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THE TRAGEDY THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME: A READING OF ARTHUR KOPIT'S *OH DAD, POOR DAD, MAMMA'S HUNG YOU IN THE CLOSET AND I'M FEELING SO SAD*

*For this have I returned? Was the way opened to the light of heaven
that I might look on two funerals and a double murder?
(Seneca, *Phaedra*, 1213-1214)*

Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad. A Pseudoclassical Tragifarce in a Bastard French Tradition was written in 1959, staged first in London in 1961 and then in New York in in 1962 (Wilmeth 2000, 314).¹ Unlike other Kopit's works (especially *Indians*), it has drawn little scholarly attention, having been either praised as the peak of American Absurdism (Wilmeth 2000, 114), criticized as an unsuccessful attempt at bringing to the United States and, at the same time, challenging the conventions of the theater of the absurd (Engler 1993, 283), or dismissed as a "modish and, somehow, collegiate foray into absurdism and antiestablishmentarianism" (Simon 1979, 77).² Despite his efforts, as Martin Esslin notices, the author "spoils his opportunity to transmute his material into a grotesque poetic image" (2004, 316). The play revolves around the dysfunctional relationship between a domineering mother, Mme Rosepettle, and Jonathan, her 17-year-old and hyper-infantilized son. They are travelling across the Americas, taking along with them a coffin where Mme Rosepettle's late husband is buried and are temporarily in a hotel room in Cuba. That *Oh Dad* is a complex, if not obscure text is remarked by Kopit himself, who, in his 1997 preface to the play, overtly states: "my plays always begin at least somewhat in the dark. Something is hidden. Hidden from me. It could be about a character. Or the situation. Most important, though, I sense that this hidden 'thing' matters to me in some special way" (X). These preliminary remarks dovetail with the play's final sentence, uttered by Mme Rosepettle, whose almost rhetorical question ("What is the meaning of this?") openly calls for an answer that only readers – or spectators – can provide. Though, as Zóltan Szilassy maintains, any "'serious interpretation' would perhaps be in utter contradiction with the spirit of the play" (1977, 145), *Oh Dad's* last line seems to suggest that there must be a meaning hidden somewhere, that only waits to be dug out. We are confronted, thus, with a twofold hermeneutical challenge. On the one hand, the play's subtitle, by defining it a "tragifarce in a bastard French tradition," overtly relates it to the theater of the absurd, thus advising against any attempt at looking for hidden meanings under the surface of its surreal story. On the other, the play's conclusion (besides Kopit's words in the preface) is a recommendation to mistrust its apparent lacking of realism and coherence, because an invisible kernel must exist to counterbalance its ostensibly implausible plot.

The main contention of this article is that a meaning of the play actually exists, and that it lies in a paradox: I argue, in fact, that despite its nonsensical plot and characters, *Oh Dad* possesses a signifying core that provides it with a sense, but that this kernel is a fracture, or a gap in the mechanism of signification. This gap is what makes it difficult to assign *Oh Dad* to a specific theatrical genre. Despite having all its typical narrative and formal features, the play is definitely not a tragedy, nor is it a "tragifarce," as the subtitle suggests, it is

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¹ Don Shewey reminds, in a brief history of the play, that it was written for a playwriting contest when Kopit was only 22, in the summer when he graduated in Engineering, and was awarded a \$250 prize.

² Kopit's relationship with the theater of the absurd is quite controversial, as Matthew Roudané points out: "It would be misleading to align Kopit too directly with the Theatre of the Absurd, but, technically, his work does bear traces of the great European writers – Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh, and Eugène Ionesco – who held court over the theatrical avant-garde in Europe in the late fifties. Kopit, like Albee, not only absorbed the works of his contemporaries but also looked back to the great Modernists in Italy and Germany" (in Wilmeth 2000, 396).



rather an impossible tragedy. The reasons for this impossibility are to be looked for, on the one hand, in the play's historical and geo-political context – which, though apparently not relevant to its narrative and symbolic economy, provides it with a substantial rationale – and, on the other, in the central figure of Mme Rosepettle, the only character who at the end of the play cries for “a meaning of this,” despite being herself the hindrance to the unveiling of any coherent sense.

