

University of Pardubice

Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

African-American issues in mid-20th century America as represented in The
Death of Bessie Smith

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Bachelor thesis

2013

Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta filozofická
Akademický rok: 2012/2013

ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(PROJEKTU, UMĚLECKÉHO DÍLA, UMĚLECKÉHO VÝKONU)

Jméno a příjmení: **Martina Brendlová**
Osobní číslo: **H10510**
Studijní program: **B7310 Filologie**
Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**
Název tématu: **Afro-Americké otázky v Americe poloviny 20. století jak zobrazeno ve Smrti Bessie Smithové**
Zadávající katedra: **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

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An important part of this BP should be how actual historical events can be compared to depictions in literature in general (very briefly), and in theatre plays in particular (in a bit more detail - e.g. in Shakespeare). So the opening chapters should present some theories about this kind of representation; playwright Arthur Miller has written about this for example. Next, a short biography of Bessie Smith with emphasis on social and historical events of the early 20th century affecting African-Americans (especially women) should be included. These events can be compared to the situation for African-Americans during the late 1950s, when Albee's play was written. In the following chapter pertinent biographical information on Edward Albee and a short overview of his important works should be featured. A brief summary of the plot, characters and style of writing of *The Death of Bessie Smith* should be described. The longest and most important part of the paper should be an analysis of how African-American issues are depicted in the play. On the other hand, Albee, a white playwright, has himself commented on how his play is not only about African-American issues, but attempts to make a more universal statement about American society and values using certain historical events, so in this way the plays by Eugene O'Neill *The Emperor Jones* and *All God's Chillin' Got Wings* may be compared or contrasted.

Rozsah grafických prací:

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:

Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**

Seznam odborné literatury:

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<http://books.google.cz/books?id=A9YbZIZE84sC&printsec=frontcover&hl=cs>

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Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **30. dubna 2012**

Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **31. března 2013**



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V Pardubicích dne 30. listopadu 2012

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Martina Brendlová

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank to my supervisor Daniel Paul Sampey, MFA for his guidance, encouragement and especially for his great advice.

ANNOTATION

This thesis focuses on the depiction of African-American issues as they appear in Edward Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. The thesis depicts the position of African Americans in American society during the 20th century and their relations with a white community. At the same time, space is also devoted to the depiction of Bessie Smith's character whose accuracy is compared to historical records. Finally, literary devices used by Edward Albee in this particular play are examined.

KEYWORDS

African Americans, Edward Albee, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, segregation, social inequality, discrimination

NÁZEV

Afro-Americké otázky v Americe poloviny 20. století jak zobrazeno ve *Smrti Bessie Smithové*

ANOTACE

Tato práce se zabývá vyobrazením problémů, se kterými se potýká afroamerická komunita v díle Edwarda Albeeho *Smrt Bessie Smithové*. Práce mapuje postavení Afroameričanů v americké společnosti během 20. století a jejich soužití v rámci bělošské komunity. Zároveň je prostor věnován také vyobrazení Bessie Smithové, jejíž postava je porovnávána s historickými záznamy. V neposlední řadě jsou také zkoumány literární prostředky, které Edward Albee využívá v dané hře.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Afroameričané, Edward Albee, *Smrt Bessie Smithové*, segregace, sociální nerovnost, diskriminace

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INTRODUCTION

This bachelor thesis focuses on the analysis of Edward Albee's one-act play *The Death of Bessie Smith* in terms of African-American issues. Albee is regarded as one of the most significant American playwrights of the 20th century. He appears to be a social critic who frequently preoccupies with morals, relationships and American values. These themes are also represented in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, a play which is based on a historical event concerning Bessie Smith's death. The aim of this bachelor thesis is to examine various African-American issues as they appear in the play as well as to analyze the representation of Bessie Smith and features that Albee employs in this play.

The content of this bachelor thesis comprises five chapters, four of which provide a theoretical background to the analysis of Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith*. The first chapter focuses on a comprehensive depiction of African Americans, their lives and problems which they regularly encountered within a white-dominated society during the 20th century in America. This chapter also offers a subchapter concerning a relevant biography of popular blues singer Bessie Smith. The second chapter is divided into three subchapters examining Edward Albee's biography as well as an overview of some of his plays, which are compared and contrasted to his *The Death of Bessie Smith*. Special attention is paid to the nature of Albee's plays, specifically to his themes, characters and devices that he frequently uses throughout his work. The third chapter is devoted to a brief overview of *The Death of Bessie Smith* as such, including a brief plot, characters and features which selected scholars and critics have observed in this play. The last and the longest chapter is concerned with the analysis of the play in terms of African-American issues, specifically social inequality, segregation, struggle for equality and others. Each issue will be thoroughly examined separately. The role of the character of Bessie Smith and the historical accuracy of the play are also taken into consideration. Additionally, features that Edward Albee employs throughout his plays are further reflected in this particular play. Finally, the bachelor thesis is summarized and concluded.

1. BESSIE SMITH AND AFRICAN AMERICANS DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The following chapter will focus on the depiction of African Americans during the 20th century in America. Their position in a society dominated by whites will be discussed, including their common problems, such as social inequality, segregation, discrimination and other issues. Furthermore, the relevant biography of Bessie Smith during this period will be also briefly mentioned.

1.1. AFRICAN AMERICANS

The position of African Americans in American society has always been inferior. This tendency stems from the tradition of slavery, when blacks were the exclusive property of their white master and had hardly any rights (Myrdal, 1996, pp. 577-578). After the Civil War, Congress passed the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendment, which officially made slavery illegal and declared full citizenship and the right to vote for blacks. Once these amendments were accepted to the Constitution, blacks earned their civil rights. However, that was not acceptable for the Southern whites, who responded with violence and intimidation, which was generally tolerated. As a result, the newly guaranteed civil rights were constantly violated, as the federal government was gradually failing to defend them (U.S. Department of State, 2005, pp. 148-151; Smith, 2001, pp. 16-20).

The South still perceived blacks as a subordinate race which needed to be kept inferior. Even after declaring equal rights for black people the white population, particularly in the South, was convinced that their white supremacy should be maintained, as Smith (2001, p. 4) explains:

Over the course of the postwar decades, white southerners, committed to and obsessed with maintaining their supremacy, used every means at their disposal first to define a special, unequal sphere for African Americans and then to keep blacks in their place.

Consequently and irrespective of law, whites practiced a policy of oppression, racism and segregation towards the black community, which from the 1890s became known as Jim Crow and persisted until the mid-twentieth century (Smith, 2001, pp. 6-7).

Jim Crow defined a position in a society based on race and influenced all areas of human life. Smith (2001, p. 27) explains how blacks' lives were affected by the racial policy:

Blacks either were excluded from public or quasi-public facilities or provided separate but never equal accommodations. Well into the 1950s and even the 1960s, African Americans lived in racially segregated neighborhoods, attended segregated schools, traveled in segregated buses

and trains, and had access to generally inferior libraries, museum, hospitals, churches, theaters, stadiums, restaurants, hotels, parks, and beaches.

Therefore, being a black meant being an inferior citizen. Blacks were served only after whites if they were served at all. They had to address white people politely showing their respect, whereas white people demonstrating their dominance called them niggers. When a black met a white on the sidewalk it was the black who was supposed to leave in order to avoid difficulties (Smith, 2001, pp. 7-8, 22-23). Myrdal (1996, pp. 586-587) maintains that discrimination affected also personal life of both races, as the interracial marriages were generally condemned in the South. The reason for the contempt was to prevent mixing of white blood with lower black blood, so that the white race would be maintained, which subsequently led to the justification of segregation. On the contrary, Myrdal (1996, p. 603) claims that the North was more benevolent to tolerate such marriages.

Racial policy affected all public spaces where blacks and whites were getting in contact, including medical facilities. Some hospitals were segregated and some did not admit black patients at all (Smith, 2001, p. 158). David B. Smith (1999, p. 10) maintains that black patients in hospitals were obliged to wait in separate waiting rooms in the basement for long hours. The situation was similar when blacks visited a physician: “[...] you had to wait until all white patients had been seen [...] as long as white patients kept coming in, you kept being pushed further and further back.” (Smith, 1999, p. 10). Moreover, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights conducted a survey on medical treatment of blacks and findings showed that:

In Memphis, Tennessee, a 128 bed city-owned hospital built partially with Hill-Burton funds was the only general accredited facility available to Black paying patients. Three large private church related facilities with a total of 2,082 beds did not admit Blacks. Other small facilities including a Black hospital did admit Black patients (Rice and Jones, 1944, p. 95).

As a result of these discriminatory measures, many blacks died (Smith, 2001, p. 19).

One of the reasons for hostility of whites stemmed from their disbelief in social equality. They believed that blacks were destined to serve them. Indeed, wealthier whites often used blacks as servants at their homes and living so close made their relations rather friendly until blacks challenged their social position (Myrdal, 1996, p. 597). Myrdal (1996, p. 597) suggests that at that moment they became a target of hatred, as they were perceived as “‘smart,’ ‘uppity,’ and he ‘wants to be white’ [...]”. Therefore, many of blacks trying to improve their social status praised their masters and pretended inferiority to avoid difficulties. Myrdal (1996, p. 596) explains that whites did not need educated and independent servants but easily exploited labor. Interestingly enough, blacks had to face most aggression from the poorest whites who felt threatened by prosperous blacks, as they challenged their low social

position. To these whites “The educated Negro, the Negro professional or businessman, the Negro landowner, will particularly appear to them ‘uppity,’ ‘smart’ and ‘out of place’.” (Myrdal, 1996, p. 597). These whites aimed at keeping educated blacks at the very bottom of the society by means of violence, discrimination and injustice (Myrdal, 1996, pp. 593-598)

Whites despised even educated blacks anytime they got in contact with them. The educated blacks were intelligent and wore proper clothes, therefore whites believed that they endeavored to get as equal as white people and claimed that “the worst blacks were those who were educated and relatively well-to-do and who insisted on imposing themselves on the white people.” (Smith, 2001, pp. 91). According to Smith (2001, p. 159), white people were generally afraid of the educated black population, hence they restricted their access to education. The reason for these restrictions was firmly grounded in the conviction that blacks were “not worthy of education” and in the disbelief in social equality (Smith, 2001, p. 159). In this respect, the more educated blacks were and demanded equality, the more they were hated by the white majority.

Blacks were humiliated and intimidated on a regular basis. They were excluded from the first class cars, since they were too good for them. Other times they were told to move to the front or back. According to a white citizen the most important thing was that blacks had to obey white rules (Smith, 2001, pp. 157). According to Smith (2001, p. 162) American society resolutely defined who was a servant and who was a master, thus “[...] the poorest illiterate white could claim a standing in society denied to the wealthiest and most intelligent and educated black.” In this respect, America changed a little from the times of slavery when the role of blacks was inferior, while whites maintained their superiority.

As mentioned above, the most rigid segregation and discrimination could be found in the South, in contrast to the North where the situation was subtly different. The main reason for the warmer atmosphere was the fact that:

Upon the ideological plane the ordinary Northerner is, further, apparently conscious that social discrimination is wrong and against the American Creed, while the average Southerner tries to convince himself and the nation that it is right or, in any case, that it is necessary (Myrdal, 1996, p. 600).

For this reason, discrimination was not very significant in the Northern states and blacks shared facilities with whites and even operated their own businesses. Moreover, the North valued educated and hardworking blacks much more than the Southerners who perceived such blacks as arrogant and white (Myrdal, 1996, pp. 599-604). As a consequence of social injustice, plenty of blacks migrated north to seek equal opportunities. Meltzer (1967, pp. 43-

44) maintains that during the 1920s Harlem in New York became a Mecca of the newly arriving Southern blacks who were seeking economic prosperity and social equality. Nevertheless, discrimination in the North was gradually increasing, due to the racial prejudice brought by the white Southerners (Myrdal, 1996, pp. 599-604). All in all, living conditions of blacks in the North were not ideal, but they were still more bearable than those in the South.

