

DEATH-WATCH – A JUXTAPOSITION OF LIVING AND DYING: A STUDY OF THE PLAY THE LADY FROM DUBUQUE BY EDWARD ALBEE

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ABSTRACT

The The Lady from Dubuque is also based on the idea of death-watch – a juxtaposition of living and dying. This play is inspired by Elizabeth Kubler Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969) and this is why the title character in Albee's play is named Elizabeth. Ross's book presents a case study of a woman named Mrs. W who is dying and wants to be left alone to die in peace. Along with this, Mrs. W's husband is unable to accept this final reality i.e., his wife's death and his approaching loneliness. So, his wife is angry with him for "not facing it and for so desperately clinging on to something that she was willing and ready to give up" (Ross 116). In Albee's *The Lady from Dubuque*, just like *On Death and Dying*, Jo is in the final days of her illness, and her husband Sam is unable to face the fact that his wife is dying. Albee agrees with Ross's idea that, "It (death) is as if the pain had gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for the final rest 'before the long journey'" (113). This is what Jo, the dying person, believes and feels; but Sam's escapism proves a hurdle in her smooth process of dying.

Introduction

This play discusses death at another completely different level. Unlike *The Sandbox* where death is portrayed as a refuge, an escape from life; in *The Lady from Dubuque* death is a horrifying thing from which the loved ones of the dying lady are trying to escape by ignoring the final reality of her approaching death. There are four couples in the play – Sam and Jo, Fred and Carol, Lucinda and Edgar, and Elizabeth and Oscar. The play opens with the first three couples. The situation is this, Jo in her early thirties is dying and spends a final evening in the company of her husband Sam and their group of friends – Fred, Carol, Lucinda and Edgar. But her husband and friends are engaged in the game of "Twenty Questions" (LD 561) and make fun through psychological assault and biting verbal repartee. Despite supporting Jo who is dying of cancer, these characters are using these "fun and games" as a medium to escape from the finality and bitter reality of death – the reason for which they have gathered there. Jo, feeling neglected, says "Don't you just hate party games? Don't you just hate them?" (LD 563). She reminds her husband, Sam, again and again of the fact that she is dying; but Sam unable to embrace his beloved wife's death, declines the fact and again indulges in the fantasy.

JO. Your name is Sam, and this is your house, and I am your wife, and I am dying . . .

SAM. (private) Don't, Jo.

(To the OTHERS)

Come on gang. Who am I? (LD 563)

This game of "twenty questions" is considered by Ronald F. Rapin a "guessing game" and further he asserts:

This guessing game is used by Albee as a pretext for the planting of larger, more serious philosophical issues in the work as a whole. In fact, the question 'who am I?' repeated over and over by one of the main characters, Sam, at the beginning of

Act One, is ostensibly only a question regarding the game of Twenty Questions.
(99)

Thus, Albee is emphasizing on the thematic search for self-identity through confusing, mazelike dialogues; and gives a paradoxical presentation of this quest by the comparison that at one hand people are indulged in the philosophical game, and at the other hand they are using this game as a prop to escape the final truth of their life i.e., death. "Death's door and all" (LD 569) is ignored by all the characters in the course of the play. This is why when the game ends, Jo sarcastically asks them, "Yes, and wasn't it boring? Wasn't it all . . . empty, ultimately? Didn't we waste our time?" and further she says, "Especially if you're dying, as I am?" (LD 573). She is pointing that death is inevitable whether we negate or neglect it.

Jo's realistic comments suggest that though Jo's life is physically about to cease, yet she has more life than the physically healthy characters. Jo is not only the character who is dying, but her husband and her companions have already succumbed to the disease of escapism which now paralyzes them and finally will kill them more mercilessly than Jo's cancer because they "want some comfort" and for this comfort they "want some lies" (LD 596). Sam, is the embodiment of the loved one who is unable to face the reality of his wife's death. Each time he has to refer to the death, he evades it. Thus he is unable to help Jo, "IN THE HOUR OF MY GODDAMN NEED!" (LD 571). Jo is not getting any help and support from her husband. In a direct reference to Kubler Ross, Jo makes the remark: "Well, I dare say the day will come I'll need you all. Then, of course, the day will come I won't need a soul. And then, of course, the day won't come" (LD 590). Addressing the audience, she further asserts, "That's what they tell us. Isn't it – that growing pile of books on how to die? That somewhere along the line you stop needing those you . . . need the most? You loose your ties? God, what do you need then?" (LD 591).

Just like *All Over*, the play concentrates less on the person who is dying than it does on the survivors. This is why, all the characters are more concerned with Sam's fate after Jo's death because Sam is unable to cope-up with the present situation. Despite placating his wife and helping her to embrace the approaching death, Sam seems unable to accept the reality that his wife is dying and is leaving him. Throughout the first act he tries to escape from this truth by indulging in games and being social with his friends. Like a number of Albee's characters, Sam avoids confronting painful truths. So, this evening of drinks and games occurs in order to pacify Sam's desires and needs than to sooth Jo's pain because this evening is a medium for Sam to distract himself from Jo's suffering as well as from his inability to confront the reality of her dying. So, Sam seems more concerned about his own needs than Jo's needs.

