CHASING A MYTH:
THE FORMULATION OF AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE PLAYS OF
EDWARD ALBEE

by
James Frederick Kittredge

Copyright © James Frederick Kittredge 2006

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
SCHOOL OF THEATRE ARTS
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2006
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This thesis has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at the University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under the rules of the library.

Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of the source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the copyright holder.

SIGNED: James Frederick Kittredge

APPROVAL BY THE THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

______________________________   _____________________
Jerry Dickey                  May 9, 2006
Associate Professor of Theatre Arts   Date
DEDICATIONS

This thesis is dedicated to my brilliant, beautiful, and unendingly supportive wife, Heather. Your pegs and shocks are totally sweet.

And to Benjaham, wherever he may be.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT..........................................................................................................................5

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION..........................................................................................6

*Getting Ready for the Zoo: Life in 1950s Consumer Society*.................................8

*A Portrait of the Playwright as a Young Man*.........................................................13

*A Distored Mirror of Nightmares and Dreams: An Albee Style Primer*..............18

*The Beginning of the End: A Road Map*.................................................................25

CHAPTER II: THE EARLY PLAYS..................................................................................35

*The Zoo Story*.............................................................................................................38

*The American Dream*.................................................................................................45

*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*................................................................................51

CHAPTER III: THREE TALL WOMEN..........................................................................61

CHAPTER IV: THE PLAY ABOUT THE BABY...............................................................77

CHAPTER V: THE GOAT, OR WHO IS SYLVIA?......................................................93

CONCLUSION.................................................................................................................111

REFERENCES..................................................................................................................116
Edward Albee’s late-career plays contain realistic characters who struggle to create identities for themselves in an America still clinging to misbegotten cultural ideals of the 1950s (e.g. power, money, the “perfect” family). This thesis seeks to give these relatively unexamined later plays the attention they deserve. Therein, Albee’s conception of the American Dream is defined through an analysis of essays on post-World War II American domestic social attitudes. The playwright’s biography is also examined. I then discuss Albee’s stylistic and thematic groundwork by way of criticism of several early plays (The Zoo Story, The American Dream, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?), followed by original textual analysis of three later plays (Three Tall Women, The Play About the Baby, The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?) in an attempt to uncover how Albee’s comment on American cultural mythology has changed since the beginning of his career.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Edward Albee has never been a playwright to mince words. In the preface to his early play *The American Dream*, he writes, “The play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy keen” (54). With those words, written by a still-green wunderkind, the playwright laid the thematic groundwork for a career that would go on to span five decades. Unsure of their place in American society, and left disillusioned by the empty promises of Henry Luce’s simplistic “American Century” philosophy, Albee’s characters drift through life unfulfilled (whether or not they choose to admit it), constantly striving for an ideal existence that lies beyond their grasps.

In early works, such as *The American Dream*, *The Zoo Story*, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee explores the dangers of the burgeoning 1950s consumer culture in which he came of age as a playwright. Concerned with a country increasingly manipulated by marketing and mass-media, he turns an absurdist lens on what had become quintessentially American aspirations: the desire for the “perfect” nuclear family, the attainment of a comfortable life ensconced in the suburbs, and economic self-sufficiency. In an attempt to attain the so-called “American Dream” the characters in these plays have replaced values such as truth, morality, and compassion with illusion, grotesque consumerism, and personal isolation.
While there is abundant material dedicated to analyzing the stylistic and thematic concerns of these early plays, little scholarly attention has been paid, as yet, to the plays that form the past fifteen years of Albee’s oeuvre. In these works, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning Three Tall Women, The Play About the Baby and the Tony Award-winning The Goat, or, Who is Sylvia?, the playwright’s modus operandi has shifted. In the beginning of his career, Albee’s focus was macrocosmic in scope. His early plays contain characters who serve as symbols for misbegotten American cultural ideals (e.g. power, money, the “perfect family”). Although The Play About the Baby can be seen as a return to form, the lion’s share of Albee’s later work is more microcosmically focused. The individual is no longer a symbolic entity. Instead, the playwright creates realistic characters who struggle to create identities for themselves in an America still clinging to the aforementioned ideals. In Three Tall Women, for example, “A” looks back on her life, examining the ways in which she compromised her own morals in the pursuit of an economically comfortable life as the “perfect” wife. In The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?, Martin grapples with being an outsider in a superficial society that favors the appearance of happiness, financial security and familial affection over genuine, meaningful (if thoroughly disturbing and bestial) love. Also, of special importance is that, like their predecessors, the later plays have at their core a belief that the one enduring American value is self-deception.

This thesis seeks to give these later plays the attention they deserve. First, Albee’s conception of the American Dream will be defined through an analysis of scholarly essays on post-World War II American global hegemony and domestic social
attitudes. The playwright’s biography will also be examined. Following will be a discussion of Albee’s stylistic and thematic groundwork by way of analysis of the early plays. The lion’s share of the piece, however, will be original textual analysis of each of the three later plays in an attempt to uncover how Albee’s comment on American cultural mythology has changed since the beginning of his career.

*Getting Ready for the Zoo: Life in 1950s Consumer Society*

Fundamental to an understanding of Albee’s work is an appreciation of the cultural milieu in which he came of age as a playwright. In the post-war years, from 1945 to 1960, America emerged as a dominant, and infinitely wealthy, world power. During this time of suburban population explosion, white, middle-class affluence, and increased media saturation, a new American Dream began to take shape. Many Americans believed their desire to live an idyllic suburban life to be not only attainable, but something to which they were entitled. As Albee would later write, however, such aspirations come at great peril.

A dominant perception of American history, according to theatre scholar Arnold Aronson, is that it is a “grand and heroic narrative – a great epic of the triumph of human spirit over adversity, the victory of good over evil, and the success of the individual in the face of enormous odds” (87). Nowhere is this view more clearly espoused than in the writings of publisher and raconteur Henry Luce. Luce’s famous essay, “The American Century,” published at the outset of American involvement in World War II, describes an
America that has the moral, financial, and military authority to lead the global community. After emphasizing the importance of America’s great wealth, he writes that we must “accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit” (113). Despite the potentially ominous nature of Luce’s final clause, his aims are purportedly altruistic. He presents the image of America as a benevolent global leader – a fiercely independent country with lofty ideals and the will to morally and politically shepherd its less fortunate neighbors.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider Luce’s preoccupation with financial superiority. Before America can act as the world’s conscience, he comments, it must make itself the “dynamic center of ever-widening [global] spheres of enterprise” (120). Ultimately, Luce’s conception of “America as the Good Samaritan” and “America as the powerhouse of the ideals of Freedom and Justice” (120) are always subservient to his concern for demonstrable financial dominance.