1. The dead on credit

Death and the dead are among the key elements that make *Oh Dad* an impossible tragedy. Though central to the story and to its narrative and symbolical apparatus, in fact, they fail to achieve any tragic effect, not only because of the play's surreal and comic atmosphere, but because they emphasize that gap in the signifying mechanism I referred to above. Cruelty and death, though triggering the protagonists' actions, look almost innocuous and even unreal, as if the characters were completely unaware of the violence they exert and/or undergo, simply registering it as an ordinary circumstance in their lives. This paradox – that is, the fact that cruel actions are perceived as unexceptional and inconsequential – functions as a recurring pattern for the whole play, which, for this reason, shuns coherent meaning and challenges any attempt at being interpreted. The play's title epitomizes its surreal atmosphere, pointing out, at the same time, the uncanny presence of death within the most intimate sphere of domestic life. Death should be, in fact, what actually makes a tragedy of the story narrated, but proves completely inconsequential in the end. It is evoked at the beginning of the play and is not mentioned again until, in her long monolog, Mme Rosepettle declares that she killed her husband (53). A coffin, moreover, is the first object that appears onstage. Mme Rosepettle and Jonathan have just moved to a hotel in Havana, where the story takes place, and the bellboys are having a hard time in accommodating the coffin in which, as we discover as the story goes on, Jonathan's father is held. This corpse is kept hidden until the end of the play, when the coffin accidentally opens, and the man's body falls upon Jonathan and Rosalie. The latter, a young woman who is in love with him, is trying to seduce Jonathan and persuade him to have sex, but he eventually kills her, smothering her to death (78).

The play's main protagonists, thus, spend their lives in close contact with death, but seem to be completely unaffected by the presence of dead bodies in their daily life. Mme Rosepettle carries around her late husband's corpse wherever she goes, eager to claim her role as a custodian of his dead body and his memory (for this reason, she angrily rebukes the bellboys, who, as she maintains, “have no respect for coffins nowadays. They think nothing of the dead” 8). The corpse is kept locked in her bedroom, where nobody is allowed. The whole action is thus triggered by a presence that, in order to set the story in motion, needs to be obliterated and ignored, functioning as an invisible excess that, nevertheless, is essential to provide the protagonists' lives with a rationale and a moving cause. Death, though actually determining the course of their existences, does not alter the protagonists' behavior (with the partial exception of Jonathan, as we will see), nor does it determine any climax within the play, or mark its tragic ending. When the body of Jonathan's father falls on the bed where she and Jonathan lie, Rosalie, who is gradually replacing Mme Rosepettle in claiming to be Jonathan's only legitimate owner,³ remains completely indifferent and motionless – to the point that, after asking “Who the hell is this?,” she locks it back into the coffin and comments: “What a stupid place to keep a corpse. [...] Forget it, Jonathan. I put him back in the closet. Everything's fine again” (76).

The reasons of this inconsequentiality are twofold. The first is that the protagonists cannot be affected by death because they have been utterly ‘monstrified’ by the dysfunctional relationships they have with each other. *Oh Dad* is for sure, a play about family as the source of “psychosexual imprisonment” (Burgoyne 1983, 198), but addresses repression as a phantasmatic, as well as tangible, social (not exclusively familiar) force. Jonathan's family has dramatically affected his perception of the outer reality and his self-perception, but it is the whole of the social structure (in which the family has of course a pivotal role) that is stigmatized as repressive, because it dehumanizes its components, before and besides subjugating them. For this reason, the presence of death cannot produce any tragic effect: were *Oh Dad* a “regular” tragedy, its characters would be profoundly affected

³ See Ótott, who argues: “There are certain similarities and contrasts between Madame Rosepettle and Rosalie; they both want to own the boy, but in opposite ways. The mother shows her love in the overprotection of Jonathan as a child, while Rosalie is interested in Jonathan as a lover. The two women are pulling the boy in opposite directions. The tension, to which he will find relief in the killing of the ferocious creatures and in the murder, is the result of the clash of principles.”



