# THE HERO'S JOURNEY IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *SEASCAPE*

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper uses Joseph Campbell's hero's journey to show how one can appreciate Edward Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Seascape* as an allegory. The play features a human couple and a pair of anthropomorphic lizards on a journey of the individual versus the self. Throughout their internal quest, the heroes must band together to overcome the psychological obstacles impeding their acceptance of death and change as part of life's process. This feat sends them into the belly of the whale to discover their unconscious fears and anxieties before arriving at the innermost cave of their subconsciouses, where they face a final crisis. As such, when read as an allegory using Campbell's hero's journey, *Seascape* promotes change and progress as fundamentally essential to a meaningful existence.

**INTRODUCTION**

The universal drive to somehow cheat death has fascinated humanity from its beginnings. In the ancient Sumerian tale, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the titular protagonist embarks on a quest to achieve everlasting life. Along the way, Gilgamesh defeats formidable monsters and encounters fantastical gods, enchanting readers with his adventures while revealing fundamental truths about the human experience. In the end, Gilgamesh does not achieve immortality, yet his journey teaches the importance of change and shows death as an integral part of life. Four thousand years later, American playwright Edward Albee joined the conversation that began epochs earlier. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Seascape*, Albee examines death through various lenses, then offers evolution via self-transformation as the key to living a meaningful life. His play features two couples at a pivotal moment of transition: anthropomorphic lizards that no longer feel they belong to the sea and humans grappling with how to spend their retirement. When both species meet, it sparks an internal quest to break through the psychological barriers preventing these characters from appreciating the significance of change and death as elements of life's process. Throughout the action, humans and lizards form a symbiotic relationship, for the lizard's primordial state forces the humans to look inward to make sense of society on land. As such, by applying Joseph Campbell's hero's journey to the human's internal battle in Edward Albee's *Seascape*, one can read the play as an allegory that explores physical and metaphorical death, ultimately promoting change and progress via personal evolution as the way to achieve a meaningful life.

**DEPARTURE**

This rendition of the hero's journey begins in the ordinary world, where the protagonists' conversation reveals their conflicting approaches to their retirement, summoning a call for adventure. Indeed, as Charlie and Nancy sit on the beach discussing their plans, mythologist Joseph Campbell might argue they are "drawn in a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (42). While Nancy hopes to fill the rest of their lives with adventure, Charlie's sole desire is to enjoy "a little rest" (Albee 325), leaving the married couple at an impasse. As the journey begins, Nancy and Charlie must learn to see death as part of life's process, so they do not squander their remaining years. In turn, their discussion on the beach reveals a "call to adventure," or as Campbell explains, "The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (42-3). Indeed, the fundamental reality of their marriage has transformed, leaving the couple at a new threshold. As Nancy asserts, she and Charlie are at "the top of the pyramid" (Albee 377), for their

children have grown and started families. She elaborates, "the pyramid's building by itself; the earth's spinning in its own fashion without any push from us; we've done all we ought to" (390). This shift in their status quo has left the pair poised to create a new life out of the rubble of their former one as they enter their retirement years. They need to accept the relationship between life and death to move forward and live meaningfully.

From the onset, Charlie's meek spirit reveals an adherence to the status quo and an aversion to change, rendering this husband part of the metaphorical living dead. As he contemplates retirement, Charlie claims, "I don't want to do…anything" (Albee 374) because "there's comfort in settling in" (391). While he may imagine "doing…nothing" (374) as a form of relaxation during retirement, the "comfort" he finds in "settling in" alludes to a grave. Here, Charlie refuses the call, and "refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative" (Campbell 49). Instead of fighting to experience life genuinely, Charlie's resignation to a metaphorical death prematurely forfeits his remaining years as he surrenders to the great unknown before his time has expired. Thomas P. Adler elaborates, "Charlie …revels in the prospect of gradually and painlessly easing out of the picture by withdrawing from all purposive activity" ("Albee's Seascape" 180). Having already fulfilled his purpose of providing for a family, Charlie prepares to wash away into obscurity like a receding tide. Nancy describes her husband's desired state as a "purgatory *before* purgatory" (Albee 375), reinforcing his descent into the transitory realm between life and death while still drawing breath. Through his humble resignation, Charlie offers a nihilistic worldview, where existence matters less as one ages until death assures one does not exist at all. His quiet surrender is a metaphorical living death, where he may be alive physically, but his spirit has been compromised by a cancer, preventing him from truly experiencing life.