Luce’s dream of American prosperity was largely realized in the years following World War II. Having achieved its status as the first financial and military global superpower, America also began to boom domestically, with much of the country’s affluence centered on the suburbs. Aronson estimates that of the thirteen million homes built in the United States between 1945 and 1960, eleven million were in the suburbs (100). Americans (Caucasians, at least) overwhelmingly fled cities for suburban, mass-produced, cookie-cutter developments. For sociologist Vance Packard, this urban exodus
represented a significant cultural shift. No longer were American communities “scale model[s] of all society, with a fair share of butchers, bakers, candlestick makers [. . .] Such towns are relentlessly being replaced by one-layer towns, which encourage birds-of-a-feather flocking” (28). As mass-marketing would later ensure, the new American ideal was an artificial, homogeneous one in which normalcy and appearances were prized above all else.

In a society of great financial wealth, especially one with rapidly growing middle and leisure-classes, consumption can quickly become king. By 1960, an unprecedented number of Americans owned staple luxury items--“75 percent of families owned a car and 87 percent a television” (Aronson 101). Owning such creature comforts became a measure of status, with homeownership being at the top of the hierarchy. Purchasing a home became less an issue of utility, convenient location, and desired amenities, and more an issue of projecting an image of one’s self and lifestyle to the world. Packard comments that the need for a home to reflect an image of success is apparent in real estate listings of the time. “A split-level house on Long Island became ‘a Georgian split, with a bi-level brunch bar in a maitre d’ kitchen.’ And tiny parcels of ground become ‘Huge 1/3 acre Estate Sites’” (62). For many suburbanites, the attainment of status, not shelter, was a home’s primary function.

Mass-media, especially television, helped perpetuate American desire for the perfect suburban life. Popular television of the time, most notably family-oriented situation comedies, presented an image of idyllic suburban affluence. “It informed the self-image of American society in a way that no previous art form or media ever had”
Programs like *The Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It To Beaver* depict white, upper-middle class nuclear families blissfully living the suburban dream. In these shows, Father is generally a genial corporate “organization man” while his dutiful wife tends to hearth and home. Children are respectful and deferent.

Although the occasional family quarrel does arise, the family unit is always preserved, traditional gender roles are maintained, and each episode delivers a pat message of moral instruction. For Aronson, such television depictions of suburban life were the very “epitome of the American Dream” (128).

Mass-marketing grew up alongside television and quickly came to define “the good life” in terms of material goods one could acquire. As economist John Kenneth Galbraith states, marketing inexorably changed the American landscape by creating demand for products that had previously been seen as unnecessary, and by urging people to “keep up with the Joneses.” “Many of the desires of the individual are no longer even evident to him. They become so only as they are synthesized, elaborated, and nurtured by advertising and salesmanship, and these, in turn, have become our most important and talented professions” (2). As was the case with the suburban housing boom, marketing rendered the concept of a material good’s basic necessity or utility relatively meaningless. Instead, advertising instructed the consumer in ways to obtain elevated social status and the outward appearance of success through the acquisition of these goods.

Many scholars of cultural studies recognize that the mass-marketed consumer culture of the 1950s, while projecting a chrome-plated veneer of success and fulfillment,
actually had very little below the surface, short of envy and hedonistic desire. As Daniel
Bell writes, “The world of hedonism is the world of fashion, photography, advertising,
television, travel. It is a world of make-believe in which one lives for expectations, for
what will come rather than what is” (70). For Bell, Americans live under a collective
delusion that acquisitiveness and the pursuit of the ideal suburban life will bring personal
satisfaction. The pursuit is ultimately hollow, however – the ideal forever out of reach.
Packard takes the argument one step further. “In truth,” he writes, “America, under its
gloss of prosperity, is undergoing a significant hardening of the arteries of its social
system at some critical points” (8). As he sees it, the quest for the mythical “good life”
creates social stratification, economic inequities, and loss of the ambitious values Henry
Luce ostensibly advocated.

Such was the world Edward Albee entered after leaving his parents’ home in
1949. He would imbue his early plays with biting critiques of American consumerism
and status-seeking, similar to those of Packard and Bell. His late career plays would be
forged in similar cultural environments. Fresh from the ruthlessly capitalistic Reagan era,
Three Tall Women, for example, highlights prevailing class inequities and prejudices of
the time. Likewise, The Goat’s Martin and Stevie are the quintessential WASP family of
late 1990s dot-com bubble—youthful, vibrant, and nearly consumed by a mediatized cult
of personality. Cultural influences do not tell the whole story, however. Albee’s
childhood as an adopted, yet unwanted son of affluence proved to be the ultimate artistic
crucible.
Edward Franklin Albee III (born Edward Harvey) was born March 12, 1928 to Louise Harvey, in Washington D.C. (his birth father’s name is not known). At two weeks of age, the child was put up for adoption and subsequently taken in by Reed and Frances Albee, a wealthy, childless couple from Larchmont, New York. The Albees were members of an old New York family that had long been in the entertainment business and Reed’s father was the founder of the Keith-Albee chain of vaudeville theatres.

On the surface, Edward’s childhood was all for which any boy could wish. Denied no want or luxury, he lived a life of suburban opulence. C.W.E. Bigsby writes, “With a St. Bernard dog to pull his sleigh in winter and a Rolls Royce to take him around town, the young Albee tended equally to precocity and corpulence” (1). The family estate was grand (the largest in the small town of Larchmont) and contained greenhouses, several dining rooms, a three-car garage, and beachfront access to Long Island Sound (Gussow 29). Also, Reed’s business put the Albees in the company of many famous entertainers. People like Jimmy Durante and Ed Wynn were regular visitors to the house (Amacher 2).