and altered by what happens onstage and what has previously happened. Being fully ingrained within the repressive apparatuses of family and society, they are only able to impersonate the part they have been ascribed, completely insensitive to any other thing that can happen to them. Death cannot exert any influence upon them, nor can it generate any awareness of the miserable conditions of their lives, just because they are already morally and emotionally dead, trapped within an alienating mechanism of roles and hierarchies. With regard to this aspect, Márta Ótót's contention about abjection as the main hermeneutical filter to decipher the work is quite disputable. Ótót draws on Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Abjection*, insisting on the abject nature of the corpse as the master signifier of the play. The corpse can of course function, in the play's symbolic economy, as a signifier, not, however, for embodying death encroaching upon life, but for the opposite reason: it negates death, pushes it to the margins of the scene, and denies that it has ever happened. The father's dead body – as a metonym for death – does not contaminate life. It is kept hidden, safely removed from anybody's sight, and properly preserved, so as to function as a perennial memento. It exerts its power upon the living, to the point that the protagonists' lives are, at least partially, determined by the presence of the dead father, but does not directly impact upon their existence. The presence of the dead body within the play, thus, rather than as a master signifier (or the "deadly prosthesis of Madame Rosepettle herself," Ótót), functions as an *absent* signifier, a trigger that draws its strength not from its impinging on the protagonists' existence, but from its silent and invisible presence.⁴

There is one more reason, however, that makes *Oh Dad* an impossible tragedy despite its potential, and that remarks the role of death as an actual (and not only symbolical) void signifier. It has to be found in Mme Rosepettle's story, which she narrates in a long monolog almost at the end of the play. She first daringly declares that she killed her husband ("I killed him of course," 53), which would perfectly line her up with many lady-killers from tragic traditions of the past. Though meeting most requirements to be a new Gertrude,⁵ however, she finally baffles her readers'/spectators' expectations, revealing that her husband's death was simply accidental: "Then one night he died. [...] The doctors don't know why. His heart, they said, seemed fine. It was as large a heart as they'd ever seen. And yet he died" (61). Mme Rosepettle, moreover, discovers that he had always been faithful to her, despite supposedly betraying her with Rosalinda, one of his secretaries. He died at one in the morning, but his death was discovered only at dawn. She triumphantly remarks, "He was lying with her in bed for nearly six hours, *dead*, and she never knew it! What a lover he must have been! [...] Their affair, their sinfulness – it never even existed! [...] His love was sterile! He was a child. He was weak. He was impotent. He was *mine*" (61). Not only, thus, was any murder ever committed, but any adultery either. Any expectation about the play as a gory tale of betrayal and murder is disappointed: Mme Rosepettle did not kill her husband, who, in turn, had never betrayed her with his secretary.

2. Dumb echoes of tragedy

Oh Dad is an impossible tragedy because it makes use of tragic elements that, however, do not produce any tragic effect, such as the presence of a corpse onstage and the final killing of Rosalie. A similar dynamic occurs with the choice of the protagonists' names, which elicits hermeneutical investigation too, only to eventually frustrate any attempt at achieving a satisfactory explanation. The proper names in the play can be read, moreover, as part of an intertextual strategy employed by Kopit. Through its bizarre choice of proper names, in fact, *Oh Dad* evokes other theatrical works, whose genuinely tragic nature is nonetheless rejected, and replaced by an utterly nonsensical arrangement of characters and events, which, at least apparently, shun any dynamics of signification and tragic resolution.

Even at a superficial reading, the recurrence of the protagonists' names is inevitably noticed. The abundance of "roses" – Mme Rosepettle, Commodore Roseabove, Rosalie, Rosalinda – calls for an interpretive reading that, as for other elements in the play, ends up in a deadlock. Whereas a considerable number of characters

⁴ The difference between Kristeva's and Kopit's understanding of the symbolic role of corpses can also be explained in cultural terms. Whereas the former, on the basis of the European tradition, considers the dead body as abject because bodily decomposition actually blurs the borders between life and death, and thus threatens the subject's integrity, Kopit represents an embalmed body that, as customary in the US funeral habits, has been emptied of all its fluids and made fit for a theoretically limitless preservation.

⁵ There are passages in which diverse Shakespearean echoes can be vaguely identified. Mme Rosepettle words "My lips, Commodore, are the color of blood" (43), for instance, bear a pale resemblance with the famous verses in which Lady Macbeth acknowledges her crimes ("My hands are of your colour," 2.2.67).



have, more or less, the same name, the young protagonist, Jonathan, is every time called by different names by his mother, as Rosalie incredulously notices:

JONATHAN: Jonathan. Ca-ca-call me Ja-Jonathan. That's my na-na-na—

ROSALIE: But your mother said your name was—

JONATHAN: Nooooo! Call...me Jonathan. Pa-pa-please?

