Three Tall Women Study Guide

Three Tall Women by Edward Albee

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Critics have noted autobiographical elements in several of Albee' s plays, particularly *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) and *A Delicate Balance* (1966). By his own admission, however, *Three Tall Women* is Albee's most intentionally autobiographical work to date.

The protagonist of the play, a compelling woman of more than ninety years old, reflects on her life with a mixture of shame, pleasure, regret, and satisfaction. She recalls the fun of her childhood and her marriage, when she had an overwhelming optimism for her future. Yet she bitterly recalls the negative events that resulted in regret: her husband's extramarital affairs, the death of her husband, and the estrangement of her gay son.

The woman's relationship with her son is the clearest indication that Albee was working through some troubled memories of his own in *Three Tall Women*. The playwright was raised by conservative New England foster parents who disproved of his homosexuality. Like the son in his play, he left home at eighteen. Albee admitted to the *Economist* that the play "was a kind of exorcism. And I didn't end up any more fond of the woman after I finished it than when I started it."

Besides exorcising some personal demons with the play, Albee regained some respect among New York theater critics. Many critics despaired that the playwright, who showed such promise during the 1960s and 1970s, had dried up creatively. In fact, *Three Tall Women* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1994, as well as the Drama Critics Circle, Lucille Lortel, and Outer Critics Circle awards for best play.

Author Biography

Born in 1928, Albee was adopted by Reed and Frances Albee, a wealthy couple involved in the theater. He was a precocious writer, composing poetry at the age of six and a play at twelve. As a teenager, he left home when his parents disapproved of his sexual preference; this confrontation would appear later in his plays, in particular *Three Tall Women*.

Albee's first one-act play, *The Zoo Story*, (1958), garnered comparisons with the works of Tennessee Williams and Eugene Ionesco. Subsequent works such as *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), *The Sandbox* (1960), and *The American Dream* (1962) earned Albee a place among the top avant-garde writers of the day.

Without doubt, Albee's best-known work is *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962). In this three-act drama, a middle-aged, hard-drinking couple argues and complains about their miserable lives. Critics suggested autobiographical motives in Albee's depiction of George and Martha, the feuding husband and wife, and welcomed the play as an invigorating exploration of the troubled lives of American families. The play was turned into a film starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in 1966. That same year, Albee earned the first of three Pulitzer Prizes for *A Delicate Balance*.

During the 1970s and 1980s, he produced a string of notable failures that included *Box* and *Quotations from Mao Tse-Tung* (1969), *All Over* (1971), and *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980). The only play during this period that received a generally favorable response was Seascape, for which he won a second Pulitzer Prize in 1975.

While his plays remained popular on university stages and in regional theaters around the country, Albee seemed like a professional outcast. During this time he continued to write, and taught the craft of playwriting at the University of Houston in Texas. Then, in the early 1990s, he earned his third Pulitzer Prize as well as widespread critical and popular acclaim for *Three Tall Women*. In 1993 the Signature Theatre in Manhattan devoted an entire season to Albee's plays.

In 1996, President Bill Clinton awarded him the National Medal of the Arts for his distinguished career. Critic Robert Brustein noted in *The New Republic*, "His late career is beginning to resemble O'Neill's, another dramatist who wrote his greatest plays after having been rejected and abandoned by the culture. Happily, unlike O'Neill, he may not have to wait for death to rehabilitate him."

Plot Summary

Act I

At the beginning of *Three Tall Women*, three ladies generically named A, B, and C are sitting around a wealthy, extravagantly decorated bedroom.

A is an elderly woman who insists that she is ninety-one years old. A young, bright woman, C is the lawyer for A's estate. She disagrees, and claims that A is actually ninety-two. B, who seems to be A's caretaker, is fifty-two years old and attempts to mediate the dispute. These are the three tall women of the play's title.

In spite of B's objections and A's protestations, C will not relent. She can't understand why A would lie about one year of her life. "I can imagine taking off ten or *trying* to," C admits. "Though more probably seven, or five good and tricky but *one*!? Taking off *one year*? What kind of vanity is *that*? Their dispute is the beginning of a complicated gap between age and experience that grows wider, and more poignant, as the play progresses.

B accompanies A to the bathroom, then returns to the room to talk with C alone. B explains how difficult A's life has become. She can no longer control some of her bodily functions. For example, she wets the bed; yet, stubborn as she is, A refuses to wear a diaper or take other precautions. B is philosophical regarding A's predicament. "It's downhill from sixteen on! For all of us!" she reminds C.

A returns from the bathroom, cranky and demanding. She takes her favorite chair back from C, asks for her pillows, and makes herself comfortable. Then she begins what may be a daily routine: she reminisces about her life when she was young, pretty, and popular. This continues for the remainder of Act I A recalls stories from her youth, while B and C listen, comment, and learn from her experience.

As A chronicles her life as a young girl she is occasionally confused, but her demeanor remains dignified. Initially, C needles her for her petty prejudices and forgetfulness, but the women seem to bond during the conversation.

Just as A begins to tell B and C about an affair she once had as a young lady, she realizes she must go to the bathroom again. B helps her off, then returns to the room alone to talk with C about A's declining health. A broke her arm when she fell, and as a result of the break, the bone is disintegrating. The doctors want to remove it, but A will not let them.

The sound of crashing glass from the bathroom disturbs their conversation. Apparently A occasionally plays foolish pranks. On a whim, she has broken a glass in the bathroom sink, and B must now play the stern disciplinarian. She scolds A for her childish behavior. A returns to the bedroom.

C is trying to straighten out A's bank account and get all her bills paid, but A misplaces important paperwork and forgets to sign checks. C realizes that A is mistrustful of everyone around her.

Occasionally, A complains that "he never comes to see me." B explains to C that she is referring to her son, who visits infrequently. A rails that her son doesn't love her but "he loves his boys, those boys he has," suggesting the reason her son is not around is that he is gay, and his mother's intolerance has driven him away.

As A prepares for her nap, she remembers taking care of her own mother when she was dying. In the middle of her story, she freezes suddenly. C thinks she has died, but B recognizes that the old woman has had a stroke. They exit to call A's son and her doctor.

Act II

At the beginning of Act II, A is on her deathbed. B and C are nearby, discussing her condition. Then another A enters, looking perfectly healthy, without even a sling on her arm.

"Any change?" she asks. "Ho, we're .. .just as we were; no change." With B's response, it becomes obvious that, in an odd turn of events, A, B, and C are now aspects of the same person, at different times of life. While A is the elderly version of this eccentric, anonymous woman, B is the same woman at fifty-two, and C is the protagonist at twenty-six.

Act II is comprised of a series of monologues from these three versions of the protagonist at three different stages of her life. As each woman speaks in turn, she provides different perspectives and descriptions of key events in her life.

Whatever the event, each aspect of this woman views it differently because of her age and experience. C seems more innocent and adventurous, while B is a bit stodgy and unforgiving. A has the perspective of age, and no longer worries much about the opinion of others. At no time are the differences among these characters more pronounced than when their son known as The Boy actually appears, visiting his sick mother on her deathbed.

The Boy appears just as he was the day he ran away. When he arrives, B is enraged and screams at him to leave.

Since the three versions of the tall woman exist only as figments of the old women's imagination, however, The Boy cannot see nor hear the three women, only his mother on her deathbed.

Meanwhile, C is amazed at the sight of her future child, while A is touched he has come back to see her, even though it is almost too late.

As The Boy sits near his dying mother's bed, A, B, and C continue their rambling personal history. She chronicles the death of her husband from prostate cancer. None of the individual aspects of this unique woman seem to fit together; none of the versions like each other. A resents C's youth, B thinks A and C are foolish, and C can't stand the thought of becoming A or B.

Near the end, each woman focuses on the happiest time of her life. C assumes the best is yet to come. She is very optimistic about her future.

B enjoys her time of life, with "half of being adult done, the rest ahead of me. Old enough to be a *little* wise, past being *really* dumb."

A believes the same thing. "The happiest moment? Coming to the end of it, I think," says A. For her, the final detachment from life right before death signals maturity, comfort and peace. "That's the happiest moment," A insists in the final lines of the play, "When it's all done. When we can stop."

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

A, an old woman, sits in her chair. B, a middle aged woman, sits on a bench at the foot of a large bed. C, a young woman, sits at a desk. A announces that she's ninety one. C tries to convince her she's ninety two. B tells her to let it go, but A insists, saying she is thirty years older than "he" is, and that he reminds her of this fact all the time. C suggests that "he" may be wrong. A argues that he should know how old he is, he tells her every time he comes to visit. She frets about what day it is, disagrees when B tells her, then teases C about it being "today." C speaks sharply to her, B speaks sharply in response, and A says she cannot speak to someone who pays her in that way, then starts to cry. B and C let her cry herself into silence again.

C wonders why anyone would be so vain as to lie about being one year younger, saying she can understand five or ten years, but not one. A and B tease her about how she keeps going on about things, then A suddenly announces she has to go to the bathroom. B helps her into the bathroom, even though A complains that B is hurting her. B returns, saying that they made it that time, and commenting that it's the same routine every morning; get her set in her chair, and she realizes she has to go. She adds that sometimes they make it in time and sometimes they do not. C suddenly worries that this happens when A is sitting in the chair C is sitting in, but B reassures her that it is always in the other chair. C says it must be awful, getting older and losing control like that. B tells her to relax, it is inevitable, and then suggests that children should be taught from the time they are six that they are on the road to dying. C says that is an awful idea, and B tells her to "grow up." A returns, complaining of being neglected. B and C get her settled in her chair and bring her a pair of pillows, one for her back and one for her broken arm. B makes a joke about her arm, A laughs, then asks why C is not laughing. When C does not respond right away, A and B tease her about not paying attention. C feels they are ganging up on her and says loudly that there is nothing the matter with her. A asks why she is yelling.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

The fact that the women have no names suggests that while they are individualized characters, they are also archetypes, or representatives of universal human traits or states of being. This means that on a symbolic level, A represents all of the elderly; upset and bewildered at the loss of physical and mental faculties. B represents the middle aged; experienced with the world and with life. C represents the young with their narrow, inexperienced perspectives. The portrayal in the first act of A's process of physical and mental decay represents the ultimate deterioration in faculties that all of us, not just women, are inevitably faced with. In Act 2, however, when we see that all three characters are the same person at different ages, the story goes a level deeper to suggest that the aging process is also about coming to terms with one's past, and the

necessity of doing so before death. Act 2, therefore, is the part of the play that more clearly states its themes.