Despite outward appearances, the Albees were an intensely dysfunctional family. Reed was a “small and taciturn” man who provided little affection for his wife, and even less for his son (McCarthy 5). As one Albee biographer wrote, “Reed was a man of little motivation to do much except practice adultery” (Dukes 1). Albee himself commented
on his father's proclivity for infidelity years later: “[Reed] was often nailing the whores to the billiard table at the Lotos Club in New York” (qtd. in Gussow 27). Albee knew, from an early age, that the lavish parties his parents threw and the social engagements they attended ceaselessly in New York were little more than high-profile photo opportunities. In reality, his parents’ relationship was one of grudging co-habitation.

Frances Albee (known primarily as Frankie) was the apparent polar opposite of her husband. Unlike the short, nebbish Reed, Frankie was a tall, vivacious, imposing figure. Every mention of her in biographical materials refers to her stature. Richard Amacher calls her a “tall, imperious [. . .] lady of formidable aspect” (1), and Mel Gussow writes that she was a “valkyrie, Brunhilde towering over Edward and his playmates” (32). A former Bergdorf window model, Frankie was twenty years younger than Reed and was initially looked on with suspicion by several members of the insular Larchmont community. “I can’t say for sure that she was a tramp or that she married him for money,” Albee once commented, “but I suspect so” (qtd. in Gussow 28). As Albee saw it, and later commented on in such plays as *Three Tall Women*, his parents’ marriage was born more out of commerce and political expediency than love.¹

Although seemingly incongruous with their initial desire to adopt Edward, the Albees were almost completely uninterested in being parents. Much of Albee’s childhood was spent in the care of various surrogate parents, from nannies, to coaches, to the family driver. He did not eat dinner with his parents. Instead, most meals were spent in the company of the family’s servants. “I spent most of my time with my nannies or away at summer camp and at school,” Albee once remarked. “I didn’t see those damn
people – my parents – more than six weeks of the year” (qtd. in Markowitz). Reed, who by all accounts was terrified of having an in-depth conversation with his son, even went so far as to hire a fatherly male companion for young Edward. Ostensibly, this man was to have taught Edward about self-defense and physical fitness. Really, though, Reed hoped that, by hiring him, he could avoid having a talk with his son about the facts of life (Gussow 37).

The real reason for the Albees’ adoption of Edward may have been their desire to have a “trophy child” to show off at dinner parties. Indeed, much of Albee’s early childhood was spent sitting alone in his room, waiting for his parents to call him down to a party, only to be sent back upstairs minutes later. When he was brought down, Gussow notes that Albee’s parents always kept him at “a cool distance” as if he were little more than a personal possession (35). Albee echoed this view years later. When discussing his adoption, the playwright remarked, “They bought me. They paid $133.30” as the cost of his “professional services” (qtd. in Gussow 22). If he misbehaved, Frankie would threaten to “return” him, as if he had been purchased in a store. Looking back on his childhood, Albee feels that his parents saw him not as a child to be nurtured, but as a toy to be polished and then stored on a shelf.

The Albees also used Edward’s schooling as a method of disposal/storage, sending him away to a succession of private schools. Feeling perpetually out of place in an academic setting, Albee paid little attention to his schoolwork and was expelled from nearly every school to which he had been sent. There was little love lost. Albee referred to one such school, the Valley Forge Military Academy, as “Valley Forge Concentration
Camp” (qtd. in Bigsby 2) and commented that another “only taught two courses, sadism and masochism” (qtd. in Markowitz). His parents took little interest in his many expulsions and academic peccadilloes, never punishing him, and often not allowing him time to come home before shipping him off to another school. This neglect only made Albee further resent his academic “prisons” because it reinforced the notion that his parents cared nothing for his education. His schooling was merely a means to get the boy out of their house.

During any interview in which his childhood is discussed, Albee is quick to state that his parents never committed any acts of physical abuse. They never beat or spanked him (although the latter job most likely would have fallen to a servant anyway). Indeed, his father paid him almost no attention, negative or otherwise. Instead, Albee suffered “emotional sadism” at the hands of his mother (Dukes 2). Frankie was psychologically abusive, regularly ridiculing Albee for a spectrum of perceived personality flaws, from his artistic aspirations, to his lack of innate athleticism. She would also regularly demean him in front of his playmates. The abuse grew so intolerable that he made a number of attempts to run away. The first, and perhaps most notable, came when Albee was eleven, and he attempted to commandeer the family sailboat and escape across Long Island Sound (Markowitz).

Increasingly, as he grew up, Frankie pressured her son to live the “All-American” life, even forcing him into an engagement (even though he had previously admitted his homosexuality to her). As Albee comments, “That was another part of life: living at home, being the dutiful son, engagement and the rest of it. I knew I was supposed to
become the kind of person they wanted me to be, which meant business or something, turning into a commuter, marriage, two and a half kids. For God’s sake, what did I think I was doing?” (qtd. in Gussow 70). The pursuit of his mother’s ideal was a hollow one, and the clash surrounding it would eventually drive him from the house.

One evening in 1949, after a particularly intense argument with his mother, Albee had had enough. He packed a single suitcase and left the house, intending it to be the last time he ever saw his parents. As he put it years later, “I had to get out of that stultifying, suffocating environment” (qtd. in Markowitz). Purportedly feeling no lingering rage or hope for revenge, Albee viewed his exodus as a welcome liberation. His adulthood (and theatrical apprenticeship) began the moment he left. “I don’t think anyone growing up in a white, upper-middle-class, rich, deeply fascistically Republican family could be said to grow up until he has left,” he once remarked (qtd. in Markowitz). The next ten years proved to be a tremendous learning experience for the young Albee. Living a self-imposed bohemian exile in New York’s Greenwich Village, he worked odd jobs, drank heavily, and began writing in earnest (largely producing poetry and short prose fiction). Less than a decade after leaving home, as a thirtieth birthday present to himself, Albee completed his landmark first play, The Zoo Story.

One need only examine the emptiness of Peter’s outwardly perfect life in The Zoo Story, or the loveless, commerce-oriented marriage of The American Dream’s Mommy and Daddy to find traces of the playwright’s life with Reed and Frances Albee. Thomas Dukes asserts that the Albees most directly fueled their son’s work by exposing him to the “cruelty of the nuclear family that itself is supposed to be the American Dream” (5).
Albee discourages exclusively biographical readings of his plays. In one interview he remarked, “No worthwhile piece of literature is any good if it has to be related to some biographical factor in the author’s life” (qtd. in Krohn & Wasserman 14). He recognizes, however, that his childhood has greatly informed the content of his drama.