ROSALIE: All right...Jonathan. (25)

As for the large usage of Rose, different hypotheses can be formulated. First, a dense network of intertextual cross-references can be figured out. As Brend Engler remarks, for instance, allusions to Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) are quite evident (282). The latter, a family play staging the conflict between an over-protective mother and her daughter after the tragic death of the husband/father, features a number of protagonists whose names (Serafina Delle Rose, Rosa, Rosario) echo the rose of the title. Kopit's play, by mocking the conventions of the American drama of the 1950s, turns the tragic tension of Williams's play into *Oh Dad's* ironic and surreal atmosphere.⁶ Rose is also employed in another play by Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), which also stages the tragedy of a fatherless family. The nickname of the protagonist's sister Laura is "Blue Roses," and her character was modeled on Williams's sister Rose, who suffered from mental disorders.⁷ Besides the (probably) obvious reference to Tennessee Williams's life and work, other highly popular texts in which the word rose is diversely employed come to mind, in association to the use of the name in *Oh Dad*. Given the play's surreal character, for instance, it does not seem too far-fetched to relate the "roses" scattered in the play to the most popular verse in which the same word is used, namely, that "rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" that Gertrude Stein had written more than forty years before. By repeating the same word with no other semantic connotation, the verse empties it of any sense, merely evoking the vivid image of an object deprived on any relation to its process of signification.⁸ The iteration of the name in the play achieves a similar effect, and further emphasizes its apparent purpose of rejecting any coherent meaning. Provided that also political implications can be retrieved in the play (as I will argue later), the word rose could be loosely associated to the Rosenbergs, whose trial and execution had at the time traumatized the US public opinion, bringing to the surface the violent and repressive character of the conformist American society of the 1950s.

The difference in the name choice between Jonathan and the other characters is also noteworthy. It evidently remarks Jonathan's radical otherness, and the fact that he is (or seems to be) so harmless and innocent that his personality and identity could be completely controlled by anyone – and are actually manipulated by his mom. As Kopit remarks, "Madame Rosepettle calls her son, whose given name is Jonathan, either Albert or Edward or Robinson, which turns out to be the full name of his dead father" (Preface X). Jonathan, thus, is called by his late father's names, which reinforces the already clear polarization between the mother, on the one hand, and the dyad father/son on the other, as, respectively, perpetrator and victims. The domineering and sadistic Mme Rosepettle completely reverses the traditional gender roles within her family, by subjugating and annihilating the two men, and reducing them to grotesque figures, deprived of any authority and any sexual power. They are both, moreover, hyper-infantilized. This is quite evident for Jonathan, who acts like a child terrified of women and sex, and emerges in Mme Rosepettle's story about her husband, who, as she remarks, only asked "a little sex and a little food and there he is, asleep with a smile and snoring" (58), to be then compared to "a naughty boy anxious to see his mother's reaction to a mischievous deed" (60).

The parallel between Jonathan and his father, epitomized and reinforced by them being called by the same names, has also interesting intertextual implications. The number of traits shared by a weak and victimized

⁶ Engler also points out other references to Tennessee Williams's theater, as the presence of the Venus flytraps, reminiscent of *Suddenly Last Summer*, in which the murder of a young homosexual man is tentatively concealed by his mother. Analogies to this play are also noticed by Zoltán Szilassy (145).

⁷ The relationship between Tennessee Williams and his sister Rose, and the latter's influence on his work, has been widely documented. See, among others, Michael Paller's 2002 article.

