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3 March 2017

Literary Analysis

### In the Middle, But Certainly Not Average

Discussing the end of the play *Middletown* is hard enough, because it is a play that contemplates the events, thoughts, struggles and behaviors which are often lost or feared when in the middle of life. Will Eno, the writer, confronted the challenge of ending a play which focuses on the middle of things by concluding with a recording that discusses black holes, which appear to have no end. The ending is kind of twisted, but then that seems to be the point; life is confusing, difficult, and often incomprehensible, just like a black hole. One theater critic, David Sheward, saw a recent production of *Middletown* in a boring and cliché light. In fact, Sheward literally “Yawn[s]” in his review (Sheward 2).

Whether or not the quality of the performance that Sheward saw led to his disappointment and disdain of *Middletown*, I am unsure. Either way, he has a much more disparaging opinion of Eno’s work than I do. Sheward refers to the characters as “tranquilized mental patients” who got their beliefs from “fortune cookies and ... an overdose of antidepressants” (Sheward 1). Claims like these seem to result from him either being afraid of or just preferring to avoid thinking or speaking about the things that are most universally relevant to people, no matter their background.

Bored with the ending of the play, Sheward harshly comments: “One is born while one dies; the cycle goes on. How ironic! Yawn” (Sheward 2). In this respect, I slightly agree with

Sheward; I do think having John Dodge dying as Mary gives birth to her baby, also named John, is cliched. That being said, birth and death are the two main events that power life's cycle and are inevitable for it to continue. Since, Eno's play encompasses the idea of the life cycle then it would be almost impossible for him not to have birth and death occur in the play, while still addressing the major theme of life's cyclical nature.

Furthermore, I do not think the birth and death define the ending. When I think of the play's ending I refer to the radio recording in my head, not John Dodge's death and baby John's birth. Specifically, the words, "finally, it will cease altogether" come to my mind (Eno 76). These words refer to what Sally would see after years of watching her friend fall into a black hole. That one sentence ends the play and embodies the end of life; it just ends in a moment. However, I think one of the most important parts of the radio address on black holes is when the announcer says how one "can never quite reach the center" (Eno 76). This phrase connects to the intermission of the play, when the actors in the audience talk about how "since you don't know the end, you're not sure what you're in the middle of" (Eno 38). Even though each of these comments refers to the center or middle, they all explore the idea that we can never know when life "will cease altogether," so the middle of our lives is always unknown even as we constantly experience it, due to the fact we cannot know when it will end (Eno 76).

Eno takes advantage of such moments and phrases to confront these large concepts like the middle and end of life. Specifically, in the intermission scene, he breaks the fourth wall and has the actors discuss the play while sitting amidst the audience. The scene is full of small but insightful comments, yet Sheward critiqued it as a "superpretentious and unnecessary segment" (Sheward 1-2). Sheward's criticism of this scene, instead of other scenes, is surprising because

this scene has much more packed into it, and less cliché elements than others. For instance, the many short phrases which Sweetheart delivers, including “Life,” “Huh,” “I have the worst memory,” and especially her last phrase “People always look so worried” (Eno 40-41).

Sweetheart only contributes to the conversation through words that other people have said, except her first line in the scene: “Feelings” (Eno 37). Since she never says anything that was not already said, she appears to symbolize consciousness and memory. She even comments upon the difficulty of remembering things, making it ironic that she repeats things. The repetition of phrases frames her allows her character to embody a cyclical nature with observant qualities, both of which are key aspects to the typical human mind. While the other actors deliberate over things said, done, and big concepts, Sweetheart tosses in her unpredictable comments, similarly to how memories, life and the mind are unpredictable, yet have elements of familiarity. To Sheward, this girl must be a part of why he condescends the scene - this is the only scene in which she appears. Perhaps he criticizes the scene and production because he does not wish to comprehend or discuss the big picture ideas that Sweetheart represents, so instead he disparages what he wishes to avoid.

Although I find Sheward’s criticism of the intermission unwarranted, I do think one scene is unnecessary: the astronaut scene. The scene has little to no insight that is not already provided through other scenes, and it does not contain the same wit or humor that Eno uses throughout the play. In fact, majority of the scene is just descriptions of the world and universe by Greg, the astronaut. His dialogue consists almost entirely of phrases such as, “it’s just this beautiful fragile thing,” “all these things are miraculous because all these things are earthly,” “it doesn’t look lonely from up here,” and the most cliché one, “I’m just trying to picture life” (Eno 30, 31). All

of these phrases are predictable, especially for a man looking at the world from outer space. He says all of the things you would expect your mom to say when looking at a pretty landscape or even a picture of the world from outer space. The cliché phrases in this scene are surprising considering how well Eno incorporates big ideas into other scenes, with moments like the intermission scene where the fourth wall is completely broken, or with the tourists, who say profound things without even realizing it because they are so focused on the moment - they, just like many others in the town, are caught up in the middle. The astronaut, however, is the only person who is not in the middle. He is on the outside; he is not a part of the everyday behavior and experiences represented in the rest of play's characters.

Other than the astronaut scene, Eno uses the common, the unavoidable, the uncertainties which we encounter during the middle of life to develop a world which we know and recognize. He shows the audience familiar apprehensions about life, death, fear, growing up, loneliness, and all the things that make us kind of squirmy. Sheward may discuss these topics briefly with disdain, as if they are unnecessary because everyone already thinks about them, but by doing so he avoids and refuses to accept the benefit of addressing the unavoidable components of life as candidly as the play. Eno takes the opportunity to thoroughly address the beginning, the middle, and the end of life - the pieces that are inevitable and make us feel trivial, sad or uncomfortable. He too recognizes that people think about these things, but he goes a step further than Sheward to notice that people are also stressed and weighed down by them. Eno uses the characters and their connection to the audience to separate the concepts of inevitable and doom, and literally lets the audience sit in on the discussion, making them feel less afraid of, and feel as though they can even laugh at unavoidable human experiences. The ending especially lets the audience know that

even if life is a black hole of uncertainty, we can still laugh at the uncertainties while in the middle of it, especially since there is no way to know how far the away the end is.

Works Cited

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