In contrast, Nancy appears as the antithesis of Charlie with her fantasies of travel and childlike awe of the world. Adler describes this spirited wife as "Filled with a Wilderian 'wonder' at experience and adventuresomeness over what lies ahead" ("Albee's 3 ½" 76). Indeed, Nancy's passion for life reveals itself in rushes of dialog, such as when she declares, "I love the water, and I love the air, and the sand and the dunes and the beach grass… I love every bit of it" (Albee 372). The repetition of "and" poetically divulges her unfettered enthusiasm for life, lending a youthful quality to Nancy's bemusement that contradicts her husband's attitude. Likewise, when Charlie declares, "You've had a good life" (387), she grows angry, asserting his words betray "a way of thinking" (389) that she cannot accept. Nancy retorts, "Am not *having*? Am not *having* a good life?" (389). After all, "have had" implies their life has already been lived, while "having" suggests an ongoing adventure. Nancy refuses to succumb to the fatalist mindset implied by "have had," for she does not see age as a debilitating factor that will prevent her from "having" a good life. As Nancy dreams, "We could go around the world and never leave the beach, just move from one hot sand strip to another" (373). Although a fantastical scheme, they *could* venture from beach to beach, relaxing while still enjoying "a little *life*" (391). Through this daring mindset, Nancy aims to prevent Charlie from becoming "a vegetable" (390) and to thrust him back into vital existence. She believes life is about the experience, and she will seek adventure until her inevitable end.

Nevertheless, Nancy also remains unable to embark on the journey, for she refuses to acknowledge and accept death as part of life, leaving her with Charlie among the living dead. Indeed, without the means to escape the inevitable, Nancy drowns herself in a tsunami of fantastical ideas meant to distract her mind from the reality that death is part of life. In this way, she also refuses her call to adventure, hiding inside an illusion that elevates life while ignoring mortality. Gabriel Miller clarifies, "Albee implies that [Nancy's] need to move from place to place… is not so much a desire to expose herself to new things [but] a need to deny the inevitable. If one keeps moving, perhaps one needn't contemplate one's own mortality" (152). Likewise, Nancy's fantasy of a nomadic beach-comber lifestyle is impractical. It leaves the couple like fugitives on the run from an omnipresent enemy who can always find them. Nancy even views the possibility of her mortality passively: "You are not going to live forever," she explains to Charlie, "Nor am I, I suppose come to think of it, though it would be nice" (Albee 375). While urging Charlie to embrace retirement and "do *something*" (374), Nancy's death is an afterthought. She "supposes" it will happen, much like one might expect the mailman to drop by in the afternoon. Nancy's quick embrace of immortality fits here, yet its impossibility reinforces her denial of the connection between life and death. However, one cannot separate these entities, for they represent

the ultimate symbiotic relationship. Miller argues, "Nancy must learn to acknowledge this powerful duality" to live a meaningful present (152). Otherwise, "Nancy's desire to visit other beaches is only an illusion of growth" (Miller 152). Until she acknowledges death as part of life's process, Nancy will remain half in a dream, much like her husband places himself half inside a coffin. When coupled together, both husband and wife need an intervention; a *deus ex machina* must appear to extract them from the living dead.

## UBER-NATURAL AIDS

When Charlie and Nancy encounter an anthropomorphic pair of lizards named Sarah and Leslie on the beach, it disrupts their status quo, thrusting them into the adventure. At this juncture, Campbell explains the heroes may come across a mythical companion or group who will ultimately help the heroes achieve their aim (Campbell 58). In *Seascape*, the lizards appear like "supernatural aid," come to escort these reluctant heroes across the threshold (59). While typical "supernatural aids" have magical properties, Albee's lizards reflect an extremely natural state. As Lucina P. Gabbard contends, Sarah and Leslie "concretize the evolution of mankind from water animals, the emergence of the individual embryo from its watery womb, and the return to consciousness of the repressed self" (308). Indeed, the lizards do not understand human norms, mores, or customs, such as the practice of shaking hands "to prove they [are] friendly" (Albee 408). The less-evolved Leslie and Sarah live in a prehuman condition. In response, Charlie and Nancy will need to break down concepts like love, death, and evolution completely for the lizards to understand them. This process will ultimately facilitate Charlie and Nancy's acceptance of change and death as part of life since it will require the humans to engage with their "repressed [selves]" (Gabbard 308). As such, the lizards reflect *uber*-natural aid, for they are "supernatural" as talking amphibians and "super" or extremely natural in their primitive state. This duality renders the lizards uniquely suited for helping the humans cross the threshold and continue their quest.

