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Between the IDEA and the REALITY falls the SHADOW:

A Comparative Study of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* and T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*

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In 1892 Nietzsche had pronounced God dead. The mass of men who did not read Nietzsche were not yet affected by his devastating affirmation. In 1865, Ibsen, presumably an atheist, wrote *Brand*, in which God was portrayed as a “reality” to its protagonist. And even in the nineties, God was still in his heaven. Disturbed by doubt during the twenties, the world turned nevertheless giddily livable and hectically “safe.” The destruction of old idols was an intellectual’s game. However, the Second World War (1939-1945) all but demolished the age-old fortress of belief sustained by the idea of God. For the post-War artists, the image of a Transcendental Signifier, apart from its sacred meaning, offered the concept of a coherent order, a hierarchy of values which either rationally or transcendently illuminates the chaos of existence. According to Heidegger,<sup>1</sup> Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) was, actually, “waiting for God” (Barrett 55). To put it differently, it was waiting for order in the world where human beings while away time, uselessly, questioning the meaning of Christ’s crucifixion. As a result, painting, literature, and drama sought multiple ways to introduce new techniques of projecting

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the paradigm shift from the outward into the innermost states of human mind – fantasies, nightmares and dreams. While Jean Genet dramatized the “true image of a false spectacle” (Genet 32) by depicting the Modern civilization as a blazing bawdyhouse in *The Balcony* (1957) – both, as a brothel where ordinary citizens enact their dreams of power or self-abasement as bishops, generals, executioners, and as a dream house where the repressed desires of petty functionaries reap gratification from their sordid sublimation; Arthur Adamov personified the illusory, futile, contradictory nature of human ideologies and objectives through the poetic image of a constantly faltering “absurd” apparatus – the pinball machine in *Ping Pong* (1955), as well as the ambiguous symbols of butterflies and ostrich feathers in *Paolo Paoli* (1957). Thus the end of the Second World War marked a significant change in social discourse altogether.

Similarly, in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin offers a concise description of Edward Albee’s (and T. S. Eliot’s) world as follows: “The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war” (Esslin 23). Esslin describes the loss of meta-narratives in post modernity, a condition that potentially leaves subjects isolated and meaningless. Eliot and Albee’s works respond to this condition by dramatizing alienation and the search for meaning. Significantly, Irene Worth<sup>2</sup> once commented that Albee’s radio play *Listening* (1976), in which she played a leading role, corresponded with Eliot’s worldview:

In a sense, it is the realization of something T. S. Eliot said to me when I was in *The Cocktail Party* and I made the mistake of asking him what the play was about. Eliot said that, for him, the horror of life at that time was the absolute breakdown in the ability of people to reach one another. We make noises, he said, and think we’re talking. We look at one another, and think we’re seeing. And we’re wrong (Albee, *Conversations* 123).

Worth’s “mistake” generated an explanation of the world as Eliot saw it, a world similar to that envisioned by Albee, particularly in his controversial and perplexing rumination on faith and religion, *Tiny Alice* (1964).

Between the IDEA and the REALITY falls the SHADOW:

A Comparative Study of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* and T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*

Scholarship on *Tiny Alice* has traveled even further, perhaps, from Albee's belief that the mere experience of the play unencumbered by critical apparatuses is the surest route to clarity. A number of academic critics have pointed to the play's reliance on prior sources to better understand its absurdities. Most consistently mentioned and most illuminating is T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* from 1949. Christopher Bigsby suggests that Eliot's concern with the metaphysical was a foundation and an inspiration for Albee:

Not for nothing does the search for God begin with the word, and, perverse though the suggestion may seem, Albee's drama, no less than T. S. Eliot's, can be seen as religious in the sense that ... it was concerned with accounting for the mechanisms whereby we compensate for a sense of abandonment, adjust to an awareness of death and accommodate to a fear of contingency ... [Albee's] is a world whose order has decayed. God is dead (Bigsby 135).

Obviously, Albee is no evangelist.<sup>3</sup>

Every critic, noting the influence of Eliot on Albee, has drawn the same basic conclusion: Eliot's religiosity allows for redemption while Albee's agnosticism permits only an abyss. My reading of these plays emphasizes not a distinction between Christian orthodoxy and agnosticism, but rather Eliot's modernist exploration of a realm between the empirical and non-empirical. With this emphasis, we might see Eliot's verse drama as more explorative than has typically been seen, more willing to interrogate Christian mythology (or at least its mysteries), and we might also see Albee offering meaning that is more than abyssal. Though Eliot and Albee are from different generations, use different formal approaches (loosely characterized as verse drama and absurdist theatre), and have differing worldviews (the Orthodox and the agnostic), their plays resolve at a similar place, which, following Eliot, is the place we might call "the Shadow." Ultimately, I would like to suggest that this notion of the Shadow-space provided Eliot and Albee resources for dealing with contingencies following World War II.

