CHAPTER - VII
EXISTENTIAL MODEL IN THE PLAYS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS: THE SUMMING UP

The critical literature addressing the dramatic form employed by Eugene O'Neill in *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman*, and Tennessee Williams in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, implies a disparity of design. For example, Orm Overland identifies Miller's attempt to unify social and familial concerns as a dominant factor in his creation of dramatic form. Walter Kerr points to the isolation of Williams' characters as the primary component of his work. Whereas, Jay Halio identifies a homecoming motif as central to the majority of O'Neill's plays. No study to date has examined these three plays and the critical literature associated with them to determine if these three related concepts might be employed by the playwrights as a part of a more comprehensive influence. No correlation then has been made between a common factor dictating dramatic form and the vision of reality each play presents. Such a comparison study would consolidate the scattered fragments in the critical literature collating them with an examination of each author's manipulation of the dramatic constituents in each play. As this type of study has not been previously undertaken the similarities apparent in O'Neill's, Miller's and Williams' approach to dramatic form have not been identified. Nor has the philosophic perspective encompassing the tendencies identified by Kerr, Overland, and Halio.

It is the contention of this study that all three of these plays exhibit strikingly similar characteristics in regard to each playwright's manipulation of dramatic form. *A Long Day's Journey Into Night, Death of Salesman*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* present an identical vision of reality which draws its sustenance from an existential philosophical perspective concerned with consciousness and nonbeing. Each of these three plays presents an ontological-familiar then which is translated into concrete dramatic form such that subject, theme, dramatic
action, characterization, dialogue, symbol, set design, lighting and sound are all projections, of an existential ideology. In each play ten specific tenets of an existential perspective can be identified which present this emphasis upon the self in concrete dramatic form. In translating these elements into a dramatic design, these Pulitzer Prize winning dramas substantiate the existence of an existential dramatic form in American playwriting.

As an examination of the dramatic form developed in these plays has shown, each playwright has translated specific existential tenets into dramatic constituents to present a vision of reality reflecting a concern with consciousness and nonbeing. O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey* presents a family at odds with itself, grappling with crumbling identities. O'Neill's drama documents one day in the life of the Tyrone family a day which begins in sunlight and progresses toward the utter darkness of nonbeing. The "Journey" referred to in the title signals an interior probing, questioning the values each member exposes. It is above all, a confrontation with the dark night of the self, unconsciousness. Drama critics Brooks Atkinson was fundamental in identifying a primary component of the work which illuminates its employment of an existential perspective. In describing the play's orchestration of dramatic action Atkinson characterized the Tyrone family's incessant bickering as "life lived on the brink of oblivion." The pace of the action is catapulted by this threat and a spiritual longing. James Tyrone laments the loss of his considerable acting talent. Mary feels she can no longer call her soul her own. Edmund longs for the same spiritual union he once felt at sea. Jamie attempts to lose himself in the bottle. Each of the four desperately unhappy Tyrones struggles to find the lost self each has misplaced in this cloistered environment with the fog rapidly creeping in over them. The realistic facade of the Tyonre living room gives way to a symbolic journey of the self from the fading light of waning consciousness to the darkness of nonbeing.
This study of Arthur Miller's *Death of Salesman* also provides a comprehensive analysis of his treatment of the play's dramatic constituents pointing to the playwright's translation of an existential perspective into dramatic form. Miller opens up the Salesman's head to present the sum total of Willy Loman's consciousness, his way of thinking. Miller structures the play to coincide with the subjective nature of individual consciousness. He presents the simultaneous nature of Willy's existence in the past and in the present. Above all, Miller introduces us to this tired drummer with his bag of cliché slogans to dramatize the plight of a spiritual being set adrift in an impersonal material world. Every aspect of the play's design reflects Willy's subjective perception of his own existence in the world. Even the physical environment Miller has organized is indicative of this subjective view of a private man searching for some sense of his own worth in a world of strangers. As Miller tells us, "Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides." As this comparison study of Miller's development of dramatic action, is reliance upon existential tenets, has demonstrated, he initiates an almost topographic pattern of action to make the seemingly intangible locality of Willy's mind concrete. This investigation of Miller's development of characterization in the play also points to the playwright's emphasis upon existential concepts of angst and authentic values. For Willy is a man who feels "kind of temporary" about himself. He is a man torn between a slick, vulgar version of the American Dream and his genuine appreciation of the lilac and the wisteria in bloom.