In this way, humans and lizards will pass the first threshold, enabling them to venture deeper into the psychological complexities hindering Nancy and Charlie on their internal quest to find more meaningful lives. Campbell explains, "passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth…symbolized in the worldwide image of the belly of the whale. The hero…is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died" (74). In their capacity as *uber*-natural aids, Sarah and Leslie present Nancy and Charlie with the unique opportunity to see and judge themselves from a safe distance, making any revelations more palpable and easier to accept. By helping these *uber*-natural aids, Charlie and Nancy "transit into a sphere of rebirth" (Campbell 74): As they break down manmade concepts, the humans will need to reexamine what they mean and how that definition relates to their lives. In doing so, Charlie and Nancy undergo metaphorical deaths of their former selves, a prerequisite for living life fully. After all, at its most basic level, evolution is the death of the former self and the birth of a new one.

## IN THE BELLY OF THE WHALE

While explaining emotions to the lizards proves difficult, the process exposes the human's latent anxieties that hinder them from embracing change and death as fundamental components of life. Here, the couples' struggle to understand one another offers "a form of self-annihilation… instead of passing outward, beyond the confines of the visible world, the [heroes go] inward, to be born again" (Campbell 77). One of the most revealing trials comes when they hit upon the concept of love. Nancy begins this discussion by explaining humans care for their children because "We *love* them" (Albee 419). She then attempts to describe what "love" means using adjectives: her children make her feel "possessive… grateful, and proud" (420). Considering she immediately chose to associate love with her children instead of her husband, Nancy must view the concept as an emotion directly connected to motherhood. Interestingly, Nancy's role as a mother was never compromised. No matter what her marriage endured during Charlie's period of "*melancholia*" (381), Nancy would always be a mother to their children, making her "grateful" to them for giving her a concrete identity. However, if she is no longer an active mother,

Nancy must solely rely on her role as a wife. Unlike Sarah, who has only ever been Leslie's mate, for their children "just… float away" (416), Nancy and Charlie never made up the entirety of the other's world, significantly breaking with the lizard's norm. By trying to define love through her children alone, Nancy reveals her not fully actualized identity as a wife. Simply put, her life's story is only half-told. While she cannot foresee what this single role might entail, her adventurous spirit suggests Nancy wants to find out. After all, for Nancy, life is experience. She cannot appreciate death as an experience akin to the one she enjoyed as a mother. In fact, death could preclude Nancy from experiencing life with her husband alone. Consequently, she denies death is part of life.

Nevertheless, the lizards do not understand love through the lens of children, leaving Charlie to delve into his subconscious to create another meaning. Here, Charlie tries to equate love with desire, believing Leslie must have "wanted" (Albee 422) Sarah to fight rivals for her. Charlie's portrayal of love connects the emotion to sex, implying his chief association with the word is physical and revealing his latent anxieties. Indeed, when discussing his "*melancholia*" (381), stage directions indicate Charlie looks "vulnerable" as Nancy mentions her thoughts of divorce (381). Considering his connection between love and sex, the lack of physical intimacy husband and wife shared during that period renders "*That* time" (381) at odds with Charlie's assessment of love. He could not physically show Nancy that he loved her, complicating his definition of the emotion while challenging his masculinity. As he transitions from a worker into simply a husband, Charlie has lost his unyielding identity as a provider, a role that satisfied his masculine drive throughout their marriage. When Leslie claims to have chosen Sarah because "she smelled all right" (422), the lizard further problematizes Charlie's connection between love and sex. After all, the Darwinian concepts fueling Leslie's selection of Sarah also link sex to virility: her smell meant she would make a fruitful mate. Here, love is a physical, measurable experience that gives value to the individual. Without his identity as a provider, Charlie can no longer count on this role alone to satiate his masculinity; he must rely on being Nancy's loving husband. Such a transformation may trigger a fear of change, and Charlie does not readily embrace unknowns. After all, when he first sees the lizards, Charlie decides the "liver paste" from lunch must have soured: "We ate the liver paste and we died," he claims, likely hoping it is true (398). Charlie would rather accept physical death than admit he has seen something new. Similarly, this fear of change has left Charlie uneasy in his new role as simply a husband but no longer a provider. While Nancy cannot appreciate death as an experience, Charlie fears the uncertainty of change. Ultimately, the couple will need to overcome these anxieties to live a more meaningful present.

## THE INNERMOST CAVE

Overall, the transformation of Charlie and Nancy's identities suggests the retirees must accept the metaphorical deaths of their former selves before they can perceive physical death as part of life. This acceptance will rely on evolution, a concept akin to the Holy Grail on their adventure. In a way, evolution becomes this journey's "miraculous energy-substance" (Campbell 155), for embracing the symbolic death of the former self is how to achieve a meaningful life. In this case, accepting the need for evolution or change is "what [they] must do to be saved" (85), yet the concept remains foreign to the lizards. They do not understand humans are products of species growth and that the world has not maintained a status quo for the duration of its existence. Here, the retired couple must again look inward to find a way to explain a human concept, a process that will allow them to accept their personal evolution.