The way that "he" is used interchangeably throughout the play to refer to both A's husband and son is important on a couple of levels. Firstly, it reinforces the idea that A's memory is not what it once was. It also indicates that she confuses the two of them because she had similar relationships with both given that, as the play reveals, both men acted with what A perceives as insensitivity and selfishness. This leads to the second level of significance of the men being unnamed. In keeping with the play's archetypal sensibility, calling A's husband and son "he" suggests that, in their insensitivity and selfishness, they too represent universal characteristics. In other words, they are archetypal men.

A third archetype is represented by A calling her sister "Sis," instead of giving her a name. In this case, the archetype is of the sibling rival. Later in the play we discover various ways in which the rivalry plays out, including A's inferiority complex and how A makes herself seem a better person through continually referring to Sis as a "drunk."

Both A and B repeatedly tell C to grow up. This suggests that C's attitudes and perspectives are childlike, and trigger significant resentment and impatience on the part of the other two women. This is the case also in the second act, when the three women become aspects of the same woman. In that context, A and B's impatience with C suggests that the older selves have no time for their younger self, no respect, and no patience. This reinforces the play's central theme that part of the aging process is reconciling with one's past choices, actions, and attitudes.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

A asks again what day it is, then asks whether this is the day he is coming. When B tells her he is not, A complains that he never comes and that everybody wants something, a lesson she learned from her mother. She goes into a rambling reminiscence of how her mother tried to prepare her and "Sis" for life, and how Sis could not do it, but she could. She says she met him, knew that he wanted her, and lied about how she could ride horses to get him. She goes into another rambling memory about how she rode after she got married and won prizes for it. B asks whether A rode when she was young, and this triggers another confused memory about her parents, which makes A cry again. And again, B and C wait her out. A calms down, then returns to her memory of riding, saying you only rode if you were rich but she did not get rich until she got married. She refers in passing to having an affair and to the fact that Sis drank, then suddenly has to go to the bathroom again. B helps her off. When B returns, she explains that A fell and broke her arm, that it is not healing, and that the doctors want to amputate but A refuses.

Suddenly a glass breaks offstage. B runs off and brings A back on, laughing because she broke the glass on purpose and got a reaction out of B. B complains sharply to C about how she did not help, and their conversation reveals that C is just there as a representative of A's lawyers. A becomes confused, thinking that C is there representing a lawyer who in fact died several years ago. C explains that she is there because A's finances are a mess, that she is unreliable about writing checks and paying bills, and proposes that the lawyer handle all the finances and bring checks over for A to sign. A refuses, fighting to keep her independence for as long as she can. She suddenly goes off into another memory of horses, telling a story of how he was shot in the shoulder accidentally while hunting. She touches her own arm, suddenly aware of the similarity in their experiences.

A goes into graphic detail about his injury, the infection that resulted and the treatment he went through. As C becomes more and more upset, A tells how the doctors told her to take him to the desert and "bake" the infection out of him, how it worked and the arm was healed, and how all that remained were the scars. She says that from then on she rode side-saddle. She remembers the name of the canyon where they went, which leads her to the memory of the meeting she had with a famous movie star. At first she has difficulty remembering the star's name, but remembers her husband, whom she refers to as "a real smart little Jew." As C reacts negatively to the racism in A's remarks, A suddenly remembers the movie star's name. When B and C are not as excited as she is, she asks what is wrong with them. C says they are Democrats, and A tells her to not get "fresh."

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

On one level, this section of the play offers an even more vivid portrait of mental deterioration brought on by age. This is revealed in the way A's mind wanders from story to story and memory to memory, all interrupted by her inability to control her bladder. On another level, A's erratic memory allows for exposition, or the revealing of information about the past, in a way that does not sound forced or contrived, as a lot of exposition in plays tends to sound. On a deeper level, these stories begin the exploration of the play's main theme, the necessity of coming to terms with the past, by revealing some of the past with which A must come to terms. We learn about the pressure put on A by her mother, the sense of sibling rivalry A felt, and continues to feel, towards her sister, A being a poor girl marrying into a rich family, the hint of an affair, and we catch a glimpse of A's racism. The most significant incident in the past recounted in this section, however, is the story of the injury suffered by her husband, which ends with the reference to scars. This story foreshadows the bracelet story, the climactic speech in this act about the sexually charged encounter between A and her husband, in that the physical scars resulting from her husband's injury symbolize the emotional scars left on A by the sexual encounter.

A's broken arm is a symbol not only of her physical deterioration, but her emotional and spiritual decay as well. As we see more clearly in the second act, when we see who A was as a girl, she has aged from a playful, energetic, and independent young woman with the potential for joy, into someone bitter, lonely, nasty, and selfish. Her refusal to have her arm amputated represents her refusal to give up the beliefs that sustained her through her independent youth and difficult marriage. These beliefs include the conviction that she has to look after herself and keep an eye out for both good opportunities and people taking advantage of her. The irony is that these beliefs, and her insistence upon hanging onto them, are part of what has made her life lonely and miserable. Both her desire for independence and her continued rage at her son and husband seem to be fueled by the same determination. In some ways A could be perceived as being admirable in her desire to preserve as much of her independence as possible. Ultimately, however, the play illustrates how resolve like A's can become twisted into selfishness and bitterness, and warns how becoming so twisted can result in both physical and spiritual pain.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

B laughs at the expression "getting fresh," saying she has not heard it for years. A says her mother used it a lot to both her and Sis, then suddenly remembers that both her mother and Sis are dead. This leads her to remember, with happy satisfaction, that most of her friends are dead. B says that it does not really matter; she did not really like them anyway. A agrees, saying that her friends changed as they all grew older, and uses Sis as an example. She says nastily that Sis was younger, smarter, and had more boyfriends, then tells a long story of how she and Sis came to the city together, explored drinking and relationships together, and how they shared a wardrobe, keeping track of who wore what clothes on which date with which man. She also refers repeatedly to the fact that Sis drank. She finishes by saying that Sis didn't like men much, or sex, and that she had to be forced to be married, to a "wop."

C shakes her head, but B tells her that "wop" is just the word that A learned to use, and that it does not really mean anything. A explains she has lots of Jewish friends and other friends of other ethnic backgrounds, but no "colored" other than the "help." She says that "he" hates her saying things like that and that he once said he would not come to see her if she kept saying them. B prompts her to go on with her story about Sis, and A talks about how she was taller than Sis. This starts her crying about how she has shrunk, how she used to be tall and dance with tall boys, some of whom were "fairies" but others of them were "regular." She says she used to go off with them, adding that Sis could not believe she did it. A says that she always "had an eye out," was more careful than Sis about men, and refers to the way that the family of Sis's first husband took advantage of her. She complains about how everyone takes advantage of her, complains about how all her staff steals, then talks about "him" having a glass eye. When A realizes she cannot remember, she starts to cry again. B tries to reassure her, saying that everything she cannot remember is all still there, she just cannot bring it to mind all the time. C suggests that there is safety and salvation in forgetting things. This leads A to something she does remember; her husband.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

Further details of the relationship between A and Sis are revealed in this scene. We get the clear sense that while A was extremely jealous of many things about Sis, she took real pride in the one thing that made them different; the fact that A enjoyed sex whereas Sis did not. Aside from illuminating how much of a rivalry exists between the two sisters, this aspect of their relationship foreshadows the key bracelet story that climaxes the first act by illustrating A's joy in sex.

There are more glimpses of the narrowness of A's views in this section, in her references to wops, the colored help, and fairies, as well as to the way she has to keep

an eye on everyone. This constant suspicion is one reason she has become bitter and nasty. with the bracelet story offering an illustration of another reason; the way that her one source of joy, sex, was betrayed by her husband.

The references to memory, and the potential for salvation in not remembering things, is an ironic comment on the play's theme, suggesting that one way of reconciling with the past is simply to forget it. The action of the play, however, and the vividness of certain of A's memories, suggests that there are some things that cannot be forgotten, such as what happened with the bracelet, and that acceptance of what happened is the only way that reconciliation is possible.

Act 1, Part 4

Act 1, Part 4 Summary

A remembers how her husband always gave her jewelry, saying that pearls and diamonds were her favorite stones and that bracelets were her favorite pieces. She starts telling a story of how she and her husband came home from a party. She got undressed and sat at her bureau, naked except for her jewels. Suddenly embarrassed, she says she cannot go on, but B and C encourage her to continue. A, with increasing embarrassment and anger, tells how her husband came in naked with a new bracelet around his erect penis, which she says was very small. She says he came closer and closer, bringing his penis closer and closer to her face, and told her that he thought she would like it. She says that she told him she could not "do that," that she could never do it, and that as she insisted, he slowly lost his erection and the bracelet slid into her lap. She finishes by saying that he told her to keep it and left the room. Then she starts to cry, and asks B to help her get into bed.