*A Distorted Mirror of Nightmares and Dreams: An Albee Style Primer*

From the initial publication of early plays such as *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream*, Albee was lauded as much for the unique stylistic conventions of his work as for its content. Of particular interest to critics and scholars was the playwright’s eclecticism of form and style. Scholar Nelvin Vos writes that Albee’s drama is so powerful because it adeptly combines “Ibsen’s realistic drawing rooms, Strindberg’s expressionism, Chekhov’s juxtaposition of images of despair, Pirandello’s involved paradoxes, and Shaw’s disquisitions” (20). From the surreal symbolism of *The American Dream*, to Virginia Woolf’s claustrophobic naturalism, to *Seascape’s* anthropomorphic lizards, Albee draws from an expansive toolbox in his attempt to craft “aggressive acts against the status quo” (Albee, “Edward Albee: An Interview” 144). In the first published scholarly articulation of Albee’s unique style, Martin Esslin grouped the playwright together with others such as Genet, Beckett, Pinter, and Ionesco as members of what he dubbed “The Theatre of the Absurd.” These playwrights, according to Esslin, employ a number of shared stylistic conventions (such as symbolic characters,
unconventional uses of language, and poetic stage imagery) in service of a belief that life in contemporary society has lost meaning and, thus, become absurd.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “absurd” as something which is “out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical. In modern use, esp. plainly opposed to reason, and hence, ridiculous, silly” (“Absurd” 2). Esslin’s Theatre of the Absurd playwrights view their world as one of disharmony in which one gets “a sense of the senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose” (Esslin 24). Absurd plays express an underlying anxiety that man drifts through an unexamined life in which routine and social convention are used as a means of avoiding personal pain and isolation. As Albee once remarked, “Anybody who doesn’t carry a certain amount of existential angst with them throughout their lives is either a dumb brute or, by choice, insensitive. We must have it. We have to have it” (“Interview With Edward Albee” 130). His plays, like those of his Absurd colleagues, are designed to alert their audiences to a deeply disharmonious human condition.

Esslin writes that the Theatre of the Absurd “castigates, satirically, the absurdity of lives lived unaware and unconscious of ultimate reality. This is the feeling of the deadness and mechanical senselessness of half-unconscious lives” (400). Albee explores this idea by leveling a critique at the American suburbanite. For example, take the following excerpt from The Zoo Story, in which Jerry goads the stuffed-shirt Peter into a territorial confrontation over a park bench:
JERRY. You have everything, and now you want this bench. Are these the things men fight for? Tell me Peter, is this bench, this iron and wood, is this your honor? Can you think of anything more absurd?

PETER. Absurd? Look, I’m not even going to talk to you about honor, or even try to explain it to you... You wouldn’t understand.

JERRY. . . . This is probably the first time in your life you’ve had anything more trying to face than changing your cat’s toilet box.

Stupid! Don’t you have any idea, not even the slightest, what other people need? (44-45)

Here, Jerry attempts to awaken Peter, to make him realize that his idyllic middle-class life of blithe optimism, leisure, wife, children, cats, and parakeets, has isolated him. Peter’s existence of seeming bliss has rendered him emotionally numb and unable to communicate with Jerry in any way other than through banalities or blind rage.

Characters like Jerry search for meaning in a world devoid of “what was once its centre and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed, purposeless – absurd” (Esslin 399). Many of Albee’s characters share this quest. Symbolic characters and “images of non-reason” (Way 31) advance his argument that American acquisitiveness and adherence to surface appearances have created a culture of people left unfulfilled and emotionally bereft. In The American Dream, for example, the Young Man is the very personification of Albee’s critique. An Adonis-like youth, the Young Man admits that, despite his beauty, he has no
talents or passions. Instead, he seeks to fill his emotional void by acquiring as much money as possible.

Another stylistic characteristic shared with the Theatre of the Absurd is what Esslin calls “a radical devaluation of language” (26). Rather than demonstrating meaningful interpersonal connection, language is used as a means of highlighting a character’s inability to communicate and to demonstrate the hollowness of banal social intercourse. Albee’s plays, which Robert Brustein deemed “[works] of linguistic pyrotechnics” (“The Audience, or Who is the Goat?”), employ language along similar lines.

Some of his characters demonstrate semantic prowess at inappropriate times as a way to avoid a painful realization or to defer an uncomfortable confrontation. Take this example from The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? in which Billy tries to come to terms with Martin’s bestial infidelity:

BILLY. Parents fight; I know that; all kids know that. There are good times, and there are rotten ones, and sometimes the blanket is pulled out from under you and . . .

MARTIN. You’re mixing your metaphors.

BILLY. What!?

MARTIN. Never mind; probably not the best time to bring it up. You were saying . . . “There are good times and there are rotten ones”?

BILLY. Thanks.

MARTIN. Welcome.
BILLY. But sometimes the whatever is pulled out from under you.

MARTIN. Rug, I think.

Martin is unable to connect with his son in a meaningful way. Rather than witnessing the pain his “affair” with a goat caused to those he loves, Martin distances himself from the conversation with gratuitous semantic nitpicking.

Albee also uses absurd language in order to lend wholesale criticism of what Brian Way calls “the American Way of Life.” In Albee plays, he writes, “normal human feelings and relationships have been deprived of meaning. The gestures of love, sexual attraction, parental affection, family feeling, and hospitality remain, but the actual feelings which would give the gestures meaning has gone” (35). Possibly the best example of this use of language comes from The American Dream, in which a social worker (Mrs. Barker) has just arrived at Mommy and Daddy’s home to arrange an adoption:

MOMMY. Are you sure you’re comfortable? Won’t you take off your dress?

MRS. BARKER. I don’t mind if I do.

MOMMY. There. You’ll feel a great deal more comfortable.

MRS. BARKER. Well, I certainly do look a great deal more comfortable.

DADDY. I’m going to giggle and blush.

