

# A Brief Analysis of American Psychology

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**Abstract – A detailed analysis of American psychology would lead to a better understanding of the psyche of this civilization. Since William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890) a very large corpus of material bearing psychoanalysis issues was published in America. It helped to create a uniquely American climate of opinion with regard to the nature of mind, relations between body and mind, mental states, mental health and mental diseases. On the basis of this book James' psychology revolves around four methods: analysis, introspection, experiment and comparison. James discusses about illusions and offers a psychological explanation for them. He believes that brain reacts by those incidents which it has already experienced. He advocates that the brain makes us usually perceive the probable thing i.e., the thing by which the reaction was aroused on previous occasion.**

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## INTRODUCTION

So to say, illusions, for him, are a phenomenon of habit. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the studies came which gave the detailed analysis of the quintessential American mind. This task was inaugurated by Fay (b. 1939) who illustrated the depth and interest value of psychological literature to provide evidence of the extent to which psychological ideas had permeated American culture by the end of the nineteenth century.

In the beginning of the twentieth century Nietzsche declared the death of God which created a religious vacuum in the society. This declaration disintegrated the society which was reflected in the twentieth century literature, but Freud tried to restore peace and harmony by declaring the necessity of God. Freud devoted three books – *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1938) – to the elucidation of religious emotions. Freud stressed the infantile element behind religion, arguing that people need faith in God and ceremonial practices as a crutch for human helplessness. Paul Rozen says, "Freud saw religion as a wish fulfilling compensation for childhood weaknesses that were never outgrown" (48). Freud's work is a challenge to the traditional religious thoughts and beliefs because he believes that men could do better than in the past, if only they would give up superstitions, ignorance, neurosis and the strict adherence to religion. Freud's views present psychoanalysis as a scientific way to look at the things which previously had the touch of religious magic. Freud's views on religion are based on attacking some inadequacies, which have been clinging to it from a

long time – fearful and defensive aspects of religious beliefs rather than love and faith. Thus, Freud became an iconoclast by giving the importance to man in the modern time who was put back earlier. In the book *The Understanding of Dreams* under the section "Two Dreams of Patient of C. G. Jung", the second dream also indicates the same idea of the defensive aspect of religious beliefs. In the dream people are going inside a religious place and believe that they will be cleansed when they will come out. Finally, when the dreamer went inside the voice says,

What you are doing is dangerous. Religion is not a tax to be paid so that you can rid yourself of the women's image, for this image cannot be got rid of. Woe unto them who use religion as a substitute for the other side of the soul's life; they are in error and will be accused. Religion is no substitute' it is to be added to the other activities of the soul as the ultimate completion. (qtd. in Becker 60)

In the twentieth century many dramatists and novelists used psychology in a scientific way in order to bring man to the center of the universe. The writers, such as Albee, subverted the earlier religious beliefs. The subversion was started by O'Neill, Williams and Wilder. Albee advanced the ideology of his predecessors. Albee portrayed this psychological dilemma of man in many plays, however, it is very evident in *Tiny Alice* (1964), *Seascape* (1975) and *Three Tall Women* (1991). This religious dilemma was handled by Edward Albee in *Tiny Alice*, and before Albee the same perplexity of religion was depicted by Tennessee Williams in *The Night of the Iguana* (1948). The contrast of *Tiny Alice* to *Iguana* will be helpful for searching the artistic and

psychoanalytic goals in Albee's *Tiny Alice*. Certainly these plays are diametrically opposed in artistic intent. Albee's play exacerbates the problem of spiritual alienation; William's play proposes a cure. There are, however, similarities between the two plays. Both have at their heart a protagonist whose faith in God has been shaken and both the protagonists find alienation within their espoused religions. This alienation signals a larger problem, i.e., religion's inability to serve the spiritual needs of the modern individual. Specifically these two playwrights are critical of Christianity – the major religion of America. Christianity is perceived by Williams and Albee as a religion of hypocrites, of sexually frustrated churchwomen (Judith Fellowes in *Iguana*) and of self-serving churchmen (the Cardinal in *Tiny Alice*). Strict adherence to Christianity is also seen as the protagonists' problem. The protagonists in both the plays are not Christ figure, but a self-indulgent imitator of Christ. William's goal is to have his protagonist – Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon – discover his self-delusions and convert to a liberal humanism that is based on the transcendental power of love. Albee's goal is to show that his protagonist – Brother Julian – cannot find a successful method of transcendence, but only finds a social and religious method which leads to his ruin.