As A has a tantrum about how her arm hurts, B helps her into bed and tucks her in. C apologizes for not helping, saying she is not good at empathizing, imagining herself in the place of other people. B tells her that it is all right, she will be old soon enough and will not have to imagine. They watch and listen as A rambles about how she cannot remember things, how she both liked and hated being tall, how she had to keep an eye on everyone, how he never comes to visit, how he sometimes brings flowers and chocolates when he does, and how he does not really love her. B tells her he does, but A insists he does not, saying he loves boys more than her. As B reacts with disgust, A goes on to complain about how she had to be strong for everyone and how everyone including Sis and her mother hated her for her strength. Just as she is saying she had to be strong because noone else was, she suddenly shudders and becomes still. Startled, C wonders whether A has died. B checks A's pulse and says she is still alive, but thinks she has had a stroke. B goes out to call the doctor. C goes out to call A's son.

Act 1, Part 4 Analysis

A's reference in passing to the Son liking boys indicates that the Son is gay, while B's disgusted reaction foreshadows her rage at him in Act 2. This entire exchange foreshadows the revelations and confrontations in the final quarter of the play, as this woman at all her ages in the second act (A, B, and C), confronts the Son in memory and in person.

The main body of this section of the play is composed almost entirely of A relating the bracelet story. A never actually says it, but the implication is clear that in return for giving her the bracelet, her husband wanted her to perform oral sex on him. Her insistence that she could not do it and never did it suggests that she was repulsed by the very idea, while her husband's vividly portrayed disappointment clearly suggests that he, in

turn, was just as turned off by her apparent disgust. This mirrors B's intense disgust at the idea that her son is gay. A's rejection of her husband and his rejection of her combine with several other factors to suggest that the incident of the bracelet was a turning point in both the marriage and in A's life. These other factors include placing the story at the climax of the first act, the way that the story is told in exceptional detail compared to A's other memories, and the way that A is more nervous about telling the story and more deeply upset when she is done than she has been with any of the other stories. All of this suggests that the emotions associated with the incident are intense and fresh in her mind, and that this incident made a more profound impact on her than anything else.

The question then becomes what the incident represents. First, it represents the end of A's joy in sex, which, as we have already seen, is what distinguished her, at least in her own mind, from her sister and mother. Yes, the second act reveals that she had an affair with the groom, but it is clear that this affair was undertaken more out of a desire for revenge on her adulterous husband than anything else. Second, it marks the beginning of the way A's joy in life was destroyed since, as we have already heard, the trappings of wealth like riding and jewelry were what made life, and particularly her marriage, endurable. Her joy in jewelry is taken from her in this scene, while we hear in the next act that her joy in riding was taken from her after she was thrown from a horse.

Third, the incident foreshadows the revelation in the second act that jewelry for this woman represents being valued, and reveals the shallowness of those values by showing how she gets the bracelet and all the other trappings of wealth, but loses intimacy with her husband and with herself. This is illustrated by the mutual rejection shown by A and her husband at the end of the story. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly in terms of the play as a whole, the bracelet story represents the last and most important aspect of A's past that she has to let go in order to die peacefully; her resentment of her husband. At this point in the play we as the audience or readers do not necessarily know that fact yet, but discover it throughout the second act of the play, which tells the story of how A, and her younger selves as represented by B and C, come to terms with the past and with letting go. This reconciliation with the past is necessary for them to reach the point at the end of the play where they can join hands and A can say that the best time of life is at the end, when it is all done, and they can stop.

Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

A lies in bed, her face covered with an oxygen mask (this is in fact a mannequin dressed to look like A). B and C come in, look down at A and see there has been no change. C talks about how hard it is to consider death, while B talks about the various ways in which it can come to anyone. Their conversation reveals that they are actually both A at earlier stages of her life. C sits down to write a living will so that she will not face the drawn out, painful deterioration A has faced. A herself appears, comments that "he" kept reminding her to write a living will, and adds that she never got around to it. She looks down at herself in the bed and hopes her ending will be quick, commenting that a friend of hers lasted for years while her children argued over money and whether to let her go. C protests that she does not want to hear any more of this kind of talk. A tells her to "grow up," and C says there is no way she is going to grow up like either A or B.

C then turns to us and tells us how she is a good girl, how mother brought her and Sis up well, how they both dated but never got really serious, and how she always had her eye out for the right man. She goes on to talk about how she and Sis earned their living as human mannequins, walking through the crowds at department stores modeling the clothes for sale in the women's department. B comments that she does not want people to know that, but A tells her to be quiet and says that it was fun. C describes how she used to flirt innocently with the husbands shopping with their wives, but A remembers a little more calculated-ness about the job. C covers her ears, saying does not want to hear anything about that. A and B ridicule her, but C protests again that she was a good girl ; not a virgin, but still a good girl. She then remembers the young man who took her virginity, a beautiful and very sexy young man who was the same height as her. She talks about how he became sexually aroused while they were dancing together, how they flirted with each other, and how she remembered her mother always telling her to control her urges. She also says, however, that she wanted him so much that she went ahead and had sex with him anyway, adding that they were together several times but that she could never perform that one sexual act for him, even though she wanted to.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

The relationships between the characters as established in Act 1 play out more specifically in Act 2. C's discomfort in Act 1 with aging in general becomes disgust in Act 2 with what she sees herself becoming, while B's world weariness and cynicism become weariness with her own youthful self-delusion. The most significant change in character appears in A, who seems restrained and almost gentle. This shift in character suggests that on some level she has left behind her past, as represented by the dying body in the bed, and is embracing peace and forgiveness. This forgiveness of both herself and the men in her life, her husband and son, is not complete. Part of the story of this act is how

A discovers and deals with the parts of her past she has yet to transcend. But her manner, her words, and even her clothing (she is described as wearing a lovely lavender dress) indicate she is on her way.

C's narrative of her life adds an important piece of information to the puzzle of who this woman was through the story of how she and Sis were mannequins in a department store. We learn that A, when she was C's age, was much more sexually active and aggressive than we had been led to believe. We also clearly see that she rationalized her sexual activity by saying she was a good girl, although in this context "good" is certainly a relative term. The end of C's story, in which she tells how she made love with the beautiful man in spite of what her mother told her, reveals just how determined she was to live according to her own desires. This reinforces the idea that this woman's courage and independence of spirit are something to be admired in spite of the fact that it led her, as we have seen and will continue to see, into bitterness.

Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

B tells C she will meet her husband in two years, when she is twenty eight. A reveals he died when he was sixty-six, which leads B to calculate that they were forty years with one man, "more or less," and that she will be alone for sixteen years. C asks how she and her husband met, A and B make fun of how he had only one eye, and C starts asking what B meant about "more or less." A and B refer to an affair with the groom which apparently happened after B discovered her husband had been cheating on her. This leads to an argument about why men cheat (because they are men) vs. why women cheat (because they are lonely). C insists on knowing more about her husband. B goes into some detail about how he made her laugh, how he was a good dancer, and how he liked tall women. C cannot understand why she marries him, but A reminds her that he was rich, and that their father had died.

This shocks and surprises C. A realizes she cannot remember how their father died, and sits quietly as B goes into detail about what happened when he had his heart attack; the terror in his eyes, and the way everybody cried. She recounts how she and Sis cried together but Mother went out onto the porch to cry quietly. This leads A to remember how Mother got nasty and lonely as she got older, criticizing her and siding with Sis all the time. B and C both say that Mother could not have been like that. A argues that she was, then talks again about their husband, how they laughed together, how his mother hated her but his father liked her a lot. B says she thinks the father wanted her, and A agrees. She agrees again when B talks about how glad the father was when he had a grandson, and they agree one more time in the way they feel negatively about their son. Just then the Son enters the room.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

The discussion of infidelity combines with A's explanation of why she married to reinforce the idea that before, during, and after her marriage, this woman felt alone, and that she felt she had to take care of herself because nobody else was going to do it. This means, in terms of the affair, that she needed to get affection from somewhere since she was not getting it from her husband, and so she took steps to get it from the groom. In terms of her marriage, it has already been made clear that her family was poor and that her father could not take care of her financially or emotionally, so she took care of herself by keeping her eye open, as she herself might say, and married someone who could provide for her. This illustrates that there is a hard core of realism at the heart of this woman, which C seems to have difficulty accepting. Her resentment of this aspect of her personality is the part of the past with which she needs to come to terms. The aspects of the past that B and C need to face are revealed as this act continues. The deaths of both Father and Mother play a role in illustrating the play's theme, in that both died in fear. The father's fear is clearly referred to by B, while the

Mother's fear is revealed in her obvious resemblance to A, because A's misery in the first act is just as clearly the result of fear of what her body and mind are becoming. The inference, therefore, is that Mother was miserable because of fear as well. Both deaths illustrate how fear is something else with which one must make peace before death, an idea first introduced in B's description earlier in this act of her father's death, and reinforced by the story of the fear in her husband that A tells later in the act.

Act 2, Part 3

Act 2, Part 3 Summary

When the Son appears, B suddenly screams in his face for him to leave. As A calms her down, C comments on how handsome he is. B says she would not feel that way if she knew what he had done, and calls him filthy. A reveals that the Son looks exactly the same as he did when he left, and that twenty years after he left he came to see her again. B reacts with disbelief, and A explains that when she had a heart attack he came and they had a kind of reconciliation. As B angrily protests that she will never forgive him, A admits that she never did, and reveals that the two of them never really talked about the past beyond some of his memories of being a little boy. B says she never wants to see him again, but A tells her that after twenty years, after all the deaths of her family and friends, she got lonely and was glad to see anyone.

C asks again how they changed, what happened for them to become so angry that they drove him away. B then tells us, and C, how she became so angry and bitter. She delivers a long speech about how she discovered that her husband was having affairs, about her affair with the groom which ended in her having him fired even though she had promised not to, and how all the other aspects of her life became harder and harder to deal with. These aspects include Sis's drunkenness, the hatred of her husband's family, the way that the Son got kicked out of every school he ever went to and got involved sexually with both men and women, and how he confronted her with his knowledge of what happened with the groom and then walked out. She shouts at him again to get out of the house, then asks C whether that is enough of an explanation of change for her. C says quietly that it is.