MOMMY. Daddy’s going to giggle and blush. (79)
Here (and in the subsequent suggestion that Daddy has ejaculated at the sight of the undressed Mrs. Barker), middle-class hospitality and social interaction are satirized to the point that they become a meaningless grotesquerie.

According to Esslin, creative use of language, however, should never upstage the creation of meaningful, poetic stage pictures. Writing of Ionesco’s *The Chairs*, Esslin comments that “the poetic content of a powerfully poetic play does not lie in the banal words that are uttered but in the fact that they are spoken to an ever-growing number of empty chairs” (26). Like his Absurdist colleagues, Albee creates powerful, often disquieting stage images in order to produce visceral reactions in his audience. For him, “the reality of vision is more immediate and nearer to the core of experience than any description of objective reality” (Esslin 423). Although his plays are perhaps more cerebral than those of his Theatre of the Absurd counterparts, Albee deftly weaves memorably poetic images throughout his plays.

Two of Albee’s plays provide excellent examples of a jarring stage image or visual “trick” included at a play’s climax to punctuate the playwright’s critique. In the final scene of *The Play About the Baby*, for example, Man and Woman execute “the old blanket trick” (87) in which a bundle containing the titular baby is brought on stage and violently unfurled only to reveal that there is no baby. The audience looks on in horror and is forced to reconsider the play’s reality. Did the baby ever exist? Was Boy and Girl’s innocence genuine? In the closing moments of *The Goat*, Stevie enters the stage “dragging a dead goat. The goat’s throat is cut; the blood is down Stevie’s dress, on her
arms” (109). Even though the goat is, in effect, a home-wrecker, the audience cannot help but feel sympathy for her once her corpse is brought on stage.

Several years after the publication of Esslin’s book, Albee published a response to his inclusion in it. “When I was told, about a year ago,” he writes, “that I was a member in good standing of the Theatre of the Absurd I was deeply offended. I was deeply offended because I had never heard the term before and I immediately assumed that it applied to the theatre uptown – Broadway” (“Which Theatre”). While his opening statement is obviously facetious, it does contain an element of seriousness. He is never content for his work to be pigeonholed into a genre or school, writing that labeling “can be facile and can lead to non-think on the part of the public” (“Which Theatre”). The statement also intimates Albee’s contempt for what he sees as the escapist, mindlessly imitative mainstream commercial theatre.

Albee has always maintained, despite the perceived stigma of the Theatre of the Absurd label, that most of his work consists of “good old fashioned naturalistic plays” (Albee, “Edward Albee” 67). As a self-styled dramatist of the domestic, Albee seeks to bring his critique of the “American scene” to as many people as possible by creating naturalistic settings. “If Waiting For Godot had been set in a living room, nobody would have had any trouble with it. It’s this fucking blasted heath that got in everybody’s way” (Albee, “Edward Albee” 67). William Hutchings echoed the playwright’s comments in his review of Three Tall Women: “With its set of a wealthy bedroom rather than the ominous darkness of the Beckettian void [. . .] Three Tall Women domesticates [Beckett’s] dramatic territories [. . .] They have now been made accessible.” Indeed,
nearly all of Albee’s plays from *The American Dream* to *The Goat* take place in a setting instantly recognizable to his audience, the living room.

What sets Albee apart from a number of other playwrights of the Absurd, is his ability to deftly combine the absurd and the naturalistic, the symbolic and the concrete. His protagonists, for instance, are “at one and the same time distinctly themselves and just as distinctly Everyone Else,” writes scholar Anne Paolucci (46). *The Zoo Story*’s Peter is just as much a symbol of suburban self-deception and superficiality as he is a fully formed man, out for a leisurely read in the park. In any given play, Albee’s dialogue also oscillates between dreamily absurd patter and gritty, realistic conversation. Take *Virginia Woolf*, in which George’s eerie, repetitive, otherworldly chants of “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” (241) are given counterpoint by the play’s “full-bodied distillation of common American speech” (Clurman 77). Albee’s drama presents its audience with a “mirror” reflecting society’s “nightmares and dreams” (Esslin 22). His plays show a world that is as familiar to its viewers as it is disquieting and disharmonious.

*The End of the Beginning: A Road Map*

Despite being the recipient of three Pulitzer Prizes and numerous Tony and Drama Desk awards, Albee has not always been met with a warm critical reception. As Steven Drukman suggests, “The problem has been that critics have not kept with him. As other American playwrights have been allowed room to grow, granted laissez passer to
mix genres within plays or jump from genre to genre as they develop, Albee was issued a moving violation” (“Won’t You”). Throughout his career, Albee’s plays have been met with a spectrum of critical opinion from delight to disgust. Often a given work will provoke harshly contradictory responses from reviewers. As an example, take this brief exchange from an Albee interview given shortly after the original production of *The Lady From Dubuque*:

PATRICIA DE LA FUENTE. What about *The Lady From Dubuque*?

That has been classified as your best work since *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

ALBEE. It was also called, by John Simon, the worst play ever written by anybody, ever. It’s one of the two. (Albee, “Edward Albee: An Interview”)

Few other playwrights provoke the same kind of passionate, polarized response. Even more striking is the nearly complete lack of critical middle ground. Reviewers either love Albee or hate him. As another illustration, witness Brustein’s review of *The Goat*, in which he praises Albee’s artistic prowess, remarking that the playwright had “achieved the Miltonic goal [. . .] [The play] manages to justify the ways of ‘deviant’ man to God” (“The Audience”). He then goes on to compare Albee’s work favorably to that of Racine. In a review of the same production, however, another critic warned potential audience members that they “will simply be perplexed and sickened by this self-indulgent mess” (Gardner). If anything, the controversy and diversity of opinion surrounding Albee’s plays suggest a sustained public interest in the playwright’s work. Although
many of his more recent plays remain relatively unexamined in significant scholarly works (few compilations of critical essays or book-length analytical studies discuss plays later than *The Lady From Dubuque*), the Albee discourse is a vital one.