⁸ See also Shewey, who maintains that, besides Stein, "the eerie insistence of an Ionesco game" could also have been a source of inspiration for Kopit's choice of names. Gertrude Stein is also included among the characters of Kopit's 1962 play *Chamber Music*, in which eight famous women from the past are hospitalized into an asylum.



son and a dead – and reportedly killed – absent father, and the final death of the only woman who was in love with the play's young protagonist, turn *Oh Dad* into an irreverent and surreal parody of *Hamlet*. When Mme Rosepettle rebukes Rosalie for seducing Jonathan, she addresses her as an unaware – and ridiculed – Ophelia: “Go, my dear. Find yourself some weeping willow and set yourself beneath. Cry of your lust for my son and wait, for a mocking bird waits above to deposit his verdict on your whorish head” (37). Jonathan's pathologically eternal adolescence evokes and, at the same time, desecrates Hamlet's stubbornness in rejecting the adult world and his murderous and lecherous hypocrisy. However, at the end of the story, he does not take any revenge (if not on his mother's piranha and Venus flytrap, which he furiously destroys), nor does he even realize that he is the victim of his mother's machinations.⁹ Both Hamlet's and Jonathan's existences, moreover, are crucially affected by the phantasmatic presence of their dead fathers. They both actually meet the old King Hamlet and Albert Edward Robinson Rosepettle III, at the beginning and at the end of the plays respectively. While Hamlet, however, yearns to see his father and know his truth (and the latter, who had been silent with anyone else, talks to him only), Jonathan almost refuses to look at his father's body when the coffin opens. He is “too terrified to scream” when the corpse is shown, so much terrified that he “puts his hand across his mouth and sinks down onto the bed, almost in a state of collapse” (76). The presence of the dead father is too much for him to stand, to the point that he cannot speak nor look at him anymore, thus rejecting an anagnorisis that he has, eventually, almost reached. The play's conclusion, rather than signaling Jonathan's transition from childhood to adulthood, after the acknowledgment of the (symbolic, and not only actual) death of his father, casts him back to his original innocence. His “regained childhood [...] achieved through another kind of sin, murder” (Ótött) makes the discovery of the corpse a mere accident, utterly inconsequential in the drama of his family.

3. The empire fucks back

The surreal story of Jonathan and his mother, by portraying the nuclear family as an intrinsically grotesque institution, implies that no tragedy could be staged in the modern world: the bourgeoisie's takeover of power, at the expense of the old aristocracies featured in classical tragedies, turns any tragic accent into its own parody. The play, however, discloses another kind of historical awareness that makes it an impossible tragedy despite its potential, an awareness directly related to the time in which it was written and staged. Though not overtly addressing political issues, in fact, it makes an interesting parallel between different apparatuses of repression, namely, the family and the nation, whose dynamics are compared and tacitly equated. The stage, thus, becomes the farcical metaphor for both the despotic power of the nuclear family and the soft power of the US nation, which, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, effectively conditioned the political equilibrium of many countries. In doing so, thus, the play attacks the United States' policy in Central and South America and its disguised imperialistic purposes.

Among the visual and narrative means that the play adopts to instance dynamics of power and control, the constant reference to windows is one of the most meaningful. The relationship between the world onstage and what happens elsewhere, and that can only be looked at through windows, is crucial to the play, as emblematically stated at the beginning: “Downstage center French windows open onto a large balcony that juts over the audience” (7). Not only do windows allow the characters to look at what goes on outside the hotel, thus opening a breach in the oppressive atmosphere of the three scenes. They also shed light on the real world, framing the story within the actual context in which it is set.¹⁰

The opposition between the inside and the outside is staged, first of all, as an unbalanced dichotomy between the public and the private sphere, mirrored in the morbid relationship between Mme Rosepettle and Jonathan. Jonathan's body and soul, his skin “as white as fresh snow,” which “would burn if the sun struck him,” his voice “like the music of angels” (61-62), and his pure mind, are his mother's foremost concerns, what definitely

⁹ The opposite is maintained by Burgoyne Dieckman and Brayshaw, who write that “he comes to realize what his mother has done to him” (199), and for this reason kills her beloved creatures. He is probably only unconsciously aware of what he is undergoing, since until the play's end violently protests that “Mother was right,” and repeatedly accuses Rosalie of being dirty (77), before killing her.