A says that there is more. C indicates she does not want to hear it, but A starts to explain how she, the woman in the bed, came to be. She starts by talking about how she broke her back, something that B remembers as well. She was riding a brutish horse and got thrown off. A says the cast weighed a ton, and that she killed time in bed wondering who her husband was off having sex with. A and B agree that they were better off after the accident, saying that all the people around her for whom she was caring (Mother, Sis, her husband) saw being thrown by the horse as evidence that she was not perfect, and therefore did not resent her helping them as much. A comments that he was nicer after that, gave her a big diamond ring, and let her stop riding. C asks whether she got to shoot the horse, and A and B both laugh, saying the thought never occurred to them.

B asks what happened to the diamond ring. A says she sold it, like she sold all the other jewelry to replace the money that did not seem to go very far. She reveals that all the jewels she has now are fake, and that everything they represented is fake. C protests that jewelry always means to her that she is valued, and that this is not fake at all. Looking at the figure in the bed, A says that she kept all the money from selling the jewelry, hid most of it, and by the end had forgotten where she hid it.

B asks A whether the cancer that killed the husband was bad. A has a long story about just how bad it was physically and how frightening it was, and ends by telling C that death and decay are unavoidable. They admit they do not like each other, and B comments quietly that that is the way it goes.

Act 2, Part 3 Analysis

As A explains, the Son appears the same as the day he left. This means that he is as he was, not as he is at the moment of A's death. In other words, he is a memory in the same way as B and C are memories. He is also an archetype, in that he represents the way that children in general can disappoint and betray their parents. Also, B reacts to him in the way she reacted to him around the time he left. This suggests that his departure is the part of her past with which she has to reconcile in the same way as C has to reconcile herself with her core of realism. On the other hand, A's reaction to him illustrates again how she has moved, at least to some degree, beyond the bitterness of the Act 1 version of herself, although as we shall see, she has still got a way to go.

B's story of what happened to make her bitter and cynical, and A's stories of the horse and the jewelry, all build to the important revelation, as spoken by C, of what this woman really felt was the value in her life; wealth. These stories indicate how she felt that her strength was not valued and, therefore, did not value it in herself, and how she saw her value in terms of the expensive jewels she got. The revelation that the jewels have all been sold and replaced with fakes indicates that her value system proved to be false. This discovery of the emptiness of her values is reinforced by A's admission that she cannot even remember where the money from the sale of the jewels has been hidden, and so has nothing left to show from living her life from a materialistic point of view. This is the aspect of her past that A has to reconcile with, in the same way as the other two have to reconcile with troubling aspects of their lives.

Yet another image of a frightening death appears at the end of this section in A's story about the death of the husband. This reinforces the idea that fear is another aspect of death that must be transcended in order to achieve a final peace.

Act 2, Part 4

Act 2, Part 4 Summary

The Son looks at A, suddenly able to hear and see her. A tells him how she had a premonition that she would die, that only the servants would be with her when it happened, and how he only came to see her once she was gone. She describes in detail the scene when he came in, carrying flowers and then holding her hand which, she repeats over and over, was cold.

C again says that she will never become A, saying that she "denies" her. A angrily responds by denying the Son, B, and C. C cries out, asking whether bitterness is the only alternative and wondering what happened to all the happy times, whether they ended with her. She talks about being unable to remember the actual feelings associated with both good and bad times, and pleads with A and B to tell her of the happy times to come for her.

B tells her that hers is the best time, middle age; old enough to be a bit wise and not so young that you are stupid. She talks about middle age being at the peak of a mountain, being able to see everything that has gone before and everything that is to come, and being the only time you get to see the whole picture with real perspective.

A tells them that they are both wrong, that the end is the best time; when you can let go of everything in the past and celebrate the ultimate, final peace that comes after death. She talks about being able to see herself and her life in the third person, look at it all objectively and not become emotional, neither happy nor sad. Finally, as she takes B's and C's hands, and says that the best time is the final moment, when at last it is possible to stop.

Act 2, Part 4 Analysis

A's premonition about the Son's reaction to her death represents her feelings about their relationship, how she feels abandoned by him and cold towards him. This latter feeling is represented by her saying that her hand is cold when he takes it, which in turn suggests that it is too late for him to feel sorry or express regret. It seems, however, that she does not need to make peace with him, since she is making peace with someone more important; herself. Her expression of denial is little more than an expression of anger, and of impatience with C's attempts at denial. A knows by this point, as the play has shown, how attempts at denial are useless. The past is there, will always be there, and must be reconciled.

The final statements of the three characters are summaries of their views as archetypes. C's desperation for happy times is the archetypal hope of youth that the joy they have experienced to that point is not their only joy, while B's perspective from the top of the mountain represents the archetypal perspective of middle age, where the

innocence of the past and the inevitability of the future can be seen clearly and objectively. Both B and C represent the archetypal possibility of seeing beyond the limits of age-related context and into life as a whole, or a continuum.

A's final speech sums up the play's theme. Her speech illustrates the relief associated with being able to let everything about the past go; both the pain (represented by B) and the joys (represented by C), and moving toward ultimate peace. Two important things occur during this speech, one illustrated by the script and the other inferred from it. In terms of the first, the text clearly indicates that the confrontations and admissions of the second act have enabled A to finally put her past to rest. This is manifested in the specific stage direction of A taking B's and C's hands as she speaks the play's final words.

In terms of the second, it is not clearly stated but we understand that as A speaks those words, about being able to stop, A dies, bringing the journey of this tall, strong, willful, archetypal woman to the peaceful close she, in all her aspects has so desperately, and painfully, sought.

Bibliography

Albee, Edward. "Three Tall Women." Penguin Books. New York. 1995

Characters

A

A is the "tall woman" of the play's title. As the elder version of B and C, A is an intriguing blend of contradictions. In the first act, while she is being cared for by B and C, she is alternately childish and dignified, panic-stricken and stoic.

A's narrative is punctuated by crude, bigoted comments. The Italian man her sister married was "a wop." The domestic servants she knew as a girl "knew their place; they were polite, and well-behaved; none of those uppity niggers, the city ones."

A's intolerance has proven especially harmful in her relationship with her homosexual son. She found his lifestyle and sexual preferences abhorrent, and he left home because of her attitude. For twenty years they did not see one another, and she ultimately regrets it.

In the second act, Albee provides sympathetic glimpses of A. As she watches herself dying, she interacts with her two younger selves and earns at least grudging respect and admiration for her long life. Through her character, Albee seems to suggest that old age provides unique insight into the human condition, and prepares us for death. "That's the happiest moment," says A in the final words of the play. "When it's all done. When we can stop. When we can stop."

B

B turns out to be two different characters. During the first act, she is A's live-in caretaker. In this role, she is a servant to the older woman, helping her eat, dress, move around, and go to the bathroom. She also functions as a buffer between A and C, the youngest of the women. While C finds A's antics pathetic and ridiculous, B is more sympathetic.

In the second act, B is the "tall woman" at fifty-two years old. She is able to reflect on the first half of her life with some measure of objectivity. She urges C to accept life's vicissitudes and unfairness. While C is idealistic and A is resigned, B is cynical. For instance, although her marriage is an unhappy one, she is pragmatic; she settles for the financial security in lieu of sexual fidelity.

In spite of her problems, however, she insists middle-age is the best age to be. "This must be the happiest time," she tells A, C and the audience, "half of being adult done, the rest ahead of me. Old enough to be a *little* wise, past being *really* dumb."

The Boy

The Boy is the "tall woman's" estranged son. He is discussed during the first act, but doesn't appear until the second act. Even then, it is only for a short time; he sits at her bedside after her stroke and never says a word.

From A and B, the audience learns that the boy is gay, and his mother did not approve of his sexuality or his lifestyle. During an argument while he was still a teenager, his mother threatened to throw him out of the house. Feeling rejected and betrayed, he left on his own accord. The two were estranged for twenty years.

In the first act, C functions as a representative of A's lawyer, visiting on business. It seems that A has not been signing all her checks and paying all her bills, and C has come to put her accounts in proper order.

Despite her professional role, she is harshly critical of A's personality. She argues with A about her real age, mocks her for her faulty memory, and is offended by her bigoted remarks.

By the end of the first act, though, she begins to change her tone. Watching A struggle with simple tasks, such as going to the bathroom, inspires sympathy for her situation. When A has her stroke, C seems genuinely concerned for her.

In the second act, C is the "tall woman" in the prime of her youth. She is young and quite idealistic. She does not want to accept her future as told by A and B; she cannot believe she would marry a man she does not love and drive away her son.

While A is the voice of experience and B is a cynic, C is Hope personified. Despite all she is told about the dangers that lie ahead for her, she insists, "I *know* my best times ... haven't happened yet. They're to *come*. Aren't they?"

Themes

Aging

The characters in *Three Tall Women* provide insights into a universal theme: the human aging process. By depicting a woman at three different stages of her life, Albee cleverly juxtaposes three very different experiences and perspectives.

C is twenty-six and represents youth. Idealistic and free-spirited, C refuses to believe her two older aspects when they tell her what her life has in store for her. She can not believe she will one day marry a man she doesn't love, cheat on him, and drive her only son out of the house. Even near the end she insists, "I *know* my best times... haven't happened yet. They're to *come*."

B represents middle age, halfway between her carefree youth and the decrepitude of old age. At her age, she has gained some perspective on her life, but has become a bit jaded in the process. Still, she considers her age as the best time of her life. "This must be the happiest time," she says, "half of being adult done, the rest ahead of me. Old enough to be a *little* wise, past being *really* dumb."