Nevertheless, some critics assert that the playwright’s work is no longer relevant and that his more recent plays are blindly re-treading ground explored forty-five years ago. One reviewer, for instance, wrote of *The Play About the Baby*, “[Albee] seems to be running on empty in this pretentious recycling of worn-out themes [. . .] with theatre-of-the-absurd devices that grew stale years ago” (“The 2001 Best and Worst”). Hopefully this thesis will be an effective refutation of these critics. Albee’s plays speak powerfully to an America still struggling with the negative effects of consumerism and acquisitiveness. To see that this is so, one need only be reminded of this country’s ongoing debate over issues such as President Bush’s tax cuts or the so-called “Ownership Society.” Those who question the continued relevance of Albee’s portrayal of the American Dream (from his play of the same name) as a charming, stunningly attractive (if totally vacuous) boy need look no further than the images of deified celebrities that line supermarket magazine racks.

In addition, I would argue that Albee’s dramaturgical focus has made an important shift away from using symbolic characters to critique American cultural aspirations and preoccupations, such as financial acquisition, the ideal family unit, and suburban normalcy. Instead, Albee’s later plays depict realistic individuals who must forge identities despite the pressure to join the pursuit of these aspirations.
Subsequent chapters of this work will be devoted to analysis of the development of Albee’s oeuvre. In Chapter II, I will critically examine several seminal pieces from Albee’s early career – The Zoo Story, The American Dream, and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. These iconic Albee creations represent the thematic and stylistic foundation of the playwright’s work. Through a combination of scholarly survey and original analysis of style and content, I will present the ways in which Albee assaults what he sees as the myth of the American Dream. This section will compare the ways that these plays constitute the American Dream and will explore notions of protective self-delusion present in all three.

In the Absurdist The Zoo Story, Albee “attacks the very foundation of American optimism” (Esslin 312). Starting off innocently enough as the story of an Everyman’s Sunday afternoon trip to the park, the play quickly becomes a darkly comic exploration of middle-class vacuity and the myth of suburban bliss. In the play, the sociopathic Jerry is disillusioned by the state of American society. Unable to forge and maintain meaningful relationships (even with a dog), and scornful of suburban America’s blithe indifference to anything past its white picket fences, Jerry sets upon the “All-American” Peter in an effort to wake him up to the living death of his myopic, materialistic existence.

The American Dream continues Albee’s assault on American consumer culture. A more symbolist, non-naturalistic work than The Zoo Story, The American Dream paints a grotesque picture of the American family. It “investigates the materialism, opportunism and hypocrisy built into the kind of marriage which is used as a social
device for passing on property and producing children” (Stenz 25). In the play, Mommy and Daddy live together in a marriage that is largely a financial arrangement. There are no real feelings communicated between the two – only empty banalities and material desires. Their child, the “bumble of joy,” is systematically dismembered because of its failure to bring Mommy “satisfaction,” as if it were a defective toaster. Finally, the distorted American Dream is embodied by the Young Man, a physically beautiful, yet spiritually empty potential replacement for the “bumble.” Through the use of symbolic characters and caricatured language, Albee highlights the meaninglessness of Americans’ social interactions and examines the moral bankruptcy of their acquisitiveness.

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is widely considered to be Albee’s artistic high water mark. “It is, in Albee’s repertory, what Long Day’s Journey Into Night is in O’Neill’s,” writes Anne Paolucci. “The aberrations, the horrors, the mysteries are woven into the fabric of a perfectly normal setting so as to create the illusion of total realism, against which the abnormal and the shocking have even greater impact” (45). George, the frustrated academic, and Martha, his imperious, ambitious wife, are fully-formed characters inhabiting a realistic world. Beneath the surface of the play’s realism, however, lie “elements of dream and allegory” (Esslin 313) personified by the couple’s illusory son. George and Martha use this dream child as a way to avoid confronting reality (e.g. the emptiness of Martha’s financial ambitions, the couple’s codependence, their inability to communicate genuine feelings). Finally, at the play’s conclusion, after a purgative night of linguistic jousting and mutually-inflicted emotional abuse, they symbolically kill the child as a way to abandon their illusions.
After my discussion of Albee’s early plays, the rest of this work will be devoted to in-depth, textual analysis of three of Albee’s recent pieces – *Three Tall Women*, *The Play About the Baby*, and *The Goat, or, Who is Sylvia?*. Since there is little significant critical discussion of these works, apart from production reviews, the last three chapters of the piece will consist largely of my own observations and analyses of the plays. Of special concern will be the ways in which the playwright’s characters formulate identity while struggling with distinctly American notions of financial success, cultural superiority, and the idealized nuclear family. I will also revisit the conflict of self-deception and reality, which Albee employs as an overriding theme in his work.

These three later plays provide an apt counterpoint to the early works. Albee writes retrospectively, as a man looking back over his life’s work, and imbues his later creations with the perspective of age and experience. In *Three Tall Women*, the play for which the playwright received his most recent Pulitzer, A (an infirm, elderly woman who is based on Albee’s own mother) is attended by B (her middle-aged nurse) and C (a twenty-something estate lawyer). Through half-recalled memories, sentimental monologues, and off-color jokes, A reflects on how she became the person she is. In the second Act, after A has had a stroke, her character is divided between the three actresses, each becoming her at different stages in her life.

Although the splintering of A’s character is stylized, Albee maintains the play’s realism. By having three different actresses play the same character, the playwright allows the audience to visualize the evolution of A’s character, from idealistic youth, to embittered, emotionally numb crone. Along the way, Albee examines the moral
compromises the character makes as she strives for elevated status and a life of financial ease. She could very well be a realistic, end-of-life version of The American Dream’s Mommy. A is a character for whom the party is over. She is a lonely woman, longing for the escape of death, and regretting her pursuit of a materialistic American Dream.

The Play About The Baby, Albee’s next play after Women, returns to the stylistic territory of The American Dream. The two main characters, Boy and Girl, are a youthful, cartoon version of Adam and Eve: naked, boisterously innocent, and ostensibly completely happy. They have a new baby and life could not be sweeter. Enter Man and Woman who profess that they have arrived to take the baby away. As I will explore in my chapter discussing this play, the baby soon becomes a symbol of the younger couple’s (and by extension, America’s) shallow, wide-eyed optimism. In addition, Boy and Girl’s entire notion of identity and personal fulfillment is constructed around being parents to this ideal child.