¹⁰ Burgoyne Dieckman and Brayshaw elsewhere remark that “Kopit's dramatic universe parallels the Panopticon model of society described by Michel Foucault: a prison in which all cells are exposed to the surveillance of a central power” (195). They also highlight the symbolic role of the airplanes that Jonathan spots every now and then, which could stand for “unrealized hope[s] of freedom” (202).



justifies her choice to keep him permanently locked indoor. Rosalie, the only character who sees Jonathan as a grown-up man and, for this reason, tries to seduce him, poses a threat to this mother-and-son's symbiotic, albeit dysfunctional, relationship, being the only external agent that has found its way within an otherwise claustrophobic and neurotic familiar setting. Mme Rosepettle admits that she goes to the beach at night to annoy the couples who make love by throwing sand at them, and, after discovering Jonathan and Rosalie talking together, gets suddenly angry and accuses the woman to be seducing her son, whom she purposely keeps secluded from the world. Rosalie threatens Jonathan's purity because she is part of a more complex reality that can alienate Jonathan from that "cage in the darkest corner of [her mother's] room" (59) that makes his household. Sex, thus, is, for Mme Rosepettle, a synecdoche for that menacing world that could contaminate Jonathan, as she openly admits: "the world beyond the door [...] A world waiting to devour those who trust in it; those who love. [...] your sex-driven, dirt-washed waste of cannibals eating each other up while they pretend they are kissing [...] your blind world of darkness" (62).¹¹ Jonathan, on the contrary, has internalized his "mother's fear of sexuality [...] carefully inculcated [...] through a system of external control" (Burgoyne 1983, 200), and is trapped within dynamics of attraction and repulsion for the world. He distinctly perceives a proximate yet unknown reality that, though kept at a distance by all means, nevertheless exerts its power of seduction upon him – and also triggers the action onstage.

There is no symmetry, thus, between the action onstage and the world outside, whose glimpses are furtively caught by Jonathan and his mother, and which, in turn, casts its panoptical gaze upon them. Watching is all Jonathan can do – to the point that, when asked by Rosalie "What sort of things you do?," he replies "Other things. [...] Like...watching" (24) – and is also the way through which his mother can exert her power upon him. Having herself tried to frame the world within her own gaze, Mme Rosepettle "perpetuates the pattern of imprisonment by locking her son Jonathan in the hotel room," thus turning him into "watched (by his mother) and watcher (viewing the world through the hotel windows)" (Burgoyne 1983, 198). That power can be exerted through the integral control on people's bodies and behaviors is the central assumption of biopolitical thought, which has theorized the slippage from violent repression to (apparently) innocuous control as the essential paradigm of modern forms of power. Imperialism has often accompanied and counterbalanced biopolitical policies, functioning as the obscure, authoritarian and aggressive counterpart of the docile techniques of discipline and control employed by biopolitical power. *Oh Dad* stages this opposition, insisting on the contrast between the household and the outer world as two aspects of the same power, based on taming and controlling at home, and on violent repression abroad.

This unbalanced opposition between "home" and the world outside, between an apparently quiet and chaste domesticity and the perils lurking anywhere else, also functions as a metaphor for the relationship between the United States and the rest of America, as suggested by the numerous clues disseminated throughout the text. The geopolitical world, as looked at by Mme Rosepettle, is implicitly divided between friend states, whose policies are perfectly in step with the American ones, and the enemies that blatantly oppose the US effort to exert control. Argentina and Cuba best epitomize such opposition: the former had been the last country in Latin America to wage war on Germany during the Second World War, lending, after the war, more or less covert hospitality to the Nazis who fled Europe. During the 1950s and the 1960s, it was governed by many military juntas that, frequently supported by the US government, took over the country, and by the charismatic figure of Juan Perón, who soon championed the anti-communist cause.¹² On the contrary, Cuba, a communist country led by Fidel Castro since the revolution of 1959, strongly opposed the US imperial policies. Mme

¹¹ These words, too, are part of that intertextual net of references I referred to above. The mention of cannibalism is, in fact, reminiscent of Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*, whose protagonist, Sebastian, is devoured by a group of young men he had met and seduced in Galicia. The play goes as back as to even evoke Euripides's *The Bacchae*, in which Pentheus, the king of Thebes, dressed in female attire, is killed and dismembered by a horde of women in a state of delirious hallucination, led by his mother Agave.