A represents the final years of life. In the first act she displays dignity despite her obvious physical and mental hardships. She exhibits prejudice and pettiness. She enjoys reminiscing about her life, yet is sometimes confused and frustrated by her inability to recall the details of some things. By the time she suffers a stroke while talking about the death of her mother, her affliction seems like an act of mercy.

The second act of the play provides a different perspective of A. As she walks around her own deathbed, musing about her life and her present condition, she is still old, but now healthy. Also, her confusion has disappeared. She reflects on a full life, a mix of joy and tragedy, successes and failures.

Gender Differences

Three Tall Women is somewhat unique in its presentation of gender differences. It is an honest, sympathetic play about women. Women in the play are multi-faceted creatures, capable of both petty jealousies and noble gestures.

The absence of male characters in the play is conspicuous. Men are only talked about, and the single male character that appears on stage, the "tall woman's" son, never speaks a word. Yet the woman's relationship with men, in particular her husband and her son, have profoundly affected her life.

Each version of the woman has a different perspective on relationships with men. C fondly remembers the handsome boy who took her virginity, and fantasizes about her future husband. She is fascinated by the sight of The Boy, her future son. Too young to

realize her opinion about him will change when she gets older, she is shocked at the furious reaction of B to his appearance.

B has already met and married the man of her dreams. She affectionately calls him "the penguin," and he has taught her some hard lessons about relationships. "Men cheat; men cheat a *lot*," she informs her younger *self.* "We cheat less, and we cheat because we're lonely; men cheat because they're men." The penguin never appears to defend himself, so the impression of men he leaves behind is a distinctly unfavorable one.

As the eldest of the trio, A has long since forgiven her husband and recovered from the death of her father. She even regrets her estrangement from her son. In the course of more than ninety years, she was a daughter, a wife, a mother, and a widow. From these experiences, she has gained a more tolerant and balanced perspective of the men in her life.

Style

Point of View

One of the greatest accomplishments of *Three Tall Women*, according to critics, is its creative use of the narrative *point of view*. A story is always told from someone's perspective, whether that person is the protagonist in the plot, an innocent bystander, a relative relating family history, or an omniscient narrator.

Rarely, however, is the narrator of a story able to confront her younger selves on the same stage at the same time. This is the clever feat of *Three Tall Women.*

Essentially, the play is bifurcated it is two plays in one. The first act presents A, an elderly woman in declining health, being tended by B, her middle-aged caretaker, and C, a representative from her attorney's office. In the second act, the three women are revealed to be on woman the protagonist at different stages of her life. Separately, the narrative voices of these women, representing youth, middle, and old age, are compelling and lyrical. In concert, their combined points of view sound a symphony of poignant, and universal, human experience.

Thematic Construction

Most plays are built around a plot, or a *story*. Typically a hero, the play's *protagonist*, struggles against overwhelming odds to achieve some goal a lover or a kingdom, for example. These plays are filled with conflict, with *action*.

There is no real *action* to the plot of *Three Tall Women*. Instead Albee provides the play with a collection of *themes*, ideas his characters express that provide a context for the discussion and debate that is the real structure of the play. Each scene is driven by one of these ideas, until that idea leads into another.

At the beginning of the play, for example, *age* and *aging* are established as important ideas immediately, and the earliest discussion among the play's "three tall women" is about the aging process. C argues with A over her proper age. ("You're nine-ty-two," C insists.)

Once this situation is established it becomes the background setting for a host of other ideas in the play, and the "plot" progresses to the next theme: youth. There is no greater contrast to A's struggles with age than her fond reminiscences of her youth. Though all of her memories come back to her in bits and pieces, she remembers her girlhood, riding horses, winning ribbons and prizes at shows, and her close relationship with her sister and mother.

Soon, another theme emerges: marriage. A reminisces about meeting her husband, his infidelities, and the fun they had together. Each of A's memories provides a piece of the patchwork that is the *thematic construction* of *Three Tall Women.*

Historical Context

Edward Albee's plays, like his own life, have been shaped by the changing nature of American *families*. Albee himself was adopted at an early age by wealthy New England parents, shuffled around to various private schools until he was eighteen. Like the son in *Three Tall Women*, he quarreled with his mother over his homosexuality and left home; he then attended college briefly, living off a trust fund in Greenwich Village until he began his successful career as a professional playwright.

By the time he wrote *Three Tall Women* in 1991, he had been in a longstanding relationship with the same man for more than twenty years. Albee did not experience the "typical" American family life, but then, judging by the evolution of American families during his career, neither had many of his audience members.

From 1970 to 1990, the marriage age of men went from 22.5 to nearly 26 years old. At the same time, the median age for women to marry climbed from 20.6 to 24 years old. Besides marrying older, many Americans were choosing not to marry at all. During those two decades, the annual marriage rate per 1000 people in the population decreased from 10.8 to 9.1.

To further complicate and change the cherished notion of wedlock, the "no-fault" divorce reforms of the 1970s made divorce faster and easier. During the 1980s, one in every three marriages ended in divorce. By 1995, just over 25% of the 34.3 million families were led by single parents. In fact, more than one of every four children had divorced parents.

Moreover, the number of unmarried couples living together nearly tripled between 1970-1980, up to 1.6 million. By 1995 that number had skyrocketed to 3.7 million, and unmarried births, which accounted for only 11% of all births in America in 1970, accounted for 31% of births in 1993.

A number of explanations have been offered for the decline of the "nuclear family" (i.e. mother, father, sister and brother, all related and living in the same house). For one, more women than ever before were choosing to enter the workforce, and build careers before, or instead of, building families.

Also, wider acceptance of divorce also led to an increased expectation from marriage. If a man or woman was not happy in a relationship, he or she became more likely to seek divorce in order to find a more suitable match.

Variations on the nuclear family became the norm in the nineties. Single parent families, stepfamilies, childless families, communal families, and families with same sex parents became more common.

The proliferation of same sex parents were a result of more tolerant adoption laws. Still, while acceptance of homosexual lifestyles was increasing, widespread tolerance was a long way off.

While many large companies, such as IBM, acknowledge unmarried couples who live together (including homosexual and lesbian couples) by extending to them the same benefits shared by married employees, many rights and privileges were not sanctioned. No states allowed homosexual couples to legally marry, and some states had legislation that prevented homosexual couples from adopting a child who was not the biological offspring of one of the partners.

The 1990s were also the years of "Don't ask, don't tell." While the United States military still forbids homosexuality in its ranks, the application forms for military service were changed to avoid asking about sexual preference. Recruits were encouraged to be discreet about sexual matters, particularly if they were gay.

Critical Overview

Most of the critics who reviewed *Three Tall Women* when it appeared in Off-Broadway in 1994 were enthusiastic about the play. Moreover, they seemed relieved that he had finally produced another play that had wide popular and critical appeal. As a writer for the *Economist* declared, "after a long dry spell for American drama, relieved by successful imports from London, New York has a good, homemade play at last."

Several reviewers, including the *New Republic's* Robert Brustein, noted Albee's personal stake in the play." *Three Tall Women* is a mature piece of writing," Brustein judged, "clearly autobiographical, in which Albee seems to be coming to terms not only with a socialite foster parent he once satirized in past plays, but with his own advancing age."

William A. Henry III concurred. In a review in *Time*, "Albee is exorcising his own demons in having the dowager deny her homosexual son."

In the *New Yorker*, John Lahr contended, "The last great gift a parent gives to a child is his or her own death, and the energy underneath *Three Tall Women* is the exhilaration of a writer calling it quits with the past."

Critics maintained that much of this Pulitzer Prize-winning play's appeal seems to lie in the unique interaction as three separate aspects of the same woman. "Albee's plays have always walked a line between heightened realism and dark comedy," Jack Helbig wrote in *Booklist*. Even his most surreal works are populated with characters who wouldn't seem out of place in real life." In *Three Tall Women*, Helbig continued, the trio of characters are able to provide unique insight into one woman's life because of their separate perspectives a feat that can't be accomplished in simple, realistic drama.

The character of A is the focal point of the play. As Tim Apello suggested in the *Nation*, "Albee has this little problem as a dramatist: He abhors plots. But just as one realizes, with mounting irritation, that A's colorful fragmented vignettes will never cohere into a single structured picture nobody cracks Albee's mosaic code the author saves the play with a big switch in the second act. The three actresses fuse into one contrapuntally evoked character, A through the ages."

Still, A is an unlikely dramatic hero, and as Brustein pointed out, it took a feat of adept artistic skill to make her sympathetic. "A is an entirely vicious old wretch," Brustein asserted, "with a volatile tongue and a narrow mind, but it is a tribute to the writing and the acting that she gradually wins our affections. Although prejudiced against 'kikes, "niggers, "wops' and 'fairies' (among them her own son), she is a model of vitality and directness when compared with the humor-impaired liberal C, who protests her intolerance."

Albee's writing in *Three Tall Women* drew comparisons to a wide variety of other authors. Appelo observed," *Three Tall Women* cops a bit of the puckish bleakness of

Beckett (the sole dramatist Albee has claimed utterly to admire), and a bit of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, but the grief and affection seem distant, glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope. It's O'Neill without guild, and with much less galumphing verbal rhythms."

In addition, Brustein suggested that the characters in the play suggest "a Beckett influence, though on the surface the play appears to be a drawing-room comedy in the style of A. R. Gurney."

In spite of the play's insight into the human condition, its autobiographical perspective, and roundly recognized appeal, a handful of reviewers took exception with the relentlessness with which Albee pursues his themes. "*Three Tall Women* ... is by no means an entirely successful play," Ben Brantley wrote in the *New York Times*. "It makes its points so blatantly and repeats them so often that one perversely longs for a bit more of the cryptic obliquity that is Mr. Albee's signature."