Both the plays not only deal with the spiritual alienation but also with the sexual alienation. In the twentieth century sex was a kind of perversity. In this era sexuality became a commodity because everyone wanted to owe his newfound liberty. Thus sexual competition at this time was a *laissez-faire* system, so it seemed very difficult for the modern man to bridle his unbridled sexual desires. In the play a problematic debate is going on – how can a man lead a spiritual life and a sexual life at the same time? Both playwrights perceive Christianity offering no help to their protagonists and harm their sexual well-being. Christianity separates the life of soul from the life of body because "Christianity sets its face against eroticism" (Betaille 32). It is this separation which Albee talks about through Julian's dilemma. Julian has so repressed his sexuality in pursuit of his God that when the seductive Miss Alice asks Julian about his sexual life in the past, he is not sure that he has one and then he recalls a hallucination, an encounter in a mental asylum with another inmate aptly named the Virgin Mary, but he is not sure that either it real or a fantasy. His religion offers him a chastity which hides and does not heal the sexual disturbance. Just like Shannon, Julian instead of deliverance finds himself locked in sexual contact – a contact from which there is no escape except death. Julian, in the end, is unable to recover from his spiritual and sexual maladjustment and finds no peace – neither in spirituality nor in sexuality.

The psychoanalytic idea of repressed thoughts which causes upheavals and disturbance in psyche is completely applicable on Julian's psyche. As the more

he tries to escape from sexuality the more it affects his psyche and influences his acts. Finally we witness that Julian accepts the marriage proposal not for love but only because it is a kind of service, but love is not a service and relations are not made on contracts. Through the failure of Julian's attempts to serve God, Albee is advocating that spirituality without love leads to great disruption, and sexuality is also a form of love which like other forms of love is a form of God. Albee wants his audience to succumb to the desire to love all mankind. This is one way in which theater – the gathering places of man – can spread the message of brotherhood and love which Churches are unable to spread. Thus, the religion, Albee is talking about is, Kierkegaardian Christianity which is all about to find a truth which is true for oneself, for which one can live or die. Kierkegaard reminds the reader that the Christian path is the difficult one, in the pages 13-46 of *A Kierkegaardian Anthology* man struggles between romantic and religious passions. Kierkegaard, like Albee, shows that one can be passionate about woman as well as for God. Thus, the wake of enlightenment left the world in a deep religious and philosophical crisis which called into question most of the traditional Christian dogmas and beliefs. For Kierkegaard, Christian faith is not a matter of Church dogmas, but passions for individual subjective enthusiasm. Faith, as Albee points out in *Tiny Alice*, for Kierkegaard, too, is the most important task to be achieved by human being, because on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. Kierkegaard's later writing *Christian Discourses* (1848) and *Training in Christianity* (1850) clarify the nature of Christianity. This is why he chastised, "we are what is called a Christian nation – but in such a sense that not a single one of us is in the character of the Christianity of the New Testament" (*Christianity Today* n.pag). For him, the greatest enemy of Christianity is Christendom – the cultured and prejudiced Christianity of his day. He believes in the teaching not in the torturing aspect of religion. Thus, Kierkegaard wrote:

Teach me, O God, not to torture myself, not to make a martyr

Out of myself through stifling reflection, but rather teach me

To breathe deeply in faith. (*Christianity Today* n.pag)

Albee, however, does not expect from his audience to come in the theater and henceforth heal. The feeling Albee is after involves the anguish experienced by the individual in his lack of communion with the status quo. In *Tiny Alice* Albee incorporates several themes of his other plays, but the main theme is related to the inner being, as the play deals with the layers of man's mind and psyche. These layers lead to various problems – the impossibility of the individual to

connect with the world, the difficulty of sincere communication between two people, the nastiness of sexual relationships, and the begrudged withdrawal of the human heart from the adult world. Redemption is definitely not in the air, the characters have to peep into their own psyche to find out the solution of the problems. The uneasy characters – passive male onlooker (Brother Julian), the bitter castration fearing bull male (the Lawyer), the promiscuous, hurt-little-girl cum earth-mother (Miss Alice), and the self-conscious social functionary (the Cardinal and the Butler) – are demonstrating their worst traits in order to find out the solutions of the hallucination and hysteria. All the characters show their disassociation from their life. For all the characters in *Tiny Alice*, all personal expectations are eventually dashed to fragments. Emptiness of spirit is what Albee shows to the audience and leaves it for the audience to resolve the emptiness.

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