For Nancy, her adventurous spirit has already proven well-adapted to change, leaving her open to accepting the knowledge of mortality as a byproduct of her evolution as a species. When attempting to explain the reason behind evolution to the lizards, Nancy muses, "They were dissatisfied, is what they were" (Albee 439). Here, one remembers Nancy's beachcombing plan for retirement. As stated, it distracts Nancy from accepting death as part of life. Nevertheless, her plans also betray a dissatisfaction with her present state. Audiences meet the couple at a pivotal moment, where Nancy has transitioned into the role of simply Charlie's wife and finds it lacks the adventure she seeks. However, as Adler states, "Nancy accepts flux as a part of life, as, indeed, the necessary precondition for progress and growth"

("Albee's Seascape" 182). Nancy hopes to fill the void left by her former identity as a mother and become simply Charlie's wife, but she does not want that to mean they merely "wait the judgment with [their] peers" (Albee 375). Nancy desires a retirement where they embrace life or, at the very least, "do *something*" (374). By rationalizing evolution to the lizards as a product of dissatisfaction, Nancy betrays her latent desire for change. In turn, she later describes herself as "better than a rabbit" (442). The human is "more interesting" *because* she knows how to "make art" *and because* she is "aware of [her] own mortality" (442). Here, the disconnect between life and death crumbles for Nancy as she declares herself "more interesting" *because* she knows that her life will end one day. Her knowledge of inevitable death is akin to the experience of "[making] art," rendering death also part of her "interesting" life. Nancy's connection between inherited abilities and mortality puts both concepts on the same plane. She is an evolved creature, which entails an understanding and acceptance of mortal death as part of life.

However, the males remain skeptical throughout the play's journey, resisting the unknown as a first resort. When Leslie learns that his species has evolved, he denies the very thought. He declares "through his teeth," "I have *always* had a *tail*" (Albee 440). Here, Leslie's delivery emphasizes his anger, an emotion triggered by his staunch resistance to new information that compromises his identity. After all, Leslie's "long and sturdy tail" (440) is a phallic symbol of his masculinity. The idea of not having one triggers Leslie's fear of castration or loss, much like Charlie's transition from provider to husband is a type of metaphorical castration. In retirement, Charlie no longer bears the burden of financially supporting his family. This diminished status symbolically castrates him, for no one *needs* Charlie with the same intensity anymore. Ergo, lizard and human agonize over a similar fear – the loss of the masculinity that informs their respective identities. In both cases, they must accept the symbolic death of the former self to realize their future potential. While countering Leslie's resistance, Charlie begins to recognize the inevitability of change. In truth, the lizard's tail does not define his existence. It is a single part Leslie could easily lose as his species continues to evolve, much like Charlie lost only part of his identity when he retired. As he attempts to describe evolution further, Charlie says the "crowning moment of it all" was when a "slimy creature poked his head out of the muck, looked around, and decided to spend some time up here" (Albee 441). When Charlie deems the "slimy creature's" emergence a "crowning moment," he reveals his awe at the transformation, as though mesmerized by the progression. Change no longer frightens Charlie; it has become necessary for a more meaningful existence.

## CRISIS AND RETURN

At this crossroads, Albee's human heroes will face the crisis that sparked their journey through the help of their *uber*-natural aids, enabling them to accept change and death as integral to life's process. As Campbell explains, "When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, [the hero] undergoes a supreme ordeal … intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom)" (211). In *Seascape*, the "supreme ordeal" is the confrontation with mortality and the ultimate acceptance of change and death as parts of life. Considering Nancy has already reconciled life and death, Charlie will rely on the lizards to achieve such a feat for himself. The distance between their species offers him a way to reexamine himself by looking down the evolutionary ladder at the "brute beast" who does not know "it's going to die!" (Albee 443). Here, Charlie grows "impatient for [the lizards];" he wants them "to experience the whole thing! The full sweep!" (443). As Leslie and Sarah enter this new plane of existence, Charlie desires to reveal the knowledge of biological death as part of life, ontologically severing them from less evolved creatures. His impatience masks an unconscious need to explore the crux of existence himself, for Charlie can only face the vacuous maw through his *uber*-natural aids. Therefore, he questions Sarah, "What if you knew [Leslie] was never coming back?" (444). While Nancy calls Charlie "heartless" (444) for doing this, the human is engaging in a personal struggle against death. As in many of Albee's plays beginning with *The Zoo Story*, the hero must act cruelly to render a kindness. Charlie needs to help these lizards in order to help himself. As Sarah begins to sob, the

human understands he has shown this creature mortal death by summoning his fear of "Nancy… not being with [him]" (411). As such, Charlie uses Sarah to engage in his internal struggle. Once articulate, he stumbles to say, "I'm sorry; I'm…I'm sorry (445). The repetition and ellipses betray Charlie's invisible sobs as the weight of death and loss also falls over him. He may want to return to ignorance like Sarah, yet it is too late.