At the end of the play, Man and Woman steal the younger couple’s baby and then convince them that it never existed in the first place. Boy and Girl can no longer drift through life being blindly optimistic. Comparisons to Virginia Woolf are inevitable. Although Albee assures the audience that this time, the baby is real, the message is similar: in order to grow and formulate an authentic identity, one must abandon protective self-delusions.

Albee’s most recent play, The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? has proven to be an enigma to some critics. A veritable combo platter of styles and thematic concerns, the story concerns Martin, a Pritzker Prize-winning architect, and his bestial extra-marital
affair with the titular goat. After confiding in his friend Ross about his inter-species affair, the truth is revealed to Martin’s wife, Stevie, and their seemingly perfect marriage dissolves before the audience’s eyes.

On one level, The Goat represents a decidedly twenty-first century Albee critique of the American family unit. Martin and Stevie’s marriage appears to be perfect. At the beginning of the play they lovingly trade playful linguistic barbs and act the picture of married bliss. They even have a homosexual son (of which they remind anyone who will listen), a caricatured aspiration of the modern hip, liberal family. When Martin’s infidelity is revealed, however, the audience sees that their bliss was a mythical one – their playful banter concealed an inability to communicate honestly with one another and a basic misunderstanding of each other’s emotional needs.

At a more fundamental level, The Goat asks its audience how Americans define “normal” behavior. Further, it explores the notion of whether or not there is a place in society for a man like Martin – a man desperate for a house, a beautiful wife, two and a half kids, but who finds true inter-creature connection outside the norm.

When viewed as a unified whole, Albee’s drama is as much a product of the 1950s consumerist milieu as it was of the playwright’s childhood with Reed and Frankie Albee. From The American Dream’s comment on the relative depravity of acquisitiveness to Three Tall Women’s examination of a life regretted, Albee’s plays confront the perils of collective American aspirations, be they financial or familial. They speak to an America which has been taught to believe that the suburban “good life” is the solution to life’s problems. Ultimately, however, the pursuit of this dream leaves
Albee’s characters emotionally bankrupt and indifferent to the suffering of those around them. Still, they deceive themselves into believing that everything is “peachy keen.” What else do Albee’s characters lose in the pursuit of American cultural ideals? How have the definitions of these aspirations changed over time? Throughout his career, Albee has been struggling with these basic questions. This thesis will address these questions, pay attention where it is overdue, and provide a holistic perspective on a vital, ever-evolving dramaturgy.
NOTES

1. Echoes of Albee’s parents are also felt in *The American Dream*. At some point in their marriage, Reed and Frankie took to calling one another “Mommy” and “Daddy,” much like the characters in that play (Gussow 27).
CHAPTER II: THE EARLY PLAYS

Until the winter of 1958, Edward Albee’s dramatic oeuvre consisted solely of a play called Aliqueen, a sex-farce he wrote (and which his mother promptly threw away) at the age of 12 (Green). Less than a month before his thirtieth birthday, after ten years spent drifting between menial jobs and tenement apartments, Albee sat down at his rickety kitchen table and began to write. Over the next three weeks the young playwright obsessively pounded the keys of the ancient typewriter he had “liberated” from his place of employment (Gussow 91). The end product was The Zoo Story. For Albee, the process of writing the play was a transformative one. As he recalls:

Something very, very interesting happened with the writing of that play. I didn’t discover suddenly that I was a playwright; I discovered that I had been a playwright all my life, but I didn’t know it because I hadn’t written plays [. . .] And so when I wrote The Zoo Story, I was able to start practicing my ‘nature’ fully. (qtd. in Roudané, Understanding 3)

From there, “the words never stopped” (Gussow 91). Over the next four years, Albee wrote five plays that became international hits, The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith, The American Dream, The Sandbox, and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Despite initial controversy, the plays this chapter deals with (The Zoo Story, The American Dream, and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?) were all met with great popular and critical success. To wit, Zoo’s initial Off-Broadway run played to sold out houses for more than a year. The original Broadway production of Woolf was so popular that
additional performances per week, and a second tandem cast, were added. While
generally laudatory, early criticism of these works is relatively superficial and provides
little substantive examination of the plays’ themes or symbolism. Take, for example,
Wendell Harris’s review of the original production of *The Zoo Story*, in which the critic
remarks, “The revelation of *The Zoo Story* is merely that eccentrics on the verge of
suicide are more interesting than the ordinary [. . .] citizen” (121). Nevertheless, there
was a consensus among critics that the young playwright had something to say and that
his star was on the rise. As one reviewer commented, “One is encouraged to expect
many more good things from Mr. Albee” (Malcolm 76).

While *Zoo* and *Dream* had been Off-Broadway successes, *Woolf* put Albee on the
map. Of the original Broadway production, one reviewer wrote “[Albee’s] new work
[. . .] towers over the common run of contemporary plays. It marks a further gain for a
young writer becoming a major figure of our stage” (Taubman). The play, the original
production of which won six Tony awards, cemented Albee’s place in the vanguard of
American theatre.

*The Zoo Story*, *The American Dream*, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
mark Albee as the quintessential “angry young man” of the American theatre. Fiercely
polemic and politically-minded, the playwright’s formative canon is confrontational and
unflinching. In a *New York Times* piece written after the original Off-Broadway opening
of *The Zoo Story*, Albee comments that he is interested in “digging so deep under the
skin that it becomes practically intolerable. I want the audience to run out of the
theatre—but to come back and see the play again” (qtd. in Gelb). From *The Zoo Story’s*
harsh indictment of bourgeois emotional indifference to *The American Dream*’s grotesque satire of American consumerism, Albee’s early plays force their audiences to face the “rage and daily despair beneath the surface of middle-class life,” and to make a change (Green).

It is here, at the beginning of the playwright’s career, that Albee develops his critique of the “American scene” and employs a number of thematic and stylistic devices that will come to be the hallmarks of his work. *Zoo* and *Dream* both use symbolic characters and absurd situations to attack an increasingly commercialized America that has lost its moral compass. In *Dream*, for example, Albee creates a nameless family for whom individual worth has become commodified. Theirs is a world in which a child’s value is measured by how much material satisfaction it gives its mother. For these characters, acquisitiveness has led to a sterile, amoral existence in which values such as duty, courtesy, and familial affection have been rendered meaningless.