The economic situation of blacks was harsh, since their employment was affected by discrimination. Blacks had to face numerous racial disbeliefs of being lazy, incapable and lacking good morals. Therefore, the majority of blacks were landless, without much property and adequate income (Myrdal, 1996, pp. 205-208). Moreover, Meltzer (1967, pp. 137-138) argues that blacks usually occupied positions in agriculture or service and in the North they were hired to professions concerning glass, food or textile, consequently “The hard work and the dirty work – that has traditionally been the log of the Negro. It remained true into the 1960s [...]”. Myrdal (1996, pp. 205-208) adds that there were only a few exceptions of blacks holding better positions, particularly in facilities for the black community.

Furthermore, blacks are the group most affected by economic depressions, especially by the Great Depression in 1929. In that case they are usually the first to lose their job or to be replaced by whites (Myrdal, 1996, pp. 205-208). Moreover, Meltzer (1967, pp. 114-115) argues that during the depression blacks had to face hostility and often violence:

In some places racist groups, seeing black work while whites were idle, shoved in and tore away what jobs Negroes still had. In Mississippi, strong-arm methods moved to murder in 1932, when eight Negro railroad firemen were shot down because whites wanted their jobs.

In addition, their wages were considerably lower compared to those of their white colleagues. This fact was chiefly given by the permanent presence and justification of social inequality in the society (Myrdal, 1996, pp. 215-216).

Trying to resolve their bad situation, blacks were seeking F. D. Roosevelt’s support (Savage, 1991, pp. 42-44). In 1932, during the presidential elections, neither Hoover nor Roosevelt had a program for resolving the situation of blacks. In addition, when they were surveyed to voice their opinions on the race problem, they both declined to answer even when Roosevelt became a president and was asked by NAACP¹ (Weiss, 1983, pp. 23-34). Weiss (1983, p. 34) adds that for Roosevelt “the race issue was not perceived as a matter of pressing national concern, and other, more urgent problems pushed it beyond [...]”. Robert C. Smith (2003, p. 304) argues that Roosevelt deliberately ignored proposing bills to defend civil rights, as he was fully conscious of the fact that he could lose support of the Democratic Party

¹ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (U.S. Department of State, 2005, p. 211)

as well as white Southerners' votes for passing the New Deal. When the New Deal was passed, it succeeded only partly and discrimination persisted (Weiss, 1983, pp. 50-52).

However, Roosevelt's wife Eleanor was one of the few allies of blacks. On the whole, she was trusted and popular among blacks, consequently she was frequently asked for help. In addition, she could be considered to be a patron of blacks, as she "befriended civil rights leaders, spoke out against lynching, racism and black disfranchisement, promoted black appointments to New Deal agencies [...], defied the segregation laws of Alabama" (Cohen, 2003, pp. 196-197; Weiss, 1983, pp. 51-52). All things considered, during Roosevelt's presidency blacks achieved some minor triumphs which helped them to reduce the effects of the a bad economic situation during the 1930s.

Being discontent with their low social standing in the society, blacks were determined to take action in order to combat the superiority of whites. In 1941 black leaders organized a March on Washington to force President Roosevelt and government to take action against Jim Crow policy. In reaction to the march, Roosevelt made "discrimination in defense industries or in government 'because of race, creed, color, or national origin'" prohibited (Meltzer, 1967, pp. 162-163). This triumph led to others, but they were rejected by whites and followed by violence against blacks who responded with a mass nonviolent action, a form of resistance, which became the main weapon of the Civil Rights movement for achieving equal rights successfully (Meltzer, 1967, pp. 174-175). It can be concluded that after years blacks eventually triumphed over the white superiority.

To be concluded, the position of black citizens in American society has never been unproblematic. Until the mid-20th century blacks were humiliated, deprived of their rights and discriminated. However, they resisted injustice and thanks to their efforts they managed to give rise to the Civil Rights Movement and gradually achieved equal rights. The above mentioned issues are also reflected throughout *The Death of Bessie Smith* by Edward Albee.

1.2. BESSIE SMITH

Bessie Smith was a famous African-American blues singer who was born in 1898 in Chattanooga, Tennessee (Oliver, 1961, p. 1). Interestingly, in 1923 she as well as many other blacks at this time moved north and purchased a house in Philadelphia where she lived with her husband and later manager Jack Gee (Oliver, 1961, pp. 24, 51-52). During the 1920s her career flourished and "with one record Bessie's supremacy as a singer of the 'classic blues' was established [...]" (Oliver, 1961, pp. 16-17). Thousands of sold records and sold out

shows made this period of Bessie's career the most successful one (Oliver, 1961, pp. 22-28). Jack also seems to be the character presented in Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

Towards the 1930s Bessie Smith encountered the most unfortunate period of her career not only due to the oncoming Great Depression, but also because the music industry entered a new period which left behind old musical forms and classic blues faded, consequently Bessie's fame declined (Oliver, 1961, pp. 56-57). In addition, Oliver (1961, p. 65) argues that:

Even for a disc by Bessie there were now few Negroes who could afford to pay a sum equivalent to two dollars by present-day standards. There were fewer persons who could afford to hear Bessie sing in person [...]

Although Bessie's career faded during the 1930s, there was still a chance that her career would improve. Her fame seemed to recover again in 1937 when she was prepared to record and participate in a new film and shows (Oliver, 1961, pp. 67-70). Contrasted to the 1920s, it cannot be denied that during this decade Bessie became half-forgotten. This period of Bessie's career and her accident that follows are also depicted in Albee's play.

Bessie's prospects were ruined by a car accident on 26th September 1937. When she was being driven to Broadway Rastus Show in Memphis, her car collided with a truck and Bessie suffered a severe injury of her arm which resulted in her death (Oliver, 1961, p. 70). Oliver (1961, pp. 70) argues that the accident has never been fully clarified, thus numerous myths occurred and were misused to create a tension between the two races. Moreover, Oliver (1961, pp. 70-71) presents some of theories about Bessie's death. The first theory relies on the fact that Bessie Smith was not accepted to a segregated hospital and died as a consequence of losing too much blood. The other theory speculates that Bessie was accepted to a white hospital, however, white patients were served first, hence Bessie died before she was provided any treatment. Concerning the third version, Oliver (1961, pp. 70-71) maintains that:

Of a dozen versions perhaps the most likely is the report that a prominent – but unnamed – Memphis surgeon was passing the scene of the accident and stopped to render aid. Whilst trying to lift the 200-lb. body of the singer into his car his own vehicle was struck by oncoming traffic and destroyed. An ambulance summoned by another unknown person arrived a few minutes later and the mortally wounded Bessie was taken to the Negro Ward of the nearest hospital, the G. T. Thomas Hospital at Clarksdale, Mississippi. One of the best surgeons there is said to have amputated her arm, but the severe injuries that she had suffered to her face, head, and internal organs caused her death [...].

In sum, Bessie's death contributed to a discussion on race relations in American society. Additionally, it motivated Edward Albee to write a play in which Bessie's life is also reflected (Bigsby, 1984, p. 261).

2. EDWARD ALBEE AND AN OVERVIEW OF HIS MAJOR WORKS

The aim of this chapter is to provide relevant information on Edward Albee's biography which is reflected in his work. At the same time, features concerning characters, themes and other devices that are usually observed in his plays will be presented and an overview of his major plays will be discussed. The mentioned plays will be then compared and contrasted to *The Death of Bessie Smith*.

2.1. BIOGRAPHY

Edward Albee was born on 12th March 1928 in Washington, D.C. and given for adoption. He was adopted by Reed and Frances Albee, whose wealthy family owned over 400 theaters in the U.S. For this reason, Edward was growing up in a luxurious home, provided care by servants, surrounded by plenty of toys and pets and enjoying trips to theater performances. Living in such a material world, he could have anything that a child can think of. On the other hand, he spent only little time with his parents and most of the time he felt lonely and unhappy (Singh, 1987, pp. 2-3; Dircks, 2010, p. 5).

However, the assumption that living in this kind of the upper-class background would make him proud is mistaken, instead he "used a pen to criticize the moral and spiritual damage inflicted upon people by excess of material wealth and a misguided pursuit of the 'American Dream'" (Adams, 1985, p. 3). In addition, as a child he could see profound differences between his adoptive parents who, according to Singh (1987, p. 3), resemble characters in some of his plays, namely in *The American Dream*. Frances was a very outspoken lady. Compared to her, "Reed Albee, a small, silent man, eager to please his second wife, had fallen into a habit of continual agreement with anything she said or did in order to avoid argument." (Singh, 1987, p. 3). According to Dircks (2010, pp. 5-7) the growing antagonism between Edward and his parents escalated into arguments on various subjects, such as morality, and consequently made Edward abandon his parents and live on his own.

2.2. STYLE OF WRITING

As far as Albee's style of writing is concerned, Stenz (1978) in her publication *Edward Albee: The Poet of Loss* uncovers various aspects of his style, which are worth mentioning.

Stenz (1978, p. 2) argues that Albee is rather a negative and critical voice in the American theater suggesting that:

[...] he is a stern moralist who believes that there are right values and wrong values. Deliberately, his purpose is to shock, to offend and to disturb. Yet he too uses the technique of kindness and cruelty which so many of his characters apply to their particular situations in his plays.

Moreover, she maintains that “confrontation and violence precedes the awakening from a death-in-life situation in his characters.” as a result a character is enlightened (Stenz, 1978, p. 2). Consequently, a reader should be affected, shocked and is expected to be emotionally involved in the plays (Stenz, 1978, p. 2).

The nature of Albee’s plays is not entirely clear. Stenz (1978, p. 2) maintains that Albee himself perceives his work to be naturalistic and she further suggests that the extent to what his work can be considered realistic differs and depends upon a particular play. Similarly, Singh (1987, p. 8) asserts that realism is a part of Albee’s, as well as O’Neill’s, work and is a positive force, since it portrays people as they really are. On the contrary, C. W. E. Bigsby (2000, p. 135) interprets Albee’s work in a different way arguing that “He [Albee] has never been a realistic playwright even when as in *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – he appeared to be.” Nevertheless, Bigsby (1968, p. 234) suggests that insisting on a rigid differentiation of styles is meaningless, since *A Delicate Balance* was perceived to be realistic by some critics and symbolic by others.

In his essay, P. C. Kolin finds links between Albee’s first plays. He (Bottoms, 2005, p. 17) claims that the purpose of these one-act plays is to “call America to be self-reflexive” and to confront the satisfaction of American society with its materialism, values and problems of a decade in which these plays were written. This is further supported by Albee’s statements in interviews in which he declared that “the responsibility of the writer is to be a sort of demonic social critic – to present the world and people the way in it as he sees it and say ‘Do you like it? If you don’t like it change it.’” (Dircks, 2010, p. 146). Generally, Albee, along with Miller and Williams, is regarded as a playwright of a social drama, which is applying to his early plays and developing into existential issues in his later plays (Singh, 1987, p. 11; Horn p. 9).

Interestingly enough, Albee’s plays contain also elements similar to the Theatre of the Absurd. Singh (1987, pp. 20-21) observes that, contrary to works by Ionesco and Beckett, the essence which makes, for instance *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The American Dream* absurd plays, is the fact that “for Albee, the world makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to illusion himself collapsed.”

Therefore, his tendency to confront the absurdity differs from the approach applied by European writers (Singh, 1987, pp. 20-21; Bottoms, 2005, p. 17).

Albee's plays seem to be connected by a variety of means that appear in his plays. Bottoms (2005, pp. 24, 26-27) asserts that in Albee's plays some features occur throughout his work, such as topics, characters who are lonely and usually an undefined setting, as a consequence of a corrupted society. In the same way, Stenz (1978, p. 2-3) observes that Albee often employs irony, extreme situations and well-developed characters who, however, are not easily distinguished to be good or evil, hence it is difficult for a reader to sympathize with any of them. Furthermore, Stenz (1978, p. 3) argues that female characters in Albee's plays are often depicted as evil figures, however, she points out that this interpretation is not accurate, as the author equally disapproves of the behavior of male characters and adds that:

Albee focuses on the twisted human relationships which can evolve within the establishment, on the results of materialism and parasitism, and on the deceptive nature of ambition. He points out the evils brought about by the misuse and misunderstanding of modern institutions.