Another *Times* critic, Vincent Canby, maintained: "*Three Tall Women* initially seems to be about the process of dying and death itself, though that's not the full story. It's more about the inevitable changes effected by time and circumstances, about the accumulation of events that can shape a character and that are so many they eventually become meaningless. It doesn't help that at no one of her three ages is A a very interesting woman. She's bossy and gauche as young C, bitter and tired as B and self-absorbed as old A."

A few disgruntled critics took an historical approach to criticizing the playwright, and wondered aloud where his talents had been hidden for so long. "Whatever happened to Edward Albee?" Stefan Kanfer sarcastically asked in the *New Leader*.

Kanfer actually found several things to praise about Albee's play, but in the final analysis asserted: "If this were 1962, *Three Tall Women* would herald the arrival of a playwright as promising as David Ives. One could hardly wait to see his next production. But we have been through all that with Albee, and this elegant minor effort gives very little reason to cheer. After years of commercial and esthetic disappointments, Edward Albee is once again Off-Off-Broadway. Like so many of his characters through the decades, he is going out the way he came in."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Lane A. Glenn is a Ph.D. specializing in theatre history and literature. In this essay he examines how Edward Albee combines elements of absurdist drama with realism in Three Tall Women.

As much as anything else, the popular success of Edward Albee's 1994 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Three Tall Women* can be attributed to the fickleness of American scholars and theater reviewers. As numerous articles and interviews pointed out during the show's lengthy New York run, Albee was once the darling of the American Theater scene. In the early 1960s he was hailed as the next Eugene O'Neill and was considered a literary genius of the age.

He quickly fell out of favor, however, and for more than twenty years his plays received only lukewarm, or even hostile response from New York reviewers. Albee found work teaching and directing, while he continued to write plays.

What changed? What great cultural upheaval or fundamental shift in Albee's writing style suddenly made *Three Tall Women* more palatable than two decades of near misses? The playwright himself was hesitant to hazard a guess.

" *Three Tall Women* is the first play [of mine] that has gotten almost unanimously favorable press in the United States," Albee *told American Theatre*, But I didn't expect it to, necessarily. I think of my plays as a continuing pattern of me writing. I don't think I've written a bad play or a good play; I don't think in those terms."

It is precisely Albee's unwillingness to think in conventional terms, to create a "good" play or a "bad" play based on current cultural standards, that has set him at loggerheads with American critics. Ironically, it is also his insistence on defining his own terms that has led him to be one of the most influential (though not most produced) American playwrights of the twentieth century.

While fickle reviewers like Stefan Kanfer in the *New Leader* asked, "Whatever happened to Edward Albee?" artistic allies like Lawrence Sacharow, the director of the American premiere of *Three Tall Women*, insist the playwright has been toiling away at the same kind of work his own throughout his career, whether it was popular or not. "There's a perfectly logical through-line from *The Zoo Story* to here," Sacharow told the *Dallas Morning* News.

That through-line, which is quite apparent in *Three Tall Women*, is a combination of styles: Albee's unique blend of absurdist elements and American realism, mixed with characters, themes and dialogue that are distinctly "Albee-esque."

In a 1962 essay for *New York Times Magazine* titled "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" Albee defended his style of writing plays, insisting that "The avant-garde theatre is fun; it is free-swinging, bold, iconoclastic and often wildly, wildly funny. If you will

approach it with childlike innocence-putting your standard responses aside ... if you will approach it on its own terms, I think you will be in for a liberating surprise."

He was reacting to reviewers who already, so early in his professional career, had begun categorizing and criticizing him according to how well his plays fit in with typical Broadway fare, which for most of the twentieth century has meant *realism* in every aspect of production.

While many of America's best-known playwrights have experimented with form and style, by and large their most popular plays have contained plots, characters, settings and themes that are realistic. Eugene O'Neill penned Expressionistic dramas like *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*, but he is mainly remembered for his realistic plays like *Desire Under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night.*

Likewise, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller dabbled in experimental styles of writing, but both achieved their greatest successes with more recognizably realistic plays like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Death of a Salesman.*

Albee, on the other hand, found his initial success The American Dream (1961). Thereafter, despite plays like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*(l962) that stylistically approached the realism of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller, Albee's work was conveniently associated with writers of a new non-realistic movement, "absurdism."

Critic Martin Esslin popularized "absurdism" as a label in his 1961 study *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin used the term to describe experimental plays produced mainly by European authors from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s. These writers Samuel Beckett, Eugene lonesco and Jean Genet among them were influenced by the existential philosophy of artists like Jean Paul Sartre, who famously argued that human beings are "condemned to be free." They sought to show their audiences how irrational and unjust the world could be.

To achieve their goals, absurdists produced plays that consciously countered traditional expectations of plot, character, language, and logic through a variety of anti-realistic techniques. For example, time and place were often unimportant and unknown. Plots in these plays did not necessarily develop through a series of cause-and-effect events. Instead, actions and dialogue often centered around *themes* or a particular *mood*. This thematic construction is often *circular*, with plots ending where they began.

Since communication through language was viewed as a rational tool (in an irrational world), absurdists often parodied language, and demonstrated how inadequate it was when actually trying to describe the human experience. Any attempts to improve the human condition in absurdist drama typically prove futile, or even comical in a dark way.

Some of the most famous absurdist plays include Genet's *The Balcony* (1956), lonesco's *The Chairs* (1952) and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which is credited with introducing the absurdist movement to America in 1953.

Albee has employed the characteristics of ab-surdism throughout his career. As Jack Helbig noted in a review of *Three Tall Women* for *Booklist*, "Albee's best plays have always walked a line between heightened realism and dark comedy. Even his most surreal works are populated with characters who wouldn't seem out of place in real life." This is certainly true of *Three Tall Women*, a play that contains many of the techniques of absurdism.

The "plot" of *Three Tall Women*, for example, does not arise out of a series of cause-and-effect actions. There is, in fact, no clear "protagonist" seeking some kind of realistic goal. There is only an old woman, dying and attended by her caretaker and attorney, who later transform into aspects of her younger self. Instead of actions, the story centers on themes youth and age, innocence and experience, sex, love, and disillusionment.

Like the absurdists, Albee also experiments with language as a means of revealing deeper, hidden meanings, and suggesting the irrationality of existence. With the character of A, he is able to blend realism with theatricality. A's mental faculties are deteriorating along with her physical functions, so she might be expected to act unexpectedly. Her sound is the sound of "half-naturalistic, wholly calculated incipient-Alzheimer's talk," as Tim Appelo pointed out in the *Nation*.

On a realistic level, this provides a reasonable excuse for A's overt bigotry and childish pranks. Stylistically, it also allows for the play's many monologues, soliloquies, and moments when the characters directly address the audience.

One of the most recognizable traits of absurdist writing is its nebulous treatment of character identities, time, and place, all of which are elusive in *Three Tall Women*. Ionesco's plays are peopled with vague characters like "The Professor," "The Pupil," and "The Maid." Beckett chose to christen his characters with nonsense names like "Hamm," "Clov," and "Nagg."

Albee, who has included figures as generic as "The Man" and "The Woman" in other plays, achieved an even more basic cast of characters in *Three Tall Women* by dubbing the ladies, simply, "A," "B," and "C." Decisions such as this, however, cannot be made lightly, or without thought for the larger concerns of the play.

As Albee told a group of his students at the University of Houston (reported in the *Texas Monthly*), "Lack of resolution is not necessarily good. The difference between interesting ambiguity and unintentional ambiguity is very important. Ambiguity demands as much control as anything else does."

Just as ambiguous in *Three Tall Women* is the time and place of the play's action. There is a specific location a "wealthy" bedroom reproduced on the stage, but the world outside is a mystery. The larger "place" of the play is never known, nor is it particularly important.

Most of the play, after all, takes place in the past, and is *described* rather than portrayed by the "three tall women" of the play's title. Time becomes even more malleable in the hands of the characters themselves.

At the beginning of the play, A cannot decide if she is ninety-one or ninety-two years old. As she lays on her deathbed throughout the second act, B and C become separate aspects of A at different points in her life, and through the imagination of a dying woman nearly a century of experience is viewed simultaneously, through three separate prisms of experience.

Drawing a parallel to his absurdist predecessors, Robert Brustein noted in the *New Republic*, "Beckett was the first dramatist to condense the past and present lives of a character into a single dramatic action, and *Krapp's Last Tape* is a play to which *Three Tall Women* owes a deep spiritual debt ... Beckett compressed youth and age through the device of a tape recorder, Albee uses doppelgangers; but both plays evoke the same kind of existential poignance."

An "existential poignance" is what has driven some reviewers and theatergoers away from absurdist drama. Many found the approach of the absurdists to be unnecessarily depressing, and wondered (often aloud) why someone would go to such lengths to even write about such feelings. Esslin, however, found a very different motive at work. In *The Theatre of the Absurd* he suggests:

Ultimately, a phenomenon like the Theatre of the Absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces but expresses modern man's endeavor to come to terms with the world in which he lives. It attempts to make him face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment... Today, when death and old age are increasingly concealed behind euphemisms and comforting baby talk, and life is threatened with being smothered in the mass consumption of hypnotic mechanized vulgarity, the need to confront man with the reality of his situation is greater than ever. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions and to laugh at it."

Albee agrees. In an interview with *The Progressive*, he told Richard Farr, "I've found that any play which isn't close to laughter in the dark is very tedious. And conversely, even the purest comedy, if it isn't just telling jokes, has got to be tied to reality in some way. I think a play should do one of two things, and ideally both: It should change our perceptions about ourselves and about consciousness, and it should also broaden the possibilities of drama. If it can do both, that's wonderful. But it's certainly got to do one of the two."