The friends – Lucinda and Edgar, and Carol and Fred – also present the repetitive ideas. The first couple visits Jo and Sam out of habit than concern. This is why they gain little from the encounter. Edgar does not talk to Jo and prefers to talk to Sam about Jo's illness and behaviour. In the same way Lucinda, too, wastes her opportunity to speak honestly to Jo. Edgar and Lucinda, thus, are unable to understand the needs of their neighbours cum life-long companions and they leave them in the hour of need. The second couple also demonstrates the same cold world. Fred, a self-centered man, does not show compassion for Jo at any moment. He blinds himself to her plight. Carol, a practical minded woman, as a newcomer to the group enjoys freedom. Though being an outsider to the group she is able to make honest comments and responses, yet she also succumbs to her own emotional conditions. Matthew C. Roudane rightly comments,

Albee presents a thematic statement on the manner of living by showing that although Jo's life is physically about to cease, she radiates more life than do the physically healthy characters. This is because Jo is not the only character who is dying. Her companions long before this play begins, have succumbed to a debilitating disease which now paralyzes them. (On Death, Dying 64)

For Jo, the company of the friends and husband is torturing than soothing. In consequence when the unknown persons – Elizabeth and Oscar – enter in the house, Jo welcomes them whole heartedly. The entry of these unknown persons is very absurd, as the complete play shifts into a tug-of-war in which one cannot understand what is happening. The two strangers lead the characters as well as audience to a disbelieving wonderland where the laws of time and space are no longer important – a world in which Jo's mother Elizabeth from New Jersey can be Jo's mother from Dubuque. Lucinda says, "Jo's mother is not at all what we had been led to believe [. . .] No, well; you see! Not at all what we'd imagined" (LD 632). Sam asks her "WHO ARE YOU!!!???" (LD 611) and "WHAT ARE YOU!?" (LD 616), but the answer of the woman "I have come home for my daughter's dying" (LD 622) is not acceptable because Sam declares, "THIS IS NOT JO'S MOTHER" (LD 634).

Albee once said, the play demonstrates that, "our identity is created by other people's need for our identity to exist. Our existence depends on our usefulness" (qtd. in Zinman 101). This idea of "need" and "usefulness" will justify the existence of Elizabeth as Jo's mother. Sam, the husband, is not able to be useful for the wife in the "hour of need", thus despite the fact that Elizabeth is not Jo's mother, Jo embraces her because she can prove "useful". This is why when Sam asks Jo to declare that Elizabeth is not her mother, so that the strangers can be thrown out of the house; their usefulness turns the situation in their favour. Sam says very confidently, "These are the two who have come, Jo. This is the woman claims to be your mother. Tell her Jo, tell her you don't know her" (LD 638). But Jo understands that the woman, whosoever she is, has come to "protect" and support her "from the dark and from the thunder" (LD 639), so accepts her as her mother:

SAM. Tell her, Jo tell her we don't know her.

(Jo's eyes return to ELIZABETH)

ELIZABETH. Come to me, now. It's time to hold you close, to rock you in my arms.

JO. Rock me?

ELIZABETH. Hold you, rock you, take you to my breast.

SAM. No!

.....

ELIZABETH. Protect you from the dark and from the thunder?

JO. Protect me?

SAM. NO!

ELIZABETH. From the dark and from the thunder.

JO. Make it better?

SAM (Agony) Oh, Jo!

ELIZABETH. (So tender, gentle) Make it better? What have I come for? Come to me.

SAM. (A howl of pain) NOOOOOOOOooooooooo!

(Finally, with tears and a great helpless smile, JO rushes into ELIZABETH's arms; her embrace is almost a tableau, so involved is it with pressing together.) (LD 638-39)

These dialogues hint that Elizabeth is not Jo's mother, as Jo pays more attention to the profits of going to Elizabeth; and when she makes sure that Elizabeth will give her what she is craving for, she makes this stranger her dearest mother and "embraces" her. Breda Murphy says, "Elizabeth represents a challenge to Sam to give up his desperate hope on Jo, to surrender his need for her, so that he can do what she needs, and help her to die" (99-100).

As Sam is only willing in fulfilling what he needs, so Jo, in the hour of her need, replaces the most loving person of her life with a stranger. This reminds us of the concept of changing reality which has also been discussed in *The Play about the Baby*, where reality changes according to need. In this play, too, reality is changing according to the need of the dying person. Jo embraces Elizabeth because she has come with the greater awareness of the needs of the dying person and the survivors.

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