Eliot's notion of the Shadow pervades his art, but its most pertinent usage is in *The Hollow Men* from 1925. This poem describes the plight of men without agency or meaning: "Shape without form, shade without colour,/ Paralysed force, gesture without motion" (Eliot 56). Typically read as a bleak portrait of modern life, the paradoxes here create incomprehensibility rather than alterity. Like the speaker, we become paralyzed when we attempt to puzzle out the meaning of a *motionless gesture* (emphasis mine), for instance. And yet, I read the final section of the poem as containing a slight glimmer of hope for those hollow ones in "the dead land" (Eliot 57). Several strophes in this final section are separated by italicized lines – "*For Thine is the Kingdom*" – suggesting the form of a litany (Eliot 58). The question remains whether this section parodies liturgical worship or endorses it. But regardless of possible irony, Christian ritual imposes order in the dead land, allowing the possibility for meaning even if salvation remains oblique.

The crucial strophe for my reading of *The Cocktail Party* and *Tiny Alice* comes in the midst of this litany when the speaker intones:

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow (Eliot 58).

We are positioned between a binary (idea and reality) and synonyms (motion and act). Instead of paralysis, Eliot's paradoxes might open new cognitive space – a realm not quite real and not quite ideal: the realm of the Shadow.

Literary modernism, as a matter of fact, was a continual attempt to access an expanse that corresponded to Eliot's Shadow-space. The break with nineteenth-century realist literature was not clean; Joyce's (over)abundance of textual data simultaneously makes *Ulysses* (1922) seem more real than realism and more mythical through its exaggerated emphasis on daily trivialities. Modernists were not merely concerned with representation (the "idea") nor experience (the

Between the IDEA and the REALITY falls the SHADOW:

A Comparative Study of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* and T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*

“reality”) but with a complex interaction between the two that formed a space somewhere between this binary.

*The Cocktail Party* came nearly twenty-five years after *The Hollow Men*, yet Eliot's preoccupation with the Shadow remains prominent. The play is structured around two parties, separated by several years, in the London flat of Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne. In the first act we discover that Lavinia has left Edward shortly before a party attended by Aunt Julia, their friend Peter Quilpe, and, among others, a mysterious Uninvited Guest. Their marital troubles have particular roots in Edward's infidelity with Celia Coplestone, but Edward describes the problem in abstract terms: “Lavinia always had the ambition/ To establish herself in two worlds at once – / But she herself had to be the link between them” (Eliot 314). Lavinia may be an attempted link between the idea and the reality, but she remains, at the beginning of the play, an ersatz Shadow.

Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, the mysterious Uninvited Guest, eventually guides the Chamberlaynes to renewed commitment and Celia to foreign missions. Typically, these resolutions are seen as forms of Christian redemption, where life acquires new meaning and wholeness through sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> However, this reading assumes Eliot's whole-hearted approval of Celia and the Chamberlaynes' lives.

In the third and final act, another party begins in the home of the Chamberlaynes, and we discover that Celia met a grisly death serving natives in Kinkanja. The two years between acts two and three have brought reconciliation for Edward and Lavinia. Apparently, Reilly's guidance was successful, but Lavinia remains shocked by his reaction to the news of Celia's death. He regards this fact with complacency that verges on satisfaction, and Lavinia demands a response. Somewhat ironic for a verse drama, Reilly asks if he may speak poetry. He recites:

For know there are two worlds of life and death:

One that which thou beholdest; but the other

Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit

The shadows of all forms that think and live (Eliot 383).

Reilly explains that Celia lived as one of those forms, a shadow whose death was foreseen, who lived happily in the knowledge that life was preparation for a certain death.

This death does not seem to carry with it any promised resurrection, and the other characters struggle with guilt for their complicity in Celia's demise. Reilly assures them that her death was foreseen and therefore no blame can be assigned. Resurrection is figured not as some function of afterlife or cosmic *telos*, but in Edward's realization that "every moment is a fresh beginning" (Eliot 387). Rather than some form of transformation, life involves cyclical renewal, just like the recurring cocktail parties.<sup>5</sup> Lavinia utters the final line: "It's begun" (Eliot 387). Like the final "Yes" of *Ulysses*, this line would appear to be a sign of hope. Yet in a play so focused on suffering and illusions, what has begun only potentially brings redemption. Being in the Shadow brings pain along with possibility.