To depict such destructions in human relationships the author often employs a married couple (Stenz, 1978, p. 3). Additionally, although Albee himself claims that the influence of his personal life on his plays is marginal, some of characters in his plays resemble figures from his family, such as his mother, father and grandmother who are portrayed in *The American Dream* or *The Sandbox* (Adams, 1985, p. 2; Horn, 2003, p. 10).

2.3. OVERVIEW OF SELECTED PLAYS

One of the most significant plays by Edward Albee is *The Zoo Story* (1958), his debut on the theatre scene (Bottoms, 2005, p. 17). The play focuses on two seemingly different characters of Jerry, a social outcast living alone, and Peter, a well-mannered married man, who meet in Central Park. Jerry speaks about his life of a loner who by means of isolation escapes reality and tells Peter that he realized that in order to live he has to face the reality of life. The dialogue then ends with an unexpected death (Bigsby, 2000, p. 129).

Bigsby (2000, p. 130) denotes that metaphors are Albee's powerful tool in developing Jerry's monologues and they can be also seen in his other plays. Furthermore, Kolin (Bottoms, 2005, pp. 17-18) suggests that in *The Zoo Story* Albee employs naturalism as well as techniques of the Theatre of the Absurd, hence the play was interpreted in many different ways, for instance as a play on homosexuality, Biblical issues, a warning against strangers, or loneliness and deficiency of communication. Since there exists a great variety of interpretations, Albee is "so frequently and mischievously misunderstood" (Stenz, 1978, p. 1).

Written only a few years after *The Zoo Story*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is another well-known play. According to Adams (1985, p. 1-2), in 1960s, the United States struggled with African-American issues and the SSSR and Albee, as well as others, wrote a play in reaction to the current situation and American values. In this play, Albee

critically analyzed institutions and values that Americans held dear – family, marriage, and success, for instance – and suggested they might have been created in part to escape from reality (Adams, 1985, p. 2).

Although in the play Albee proved to be a skillful playwright, the play was also considered controversial, as it challenged traditional American values and used provocative language (Adams, 1985, p. 2).

The play focuses on a married couple of George and Martha Washington who make a fictional child. George, a professor of history, meets his new colleague Nick who is eager to succeed and creates an illusion of being successful. In the end, George and Martha face reality and admit that their child was only a product of their imagination (Bigsby, 2000, pp. 130-131). Bigsby (2000, p. 131) argues that the play depicts illusions that are created in order to avoid reality. That accounts not only for George and Martha, but also for the whole society. Adams (1985, p. 22) stresses that “people today have been forced to create illusions for themselves because reality has become too difficult and too painful to face.” Both Adams (1985, p. 20) and Bigsby (2000, p. 131) argue that the play is located in New England, a cradle of traditional American values, and Albee contrasts this place with the play which violates those values. It is further supported by an academic setting which is believed to be

a place of learning, achievement, and sophisticated culture. Instead Albee shows us a hotbed of lust, deception, and sadness, with people who are motivated by in large part by greed and self-interest (Adams, 1985, p. 20).

According to Adams (1985, p. 22), the play also reveals that the characters are unable to meaningfully communicate with each other and Bottoms (2005, p. 4) adds that the play also involves features that are typical for Absurdist. It seems that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* thematically overlaps with Albee's other plays, such as *The Zoo Story*.

A Delicate Balance is another Albee's work produced in the 1960s. In spite of the fact that this play is concerned with similar themes as his previous work, Bigsby (1984, p. 292, 294) suggests that Albee presents also elements of existential philosophy, a new feature influenced by T. S. Eliot. According to Bigsby (1984, pp. 292-294), in this play Albee shows failures in relationships and individuality which are not necessarily inevitable, however, the absurdity is that characters choose a failure over an alternative, whereas in *Who's Afraid of*

Virginia Woolf? there is still a certain hope for an improvement. Singh (1987, p. 17) further believes that this play depicts “a fading civilization” and a collapsing society which is unable to live without illusions, as reality is too unpleasant. In addition, Bigsby (1968, pp. 230-231) claims that living in illusions consequently makes people incapable of establishing true relationships, owing to the fact that there is no real background.

In some aspects *The Death of Bessie Smith* seems to be similar to *The Zoo Story*, especially in terms of symbols and loneliness. Singh (1987, p. 14) suggests that the image of the Zoo represents people who deliberately isolate themselves from other people, which in fact is a metaphor for animals kept in the Zoo. Similarly, the Nurse in *The Death of Bessie Smith* might symbolize the whole white supremacy. At the same time, in both plays a feature of loneliness can be observed. In *The Zoo Story* it is Jerry “who basically lives in isolation from society” (Keane, 2000, p. 159) and on the other hand in *Bessie Smith*, the Orderly becomes an outcast when he is rejected by blacks as well as by whites.

Other similarities are observed between *Bessie Smith* and *Virginia Woolf*. Keane (2000, pp. 160-161) argues that George’s “situation resembles that of the Intern in *The Death of Bessie Smith*”, since they both are frustrated and disappointed by reality of their lives. At the same time, both plays also focus on twisted American values, including self-interest and materialism as discussed by Adams (1985, p. 20) and Bigsby (1984, p. 261). Moreover, Bryer and Hartig (2010, p. 125) suggest that the relationship between the Nurse and the Intern resembles the one of Martha and George. Keane (2000, p. 154) adds that in both plays “there is a clear father figure to rebel against [...]”.

Nevertheless, there are a few differences concerning the above mentioned plays and *The Death of Bessie Smith*. All the plays seem to deal with illusions, in contrast there seems not to be such a tendency in *Bessie Smith*. Also, *A Delicate Balance* and *Virginia Woolf* focus on a married couple, while in *Bessie Smith* there is only an affair between the Nurse and the Intern. Moreover, *A Delicate Balance* is quite distinct on its own for its existential focus. And finally, *Bessie Smith* is the first play to be concerned with African-American issues.

As shown above, Albee’s childhood influenced his work in many aspects. His style of writing and themes which he preoccupies with throughout his plays seem to more or less repeat, including subjects, such as reality and illusions, relationships and twisted American values. Therefore, his plays appear to be connected and create a whole. However, there are also distinct aspects that make his plays unique.

3. OVERVIEW OF *THE DEATH OF BESSIE SMITH*

The fourth chapter of this thesis will focus on an overview of Edward Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. This chapter will briefly discuss the plot and the nature of the play. Additionally, themes, characters, language and other features that some of critics and scholars have observed throughout the play will be introduced.

In the context of all Edward Albee's plays, *The Death of Bessie Smith* can be perceived rather as a minor work. Reading about Bessie Smith on the cover of her record, Albee was moved and consequently decided to write this play, which premiered in Berlin, Germany in 1960. A year later it was finally introduced in New York. Since the play appeared during the Civil Rights Movement, it was immediately connected to African-American issues. However, the play makes a more universal statement about American society (Bryer and Hartig, 2010, p. 124; Bigsby, 1984, p. 261).

The play is divided into eight scenes and its plot is located in Memphis on the 26th September 1937 when Bessie Smith died after a tragic car accident. According to Witherington (1967, p. 84) the play comprises three main plots: the Nurse at home, Jack and Bessie, and a hospital; and three scenes appear "thematically irrelevant". At the beginning, Albee presents Jack who meets Bernie and tells him that he takes Bessie Smith to New York for a show (Bryer and Hartig, 2010, p. 124). Meanwhile, the Nurse accuses her father of not being a true friend of mayor and "mocks him for hanging out at the Democratic Club" (Bryer and Hartig, 2010, p. 124). After this confrontation the Nurse goes to work, verbally assaults the Orderly and flirts with the Intern who expresses his wish to leave for the Spanish Civil War to provide care, however, the Nurse does not share his enthusiasm and the conversation ends with an argument. At that moment, Jack enters the hospital after he had a car accident and was denied in another white hospital. He is instantly ordered to leave by the Nurse who also threatens the Intern and discourages him from rendering first aid. The Intern helps, however, Bessie Smith dies despite all efforts (Bryer and Hartig, 2010, pp. 124-125).

The seemingly straightforward story about a black woman who was refused admittance to a white hospital could be interpreted as a criticism of a racially divided society of the early 20th century America. However, Bigsby (1984, p. 261) argues that Albee did not intend to write a play which would strictly discuss racism, despite it represents a kind of "social protest but which is more usefully seen as a morality play about the collapse of human values and national purpose." Bryer and Hartig (2010, p. 125) come to a similar conclusion that Albee's concern is much more the depiction of people who suffer from stagnation and

desperately want to change their lives. Anger, frustration, love and hate are themes that frequently occur throughout the play. Therefore, the whole play is not to be seen as a protest play only, but as a play with further implications.

Moreover, Witherington (1967, pp. 84-85) observes how Edward Albee uses language to support the stagnation of characters in the play. Witherington (1967, pp. 84-85) insists that Albee frequently makes use of the verb “go” to efficiently imply some kind of movement or action. However, in spite of the fact that all characters keep talking about “going”, the absurdity lies in the fact that they hardly ever take action to accomplish what they desire. Another example of how Albee can use language to serve his purpose is how he calls his characters. The Orderly stands for a servant and the Intern for “Intern, as the name suggests, is not to go outside himself”, when the Nurse always orders him not to leave the hospital (Witherington, 1967, p. 87). Witherington (1967, p. 86) also finds signs of irony not only in the interpretation of the play, but also in language, for instance the white hospital where Bessie Smith is denied is called Mercy Hospital. Indeed, in this play Albee shows his ability to develop his work in terms of language.

As far as characters are concerned, there are three main figures in the play: the Nurse, the Orderly and the Intern. The Nurse is a furious female character, as Stenz (1978, p. 16) insists that she is a complicated figure who on one hand is bound to her father, due to her southern identity and on the other hand she makes fun of the values of the community she belongs to. Bigsby (1984, p. 261) suggests a similar dilemma arguing that the very liberal Intern represents her chance to change her life and at the same time he challenges her role of a white woman. Consequently, she fails to accept the change. Moreover, Bryer and Hartig (2010, p. 125) observe that:

The Nurse and the Intern are locked in a love-hate relationship that prefigures George and Martha’s marriage in Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), as well as many of Albee’s of male-female relationships.

In addition, Keane (2000, p. 154) suggests another interesting parallel between the two mentioned plays concerning a rebellion against authoritative fathers. He believes that the Nurse rebels against her father by ridiculing his political abilities and similarly Martha rebels against her father.

Those who suffer from the Nurse’s frustrations are the black Orderly and the white Intern. Despite being frequently offended by the white Nurse, the Orderly still believes that he can improve his position in the society, therefore he “tolerates racial abuse in order to be accepted into the society which abuses him” (Bigsby, 1985, p. 261). The liberal Intern who

desires to help in Spain is seen by Keane (2000, p. 154) as a rebel who “dislikes racism, materialism, and the impersonal nature of institutions, in this case the hospital where he works.” He is constantly threatened by the Nurse not to violate the Southern etiquette; however, he decides to take action instead of only waiting idly (Stenz, 1978, pp. 22-23). All the above mentioned characters might be different in terms of their age, prejudices or color of their skin, however, there is a common denominator which connects them and that is, according to Stenz (1978, p. 15), a wish for a change.

In conclusion, the play is not about a simple depiction of racism. Rather the play is more complex and preoccupies with various themes, including morals and values of the contemporary society. To depict the society and support his ideas, Albee uses a variety of tools, for example language and characters who are different but at the same time connected.

4. ANALYSIS OF *THE DEATH OF BESSIE SMITH*

The following chapter will focus on the analysis of Edward Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith* in terms of race relations and various African-American issues, including social inequality, struggle for equal rights and advancement. The analytical part will be also devoted to the representation of Bessie Smith and special attention will be paid to devices which Albee employs in this particular play.