This study's examination of William's manipulation of dramatic constituents in his *Cat on a Hot Tin Room* also demonstrates the playwright's conversion of an existential philosophical ideology into dramatic form. Williams has avoided a conventional scheme of dramatic action characterized by a causal chain of events, preferring a conversational approach designed to penetrate the "mendacity" eating away at the spiritual fiber of the Pollitt
family. Williams develops an impassioned family discourse concerned with consciousness and non-being. For Big Daddy's brush with nothingness has caused him to stop and examine his life. This personal acknowledgement of nonbeing has also moved him to retrieve his alcoholic son from a death-in-life existence. Like *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, the action progresses from light toward utter darkness with only the flickering sparks of exploding fireworks offering any glimmer of light in the darkness outside. Williams has minimized physical action in the play to emphasize his concern for the inner man, the fragile nature of the human spirit dwarfed by the crass nature of commercial enterprise.

This study and its initial review of these dramatic works provides a conclusive verification of O'Neill's, Miller's, and Williams' employment of an existential-familial dramatic form. Although the systematic investigation of the dramatic form employed in these three plays and the evidence accumulated in this regard substantiates the validity of this study, such an undertaking is naturally limited in scope. This study has been limited to an investigation of only these particular plays due to the considerable time element involved. As this dissertation has dealt with only these three plays a future study is warranted as there is a need to develop this thesis and to examine its application to more contemporary American playwrights. A preliminary examination of the work of several contemporary American playwrights suggest that future study is warranted and that this same existential perspective may be identified in the works of Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and David Rabe.

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* might be appropriately subtitled "Getting at the Self." The play follows the drunken exploits of a university history professor and his acid-tongued wife. George and Martha engage in a series of embittered, caustic verbal battles, mental games, to expose the vulnerable regions of the authentic self. They lay bare the illusions and the fears of their lives. Albee has divided the play's dramatic action into three acts synonymous with the subtitles he has given each one. Act I takes on the aura of
"Fun and Games." Act II proceeds into "Walpurgisnacht," and Act III concludes with "The Exorcism," a revelation of what critic Richar Dozier has called the "secret, inner self." In his "Adultery And Disappointment in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Dozier addresses George and Martha's volatile relationship as a means that "assures them that they are still alive and kicking." This tempestuous union is balanced against the superficiality, the banal nature of their social existence. This type of cancerous condition is described by existential philosopher William Spanos in his A Casebook on Existentialism as a form of spiritual suicide.

A brief comparison of the critical evaluations made by dramatic theorists with the play's elements of dramatic form, seems to corroborate Albee's employment of an existential design in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? This design is reflected in Albee's handling of characterization in the play and the values and motivations he sets in motion. As George tells Nick:

GEORGE

Martha and I are having ... nothing. Martha and I are merely ... exercising ...
that's all ... we're merely walking what's left of our wits.

Dramatic theorist Lee Baxandall addresses Albee's concentration upon authentic values and his development of relationships in the play capable of reinforcing these values. Baxandall recognizes Albee's concern for a conscious affirmation of life and an emphasis upon values which promote consciousness. In his article "The Theatre of Edward Albee," which appears in a 1964-65 issue of The Tulane Drama Review, he describes Nick and Honey as a spiritual antithesis to the older couple who are struggling almost violently against an inane existence. As Baxandall states:

Conformist, repressed, neurotic, the wave-of-the-future couple, Nick and Honey, lack the passionate energy that would enable them to control their own fates. Like their lives, their marriage has been taken for granted.
As a type of detached and conformist contrast to the older couple, Nick and Honey represent the unconscious state of mass man's mass values. It is against this spiritual inertia that George and Martha aim their considerable verbal cannons. Nick personifies this moral stagnation when he states:

*NICK
It's just that I don't like to ... become involved ... (An afterthought) uh ... in other people's affairs.⁵

In his article "What happens in whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Max Halperen addresses this same concern for the authentic self. Halperen identifies Albee's emphasis on the conscious self and a move toward stripping the artificial facade from around it. As Halperen states:

>To Albee a man obsessed, there is one deadly sin: fear and rejection of some aspect of tangled, moist reality; and escape into the smooth deserts of illusion and indifference—an escape which, as far as Albee is concerned, is its own punishment.⁷

