near. When Grandma notices their indifference and lack of attention, she takes the toy shovel throwing sand at her. As daylight sets, Mommy weeps shortly near the sandbox and exits the scene with Daddy. Upon their leaving, Grandma finds herself half buried in the sand and unable to move. Then the Young Man stops doing calisthenics and approaches her and asks her to "be very still" (Albee, 2006, p.1061). He says, "I am the Angel of Death. I am ... uh ... I am come for you" (p. 1061). Though he seems to be an amateur, Grandma compliments him and closes her eyes with a smile.

Set in an American context, the play serves as a satire on the ideal American family life. Albee pokes fun at the American Dream and the situation of the family in his time. He satirizes lack of love and empathy felt within familial relationships. As the play opens, the audience sees the

imposing character, Mommy, followed by her subservient husband, Daddy. From the very beginning, the audience notices that Mommy and Daddy cannot communicate with each other because they do not have anything meaningful to say. Besides, if the conversation starts on the part of Mommy, the only thing Daddy can do is to approve of her words. A good case in point is the part following Mommy's talking about the place as a good one and asking for Daddy's opinion, which goes as, " Whatever you say, Mommy" (Albee, 2006, p. 1057).

The submissive character of the husband, Daddy, is an evident sign of Albee's poking fun at the principles of the American Dream whose ideals were grounded in equality of all the American people. As McCarthy (1987) puts it,

*The Sandbox* betray[s] first-hand experience of the emasculating tensions of the marital couple, and throughout his work the struggle of powerful frustrated women and their indeterminate, morally weak partners is exploited in the creation of his family settings. (p. 5)

The passive role of Daddy and the commanding figure of Mommy showcase the fact that family as the fundamental organization of love, mutual respect and understanding has lost its value and coherence; as a result, what we see is the loss of familial bond. Moreover, the subversion of the accepted beliefs pertaining to familial issues in favor of the authoritative roles ends in the death of the merits that grant meaning to life and result in the soulless life of Mommy and Daddy.

In line with Albee's concern with the absence of the true values

within the families, the character of Grandma gains importance here due to the fact that she is the image of the so-called traditional codes of behavior. In the middle of the play we are informed that following the marriage of the fifty-nine-year-old Mommy with the rich Daddy, Grandma has been forced to sell her farm and move to the city where Mommy and Daddy "... fixed a nice place for me[Grandma] under the stove ... gave me an army blanket ... and my own dish ... my very own dish!" (Albee, 2006, p. 1059). Mommy and Daddy's cruel treatment of Grandma echoes devaluation of life and Grandma is cognizant of that too, asserting "There's no respect here" (p.1058). She, additionally, criticizes their marriage since it is based on "... money, money, money" (p.1059).

Grandma's criticism is again Albee's attempt to deride the hypocrisy and clichés of the good life prevalent in the 1950s society. Albee's main struggle in the play is to challenge the hot norms of the time through his emphasis on "the meaninglessness of the American life" (Canaday, 1966, p. 28). In such society, family members grow farther and farther from one another and life gets discolored. So, the way Albee exposes us to identify ourselves with the characters is quite different from what was expected to be. We are faced with an uncaring Mommy figure who is the anti-American ideal woman of the time. On the word of McCann, "Edward Albee's plays are ferocious attacks on lethargy and complacency in American society" and "a savage denial that everything is just dandy" (as cited in Canaday, 1966, p. 28).

Mommy's treatment of everyone in the play is demanding. Her

feeling superior to Daddy shows her disregard for his personality and dignity. And her relationship with Grandma is a scene of complete cruelty towards the mother who did not give up after the death of her husband and despite all the agonies she went through, she raised her daughter all alone. As Harris claims, Albee “attempts to satirize a situation which he sees as both painful and irremediable” and so his work is “a negation of the possibility of meaningful human action” (p. 31). A working example highlights the part Grandma mentions her daughter and son-in-law’s ill-treatment of her when she says, “So, what have I got to complain about? Nothing, of course. I’m not complaining” (Albee, 2006, p. 1059). Grandma’s words shed light on Albee’s lack of hope for the future. As Miller acknowledges, “Sadly, however, we cannot say that Albee’s outlook produces any ... hope” (as cited in Canaday, 1966, p. 31). That is why Grandma refuses to complain anymore and comes to terms with her doomed life.

As mentioned earlier Foucault’s ideas regarding power and its influence on human beings have been a source of inspiration for New Historicists in that “the paradoxical circumstance of trying to control the uncontrollable is played out in the New Historicism” (Harpham, 1991, p. 360). However, how Foucault treats the notion of power is worth mentioning here since “His work is very critical of the notion that power is something which a group of people or an institution possess and that power is only concerned with oppressing and constraining” (Mills, 2003, p. 33). As seen in the play, Mommy is the one who is in control of everything and power is at her disposal. Yet, Grandma in a way disdains her domineering role,

addressing her as a “kid” or a “cow” and asking her to “be brave” (Albee, 2006, p.1060). This shows the productive aspect of power to bring about “new forms of behavior rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behavior” (Mills, 2003, p. 2). This view of the role of power justifies Grandma’s sweet smile in the sandbox since, as Foucault claims, “Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 35).