4.1. AFRICAN-AMERICAN ISSUES

This chapter aims at describing various issues that African Americans encountered throughout Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. This chapter is divided into several subchapters in which each issue is analyzed individually.

The major source of information on the position of African Americans in American society is exchanges between the Orderly and the Nurse in a white hospital located in Memphis. The Orderly is black and the Nurse is a white Southern girl who is fully conscious of her power she holds over him. There are a few main factors that influence her behavior towards him. One of these factors is the fact that she is white and "bred in the racism of the South" (Bigsby, 1984, p. 261). Her superior position is further supported by the fact that she is a woman, therefore, as Smith (2001, p. 22) argues: "Black men were expected to look down when they spoke to whites, especially white women." In addition, she seems to be in charge also because of her job position of a nurse which is more influential than an orderly. When all these factors are taken into consideration, the Nurse acts in accordance with the traditional order of things in the South.

4.1.1. SOCIAL INEQUALITY

The first issue to be examined is social inequality. As represented in the play, this issue concerns not only the black Orderly but also Bessie Smith.

The Nurse and the Orderly first meet in the hospital where she informs him about Mayor who is hospitalized on account of his hemorrhoids and she compares him to a man who was admitted a previous night badly injured. In their dialogue the Nurse uncovers how the Southern society actually values blacks:

NURSE: [...] Now, it's true that the poor man lying up there with his guts coming out could be a nigger for all the attention he'd get if His Honor should start shouting for something... he could be on the operating table... and they'd drop his insides right on the floor and come

running if the mayor should want his cigar lit. ... But that is the way things are. Those are facts. You'd better acquaint yourself with these realities. (Albee, 1960, p. 41)

In this part of her speech, the Nurse suggests that the mayor is far more important than anybody else, hence confirms the existence of social inequality. At this point it could be assumed that the mayor receives favorable treatment because of his social status. However, it appears that the reason for the unequal treatment is, in fact, the color of skin, since prior to that line the Nurse stated: "... but we are no one bit more concerned for that man than we are for His Honor..." (Albee, 1960, p. 40). That suggests that the white man is treated as well as the mayor, but if he were a black man, he would be abandoned in favor of a white man.

Similarly, the fact that American society valued a white person more than a famous black one is demonstrated when Jack enters Mercy Hospital after his car crashes. When he repeatedly demands help he stresses:

JACK: Ma'am... I got Bessie Smith out in that car there...

SECOND NURSE: I DON'T CARE WHO YOU GOT THERE, NIGGER! (Albee, 1960, p. 65)

He is given a similar reaction in the other hospital where the Nurse states "Oh, this is no plain woman... this is no ordinary nigger... this is Bessie Smith!" (Albee, 1960, p. 78). In both cases, Jack expects that stressing Bessie's name will make a difference in perceiving her not only as a black, but as a respected woman who will be helped because of her social status, which is higher than the status of any other black and any other ordinary white. Smith (2001, p. 162) suggests that such an assumption is wrong, as in the South "[...] the poorest illiterate white could claim a standing in society denied to the wealthiest and most intelligent and educated black." Therefore, Bessie is refused and it becomes evident that in the South an ordinary white will be always valued more than the most prominent black singer. Considering her social status she could be perhaps compared to the mayor, but her race makes her unable to achieve equality. This is evidence that the Southern discrimination is not based on the social status but on race.

Compared to the South, social inequality in the North seems to be less evident, as the Nurse, while verbally assaulting the Orderly, suggests what he should do next:

NURSE: I'll tell you what you do... You go north, boy... you go up in New York City, where nobody's better than anybody else... get up north, boy. (*Abrupt change of tone*) But before you do anything like that, you run downstairs and get me a pack of cigarettes.

ORDERLY: (*Pauses. Is about to speak; thinks better of it; moves off to door, rear*) Yes'm. (*Exits*) (Albee, 1960, p. 47)

In this exchange the Nurse hints at the difference between the way blacks are treated in the North represented by New York City and in the South represented by Memphis where the

whole action takes place. According to the Nurse blacks in the North are equal to whites; consequently it would be much more beneficial for the Orderly to move there and by doing so to resolve his unsatisfactory situation in Memphis. Indeed, it is true that the situation in the North was generally more pleasant for blacks and they had more opportunities, as Myrdal (1996, p. 601) insists that:

“In several minor cities in New England with a small, stable Negro population, for instance, social discrimination is hardly noticeable. The Negroes there usually belong to the working class, but often they enter the trades, serve in shops, and even carry on independent businesses [...]”.

For this reason he would have a better chance to prove himself successful there, as it is possible that people in the North would appreciate all his ambitions and determination. Moreover, suggesting New York City as a target of the Orderly’s way, the Nurse might specifically refer to Harlem, which according to Meltzer (1967, p. 43-44) became “[...] the race capital, the forum for expression of a developing racial pride.” and where plenty of blacks resided as a consequence of their escaping discrimination and racism in the South. Therefore, Harlem would be an appropriate place where the Orderly could be fully content.

Whereas in the North blacks are more likely to be perceived as equal partners, the Nurse’s statement proves that the Southern attitude is different. Such kind of an attitude is demonstrated when she immediately orders the Orderly to bring her cigarettes. She implies that in the South he is considered to be only a servant. At the same time, she seems to be confident and well aware of the fact that she is superior and hence can humiliate him as she wishes. Her assumption is confirmed by the Orderly who first considers opposing her, but after a short while he rather retreats to avoid difficulties and therefore he admits his position of an inferior black. His obedience is not only expressed by his action, but also by his agreement in which he expresses politeness and respect to the contemptuous Nurse referring to her as a madam, a title required by the Southern customs (Smith, 2001, p. 22).

In another exchange between the Nurse and the Orderly she implies that his standing in society will never be equal to the standing of whites, hence he should accept the existence of social inequality:

NURSE: [...] I’ll tell you something... you are lucky as you are (Albee, 1960, p. 42).

Uttering this, the Nurse reveals the attitude of American society towards the black community supposedly in terms of employment. The Nurse probably suggests that the Orderly should be grateful for his low-grade job. This statement could be interpreted in two ways. In connection with the Orderly’s ambitions it can be either a warning so he would not try to advance

himself, because he as a black is perceived only as a servant, thus he cannot claim a better position or it could be interpreted as a consequence of the Great Depression, as Meltzer (1967, p. 114) asserts that:

More than half of America's Negroes were jobless by 1932. Misery and suffering seeped into almost every house. In the big cities there were three or four times as many Negroes on relief as whites. In Atlanta two out of three Negro workers needed public funds to keep from starving; in Norfolk it was four out of five.

For this reason, the Orderly should be lucky to be at least employed. The former then can be considered as a proof of the existence of social inequality in American society in the 1930s. Moreover, the Nurse's hatred towards the Orderly might be also fuelled by the fact mentioned by Meltzer (1967, p. 88) that also among whites there were plenty of unemployed people, therefore she might feel that he occupies the position which could belong to a white.

As can be seen from the above mentioned examples, blacks in *The Death of Bessie Smith* struggled with social inequality. American society perceived them as inferior beings that were deprived of equal rights owing to the fact that they were believed to be only servants to whites.

4.1.2. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT

An attempt to improve the position of blacks in the society is a logical consequence connected to the issue of social inequality. In *The Death of Bessie Smith* it is the Orderly who represents this tendency to raise his social status.

The black Orderly works in the white hospital as an orderly - the lowest manual labor in this type of a facility. He directly expresses his desire to advance himself and consults the Nurse on an idea of talking to the mayor:

ORDERLY: I know... I know the mayor is an important man. He is impressive... even lying on his belly like he is... I'd like to get to talk to him.

NURSE: Don't you know it? TALK to him! Talk to the mayor? What for?

ORDERLY: I've told you. I've told you I don't intent to stay here carrying crap pans and washing out the operating theatre until I have a ...a long gray beard... I'm... I'm going beyond that.

NURSE (*patronizing*): Sure.

ORDERLY: I've told you... I'm going beyond that... This... (Albee, 1960, pp. 41-42)

By saying "going beyond that", the Orderly means leaving the position of a social outcast, a role into which he was put on account of his race. Apparently, he believes that his education and abilities qualify him to obtain a more decent job than the lowest manual job in the hospital. On the other hand, the Nurse discourages him from thinking of any advancement and

makes fun of his ambitions. Apparently, she believes that discrimination and social inequality are so deeply rooted in the South that the current situation is not likely to change and whites will maintain their supremacy. Being white and a part of the Southern system, the Nurse is also interested in keeping the Orderly at the very bottom of the social ladder. Indeed, Myrdal (1996, p. 597) insists that whites perceived blacks as competition and hence “want all Negroes kept down ‘in their place’ – this is to them defined realistically under themselves.” Her behavior is therefore also motivated by the fear of such ambitious blacks who could overthrow the white supremacy in the future.

In addition, the fact that the Orderly tries hard to advance himself and shift from his inferior position to a more superior one makes the Nurse rather anxious. Therefore, based on the assumption that the Orderly wishes to challenge the Southern etiquette she tries to threaten him by saying:

NURSE: I’ll tell you what you just want... I’ll tell you just want if you have any mind to keep this good job you’ve got... You just shut your ears... and you keep that mouth closed tight, too. All this talk about what you’re going to go beyond. You keep walking a real tight line here [...]
(Albee, 1960, p. 45)

Since the manual labor was the most common type of work for blacks (Meltzer, 1967, p. 137), the Nurse implies that the Orderly’s job is, in fact, good enough for him and that he is not worthy of a better job. The position of an orderly might be generally considered to be a miserable job; however, the Nurse believes that it is just an adequate job for a black man considering his inferior position in the white-dominated society. In this example, the Nurse again demonstrates her superiority and the power that she has over the Orderly. She is confident that if the Orderly tries to violate the Southern racial etiquette, which according to Smith (2001, p. 162) requires blacks to be nothing but inferior servants, by advancing himself she can manage that he will lose his job. Consequently, she discourages him and orders him to be obedient.

The Nurse grows even more irritated owing to the Orderly’s ambitious attitude and her speech continues in the following exchange in which she insults the Orderly, since she accuses him of “bleaching away”:

NURSE: [...] and at night... (*She begins to giggle*)... and at night if you want to... on your own time... you keep right on putting that bleach on your hands and your neck and your face...
ORDERLY: I do no such thing!
NURSE (*In full laughter*): ... and you keep right on bleaching away [...]
(Albee, 1960, p. 45)

Here, the Nurse refers to an interesting phenomenon when she suggests that by using bleach the Orderly tries to remove his black color from his skin so that his new color would be white.

Later in the play the Nurse even refers to him as to a “white nigger” (Albee, 1960, p. 47). Taken literally, the process of bleaching which the Nurse mentions might be motivated by the Orderly’s physical appearance, since Albee describes him as light-skinned. However, according to Albee’s description he is also “clean shaven, trim and prim” (Albee, 1960, p. 24), which supports the main idea that the Orderly wants to become as similar to whites as possible in order to advance himself. According to Myrdal (1996, p. 597) whites tend to think of a black in this way: “[...] the educated Negro trying to climb in social status: one moment hostility will hold sway – this Negro is ‘smart,’ ‘uppity,’ he ‘wants to be white’ [...]”. It is the way the Orderly presents himself in terms of his neat appearance, sophisticated language use along with his ambitions to achieve a better position that makes the Nurse rightfully think that he is a white black who makes all effort to perfectly fit into the white society. The only problem that he has is the fact that the white society does not want him to become its part. Smith (2001, p. 162) argues that blacks’ position of servants was strictly given and not understood. Therefore, that is also the reason why the Nurse ridicules his intentions and perceives them as a violation of his natural condition of a black inferior man. At this point she believes that his effort is vain, because hard as he tries there seems to be no way that he could raise his social status.

On his way to advance himself, the Orderly uses a technique which is also mentioned by Myrdal (1996, pp. 595-596) who states:

[Negro] is discouraged when he tries ‘to work his way up.’ It is considered better for him never to forget his ‘place,’ [...] Negroes in the South have often confided to me that they find it advantageous to simulate dependence in order to avert hostility from the whites and engage their paternalism.