In *Tiny Alice*, the Shadow looms over Julian, a Catholic lay brother sent by his Cardinal to the mysterious house of Alice, a would-be patron. The central crisis of the play occurs with Julian's need to face the difference between God and his *belief* (emphasis mine) in God. Albee never quite lets us know which of these two, the thing or man's idea of the thing, is illusory. At the center of the mansion is a scale model of itself, a replica so perfect that it seems to contain miniature versions of the human inhabitants: Lawyer, Butler, Julian, and Miss Alice.<sup>6</sup> The negotiation for transference of funds turns into a negotiation for Julian's soul, with the devious Lawyer, servile Butler, and enigmatic Alice exerting their various wills on his decision.

Critics have noted the characters sharing similar functions in *The Cocktail Party* and *Tiny Alice*. Alex, Julia, and Reilly are Guardians for Eliot's party-goers, shaping destinies and protecting social values. Lawyer, Butler, and the Cardinal similarly affect Julian's life, but the tone differs. Eliot's Guardians guide their wards through bumbling comic turns like Julia's "lost umbrella" stick. Albee's Guardians attack Julian with mind games akin to George and Martha's in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1961-1962). The Butler dampens Julian's enthusiasm over the fact that "Butler" is both the man's name and occupation:

Julian: How extraordinary!

Between the IDEA and the REALITY falls the SHADOW:

A Comparative Study of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* and T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*

Butler: No, not really. Appropriate: Butler ... butler. If my name were  
Carpenter, and I were a butler ... or if I *were* a carpenter, and my  
name were Butler ...

Julian: But *still* ...

Butler: ... it would not be so appropriate. And think: if I were a woman,  
and had become a chambermaid, say, and my name were Butler ...

Julian: ... you would be in for some rather tiresome exchanges.

Butler: None more than this.

Julian: Aha (Albee, *Tiny* 29).

Here is another instance of Albee's disrupting the separation between "idea" and "reality," which in this case involves deconstructing the general/ specific binary. The occupational category "butler" is blurred with the particular name "Butler" so that we may never be sure whether the man is being called by name or by function in any given utterance. Most of Julian's interactions with these Guardian figures involve some kind of shame. Stripping his beliefs seems to require purgation through awkwardness and embarrassment.

Julian's infamous final soliloquy has caused more perplexity than perhaps anything in the play. In his final minutes, he mingles cries to God with clichéd prayers, screams of forsakenness, stories of his youth, and descriptions of physical pain. Most prominently, this speech expresses profound doubt. A sing-song prayer – "But to live again, be born once more, sure in the sight of ..." – turns into a shout: "THERE IS NO ONE!" (Albee, *Tiny* 181). Most critics read the play's ending as a rejection of religious illusions in the material reality of death. Ruby Cohn writes, "whereas Eliot builds his comedy toward Christian martyrdom, Albee subverts such martyrdom as illusion" (Cohn 11).

Reading Julian's end as a loss of faith, however, does not take doubt far enough. Not only does Julian doubt his religious belief; he also doubts his *disbelief* (emphasis mine). Julian's deity acquires greater ambiguity the closer he comes to death. He shouts: "I DO NOT UNDERSTAND, O LORD, MY GOD, WHAT THOU WILT HAVE OF ME! ... ALICE!?" Then, laughing softly: "Oh, Alice, why hast *thou* forsaken me?" And, after looking at the model: "Hast thou? Alice? *Hast* thou forsaken me" (Albee, *Tiny* 181). God and Alice are conflated because they fill similar needs for Julian; both are *ideas* (emphasis mine) that shape his reality. What we have in this moment is not simply faith in God replaced by unbelief. His doubt penetrates even the potentially stable ground of atheism.