Another important aspect of Foucault’s elaborating on power casts light on the fact that Albee’s Mommy tries to gain the liberal thinking and power through her marriage with the obedient Daddy who is looked down on by Grandma, believing her daughter has married money. Though she has married the rich and powerless man, she cannot communicate with him because she is living a dull life. Undoubtedly such view of life is the emblem of Albee’s frown on the hollow rituals and America’s desire for pleasure, wealth and satisfaction. The choice of nameless characters is very telling as well since they are presented as dehumanized individuals who are just types. As reported by Stenz (1978), in *The Sandbox*:

All the characters self-consciously play roles in a ceremony which is being put on for the sake of appearances. Mommy and daddy, after all, are not concerned with expressing real feelings. They are dedicated to the principal of comforting outwardly to what they believe other people expect of them. (p. 34)

As Kolin further clarifies, “*The Sandbox* encapsulates such familiar Albee targets as anti-Momism, hollow rituals, failure to communicate,



sterile couplehood, complacency, and hypocrisy (as cited in Bottoms, 2005, p. 26). Kolin's mention of "anti-Momism" is another principal point in the New Historicist reading of the play owing to the fact that it originates from Albee's childhood and being adopted by the wealthy Reed A. Albee and his wife, Frances Cotter with whom he did not have a good relationship. This play reveals Albee's main concern with families because they are the first institutions that form a child's identity. The only honest character in the play is Grandma, who is the symbol of the old rural values, juxtaposed with Mommy and Daddy's modern marriage. Thus, we may infer that Grandma is the only realistic figure in the play aware of the hollowness of life. Her understanding of acceptance of her imposed death shows that "To Albee, the official culture is both rotten and irredeemable" (Samuels, 1964, p. 189). This negative view of life and culture is, according to Kolin, the reason behind Mommy and Daddy's treating Grandma "like a dog" (as cited in Bottoms, 2005, 27).

Considering Albee's method of writing and his stage effects, one may wonder about his absurdist attitude as opposed to the conventions of the realist theatre of his time. His choice of the word players rather than characters shows *The Sandbox* is, in Kolin's opinion, "a witty performance of a performance" (p. 27). His players refer to the audience directly as when Grandma breaks away with the theoretical conventions demanding, "Don't put the lights up yet ... I'm not ready; I'm not quite ready" (Albee, 2006, p. 1060). In line with that, the Young Man undercuts the realist conventions when he says, "Uh... ma'am; I... I have a line here" (p. 1061).

Even the sounds coming from off-stage activities that Mommy and Daddy infer as a signal for Grandma's death time in reality showcase the theatrical aspect of the play. Albee's goal in so doing, in Kolin's view, is to draw our attention to "the artificiality of role-playing in the theatre of realism" (as cited in Bottoms, 2005, 27). In the same manner, Stenz argues, "The author deliberately parodies theatrical conventions in order to satirize the vacuity and hypocrisy of a death watch" (1978, p. 34). Again and again we witness that what Albee intends to do is to turn a blind eye to the status quo and this aim, based on Kolin's argument, is achieved through the employment of satire and breaking up with the realist "conventions, deftly, comically" (as cited in Bottoms, 2005, 27).

The significance of studying the play through the lens of New Historicism in this short research paper was owing to the fact that it shows that Albee had not been ignorant of the existing moral issues of his time and his writing method is, actually, an effort to mirror the lost values and nostalgia human beings face in modernity. His dramatic art provides the reader with a deep understanding of the link between past and present and how these two may at times challenge our mindsets regarding the oft-quoted and accepted rituals.

As explained in depth, Albee, like other dramatists, was concerned with the follies of human beings in their private and social lives and how they got through their lives. He was greatly affected by family and familial issues; that is why we witnessed the harsh treatment of marriage in *The Sandbox*. His depiction of Grandma as the most aware character in the

play reveals, “Grandma looks death in the face and accepts it without fear” (Stenz, 1978, p.36). While, on the other hand, this unsympathetic “experience does not touch them [Mommy and Daddy]” and in the end, they “leave the scene with the same indifference and insensibility with which they arrived” (p. 36). To make it short:

In all of Albee’s plays the moral imperative is the obligation for everyone to live with awareness. The demands of institutions and the barriers people build around themselves prevent them from seeing the realities of their condition and foster the creation of self-destructive illusions. (p. 132)

Then, we can conclude that Albee’s writing was a total break with the traditional modes of writing. In his review of Albee and Stoppard’s recent plays, Brantley mentions:

Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard are directly descended from Beckett. Like him they consider the meaningless of a life that knows its own extinction, of being in the face of nothingness. They share this worldview with that other great successor to Beckett, Harold Pinter. (as cited in Bennett, 2011, p. 7)

Thus, with the New Historicist reading of the play, the reader can reach a thorough understanding about the cultural and historical issues that were the outcomes of the failed American Dream, at the core of which such notions as the ideal American family life and unflawed American marriage were supposed to provide all individuals with equality, mutual respect, and positive attitudes towards one another and consequently lead to a productive life both privately and publically. As a result, the main conclusion that can be drawn from this short paper is that Edward Albee’s *The Sandbox* has

a lot to offer about the socio-historical conventions that were dominant in America and how they affected familial relationships, leaving people with hollow grounds and uncertain feelings about what happiness, prolific life, and success were really meant to be. Likewise, the New Historicist examination of the play can provide the reader with a new angle that casts light on the fruitless promises of the American Dream of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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