The Orderly’s attitude is discovered by the Nurse, who accuses him of agreeing with everybody and everything only to gain their sympathy and achieve what he wishes. Arguing that he “tolerates racial abuse in order to be accepted into the society which abuses him”, Bigsby (1985, p. 261) supports this thesis. To exemplify this, in order to be helped the Orderly claims that the mayor is very impressive, later he sympathizes with the Intern, calls the Nurse’s father an “informed man” (Albee, 1960, p. 68) and always avoids a conflict with the Nurse so that he would not be considered an enemy probably in hope for his advancement. The Nurse notices that and cries: “You try to keep yourself on the good side of everybody, don’t you, boy?” (Albee, 1960, p. 45), later she tells him: “[...] you are a genuine little ass-licker [...]” (Albee 46) and she shows that she disapproves of his behavior.

In addition, the Nurse keeps ridiculing his becoming white and indicates that his intentions are in contradiction when she cries: "... you are so mixed up! [...]" (Albee, 1960, p. 45). The Nurse means that on one hand he tries hard to advance himself and consequently become white in order to be accepted into the white society by means of his neat appearance as well as his way of speaking and hard work. On the other hand, he believes in action, hence he would like to keep his identity, remain black and fight for equal treatment along with his black community. Because of this contradiction, he is ridiculed by the Nurse when she imagines him as a white among blacks in a march. This Orderly's double-minded attitude makes the Nurse to insult him when she says:

NURSE (*Maliciously solicitous*): Tell me, boy... is it true that you have Uncle Tom'd yourself right out of the bosom of your family... right out of your circle of acquaintances? Is it true, young man, that you are now an inhabitant of no-man's-land, on the one side shunned and disowned by your brethren and on the other an object of contempt and derision of your betters?[...] (Albee, 1960, p. 47)

The Nurse implies a fact which the Orderly refuses to talk about. She suggests that his family and friends deny accepting him into their company, as a result of his ambitions to improve his social status. The main problem of his refusal seems to be the fact that he usually agrees with white characters in the play, serves them, sympathizes with them, and therefore perhaps even approves of their behavior. That is what the Nurse emphasized earlier when she called him an "ass-licker" (Albee, 1960, p. 46) and the Orderly's community seems to agree with the Nurse on her point. To demonstrate the Orderly's behavior for which he is found in this situation, Albee decided to use "Uncle Tom", a character from a novel called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by H. B. Stowe, standing for "a black man who wants to please or serve white people" (oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com). In this case the Orderly's behavior rather approves of discrimination and therefore he is considered an outcast of his own community.

On the other hand, the white community which the Orderly wishes to belong to does not intend to accept the Orderly either, owing to his color of skin which determines him to be inferior and obedient. Therefore, he has to face an interesting consequence of his efforts. Despite trying hard to be good enough for whites and please them, he is still too black to be accepted into the white Southern community and paradoxically at the same time his efforts made him too white to be accepted into the black community. For this reason, he is denied admittance to both of the communities.

The fact that the Orderly tries hard to advance himself is also apparent from the following conversation:

ORDERLY: Why, it's a matter of proportion. Surely, you don't *condone* the fact that the mayor and his piles, and that poor man lying up there...?

NURSE: *Condone*, will you listen to that: condone! My! Aren't you the educated one? What... what does that word mean, boy? That word condone? Hunh? You do talk some, don't you? [...]
(Albee, 1960, p. 41)

The Orderly's way of speaking implies that he tries to achieve a higher position than he has also by means of presenting himself as an educated man. Indeed, when his statement is compared to the one by Jack in the opening scenes, it is clear that the Orderly uses words carefully avoiding colloquial expressions and his language sounds much more sophisticated. However, addressing the Orderly plainly "boy", the Nurse clearly indicates that she is the one who is in charge and does not respect him. By consulting him for saying the word "condone" she makes an attack on his education. According to Smith (2001, p. 159) white people were afraid of educated blacks and consequently limited their access to education, as "[T]he Southern people do not believe in 'social equality'. Therefore, it can be assumed that the reason why the Nurse ridicules the Orderly's way of speaking is to discourage him from further education, because she is afraid of his possibility to advance himself and get a higher position in the social hierarchy than she has.

As far as the problem of advancement of blacks is concerned, Albee depicts the Orderly who tries to become equal to superior whites. However, whites represented by the Nurse disapprove of such behavior, as it could endanger their white supremacy. For this reason they threaten blacks and discourage them from any advancement.

4.1.3. INTERRACIAL MARRIAGES

The problem of interracial marriages can be seen in the following utterance in which the Nurse and the Intern discuss their marriage, as it demonstrates what view on interracial marriages the Southern citizens hold:

NURSE: (*Regards him silently for a moment; then*) Marry me! Do you know... do you know that nigger I sent to fetch me a pack of butts... do you know he is in a far better position... realistically, economically... to ask to marry me than you are? Hunh? Do you know that? That nigger! Do you know that nigger outearns you... and by a lot?

INTERN: [...]... why don't you just ask that nigger to marry you? 'Cause, boy, he'd never ask you! I'm sure if you told your father about it, it would give him some pause at first, because we know what type of man your father is...don't we? ... but then he would think about it... and realize the advantages of the match... realistically... economically... and he would find some way to adjust his values [...] (Albee, 1960, p. 56)

The Intern's words suggest that the interracial marriage would be denied in the South while referring specifically to the Nurse's father. This Southern attitude towards the marriage is confirmed by Myrdal (1996, p. 606) who states:

No other way of crossing the color line is so attended by the emotion commonly associated with violating a social taboo as intermarriage and extra-marital relations between a Negro man and a white woman.

For this reason such a marriage in the South would be regarded with contempt. Additionally, the Intern implies that the Nurse's father is a racist while indirectly referring back to the second scene of the play in which the father complains about "Goddamn nigger records" (Albee, 1960, p. 29). Therefore, it is not likely that the father would approve of the interracial marriage. However, the Intern suggests that there is a possibility that the father would face a dilemma concerning materialism. He implies that perhaps the vision of wealth that a black man could bring if he married his daughter Nurse would make the father change his opinion and accept an unthinkable interracial marriage.

Moreover, the Nurse probably suggests that hypothetically it could be more advantageous to marry a perspective black man who is eager to succeed, which would be unacceptable in the South, rather than to marry a white doctor without prospects who wishes to help civilians in the Spanish war. This attitude reveals that the Nurse is a materialist who would have to face the same dilemma like her father.

As shown above, in this play Albee also presents a view on interracial marriages held by the South. It is evident that this marriage would be generally condemned.

4.1.4. A LACK OF INTEREST

A lack of interest in blacks and their lives seems to be another aspect which can be observed in Albee's play.

To exemplify this issue the following situation is examined. In this exchange between the Nurse and the Orderly on the subject of improving his prospects she asks about his expectations and he replies:

ORDERLY: What's been promised... Nothing more. Just that.

NURSE: Promised! Promised? Oh, boy, I'll tell you about promises. Don't you know yet that everything is promises... and that is all that there is to it? Promises... nothing more! I am personally sick of promises. Would you like to hear a little poem? Would you like me to recite some verse for you? Here is a little poem: "You kiss the niggers and I'll kiss the Jews and we'll stay in the White House as long as we choose." And that... according to what I'm told ... is what Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt sit at the breakfast table and sing to each other over their orange juice, right in the White House. Promises, boy! Promises ... and that is what they are going to stay. (Albee, 1960, pp. 42-43)

At this point, it is not entirely clear which promises the Orderly refers to. Perhaps he means the Amendments that were added to the Constitution and guaranteed blacks the same rights as to whites (U.S. Department of State, 2005, pp. 148-149). Therefore, based on the Constitution

the Orderly should be equal to whites. However, instead he seems that he is only a servant for the white Nurse. He could also mean promises made specifically by President Roosevelt when he entered the White House in 1932 (Savage, 1991, p. 42), the period when the play takes place. Roosevelt operated the New Deal that promised banning discrimination as Weiss (1983, p. 50) argues:

By official pronouncement, the Roosevelt administration forbade discrimination in New Deal programs. But there were wide variations in the way those programs actually affected blacks. Each program promised opportunities for blacks, each had plenty of loopholes for discrimination.

These promises might be those that the Nurse mentions in her speech. She implies that Roosevelt made promises only to get the votes of blacks to remain in the White House as long as possible instead of being interested in helping them resolve their unjust treatment. Indeed, Savage (1991, p. 43) suggests that Roosevelt was conscious of the importance of black votes, as in “close presidential election in 1936, the black vote, for the first time in history, was perceived as the key to victory.” and consequently Roosevelt was elected. Therefore, blacks were only exploited to serve Roosevelt’s purpose. Nevertheless, the Orderly put his trust in those promises, but now he is rather disappointed. The Nurse tries to make him face the reality and ruins his hopes of the bright future, as she strongly believes that what was promised will never be fulfilled and that the Orderly will never be as equal as her.

Their dialogue continues into one of the most important highlights of the play made by the Nurse who tries to awaken the Orderly so that he would realize his real prospects:

NURSE (*shakes her head in amused disbelief*): Oh, my. Listen... you should count yourself lucky, boy. Just what do you think is going to happen to you? Is His Honor, the mayor, going to rise up out of his sickbed and take a personal interest in you? Write a letter to the President, maybe? And is Mr. Roosevelt send his wife, Lady Eleanor, down here after you? Or is it in your plans that you are going to be handed a big fat scholarship somewhere to the north of Johns Hopkins? Boy, you just don’t know! (Albee, 1960, p. 42)

The message that the Nurse is getting across is the fact that there exists no way that the Orderly could be helped in improving his position, owing to the fact that no one takes interest his life. At local level, as a black man the Orderly cannot expect any help from the mayor of Memphis, since the whole action takes place in the racist South. Another point that the Nurse makes is that even if the Orderly sought help outside the South, he would not be helped even if he asked President Roosevelt neither him nor his wife Eleanor Roosevelt would be interested in him. Indeed, Smith (2003, p. 304) argues that as far as African-American issues were concerned, the President often hesitated to take an action against discrimination, as he was afraid of possible violence as well as of losing support in the South. In this case it could

be the mayor and the whole Democratic Club in Memphis that would no longer support the President if he helped the Orderly. On the other hand, Eleanor Roosevelt was very popular for her help among blacks, as “no First Lady had ever been so supportive of black aspirations.” (Cohen, 2003, p. 197). Moreover, Cohen (2003, p. 196) asserts that Eleanor was receiving plenty of letters sent by blacks:

[...] [they] did not ask her to stop racial violence or to help blacks win the political rights of citizens. Instead, they usually asked for help in securing jobs and education. Their demands reflected their most immediate needs, and the bread-and-butter issues that they confronted in their daily lives.

Therefore, Eleanor could be the only one who the Orderly could ask for help and perhaps he could send one of those letters to Eleanor. Finally, the Nurse suggests that he cannot expect any support in education. This would be again counterproductive for the whites, as educated blacks were not needed but rather dangerous in terms of sustaining the white supremacy.

All these aspects that the Nurse mentions in her speech concerned only the Orderly; however, they can be also applied to the whole black community. It seems that an important point that Albee makes through the Nurse’s utterance is how little interest there was in blacks and their well-being in American society until the mid 20th century. For whites, in the play as well as in the reality, blacks and their problems were not a matter of deep concern, as Weiss (1983, p. 34) argues they were often ignored by the President, which “illustrates how little blacks mattered in the United States in the early 1930s.” In this case, Albee presents blacks as an overlooked minority.

4.1.5. STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY

Another African-American issue that can be observed throughout the play is how blacks struggle with unjust treatment and endeavor to gain equal rights. This issue is mentioned at several points of this play.