The success of *Three Tall Women* may signal a play that has managed to do both change our perceptions and broaden the scope of our drama. By combining traditionally absurdist techniques with a realistic situation, and infusing the whole with his own unique approach to language and age-old themes, Albee managed to convince his

reviewers and audiences to once again approach him on his own terms, which is the only way he will write.

"You learn from people who've come before you and who have done wonderful things," Albee admits, "The trick is to take the influences and make them so completely you that nobody realizes that you're doing anything else but your own work."

Source: Lane A. Glenn, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Calling Three Tall Women a return to form, Appelo praises the playwright for being "back in tune with his times."

Photos reveal Edward Albee to be stricken with the Dick Clark Syndrome: an inexplicable impervious-ness to physical decay. Instead, time has taken its toll on his festering reputation.

But I'm thrilled to report that Albee the artist lives. The Vineyard Theater production of his 1991 play *Three Tall Women*, his first big New York premiere in over a decade, should help reverse his audience's exodus. No more the noisy young shockmeister pop star, now Albee plays unplugged, still singing, softly, his bitter old themes of domes-tic-cwm-cosmic discord. Rod Stewart unplugged is a lazy disgrace, Clapton a drab craftsman, but Albee is more like Neil Young: chastened by age, sad where once he soared, yet still quavering on.

Three Tall Women is largely a portrait of Albee's late, very estranged adoptive mother at 92, though the character querulously insists she's 91. (In a 1966 *Paris Review* interview, Albee querulously insisted he was 37; the interviewer reminded him he'd be 38 when the piece was published.) James Noone's set neatly conveys the old woman's luxe past and funereal future: A central floral painting is flanked by floral wallpaper, floral prints, floral lace curtains, a bed with floral pillows and a blighted floral rug worn down to atoms.

So is the wraithlike heroine, but there's a death dance of semisenescent reminiscence left in the old gal yet. Myra Carter is, as the young people say, i in the role of A, the nonagenarian mom. Her phrasing of Albee's half-naturalistic, wholly calculated incipient-Alzheimer's talk is impeccable; her voice dwindles to an Edith Evans warble, ascends to a helium keening, erupts abruptly into lacerating sobs as required. Her moods, too, are musical her memories lark and plunge. We're eager and grateful for each vivid bit of that past recaptured: her debutante milieu; her runty, randy groom; horseback riding; riding her horse's groom in the stables as she screams in sexual triumph. (Some of these memories are voiced by other actors, whom I'll introduce shortly.) *Three Tall Women* cops a bit of the puckish bleakness of Beckett (the sole dramatist Albee has claimed utterly to admire), and a bit of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, but the grief and affection seem distant, glimpsed through the wrong end of a telescope. It's O'Neill without guilt, and with much less galumphing verbal rhythms. "Eventually he lets me talk about when he was a little boy," says A of her son's visits Michael Rhodes plays the wordless role well enough "but he never has an opinion on that; he doesn't seem to have an opinion on much of anything that has to do with us, with me." Creepily remote, Albee has predicted that he won't think much about his mom now that he's devoted a play to explicating her life. But I'll bet he didn't keep mum with Ma in real life: This is the guy of whom Richard Burton wrote, "A week with him would be a lifetime."

Old A is reproved by young C (Jordan Baker), a B-school type trying to get A's finances in order. The role is as thin as the pinstripes on C's suit, and Baker is way the hell the spindliest actor in the show. Twenty-six-year-old C is reproved by B (Marian Seldes), A's 52-year-old caretaker. As dazzling a talent as Carter, Seldes is earthy and spectral, not by turns but at once. Hunched like a sardonic question mark, she moderates the conflict between the old and young women, but she's openly on the old bat's side. She's like Mrs. Danvers on Prozac still mean and weird, but detached, sourly entertained by life as if watching it from beyond, a well-adjusted shade. Her sly arched-brow amusement reminds me of Ian McKellen; her marvelously odd hand gestures remind me of Thai opera, except that I can't comprehend Thai opera, while her gestures clearly underline the dialogue. Many lovely ensemble moments seem centered on her hands, as if she were conducting. (Though Lawrence Sacharow's direction must have been superb, Ingmar Bergman was probably right to say that Albee' s best plays can do without a director, just as chamber music doesn' t require a dictatorial baton. The man is a composer, just as he wanted to be at age 11.)

Albee has this little problem as a dramatist: He abhors plots. But just as one realizes, with mounting irritation, that A's colorful fragmented vignettes will never cohere into a single structured picture nobody cracks Albee's mosaic code the author saves the play with a big switch in the second act. The three actresses fuse into one contrapuntally evoked character, A through the ages. It's played wonderfully (even Baker gets better), like a close basketball game going down to the wire. While the finale is a characteristic letdown (Albee favors inconclusive conclusions), by then the play has wandered around A's life long enough to give us a satisfying sense of her.

Mysteriously, we get very little sense of her relationship with her son, just a sketchy recounted encounter or two. I wanted more on this relationship, and fewer of the life lessons the play overbearingly urges upon us: "It's downhill from 16 on for all of us ... stroke, cancer ... walking off a curb into a 60-mile-an-hour wall... slit your throat.... All that blood on the Chinese rug. My, my." You can get deeper philosophical insights from Dionne Warwick's Psychic Friends Network. Yet even when Albee says something stupid, he says it in cadences of great and practiced beauty. The wisdom that eludes him in platitudes ("[Women] cheat because we're lonely; men cheat because they're men") he expresses better in drama: the anecdote of the pricey bracelet A's fellatio-craving husband proffers upon his angry penis is funny and scary, a lightning glimpse of a nightmare marriage.

I freely admit that much of the value of *Three Tall Women* is the light it sheds on Albee's life and other work. He has described *TTW* as an "exorcism." The original title of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was *The Exorcism*, which was retained as the title of the third act, and *TTW* makes me wonder whether critics haven't been misinterpreting his masterpiece all these years, focusing on George and Martha as archetypal man and wife (or, in a popular interpretation that infuriates Albee, as a gay couple in hetero drag. I don't see what difference it makes, nor why Albee sternly forbids all-male productions of the show). What gets exorcised killed off in *Woolf* is the imaginary kid. In *TTW*, the kid kills off the memory of his mom. What if George and Martha are "really" Edward and his ever-bickering mother, who needled him cruelly about his adoption and never

forgave his desertion? In any case, the heroine A of *TTW* is a kind of combination of the Liz Taylor and Sandy Dennis characters in *Woolf*: alternately a snarly and simpering, sickly fake mother, yet admirably defiant of the unmitigated insult of old age. From the first-act debate about a classic actress (Bette Davis in the case of *Woolf*, Norma Shearer in *TTW*) to the last act's rather heavy-handed stripping away of bourgeois illusions (who has them anymore?), the plays seem parallel, sister dramas reaching out to each other across the intervening wastes and oases of Albee's career.

Why is such a self-conscious iconoclast so annoyingly moralistic? Albee is the third-generation namesake of a top vaudeville impresario who got started with a revolting attraction: a twenty-four-ounce preemie advertised as "small enough to fit in a milk bottle." The child's name was Baby Alice. Does this have something to do with his reviled abstract play *Tiny Alice* ? Edward Albee I ran a theatrical enterprise so bluenosed it blacklisted the actors it ruthlessly enslaved if they so much as uttered the words "son of a gun" on any of its nationwide stages. Having authored five "son of a bitch's" in *Woolf* alone, Edward Albee III was the Tom Paine of the dirty-speech movement in American theater, though he was more besides. Maybe there's an in-joke in his *Alice*, and a secret triumph in its commercial oblivion: the horribly lowest-common-denominator entertainment answered by a work of arrogant mandarin incomprehensibility, spurned by the ignorant masses.

With the entirely intelligible *Three Tall Women*, Albee is evidently mature enough not to crave our hatred. Maybe he doesn't even hate his mother anymore. What's more, he's back in tune with his times. In the three tall women's last-ditch attempt to define the nature of happiness, Seldes's B muses that her position at 52 is ideal: "Enough shit gone through to have a sense of the shit that's ahead, but way past sitting and *play ing* in it. This *has* to be the happiest time." Shit happens in a day when the nation's leading dramatic characters are Beavis and Butthead, what moral could be more modish than that?

Source: Tim Appelo. Review of *Three Tall Women* in the *Nation*, March 14, 1994, pp. 355-56.

Critical Essay #3

While critical of the playwright's neglect in the area of plot, Lucre praises Albee's play as his strongest in years.

Receptive audiences at Vienna's English Theatre, which in the past has been host to Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, Lanford Wilson, are hailing the new Edward Albee offering, giving the play's three-in-one heroine emotional precedence over men and women in his previous dramas. In stirring anecdotes, the eldest third of Albee's strong composite heroine, a ninety-year-old with a prodigal son, divulges her prejudices, her attitudes and insights on the lack of substance in the upper crust into which she has married. The two other onstage characters, materializations of her self before childbirth and at middle age, hear the older component bemoan her husband's and friends' lack of backbone or moral fibre. Regrettably, her disillusion has led her to replace the legendary milkman or back seat of a car with the family's groom and stable.

As in previous plays, the author is more concerned with characters and situations than with problems and their trite resolution. Albee's power to generate real characters is legendary; and his delicate drawing of this newest one, a tall mother whose indiscretions alienate her son, may show the author's intellectual sympathy for her, quelling critics' sporadic hints at anti-female strains in earlier work. However, Albee's mother-image in *Three Tall Women*, drawn with wit and truth, is itself more palatable than the insight into life which the play dramatizes. Albee's new work warns that in a land where the populace is obsessed with self-fulfillment and determined to be happy, what must cease at once is our perpetuation of our offsprings' notion that in life we get what we want, that parents and the world at large are perfect caregivers or even caregivers at all. Rather, in the words of Albee's aged mother-composite, we must prepare the world's young for the actualities of a life in which "surcease or a series of surceases" is our only joy. Truth is our only salvation. So long as we hide from our children the sad truth of our imperfections and our mutability, we must expect the tragic splits that rend mothers and children.