Albee's employment of an imagery child in the play reflects the illusion and the vacuity of George and Martha's lives. This symbolic "little bean bag" provides one example of the playwright's concern with consciousness, angst, and authentic values. Albee uses this illusion shared by the couple to graphically illustrate the extent to which the couple has migrated from an honest perception of their situation. As Max Halperen has stated:

>Their little "bean bag" as George calls it, gets tossed back and forth, being employed both as a weapon by which they may express their disgust with each other and a shield being which they may hide their illusions about themselves.⁸

The battle the couple engages in and the death of this figment of their collective imaginations constitutes a movement toward consciousness. Halperen relates Albee's use of this device to a means of forcing the principle characters to some sense of self-revelation. He states:
Both defense and attack then are rather wide of the mark; the purpose of the
intricate structure that is their make-believe son is to evade themselves, to
evade reality.9

The through line of action Albee establishes in the play is characterized by a series of
brutal verbal attacks. This means of getting at the self is a means of peeling away the outer
layer of social existence to reveal the conscious, the authentic self beneath a false exterior.
Again, Halperen refers to Albee's concern with a quality of existence, recognition of illusion
and reality and an acceptance of one's true self. He reiterates Albee's development of
dramatic action as it coincides with a movement toward selfhood:

George announces to Martha that their son is dead. It is his way of
saying that he, George, refuses to participate any longer in the monstrous
illusions by which he and Martha have lived. It is now possible for George and
Martha to be reborn into the reality that is this, not the afterlife, a life that has
never been possessed by either of them. And that no doubt is the point of the
requiem mass George recites in Act III.

It is not a mass for the repose of a son who never existed, but for the
new souls of the living.10

This recurrent theme of getting at the self and of surgically stripping away a false
exterior and making contact with another human being, does seem to suggest that Albee's
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? adheres to the same existential dramatic form used by
O'Neill, Miller, and Williams. But only a comprehensive study examining all ten existential
tenets and their application to a specific dramatic design will verify such a hypothesis.
Perhaps at some future date an examination assessing the influence of an existential dramatic
form on Albee's manipulation of dramatic constituents in his Who's Afraid of Virginia
Woolf? may divulge if the same form used by O'Neill, Miller, and Williams is still a viable
one in the contemporary American theatre.

The Face of Illusion in American Drama by A.D. Choudhuri provides a possible
bridge connecting the works of the three earlier dramatists referred to in this study with a
second generation of American playwrights concerned with consciousness, authentic values,
and death. Choudhuri identifies the tattered remnants of the American Dream as an influence in the plays of several modern playwrights. Choudhuri states:

*The American dream of success and prosperity leads people to illusions: Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams have been its chroniclers.*

Choudhuri connects these concerns of the earlier playwrights and their manner of presentation with Edward Albee's concentration upon illusion, reality, identity and authentic values in *Virginia Woolf*. He describes this trend in the following manner:

*Much more powerfully than in any other play, Albee substantiates in Virginia Woolf the significance and impact of illusion in American culture--its soul destroying materialistic values, its cult of efficiency and go-ahead, its need for human kindness, its craze for status and success, its vague search of identification with fulfillment.*

Albee's title implies an answer compatible with existential thought. When George asks Martha "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" who's afraid of the dark side of the self?, Martha replies "I ... am ... George ... I ... am ..."

An examination of the critical literature evaluating works by Sam Shepard and David Rabe also seems to suggest that such a study connecting existential tenets and these contemporary playwright's development of a specific dramatic form may be warranted. George Stambolin traces Sam Shepard's emphasis upon individual identity and characterization in an article appearing in a 1974 issue of *The Journal of Popular Culture*. In "Shephard's Mad Dog Blues: A Trip Through Popular Culture," Stambolin documents Shepard's early and consistent development of characterization. He points to Shepard's belief that society with its imposed values and with its set of myths and media images creates its own version of reality. This mass perception negates or overrides the individual's perception of his own being in the world. Of *Mad Dog Blues*, written by Shepard in 1971, Stambolin states:

*In it he again demonstrates his mastery of dramatic collage and treaties many of the same themes found in his other plays--the search for*
innocence, the loss of identity, the tensions and fragility of human relations, and the obsessive presence of death.\textsuperscript{14}