In the play it seems that the liberal Intern could become an ally of blacks and help them with their struggle. He is greatly concerned with the war in Spain and wishes to leave the hospital so that he could help civilians as he tells the Nurse:

INTERN: There are over half a million people killed in the war! Do you know that? By airplanes... Civilians! [...] I am not concerned with politics but I have a sense of urgency... a dislike of waste... stagnation... I am stranded... here... My talents are not large [...] (Albee, 1960, p. 59)

As a matter of fact, Albee lets the Intern speak about Spain; however, in this context what he might mean is the current situation in America. Supposedly, what Albee intends to say is that

in America there is also a kind of war between whites and blacks, consequently hundreds of civilians, especially blacks, are also killed as a result of racial tensions between the two races. This is discussed by Smith (2001, p. 3) who states “Between 1866 and 1921 dozens of race riots also had marred the southern landscape.” Similarly, Meltzer (1967, p. 174) depicts the situation during 1950s: “[...] life had become a battleground of gunpowder and dynamites, cross-burnings and beatings, arson and murder.” For these reasons, the Intern does not want to only idly wait and watch. He feels the need to actively participate in resolving the situation.

In addition, the Intern, who “dislikes racism, materialism, and the impersonal nature of institutions, in this case the hospital where he works.” (Keane, 2000, p. 154) and instead wishes to help civilians in the Spanish war represents moral values which clash with corrupted values blacks struggle with. To emphasize the opposition, Albee perhaps presents the Spanish war which is also a conflict of values: “democracy against fascism, Christianity against communism [...]” (Tierney, 2007, p. 3).

At the same time the Intern mentions that the situation of blacks has stagnated long enough and now it is time to change it. He indicates that his abilities are only limited, which means that he is aware of the fact that his voice is not powerful enough to make a change, since there might be only a few white people and the whole black community that want to change things. Myrdal (1996, p. 724) adds that the society “becomes split into a white majority and a Negro minority [...]”; hence blacks have a very difficult position to fight against the whole white South. For the above mentioned reasons the Intern is the one who could be on the Orderly’s side and according to Stenz (1978, p. 22) “he may very well become one of the activists who pave the way for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s.”

Also the Orderly believes that the situation should change and that the promises concerning equal rights should be fulfilled:

ORDERLY: There are some people who believe in more than promises...

NURSE: Hunh?

ORDERLY: I say, there are some people who believe in more than promises; there are some people who believe in action. (Albee, 1960, p. 43)

Here, the Orderly speaks generally about “some people”, but it is apparent that he considers himself to be one of them. Supposedly, he wishes not to be engaged and for that reason he speaks rather indirectly, perhaps to overcome the conflict that could arise. Now, he seems to be perhaps a bit naïve, because he still believes that their promised rights will come into being. At the same time he indicates that blacks should take action and fight for their rights so the promises would be fulfilled. At that point, the Nurse notices that both the Orderly and the

Intern speak about action and she accuses the Orderly of being influenced by him. Despite the Orderly's denying this fact, she adds:

NURSE: [...] you sympathize with him... you get him to tell you about... promises!... and... and... action! I'll tell you right now, he's going to get himself into trouble... and you're helping him right along. (Albee, 1960, p. 44)

The Nurse feels very annoyed when she realizes that it is actually her lover who supports and encourages the inferior black Orderly to take action. She expected that the white Intern would marry her, respect and share her Southern values, but instead he violates them. Therefore, she begins to perceive him as a traitor of her race. Now, he becomes along with the Orderly a target of her hatred and she threatens him just like the Orderly. Later in the play she tells the Intern: “[...] just like I told the nigger... you walk a straight line [...]” She behaves authoritatively to him and suggests that she has the power to make him unemployed just like she told the Orderly earlier. Nevertheless, he is not afraid of her threats and at the end of the play he dares to take action and help Bessie Smith despite the Nurse's threatening.

Unlike the Intern, the Orderly's, despite all his talking about action, is absolutely incapable of making a change in his life and fails to use the possibility to leave the South for New York when he proves to be still inferior to the white Nurse and goes to fetch her cigarettes obediently. At this point, it might be assumed that not only the Orderly, but generally the whole black community is not ready yet to take action against the white oppression and give rise to a movement for civil rights.

On the contrary, Jack, another black in the play, takes action. His role is not to plainly ask for help the Nurses to admit Bessie to the hospital. He seems to be there to fight for rights of blacks to be rendered aid regardless of the color of their skin. In this sense he could be considered a representative of the black resistance against the white oppression. Insisting on fair treatment, this tactic could be perhaps compared to a nonviolent action associated with M. L. King during the Civil Rights Movement (Meltzer, 1967, pp. 174-175). Jack insists on his rights although the Nurse threatens him and tries to discourage him. As Jack is highly determined, the Nurse feels that he challenges his status of an obedient black man and warns him that his role is to remain inferior. Finally, he manages to persuade the Intern to help and the Orderly also joins them, which indicates that the whole black community might after all achieve their rights if they remain fighting and united.

Again, the character of Jack is in another contradiction with the Orderly. While Jack is not afraid to openly protest against the white discrimination blacks have to face, the Orderly only makes brave statements but he is not able to take any action.

However, when the Nurse and the Orderly keep exchanging their remarks on promises and action the Nurse thinks about the future and makes the following statement:

NURSE: [...] well, boy, you're going to be one funny sight come the millennium...The great black mob marching down the street, banners in the air...the great black mob... and you right there in the middle, your bleached-out, snowy-white face in the middle of the pack like that [...]
(Albee, 1960, p. 46)

In this case, the Nurse actually predicts some kind of a mass movement of blacks for equal rights. As the play was written in 1960 at the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, which began in the 1950s (U.S. Department of State, 2005, p. 276), the Nurse's vision of action might be clearly identified as the Civil Rights Movement. She also mentions a march with banners which might imply that the whole movement will have rather a peaceful course of action. Indeed, Meltzer (1967, p. 174) mentions that the non-violent action dominated the whole Movement. In addition, perhaps by mentioning marching, Albee tries to be more specific and refers to the March on Washington that happened even prior to the Movement when "In January 1941, A. Philip Randolph, the head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, proposed a March on Washington to demand that government do something." (Meltzer, 1967, p. 162). Interestingly enough, the Nurse predicts that the action will take place as late as the turn of the century, which probably means that she is convinced that at least during her lifetime there is no chance that the white supremacy in the South would be overthrown by too ambitious blacks.

This subchapter shows that although blacks were unequal to whites, who ridiculed them and deprived them of any advancement, they still believed that a change can be made. Possible consequences of the change are also indirectly indicated.

4.1.6. SEGREGATION

As the play approaches its end, Albee focuses on another issue that affected the black community. Therefore, the two last scenes of the play are devoted to depicting segregation and discrimination in hospitals.

When Jack and Bessie have a car crash in which she is severely injured, he rushes into the nearest hospital where he is denied as represented in his following conversation with the Second nurse:

JACK: There has been an accident, ma'am... I got an injured woman outside in my car...
SECOND NURSE: Yeah? Is that so? Well, you sit down and wait... You go over there and sit down and wait a while.
JACK: This is an emergency! There has been an accident!

SECOND NURSE: YOU WAIT! You just sit down and wait!
JACK: This woman is badly hurt...
SECOND NURSE: YOU COOL YOUR HEELS!
JACK: Ma'am... I got Bessie Smith out in that car there...
SECOND NURSE: I DON'T CARE WHO YOU GOT OUT THERE, NIGGER. YOU COOL YOUR HEELS! (Albee, 1960, pp. 64-65)

Although the beginning of the conversation might not appear to be racially motivated, towards the end when the Second nurse grows angry and offensively calls Jack a nigger, it becomes clear that the reason for denying Jack and Bessie is based on the Southern discrimination of blacks. Again, this conversation shows a stereotypical behavior of Jack who approaches the Second nurse respectfully calling her madam, while she calls him only a nigger, which indicates the superiority and inferiority in the social hierarchy. The aspect of segregation might not be entirely clear at this point, since Jack is only told to wait, and as Smith (1999, p. 10) maintains waiting long hours for aid was a widespread practice all across the South. However, the main hint that segregation really exists can be found in the following scene in which Jack mentions that the hospital serves only white people, consequently that is the reason why he is shouted at and eventually deprived of any medical treatment.

After being denied in the hospital, Jack drives Bessie to another hospital and tries to be admitted there. When he enters the hospital, he meets the uncompromising Nurse and tries to beg for help:

JACK: [...] I got someone outside...
NURSE: You stop that yelling. This is a white hospital, you.
ORDERLY (*Nearer the Nurse*): That's right. She's right. This is a private hospital... a semiprivate hospital. If you go on... into the city...
JACK (*Shakes his head*): No...
NURSE: Now you listen to me, and you get this straight... (*Pauses just perceptibly, then says the word, but with no special emphasis*) ... nigger... this is a semiprivate white hospital...
JACK (*Defiant*): I don't care! (Albee, 1960, p. 72)
[...]
NURSE (*Her attention on the door*): You don't have sense enough to do what you're told... you make trouble for yourself... you make trouble for other people. (Albee, 1960, p. 75)

As well as in the previous dialogue there is the confrontation between Jack and the Nurse. Unlike in the previous dialogue where there was only a foreshadowing of segregation, here it is expressed explicitly that this hospital is white, hence blacks are not rendered aid there and have to seek help somewhere else. The medical facilities for blacks were limited as discussed by Rice and Jones (1944, p. 95) according to whom a survey showed that:

In Memphis, Tennessee, a 128 bed city-owned hospital built partially with Hill-Burton funds was the only general accredited facility available to Black paying patients. Three large private

church related facilities with a total of 2,082 beds did not admit Blacks. Other small facilities including a Black hospital did admit Black patients.

Unfortunately for Jack, he supposedly entered right two of three private hospitals in Memphis where blacks were not admitted. In this case, the Intern challenges the Southern racial policy and tries to help Bessie, but she dies. The example of hospitals can represent American society which is divided into two separate worlds – the black one and the white one as in the case of the hospitals – which are not to be mixed. This situation also shows a lack of interest in the black race and that the ideology of white supremacy is worth more than a human life and that blacks are still subordinate, as their lives depend on whites. At the same time, it shows that blacks cannot expect any help from whites to improve their prospects. However, there still exists a little hope which is represented by the white Intern. Perhaps, Bessie Smith's death might be also symbolic. It could symbolize the end of an era in which blacks were oppressed and at the same time her death could mark the beginning of a new era of the fight for freedom and equality. If this assumption is correct, then this can be a proof of Albee's frequent use of symbols which Stenz (1978, p. 3) considers rather typical for his work.

4.2. BESSIE SMITH

This subchapter is devoted to the depiction of African-American blues singer Bessie Smith in the analyzed play.

Bessie Smith is introduced right at the beginning of the play in a hotel where Jack and Bessie are staying. Jack meets his friend Bernie in a barroom and tells him about his and Bessie's plans. All these characters are black and their identity is not entirely known. There is Bessie Smith, a blues singer, and Jack, who accompanies her on her way to Memphis and then to New York. Based on only limited information that Albee provides on this character, Jack can be identified as Bessie's husband Jack Gee who, according to Oliver (1961, p. 52), later also became her manager. Concerning Bessie's biography by Oliver (1961), the identity of Jack's friend Bernie remains unfamiliar. After talking to Bernie, Jack rushes to wake Bessie in order to introduce her to his friend. Interestingly enough, Bessie is not involved in the play's action at all; she is only talked about by Jack who performs all action for her. Bessie's absence might signal that black women were invisible, therefore not even worth mentioning in the play. Indeed, Sartain (2007, p. 1) argues that "belonging as they do to two groups which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American society – Blacks and women – they have been doubly invisible." An important moment comes when Jack during his long monologue mentions his conversation with Bernie:

JACK: [...] An' he said: I mean what she been doin' in the past four-five years? YOU HEAR THAT? That's what he said: Is she still singin'? An' I said ... I said, you been tired but they are askin' questions. SO YOU GET UP! [...] (Albee, 1960, p. 38)

The play takes place in September 1937 and in this utterance Jack is clearly referring to the period at the turn of the 1930s when Bessie Smith was “becoming something of an anachronism” (Oliver, 1961, p. 56). In this case, Jack does not want to admit that Bessie becomes almost forgotten and instead he claims that she was only “tired” and therefore did not perform that much. The following utterance supports the idea:

JACK: [...] if you don't do somethin', people are gonna stop askin' where you been the past four-five years... they're gonna stop askin' anything at all! You hear? An' if I say downstairs you're rich... that don't make it so, Bessie. No more, honey. You gotta make this goddam trip ... you gotta get goin' again. [...] (Albee, 1960, p. 39)

Jack seems to be afraid of the future and of the fact that if Bessie does not make a comeback, her career might end. From the utterance it is apparent that his motivation is not entirely the wish for Bessie to be the best singer, rather the reason why she should be on the top again is his interest in material wealth and financial success that her comeback might bring. If the fact that “in six months during 1926 she and her husband dissipated \$16,000 [...]” (Oliver, 1961, p. 43) is taken into account, Jack's motivation to support Bessie's career is understandable.