Officiously, critics in the 1970s and 1980s often chided Edward Albee for drawing homosexual characters, like those in his *Tiny Alice*, too subtly, forming them implicitly rather than explicitly. With *Three Tall Women*, the upbraiders may be silenced. Albee's newest male character, a defiant son who, in his forties, returns to kiss his bedfast mother's hands and face and who materializes on the stage as the youth who had packed his "attitudes" and left twenty years earlier is strikingly portrayed by Howard Weatherall. The nature of the son evolves in frank phrases from the lips of his mother, delivered with chagrin by Myra Carter, who refers to her son and his friends as "he and his boys" and who laments, "He doesn't love me, he loves those boys he has!" Yet, in the mother's dotage, the son brings special gifts of candied orange peel and freesia and sees to happy outings for her.

New York critics who in 1983 misinterpreted the talentless former freak in Albee's *Man Who Had Three Arms* as an intimate revelation of the author's self may infer the present

drama to be another little masochistic exercise, making amends for his "attitudes" as a teenager. If the play's authorial intention is a coming to terms with self, Weatherall's sincerity in the role of the son makes viewers long for their own second chance to reconcile with an aged parent as honestly as this character does.

The play's form is as convoluted as one expects from Albee. Here he intrigues us with the work's structure, forces us to figure out which of two worlds he is drawing us into the totally naturalistic world of Act One, whose three tall women are a law clerk, a ninety-year-old mother and her nurse, or the presentationally-staged world of act two where a maternal, mystical identity falls to each actress.

The playwright's penchant for puzzles unsettles even deeply-moved audiences who crowd the sold-out theatre. Rapt viewers may lose the beauty and tension of Albee's language for those precious minutes they need to solve the problem of which world confronts them on stage. Yet critics' complaints about structure are not so indicative of a play's merit as the sentiment (as opposed to sentimentality) that an audience credits in the play. Albee's long-time obsession with the orchestration of emotions and with theatrical effectiveness culminates here. Audiences applaud how effectively the playwright has rendered the mother's guilt for infidelities and for failing to remain the pedestal-figure her son perceived her to be in his babyhood. Even so, the play's structure may need a touch of the author's clever directorial hand before moving from Vienna a site Albee has called "off-off-Broadway" to New York.

The cast's delivery of the emotion in Albee's language and in his subtext is cuttingly valid, particularly in act 2 when the actresses unfold the life of the mother at ages 26, 52, and 90. Carter is an electric presence on stage as the oldest maternal figure, and voices each bit of Albee's dialogue so piquantly that what might have been, with a lesser actress, rambly and senile chatter about a lecherous father-in-law, a frigid sister, and deceased friends, instead etches the mother's character just as finely as brush strokes create an amorphous WOLS leaf. Thus we feel the tension of the mother-character who suffers from her own infirmities. She won't admit that she can no longer manage her finances, or that she is partner to her son's long disaffection. Her resentment of male infidelity, her isolation by friends' deaths, her guilt at indiscretions each is a theme from earlier Albee works like his miniature American tragedy, *The Sandbox*, or his Pulitzer prize drama *Delicate Balance*, themes broadened and surging with life in *Three Tall Women*.

Representing the demanding and expectant youth of the mother, Cynthia Bassham is at once innocent and sophisticated. Bassham, who last year made indelible the naivete of Honey in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woof?*, sashays in a sleek gown as a Bergdorf-Goodman fashion model who climbs the social ladder when she marries into wealth. Later, Bassham's character, with haunted voice and mein, recoils at the prospect of living her life without joy. The actress's expressive face is proud and stubborn in act 2 as she innocently balks at hints of what may be slated for her life; and her face is livid in act 2 when she sees the actualities descend upon her.

Kathleen Butler, who triumphed in Albee's 1987's *Marriage Play* as a disenchanted wife who would rather be hit than left, now creates a more put-upon figure as the shrewder, middle span of Albee's composite mother. With humour the actress conveys the play's authorial discernments on the sad consistency of life that with a doctor's firm slap and a hard first breath a baby comes in, and at the end, with a harder breath goes out. With strength and gravity, Butler demonstrates that a son's sulks and attitudes may freeze mother-love for a spell no matter how desperately she wants to forgive him. Later, with conviction, Butler shines as her mid-life character announces that, though her life has been crammed with hurt, she has now climbed the hill from which one can look back halfway and ahead halfway in Albee's phrase, "the only time we have a three hundred and sixty degree view!"

After a painful search for serenity with the materialized components of her selves, Albee's ultimate mother-image realizes that joy lies not in the events of our lives but in surcease when each of her conflicts ends. Alone, at the mercy of caregivers and her own infirmities, she rejoices in the surcease of anxiety over real or imagined results of her actions or misjudgments of the past. In *Three Tall Women* Albee moves from his demons toward joy, surcease, and death; perhaps now he will write for us of love instead of disillusion.

Source: Jeane Luere. Review of *Three Tall Women* in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 44, no. 2, May, 1992, pp. 251-52.

Topics for Further Study

One of the strongest themes in *Three Tall Women* is the way an individual's perspective on aging changes as he or she gets older. This theme is often found in poetry as well, particularly in the work of the English Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century. Read William Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1804) or selections from William Blake's collection of poetry, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794). Contrast the portrayal of childhood and adulthood expressed by Albee, Wordsworth and Blake. In what ways are they different? How has the passage of time affected the way people view age and experience?

The protagonist's life was largely shaped by her childhood in the early part of the century. Research the "Jazz Age" of America in the 1920s. Describe what life was like for the wealthy in the larger cities on the East Coast and compare it with today. Also, compare the opportunities available to women at that time with today. How have things changed for women?

When C learns how her life has turned out, she is very surprised. Write an outline of your personal goals in life. Where do you see yourself in five years? In ten? In fifty? Try to include as many details as you can. Then write a completely different plan that would make you just as happy. Change your career, your relationships, and your lifestyle. How can you accomplish each of your two projected lives? What elements of your plans are things you can control, and which are those you cannot?

How are men portrayed in the play? Consider her first love, her husband, and her son. Are these portrayals fair? Give reasons for your answer.

The "tall woman" and her son have a confrontation about his friends, his sexual orientation, and his lifestyle. As a result, they do not speak to each other for twenty years. What could they have done differently to avoid this estrangement? Write a scene in which the two characters meet again after twenty years.

What Do I Read Next?

In a career spanning four decades, Edward Albee has written more than twenty plays. Two of his most popular remain the 1958 one-act play *The Zoo Story*, and the award-winning *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, (1962) which also became a film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

The Great Gatsby is F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous 1922 portrait of America's Jazz Age. The novel's protagonist, the self-made millionaire Jay Gatsby, is considered the embodiment of American ambition in the early part of this century.

Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) is a "dream play" featuring the character of Amanda Wingfield, a woman who lives in a St. Louis tenement with her two children: Laura, a shy young woman; and her brother Tom, a poet who supports the family by working in a warehouse.

Longer life expectancy, health issues, age discrimination, and retirement concerns are just a few of the topics discussed in *Aging and Old Age* (1996) by Richard A. Posner or *Aging America* (1992) by Karen A. Conner.

Further Study

Amacher, Richard E. *Edward Albee*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1969.

Amacher explains the playwright's relationship to the Theatre of the Absurd, and attempts to establish his place in American theater during the first decade of his career.

Bigsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

In the second volume in this series, Edward Albee's work is discussed alongside profiles of such American artistic notables as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

Bloom, Harold, editor. *Edward Albee*, Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.

This collection includes a dozen critical essays covering such topics as language in Albee's plays, influences on the playwright, and the psychology of character in Albee's work.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd,* Doubleday, 1969.

Esslin's treatise provided the context for a whole new genre within American drama. Albee's work is placed in context with Samuel Beckett, Eugene lonesco, and Jean Genet.

Kolin, Philip C. *Conversations with Edward Albee*, University Press of Mississippi, 1988.

This is a wide-ranging collection of interviews with the playwright, conducted by notable playwrights, critics and actors.

Roudane, Matthew Charles. *Understanding Edward Albee*, University of South Carolina Press, 1987.

Part of the *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* series, Roudane's study analyzes Albee's artistic output from *The Zoo Story* through *The Man Who Had Three Arms*.

Bibliography

Albee, Edward. "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?" in *New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 1962, pp. 30-1, 64, 66.

Appelo, Tim. A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *Nation*, March 14, 1994, p. 355.

Bigsby, C. W. E., editor. *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Brantley, Ben. A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *New York Times*, April 13, 1994.

Brustein, Robert. A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *New Republic*, April 4, 1994, p. 26.

Canby, Vincent. A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *New York Times*, February 20, 1994.

A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *Economist*, April 23, 1994, p. 91.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Anchor Books, 1961, p. 316.

Farr, Richard. An interview with Edward Albee in *The Progressive*, August, 1996, p. 39.

Helbig, Jack. A review of *Three Tall Women* in *Booklist*, April 1, 1995, p. 1372.

Henry III, William A. A review of *Three Tall Women* in *Time*, February 21, 1994, p. 64.

Kanfer, Stefan. A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *New Leader*, February 14, 1994, p. 23.

Lahr, John. A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *New Yorker*, May 16, 1994.

Samuels, Steven. An interview with Edward Albee in *American Theatre*, September, 1994, p. 38.

Taitte, Lawson. A review of *Three Tall Women* in the *Dallas Morning News*, September 8, 1996.

Yoffe, Emily. A profile of Edward Albee in *Texas Monthly*, May, 1993, p. 98.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535