¹² Perón's first term as president of Argentina ended in 1955; after an initial antagonism, he sought the economic support of the US government, opting for a more conciliatory foreign policy. At the time of the play's composition, the country was run by Arturo Frondizi, who established good relations with the United States. In 1958 Richard Nixon, then vice-president of Eisenhower, visited Latin America, and his "schedule called for a stop in Argentina to attend the inauguration of president Arturo Frondizi" (Gilderhus 2017, 142); in 1959, Eisenhower's visit to Argentina was the first of a US president to the country since 1936.



Rosepettle's predilection for Argentina reflects her authoritarian personality, also functioning as a metaphor for the American nation and its role within the US and Latin America relationship during the Cold War. Especially the play's first scenes remark a strong opposition between Argentina and Cuba, in which the former is overtly praised at the expense of the latter. When Mme Rosepettle and Jonathan arrive in Havana, she complains about how bad they are being treated in their hotel. She furiously remarks that they are having terrible time in Cuba, and points out that, on the contrary, in Argentina everything was perfect. In one of the many comparisons between the two countries, Mme Rosepettle goes so far as to explicitly refer to Cuba's present political situation: "That's the trouble with these revolutionaries. No regard for the duties of rank" (10). She frequently states, moreover, her status as a foreigner, or, as she explicitly remarks in the first scene, as a tourist (10), and, though repeatedly interrogated about the reasons why she is in Havana, cannot give any plausible answer: "I have to be somewhere, don't I? [...] I am in Havana only because Havana was in my way. [...] I think I'll move tomorrow" (49). It is not clear, thus, where she is headed to; what counts, however, is that by unceasingly roaming she appropriates the places where she goes. A metaphor for the US and its presence all over the American continent during the twentieth century, Mme Rosepettle succeeds in imposing her own rules and enforcing her own law in Havana – for instance, punishing the bellboys or getting them punished for not responding to her needs – though remaining a stranger that stubbornly keeps the natives at a distance. The names of cities and countries disseminated throughout the play, moreover, underline its political concerns, broadening its scope from the criticism of the sole US foreign policies of the time to an open condemnation of past and present forms of imperialism. When Mme Rosepettle first hears of Commodore Roseabove, she is told that he is a real gentleman because he tosses "*real silver dollars* to the native boats as he sailed into port" (20)¹³; however, she notices that Roseabove's yacht is not only the largest in Cuba, but "also the largest yacht in Haiti, Puerto Rico, Bermuda, the Dominican Republic, and West Palm Beach," and probably in the Virgin Islands too (20). She has not met Roseabove yet, but describes him with reference to an exhaustive colonial geography, which includes, among others, the first independent nation in America after the United States (Haiti) and one of the many countries in Latin America in which the US installed and supported a dictatorship (Dominican Republic), besides former US colonies that are presently two unincorporated territories of the States (Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands). Political issues, though repeatedly evoked throughout the play, have no pivotal role in the story, but indirectly elucidate what the US society and nation in the 1950s looked like. The US advocacy of freedom and democracy was a means of propaganda to justify the support of dictatorships, if not of actual bloodsheds. A war was actually waged but was called by other name(s), resulting as the surreal, albeit often bloody, parody of traditional wars. Likewise, the nuclear family, misrepresented as the virtuous keystone of the US society and nation, was actually a hotbed of paranoia and repression. The play's conclusion features no final denouement, nor any possible catharsis, because there is nothing more that, either Jonathan or any other protagonist, can eventually discover and acknowledge. The origin of the evil has always been there, under everybody's eyes, but disguised and made unrecognizable, and, for this reason, impossible to blame as *the* evil. The dead body of Jonathan's father, Jonathan's own incapability to yield to his desires and react to his mother's irrational (and murderous) power, Rosalie's violent death, all originate in Mme Rosepettle's hysteric authoritarianism. Her final question is what best instances the essence of *Oh Dad* as a missed and impossible tragedy. She cannot have any answer to her "what is the meaning of all this?," because she is exactly what prevents any plausible meaning from being retrieved and thus retrospectively becomes herself the real meaning of the play. The paradoxical impossibility of the familiar tragedy, instanced in the play, thus mirrors and reverses what was going on at the time on the global scene: in both cases, in fact, the immediate and integrally visible presence of what (or who) has generated the tragedy is exactly what precludes any attempt at identifying it/her as responsible for the evil caused to the others.

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¹³ Emphasis in the text.



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