Oliver (1961, p. 70) also mentions that after years of stagnation Bessie's career seemed to improve in 1937 when she was supposed to perform in Broadway Rastus Show in Memphis, which appears to be the trip that Jack refers to in his speech and which he and Bessie leave for at the end of the third scene of the play.

The character of Bessie Smith is also present at the end of the play when Bessie is denied admittance to a white segregated hospital after she had a car accident. Owing to this denial she dies.

4.3. HISTORICAL ACCURACY

It is questionable to what extent this play is historically accurate. With regard to Bessie's biography by Oliver (1961), Jack is a historical figure identified as Jack Gee. Bessie's fading career during the 1930s is also correct as well as the trip to Broadway Rastus Show and the date of her accident. Therefore, Albee does not seem to change any historical facts. However, Albee's depiction of Bessie Smith's death might not be entirely reliable, since:

The circumstances of the crash have never been satisfactorily explained and the cruel accident has been the vehicle for much racial propaganda, much sentiment and perhaps much

‘whitewashing’ too. It has been stated that Bessie died from loss of blood after she had been refused treatment as a Negro at a white hospital. (Oliver, 1961, p. 70)

In this play Albee clearly presents a racially motivated version of her death, as a result of discrimination when she was not admitted to a white hospital after a car crash. The version that he presents corresponds to the version mentioned above. However, Oliver (1961, p. 70) argues that there are at least two other different versions. In this respect, it is rather difficult to determine to what extent Albee’s version corresponds with historical facts.

However, it might also seem that Albee’s intention is not to depict the event accurately, as Albee himself states that he was not writing about the accident as such but rather about something else (Bigsby, 1984, pp. 261-262). Bigsby (1984, p. 261) explains that Albee’s main concern is not racism but the play “is more usefully seen as a morality play about the collapse of human values and national purpose.” Additionally, he (2000, p. 135) argues that “He [Albee] has never been a realistic playwright even when as in *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – he appeared to be.” Therefore, the historical accuracy might be considered irrelevant, as the play is only based on the historical event, but instead of only depicting the event it aims at values of the contemporary society.

Likewise, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller is another example of a morality play based on a historical event of Salem witch trials, as in an introduction to *The Crucible* Watts (Miller, 1959, x) asserts that also Miller “preoccupied with the moral problems of modern American society [...]” However, despite this similarity with Albee’s play, Miller’s play represents a different approach. Unlike Albee, Miller slightly changed facts, such as the age of the two main characters (Bloom, 2009, p. 14). Additionally, in Miller’s note on the accuracy of *The Crucible* he admits to adjusting facts and altering some characters, as it was necessary for the format of a drama and also due to a lack of information (Miller, 2010, p. 3).

As shown above, Albee’s play might seem historically accurate. However, it only provides a background for the author’s own story and for that reason the historical accuracy seems unimportant. Compared to Albee, Miller approaches his play differently and changes some of the facts.

4.4. LITERARY FEATURES

Some of Albee’s literary devices seem to appear also in this play. According to Stenz (1978, p. 3) Albee uses similar themes throughout his work. However, it seems that he had never used African-American issues before. If the racial motivation of this play is taken into account, it seems that the concept of discrimination, racism that Albee presents would

perfectly fit the context of the period in which the play was written, which is the period of the Civil Rights Movement. In this sense, Albee might use the play to criticize the current situation of blacks. For employing such criticism of American society, in this case he could be considered a social critic, hence would serve the purpose of his writing as he himself stated that “the responsibility of the writer is to be a sort of demonic social critic [...]” (Bottoms, 2005, p. 28). As a matter of fact, the reason for the rough way Albee depicts Afro-American issues ranging from a simple contempt for blacks to the death of a famous singer caused by discrimination seems to also demonstrate the fact mentioned by Stenz (1978, p. 3) that: ”Deliberately his purpose is to shock, to offend and to disturb.” Consequently, it can be assumed that he personally is not contained with the situation and desires to “[...] show people how they are and what their time is like in the hope that perhaps they’ll change it.” (Bottoms, 2005, p. 28).

Apart from African-American issues, Albee typically uses other themes that frequently occur throughout his plays. These themes imply that the play is not only about racism, but generally about the state of the society. Stenz (1978, p. 3) maintains that Albee’s themes concern materialism and human relationships. They also seem to occur in *The Death of Bessie Smith* when Jack is interested in Bessie’s career or when the Nurse and her father ponder over her marriage, both of them are concerned particularly about their own prosperity and materialism. Similarly, the character of the Orderly might be also criticized for being an opportunist seeking prosperity. Albee’s focus on problematic human relationships and their failures is represented by the relationship of the Nurse with the Orderly and her with the Intern. She dislikes the Orderly for his race and attempts to improve his position, but after all even thinks about marrying him, while he might sympathize with her at some point only to avoid difficulties or to get support for his advancement. Otherwise, their relationship is rather empty with no real interest in each other. The Nurse and the Intern create also rather a superficial couple. They seem to like each other; however, gradually she shows that she is willing to betray him, on account of his helping to Bessie. In addition, Albee shows corrupted values of the society represented by the Nurse and right values of the Intern. Although there are no married couples in this play, the emotional emptiness of the relationships is supported by Stenz (1978, p. 3) who states:

Since there are few human connections of any real depth and complexity outside a family situation, the author frequently uses marriage to demonstrate the emotional insufficiency of the individual as well as to indicate the destructive pressures which distort his response to his life.

Consequently, due to a lack of the true relationship, the characters seem to find themselves ultimately lonely and lonely characters are another feature observed by Bottoms (2005, pp. 26-27). In this case, the biggest loner can be considered the Orderly who belongs neither to the white nor to the black community as mentioned by the Nurse. These themes show that apart from racism Albee targets and criticizes much more general issues that he observes in American society. However, as mentioned earlier, racism is only a device for expressing moral issues of the corrupted society. Consequently, this unpleasant fact might be the reason for introducing the play first in Germany rather than in criticized America.

There is also another feature of Albee's work concerning his characters. According to Stenz (1978, p. 3) critics often "interpret the author's women as evil forces." Apparently, this tendency seems to stem from Albee's adoptive parents, as Singh (1987, p. 3) describes them as follows:

Reed Albee, a small, silent man, eager to please his second wife, had fallen into a habit of continual agreement with anything she said or did in order to avoid argument. [...] Frances Albee, who stood a foot taller than her husband, was extremely vocal; on the contrary, always ready to express her opinions in ringing tones of approbation or denunciation, as the case might be.

In *The Death of Bessie Smith* such typical characters that could resemble Albee's parents are the Nurse and the Orderly. Although they are not married, they represent some kind of a fierce relationship in which she seems to be the evil force, as she is authoritative, loud, furious and in charge, whereas he is rather inferior, obedient and usually in agreement with her to avoid a conflict. Moreover, when Stenz (1978, p. 3) argues that Albee's characters "also function symbolically." Therefore in this play the Nurse quite clearly symbolizes the white supremacy, while the Orderly represents a black inferior minority.

In conclusion, the techniques that Albee employs frequently occur throughout his work. In this particular play, he presents symbolic characters that also resemble his adoptive parents and rather typical themes, including materialism and relationships. However, there is also an aspect of racism which makes this play unique.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the Civil War brought an end to slavery, oppression and exploitation of blacks, whites, especially in the South, maintained the tendency to treat blacks as inferior beings who were humiliated and constantly deprived of their civil rights in American society. The aim of this bachelor thesis was to examine African-American issues, which blacks encountered particularly during the first half of the 20th century as they appear in Edward Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith*. The play is based on a historical event concerning Bessie Smith who is said to die on account of a refusal in a white segregated hospital in 1937. Written in 1960, during the Civil Rights Movement, the play introduced a controversial subject and further prompted a discussion on complicated race relations between the black and white communities. However, throughout the play Albee also presents other themes predominantly American society and its values.

The play is based on a historical event; therefore the historical accuracy of the play was discussed. The historical accuracy is examined in Albee's representation of Bessie Smith and her accident and is compared to historical records. It can be concluded that Albee's depiction of Bessie Smith meets her biography and one of the versions of her accident. However, Albee's play might be found historically irrelevant, because his target is probably a fading society rather than a historical event as such.

Since the plot of the play is set around the Southern city of Memphis in a white-only hospital and both black and white characters get in contact, the theoretical part examined problematic relations whites had with blacks and their attitudes towards them during the 20th century. Based on the research in the theoretical part, the analysis proved that blacks suffered from social inequality and struggled to achieve equal rights. In *The Death of Bessie Smith* it is the black Orderly who represents an inferior black community and on the other hand there is the white Nurse, a representative of a superior white community. Throughout the whole play it is apparent that the Nurse shows her power that she has over the Orderly and treats him with disrespect and indicates that he belongs to the subordinate race which has no right to claim equality. Moreover, she uses every chance to offend him and discourage him from his ideals and advancement that he wishes to achieve. Ruining his visions of the better future, she perceives him only as an inferior man and orders him to serve her as she wishes. In this respect, she acts as a typical Southerner who has no respect for social equality and tries to preserve blacks in their historical position of dependent and exploited slaves.

On the other hand, the Orderly tries to leave his low position based on his race and go beyond it. However, he is not supported, instead, he is threatened and discouraged. He desperately wishes to improve his future prospects and leave behind his low social status of the orderly, thus he tolerates the Nurse's racial abuse. He commits to the self-improvement and wishes to achieve the social equality. However, despite his sophisticated appearance and his self-improvement he appears to only imitate white people, hence he not only remains a black inferior man, but he is also laughed at for his vain efforts. Consequently, owing to his toleration and a lack of action, he even appears to approve of the white hostility. He still believes that a change can be made, but there is only little support for enforcing rights blacks were promised. Therefore, there seems to be no institution that could help him to become equal, as in the South he is despised and nobody is interested in a rise of a black man.

Another example of the white hostility that blacks had to encounter is represented by Jack and Bessie. Jack insists that Bessie should be admitted to the white segregated hospitals, but in both cases he is shouted at and denied. Although he openly protests and shows black resistance against white discrimination, a lack of interest in blacks and segregation result in Bessie's death. Generally, there is an apparent lack of interest in blacks. They are basically overlooked and so is Bessie Smith who is not even present in the play because of her race and sex. These examples show that blacks were discriminated, segregated and additionally deprived of equal opportunities even in terms of medical treatment.

Finally, the nature of Albee's work was introduced in the theoretical part and analyzed in the analytical part of this thesis. It can be concluded that Albee as well as in his other plays also in this play uses themes of loneliness experienced by the Orderly, values such as materialism represented by the Nurse and her father or superficial human relationships. Albee also employs a prototypical character of an evil woman Nurse and a calm subordinate man Orderly both resembling Albee's adoptive parents and they also seem to be symbolic. Additionally, by depicting African Americans as inferior beings in this play which ends with Bessie Smith's death, Albee's aim might be to introduce a shocking subject and by focusing on values of American society he presents himself as a social critic.