However, the difference between Eliot and Albee's visions cannot be characterized solely in terms of Christian faith. Edward and Lavinia may find some kind of redemption in their renewed marital fidelity, but the play ends with their preparing for one more cocktail party. The shallow and mundane dominate their lives more than any metaphysical salvation. Celia is often regarded as the character whose path leads to Christian spirituality. In his review, William Carlos Williams offered what has become the standard reading of the play: "There are two ways out – and it was very kind of Mr. Eliot to have provided them – the way of the Chamberlaynes and Celia's way" (qtd. in Grant, 601). I posit, however, that neither path fully permits a "way out." If the Chamberlaynes are immersed in reality, then Celia seems lost to abstraction. Her crucifixion by natives over an anthill in Kinkanja is such an extreme death, so far removed from the play's diegesis, that it becomes symbolic. Albee, on the other hand, presents an on-stage death which vacillates between metaphysical dilemma and physical distress. We cannot quite be sure whether Julian meets God, denies God, or discovers that there is no God to meet or deny. He seemingly assumes all three positions, rendering his death something in between abstraction and reality. All we may be sure of is Albee's stage direction about a "great shadow, or darkening [that] fills the stage ... the shadow of a great presence filling the room" (Albee, *Tiny* 183).

In their post-World War II contexts, Eliot and Albee display a similar concern with meaning in community. Eliot had tried to make his art increasingly wide reaching, perhaps hoping that community could be established through aesthetic forms. The difference in style between the fragmentary and obtuse *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932), his earliest attempt at drama, and the significantly more demotic play *The Cocktail Party* exhibits a need to speak to some larger



Between the IDEA and the REALITY falls the SHADOW:

A Comparative Study of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* and T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*

group of people.<sup>7</sup> The characters at the end of *The Cocktail Party* hope that the idea of Celia conveyed by the Guardians will inform their lived experience, rendering them somewhere between the idea and the reality. Perhaps a community can exist in the Shadow despite “the absolute breakdown in the ability of people to reach one another” (Albee, *Conversations* 123).

Eliot's belief in meaning derived from the non-empirical has been contrasted with Albee's postmodern rejection of ultimate meaning despite our incessant searching. But I believe Albee seeks community no less than Eliot. Elizabeth Klaver suggests that Albee shares Thomas Pynchon's worldview and that Julian becomes a kind of postmodern detective like Oedipa Maas, caught in a web of interpretation that refuses to make sense. She argues:

Forced to continually reassess language and action, the reader of *Tiny Alice* finds her own dilemma encoded into the very fabric of the text. The determination of a solution finally appears as an impossible task for those inside the play and for those outside. When it collapses distinctions between the reader's problematic and the character's, the play uncomfortably interferes with our attitudes toward reality (Klaver 181).

This uncomfortable interference with reality may be that space where community begins, in our implication in the play's diegesis and our imagined connections between characters and the non-diegetic world. The disruption of our sense of the real indicates the greatest point of convergence between Eliot and Albee's texts. In the shift from late to post modernism, Eliot and Albee meet somewhere between recourse to abstraction, absurdism and materialism as exclusive sources of meaning, somewhere between the idea and the reality, in the Shadow.

Notes

1. Like his fellow existentialists, Martin Heidegger argued that human beings, although aware of death's certainty and the ultimate futility of life, find themselves placed in a world that is not only incomprehensible but simultaneously indifferent. Heidegger defines "the entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being ... by the term 'Dasein,'" or "Being-there" (Heidegger 27), "there" referring to Being-in-the-world. One of the "existentials," or ways that *Dasein* is aware of itself as existing, is state-of-mind, which Heidegger defines as "our mood, our Being-attuned" to the world and to our past in it (Heidegger 172).
2. Worth provides another link between these dramatists; she originated the roles of Celia Coplestone and Miss Alice.
3. Albee was raised in the Episcopal Church but left at age six, citing disturbance over the crucifixion. However, he has said, "I've always been interested in Jesus Christ. About the only substantial and good Marxist I know about" (Albee, *Conversations* 134).
4. See for instance Carol H. Smith on two possible forms of Christian redemption in *The Cocktail Party* (Brooker 146-48). Also, see Raymond Williams's "Tragic Resignation and Sacrifice" in *Critical Quarterly* 5 (1963): 5-19.
5. For an elaboration of the modernist view of cyclical history, see Louise Blakeney Williams, *Modernism and the Ideology of History: Literature, Politics, and the Past*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
6. Throughout the play, the mansion's inhabitants debate their relationship to the model, and we must keep wondering whether the "full size" mansion is really an oversized model of the "model." Albee never allows us to be completely sure what is real and what is abstraction, which positions us somewhere between the two.
7. *The Cocktail Party* did in fact achieve the sort of success Eliot had hoped for, with a successful Broadway run and a Tony Award for best play in 1950.

Between the IDEA and the REALITY falls the SHADOW:

A Comparative Study of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice* and T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*

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