At this juncture, they have reached the final battle where humans and lizards will all need to accept death as part of life, a task that will break through Charlie's denial and shatter his latent fears. As he witnesses Sarah's metaphorical descent into the unknown, Leslie grows enraged by the onslaught of emotion it generates in his wife. In turn, Leslie attacks Charlie and then "[strains] with the effort of the chokehold" (446), indicating his powerful emotions at play. The lizard understands that he will no longer exist one day, an unfathomable concept for his species. Here, Charlie does not physically resist the chokehold. The human merely utters "Help…me" (446) as he faces an immediate confrontation with death – one Charlie cannot ignore as he declines to return to the bottom of the sea in Act I (379, 384). When Leslie releases Charlie, stage directions indicate that the human "sinks to the sand" (446), as though he has endured a great battle. Having faced mortality in the lizard's grasp, Charlie emerges with an appreciation of death as part of life.

Nevertheless, the *uber*-natural aids now find themselves in crisis as they struggle to reconcile the significant changes they have gone through on land, triggering the humans to share the knowledge they have acquired. Here, Campbell explains, "the hero reemerges from the kingdom of dread… the boon that he brings restores the world" (211). In this case, the "boon" is Charlie and Nancy's acceptance of change and death as integral parts of life. Leslie and Sarah have been overwhelmed by this knowledge; they want to "go back down" (Albee 446), hoping to recapture the comfort of their ignorance. However, this retreat will prove impossible. "You'll have to come back… sooner or later," Nancy explains to the lizards. "You don't have any choice. Don't you know that? You'll have to come back up" (447). The lizards have already evolved beyond their underwater world by exploring life on land. As Nancy pleas with the lizards to remain, she acknowledges they have transcended beyond their former selves in the ocean as Nancy and Charlie have aboveground. When Charlie also claims, "You've got to *do* it – sooner or later" (448), he confirms his recognition of the inevitability of change and death. Both will happen "sooner or later," something Charlie has learned to accept. His concession to change means Charlie can appreciate the transformation in his own life and step into the next phase. After all, the only actual death is a flatline narrative where nothing progresses, transforms, or evolves.

In this way, Albee offers personal evolution as the means to render life meaningful, making it the elixir these heroes win on their quest. As Clive Barnes wrote of *Seascape's* original production in the *New York Times*: "Mr. Albee is suggesting that one of the purposes of an individual human experience is quite simply evolution" (55-6). On the individual level, change and development are necessary elements that contribute to living meaningfully. Gabbard concludes, "Charles and Nancy join hands with Leslie and Sarah to begin the attainment of oneness. Thus… Albee speaks his major theme- acceptance of death is transcendence" (316). Ultimately, the humans understand accepting life means acknowledging death, yet it does not mean they need to deny their mortality or fight against it. In the end, as Campbell's hero shares his boon with the world, Nancy and Charlie offer help to the reluctant lizards. Stage directions indicate Leslie "pauses," then "stares at them" before acquiescing, "All right. Begin" (Albee 448). As such, Nancy and Charlie's journey is complete as they embark on a new quest to help their *uber*-natural friends navigate life away from the sea.

## CONCLUSION

By applying Joseph Campbell's hero's journey to the internal battle the humans face in Albee's *Seascape*, one discovers the play can read like an allegory that promotes change and progress as fundamental components of a meaningful life. Here, Albee's allegory departs from the stage and infiltrates the

audience's world. Like Nancy, Charlie, and their saurian guides, individuals need to embark on their own internal quests to break down the prejudices and unconscious ideologies preventing humanity's evolution towards a better species. Especially in the wake of mass shootings, racial injustice, and political unrest, it has become imperative those living in the United States begin to transform their mindsets to achieve a better, more progressive society. Adherents to the old approaches to civil liberties and rights need to reexamine how their antiquated norms fit into this evolving world. Those who feel threatened by the advancement of an Other must look inward to rectify the inadequacies within themselves and learn to embrace the infusion of multiple perspectives. Like Albee's heroes, citizens need to accept the necessity of change that begins at the individual level. After all, only personal evolution can render a more accepting, harmonious, and united collective.

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