Like Albee, Shepared structures his characters as beings anxious to strip away the false facade society and families have imposed on them. In \textit{Contemporary Dramatists}, Shepard is quoted as saying:

\textit{I feel that language is a veil hiding demons and angels which the characters are always out of touch with. Their quest in the play is the same as ours in life--to find those forces, to meet them face to face and end the mystery.}\textsuperscript{15}

Consciousness and individual identity have been identified as elements common to Shepard's development of dramatic form. In \textit{American Playwrights: A Critical Survey}, Bonnie Marrance and Gautam Das Gupta identify Shepard's concern with individual consciousness and the translation of this emphasis into dramatic form:

\textit{The plays are populated by characters who think out loud, and often in long monologues which unveil truths about their inner lives. Not to compile psychological data (as in conventional realism), but to attempt to uncover essences. Shepard is less interested in character than in consciousness. Consciousness--that is, the essence of an individual's awareness of himself in the world--is the subject of Shepard's work. Consciousness that develops a theme throughout the plays, not the author as obsessive subject of his work.}\textsuperscript{16}

Similarly, T.E. Kalem's review of David Rabe's \textit{Sticks and Bones} which appears in a November 22, 1971 issue of \textit{Time Magazine}, also suggests that Rabe's work projects a primary concern with consciousness. In Rabe's hands this concern is indelibly united with a priority for authentic values. As Kalem explains:

\textit{David (David Selby) has come home to a double death. Sightless he suddenly sees the members of his family for what they are, characters out of an adman's super dreams, puppets dangling from dentifrices, automobiles and cellophane, living on packaged illusions and self-destructive myths. They are hypocrites and moles.}\textsuperscript{17}
In this same article connecting consciousness, illusion, and identity, Rabe's *Stricks And Bones* is aligned once again with David's jolt to consciousness, the horror of his Viet Name experience, the deceit of family life. Kalem states:

David is haunted by the memory of the girl he left behind, a serene Vietnamese, the only solace from the hellish cruelty which has scarred him for life. Dumped back into the domestic lap, he feels isolated. His parents are strangers to him. His boyhood, he now realizes, was a construct of deceit. For papa, superficially a most humdrum and foolish citizen, is as frustrated and made as miserable by the platitude of his life as David is crippled by the experience of war.  

In Craig Werner's "Primal Screams And Nonsense Rhymes: David Rabe's Revolt," which appears in a 1978 issue of the *Educational Theatre Journal*, Werner traces a sense of alienation pervading Rabe's works. He comments upon Rabe's use of cliché, what he identifies as "debased language," as this aspect of Rabe's work projects this sense of growing isolation. In addressing all of these concerns in Rabe's major works, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel, Sticks And Bones*, and *Streamers*, Werner states:

The problem of language lies at the center of all three plays. In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, which concentrates on the social roots of an individual rebellion, Abe demonstrates the alienating effect of the debased American language. In *Sticks and Bones*, which analyzes the destructive impact of this alienation on a family group, he links this debased language to a characteristic American refusal to accept reality.  

Werner also comments upon the life-denying existence of the family in Rabe's play. He connects this type of life to their relationship to nonbeing. Werner's views in this regard connect Rabe's play to an existential perspective emphasizing consciousness and authentic values. He observed:

*Sticks and Bones*, as its title intimates, also takes place in a world of unreconciled oppositions. Once again Rabe establishes a life-in-death metaphor by flashing a 'color close-up of David from the last moment of the play.'
It is also Werner who identifies the "spiritual nature" of the vacuum underlying the characters' lives and how this evidences itself in Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*. Werner's final observation characterizing the cumulative effect of the dramatic action in *Sticks and Bones* coincides with the existential tenet of angst:

> The final impact of *Sticks and Bones* recalls Ozzie's sense of vertigo which he described as, "A sense of hovering over a great pit into which I am about to fall."  

This brief and incomplete analysis of a cross section of the critical literature addressing Edward Albee's, Sam Shepard's, and David Rabe's development of dramatic form, points to the probable employment of an existential design in the works of contemporary American playwright. But only an in-depth analysis of each play augmented by a comprehensive examination of the critical literature will determine if these authors have utilized the same existential form employed by O'Neill.

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**NOTES**

3. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 139.
9. Ibid., p. 140.
10. Ibid., p. 141.
12. Ibid., p. 132.
18. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 522
21. Ibid., p. 524