In conclusion, this bachelor thesis sought issues that African Americans experienced during the 20th century in America. Edward Albee's play *The Death of Bessie Smith* was therefore analyzed in a great detail to show these issues. It was discovered that black characters in the play are frequently discriminated, segregated, discouraged from advancement and suffer from a lack of interest and social inequality. On the other hand, they try hard to improve their prospects and some even dare to resist the white racial policy. Either

way they encounter hostility of the white community. Additionally, historical facts concerning Bessie Smith were examined and compared to Albee's presentation of the figure concluding that in this case the historical accuracy might be found irrelevant. Finally, various literary devices that Albee uses, including characters and themes, were observed throughout the play and found rather typical.

6. RESUMÉ

Cílem této bakalářské práce je zanalyzovat problémy, se kterými se potýkají afroamerické postavy v díle *Smrt Bessie Smithové* tak, jak je významný americký dramatik 20. století Edward Albee ve svém díle vyobrazuje. Práce mapuje zejména postavení Afroameričanů v americké společnosti v období od počátku do poloviny 20. století a jejich soužití s většinovou bělošskou komunitou. Zvláštní pozornost je také věnována vyobrazení reálné postavy Bessie Smithové a celkové historické správnosti jejího ztvárnění v tomto díle. V neposlední řadě jsou také zanalyzovány literární prostředky, které Edward Albee často užívá ve svých dílech a které se vyskytují i v této konkrétní hře.

Pozice Afroameričanů v americké společnosti, zejména na Jihu, byla až do 20. století vždy komplikovaná. Již v dobách otroctví pozbyli svých občanských práv a byli zcela podřízeni svým bílým majitelům. Poté, co bylo otroctví zrušeno, nabyli černoši zpět svá práva, která jim měla umožnit stát se rovnoprávnými občany. Tato skutečnost však byla odsouzena obyvateli Jihu, jejichž přesvědčení o sociální nerovnosti černochů bylo tak hluboce zakořeněno, že odmítli jakékoli zrovnoprávnění černošských občanů a federální vláda pouze nečinně přihlížela. V důsledku toho docházelo k nerespektování občanských práv černochů, kteří se tímto opět stali podřadnými a diskriminovanými občany vykonávajícími pouze ty nejpodřadnější práce.

Kvůli existenci sociální nerovnosti se Afroameričané potýkali s nerovnými příležitostmi k dosažení vyššího vzdělání a lepší než manuální práce. Nadto byli černoši segregováni v dopravních prostředcích, školách, nemocnicích a v dalších veřejných místech. Byli ponižováni, zesměšňováni a považováni pouze za podřadné sluhy. Pokud se pokusili o získání vyššího sociálního postavení, byly jim do cesty kladeny překážky a setkali se s odporem a násilím ze strany bílých občanů. Situace se změnila až v polovině 20. století, kdy došlo k masovému nenásilnému odporu černochů, které dalo za vznik Afroamerickému hnutí za lidská práva.

Právě v tomto období výše zmíněného hnutí a jako reakci na společenskou situaci napsal Edward Albee své dílo *Smrt Bessie Smithové* pojednávající o tragické smrti zpěvačky Bessie Smithové, která podlehla svým zraněním po autonehodě pravděpodobně z důvodu, že byla odmítnuta v segregované nemocnici. Toto dílo způsobilo rozruch a podnítilo diskusi o nerovném postavení Afroameričanů ve společnosti, a to i přesto, že příběh o Bessie Smithové slouží pouze jako nositel pro vyjádření mnohem obecnějších úvah o morálce a hodnotách současné americké společnosti.

Hra *Smrt Bessie Smithové* byla v analytické části práce podrobena analýze tří aspektů. V první řadě bylo zkoumáno zobrazení problémů Afroameričanů v americké společnosti, dále pak byla ověřena správnost vyobrazení historické postavy Bessie Smithové a její nehody v souvislosti se zjištěnými biografickými fakty a nakonec byly také uvedeny literární prostředky, které Edward Albee využívá v tomto díle.

Hlavním předmětem analýzy díla *Smrt Bessie Smithové* je vyobrazení afroamerických problémů tak, jak je Edward Albee prezentuje v tomto díle. Tím nejvíce zásadním zdrojem informací o postavení Afroameričanů v bělošské společnosti se stávají dialogy mezi běloškou Nurse, která pracuje v segregované nemocnici na Jihu jako zdravotní sestra na příjmu, a černochem Orderly, který ve stejné nemocnici vykonává tu nejméně kvalifikovanou práci nemocničního zřízence. Již podle pracovního zařazení těchto dvou postav je zřejmé, kdo je v nadřazené a naopak podřazené pozici. Obě postavy tak zároveň fungují symbolicky a reprezentují dva stereotypy: Nurse ztělesňuje typického obyvatele Jihu, který trvá na podřízenosti černochů, a Orderly, který představuje černochoy utlačované a zesměšňované majoritní společností na Jihu.

Jak bylo zmíněno výše Nurse ztělesňuje jižanskou kulturu a je tedy příkladem toho, jakým způsobem běloši přistupují k černošské minoritě. Při jakémkoli z mnoha rozhovorů s Orderlym se Nurse chová povýšeně a dává tak najevo sociální nerovnost. Její povýšenost a nedostatek respektu pro jeho rasu se projevuje také tím, jakým způsobem s Orderlym komunikuje. Její komunikace se tak zaměřuje často pouze na prostá oslovení vyjadřující opovržení nebo na příkazy s cílem ponížit Orderlyho a dát tak jasně najevo, že sociální rovnost neexistuje. V momentě, kdy Orderly začne hovořit o svých ambicích na zlepšení svého sociálního postavení, Nurse zneklidní a začne být vůči němu značně nepřátelská. Tento postoj je patrně způsoben tím, že Nurse jako běloška se cítí přílišnými ambicemi černocho Orderlyho ohrožena, neboť pro rasistický Jih by bylo nepřipustné, kdyby černocho, jehož povinností je pouze bez námitek akceptovat své nízké postavení, usiloval o dosažení stejného sociálního postavení jako běloši. Z toho důvodu Nurse zrazuje Orderlyho od jeho plánů a vysmívá se jim, protože věří, že současný stav společnosti nedovolí černochům dosáhnout rovnoprávného postavení. Zároveň Nurse poukazuje na lhostejnost prezidenta Roosevelta řešit tuto sociální nerovnost, přestože její řešení sliboval, protože by jinak ztratil podporu Jihu. Nurse také naznačuje, že hodnota života bělocha a černocho je odlišná, což se v zápětí potvrzuje, když Nurse na konci hry odmítne přijmout zraněnou Bessie Smithovou, protože daná nemocnice přijímá pouze bělochy. Ukazuje se tak, že běloši považují černochoy za méněcenné, dívají se na ně svrchu a vnímají je pouze jako podřadnou rasu, která má

akceptovat svou úlohu. Stejně tak neuznávají sociální rovnost a neumožňují černošům dosáhnout rovných příležitostí. V důsledku pak dochází k diskriminaci, segregaci a lhostejnosti k černošským životům, jejímž výsledkem je v této hře smrt Bessie Smithové.

Černoch Orderly je opakem Nurse a zastupuje ve hře černošskou komunitu. Pracuje jako nemocniční zřízenec, tedy nejnižší manuální práce obvyklá pro černochoy, což naznačuje jeho celkově nízké postavení ve společnosti. Je si této skutečnosti vědom a chce ji změnit a zlepšit svoji pozici ve společnosti, neboť se zřejmě domnívá, že jeho nízká pozice je nespravedlivě dána právě jeho rasou. Proto se snaží vystupovat ve hře sofistikovaně svým kultivovaným jazykovým projevem a také svým upraveným vzhledem tak, aby se co nejvíce přiblížil bělochům. Zároveň se s nimi snaží sympatizovat v domnění, že se skutečně dosáhne rovného sociálního postavení, a slepě věří slibům o změně situace a získání rovných práv. Tato snaha je však marná, protože běloši nevěří v sociální rovnost. Navíc Orderly musí snášet výhrůžky a výsměch od Nurse. Zřejmě se Oderly také obává autoritativní Nurse a tak akceptuje svoji podřízenou roli a prokazuje jí poslušnost.

Také Jack a Bessie v tomto díle reprezentují černochoy. Paradoxně Bessie sama se ve hře nevykytuje, ačkoli hra nese její jméno. Tato skutečnost je zřejmě dána tím, že pozice černošek ve společnosti je ještě nižší nejen kvůli jejich rase, ale také kvůli tomu, že jsou ženy, a proto jsou ještě více přehlíženy. Jack navíc reprezentuje odpor, vzdáleně připomínající M. L. Kinga, vůči nadřazeným bělochům, kteří diskriminují černochoy, když hned ve dvou segregovaných nemocnicích vehementně trvá na tom, aby Bessie byla poskytnuta pomoc. Nakonec je tato forma vzdoru úspěšná a Jack na svou stranu získá mladého lékaře Interna, i přesto ale Bessie umírá.

Jak je zřejmé z výše uvedeného, Afroameričané se snažili vymanit se ze svého nízkého sociálního postavení, ke kterému je předurčovala jejich rasa. Navíc vkládaly své naděje do slibů o rovnoprávnosti. I přes svou snahu nabýt rovných práv byli zesměšňováni a odrazováni, protože jejich pozice je vždy podřadná. I přes to jsou ale někteří schopni vzdorovat sociální nerovnosti, domáhat se svých práv a případně dát za vznik také hnutí za práva černošů. Postavení černošek je zobrazeno jako dvojnásobně těžké vzhledem k jejich rase a pohlaví.

Následující minoritní předmět analýzy se vztahuje k ověření správnosti vyobrazení historické postavy Bessie Smithové a její smrti, která je jedním z prvků pro zobrazení rasismu v této hře. Vyobrazení Bessie Smithové v této hře se zdá být poměrně přesné. Její upadající kariéra během 30. let 20. století odpovídá skutečnosti stejně tak jako její cesta do Memphisu a den její nehody. Okolnosti nehody však nejsou zcela známy a Albee tak prezentuje pouze

jednu její verzi. Nicméně, vzhledem k tomu, že záměrem Albeeho zřejmě není pouze vylíčení historické události v souvislosti s rasismem, ale promítnutí mnohem komplexnějších problémů soudobé americké společnosti, může být historická správnost celé této hry chápána jako nepodstatná.

Dalším minoritním analyzovaným aspektem jsou literární prostředky, které Edward Albee představuje v této hře. Albee uvádí typické postavy, které jsou zřejmě založeny na podobnosti s jeho adoptivními rodiči. Těmito postavami jsou Orderly a Nurse, která je navíc Albeeho poměrně typickou představitelkou nepříjemných ženských postav. Navíc Albee užívá postavy symbolicky k zobrazení dvou ras a jejich vzájemných vztahů. Pokud bude tato hra vykládána jako hra o rasismu a amerických hodnotách, může být Albee chápán jako sociální kritik, který uvádí na scénu šokující téma, aby ukázal lidem nepříjemnou realitu. Tematicky se tato hra překrývá s ostatními díly Albeeho. Tato hra pojednává mimo jiné o povrchních vztazích, materialismu, současných hodnotách společnosti a o opuštěnosti. Ačkoli lze v této hře nalézt mnoho společných prvků všech Albeeho her, jedním tato hra vyniká, a to svým zaměřením na afroamerické problémy.

Závěrem této práce lze říci, že ačkoli primárním záměrem Edwarda Albeeho v této hře zřejmě není vylíčení rasismu, tak vyobrazení postavení Afroameričanů a problémů, se kterými se potýkají, je poměrně přesné. Albee představuje Afroameričany jako minoritu, které je odepřena sociální rovnost a rovné příležitosti. Tato diskriminovaná menšina je navíc segregována, držena na samém konci společenské hierarchie a je jí odepřena možnost sociálního vzestupu. I přesto se ale tato menšina snaží dosáhnout rovnoprávnosti s většinovou společností a vzdoruje jejímu utlačování a nespravedlnosti. Navíc historická přesnost vylíčení postavy Bessie Smithové může být také chápána jako nepodstatná a literární prvky v této Albeeho hře mohou být posuzovány jako typické pro jeho dílo.

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