The early plays also mark the origins of Albee’s artistic preoccupation with protective self-deception as the one consistent American value. This self-deception is especially apparent in *Woolf*, in which the two main characters, George and Martha, have created an imaginary child for themselves as a way to cope with personal disappointments and intense sadness. Although the illusory child may have shielded the couple from a degree of pain, it has left them bitter and unable to communicate with one another on a fundamental level.

Finally, Albee explores what *Zoo*’s Jerry labels “the teaching emotion,” the combination of cruelty and kindness as a means of achieving meaningful connection.
between two people (36). Both Zoo and Woolf’s stage action culminates in a violent act. In Zoo, the play closes with Jerry’s murder/suicide at the hands of a terrified Peter. In Woolf, George perpetrates an imaginary murder by figuratively killing “sonny Jim.” In each case, the play’s violence serves to dispel a character’s illusions and to allow him/her to engage fully in a life they had previously drifted through asleep.

As I examine three plays that established Albee as one of America’s foremost dramatists the ways in which he constitutes American cultural aspirations are of special interest. As the playwright once said, “The myth of the American Dream, if you’re an American writer, is not only your cultural background but your set of paints and brushes” (qtd. in Roudané, “A Playwright Speaks” 196). While significant scholarly attention has already been paid to these works, it remains important to examine them within the context of this thesis. Albee’s constitution of the American Dream in the early plays informs the way characters in the later work grapple with cultural aspirations which are largely residual products of the consumerist 1950s. Only when we gain a holistic perspective on the work can we appreciate thematic links between Jerry and Man, for example, or Mommy and A.

The Zoo Story

The set-up is idyllic. Peter, “a thoroughly respectable young executive,” sits by himself, enjoying a Sunday afternoon reading in the park (Malcolm 76). The play’s seeming serenity does not last long, however. As Anita Stenz writes, “Without warning,
on a pleasant summer’s day, the comfortable, self-reflecting world of [this] man shatters all around him” (6). Indeed, by play’s end, Peter will have taken a man’s life and had his own inexorably altered.

In the play’s stage directions, Peter is described as “a man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses. Although he is moving into middle age, his dress and manner would suggest a man younger” (11). In every way, Peter is an Everyman, a “representative of an upper-middle-class world which Albee will assault often throughout his career” (Roudané, Understanding 30). He has the appearance of the perfect life: an apartment in Manhattan’s east 70s, a homemaker wife, two daughters, two parakeets, and an executive position on Madison Ave. For Albee, Peter is a symbol of the American bourgeoisie: a man, average in every way, whose life could have been ripped from the pages of a magazine.

The play’s protagonist, Jerry, is created in diametric opposition to Peter. Whereas Peter possesses an average, yet fit physique, Jerry’s shows signs of deterioration. His “once trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was” (11). Instead of having Peter’s seeming Ozzie Nelson-esque vitality, Jerry’s “fall from physical grace” suggests “a great weariness” (11). As we soon find out, Jerry shares none of Peter’s familial or creature comforts, instead living as a transient in a decrepit brownstone.

From the play’s inception, these two seemingly disparate lives are primed for a collision. They meet in Central Park, a cultural no-man’s land between Peter’s east-side
paradise and Jerry’s west-side prison. The play’s crowning achievement, however, is that, rather than focusing exclusively on their differences, Albee “presents them as sharing a profound sense of isolation” (Roudané, Understanding 35). The primary difference between the two is simply that Jerry realizes his own alienation, while Peter’s lies below a placid veneer of middle-class bliss.

Jerry lives in a “laughably small room” adjoining countless other similar rooms in an upper west side roominghouse (22). Although he knows bits and pieces about his neighbors—the “colored queen,” the Puerto Rican family, and the lady who “cries all the time”—he has no real interaction with them (22). His existence is a solitary one typified by his short catalog of worldly possessions, which includes, among other things, several empty picture frames and a pack of pornographic playing cards. He has no friendships to speak of and a complete inability to achieve intimacy with another person. When discussing his past sexual exploits, he remarks, “I wonder if it’s sad that I never see the little ladies more than once. I’ve never been able to have sex with, or, how is it put? . . . make love to anybody more than once . . . And now; oh, I do love the little ladies; really, I love them. For about an hour” (25). His relationships with these women are purely sexual. He makes no meaningful emotional connection with them—certainly nothing worth memorializing in one of his empty picture frames.

Jerry’s attitude about American life is characterized by imagery of confinement. From the discussion of his hive-like roominghouse to his story about the play’s titular zoo, Jerry paints a picture of a society in which people are trapped and separated from
one another by socio-economic and interpersonal barriers. The zoo, in fact, provides the ultimate symbolic model for human (non)interaction.

JERRY. I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way the animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn’t a fair test, what with everyone separated from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But if it’s a zoo, that’s the way it is. (40)

For Jerry, American life is a zoo, and he an animal trapped in it. So desperate is his need to escape his isolation that he sets upon Peter, a complete stranger, and begins to talk with him. As Lisa Siefker Bailey writes, “Jerry carries with him a need to tell stories in the same way he keeps the picture frames empty in his apartment. If he can just fill the need, fill the frames, he can make a connection that will overshadow the alienation of his existence” (35). Peter, a “nice, married man with two daughters,” is an ideal target for this connection (Albee, Zoo 17).

The young publishing executive is a representative of a culture that, in effect, denies Jerry’s existence. For Peter, reality is defined by images presented on television and in TIME advertisements. Jerry’s description of his ghastly landlady astounds him.

PETER. It’s so . . . unthinkable. I find it hard to believe that people such as that really are.

JERRY. (Lightly mocking) It’s for reading about, isn’t it?

PETER. Yes.
JERRY. And fact is better left to fiction. You’re right, Peter. (28)

In a worldview dominated by an idyllic family life and a comfortable economic existence, such ugliness is unimaginable to Peter. In effect, Peter is a manifestation of what Albee calls “the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen” (The American Dream 54). He, like his bourgeois brethren, have become blind to life on the other side of the park.

In an increasingly desperate attempt to forge a connection with Peter and to wake him up to the emptiness of his existence, Jerry launches into the allegorical “STORY OF JERRY AND THE DOG” (30). Over the course of the story, in which Jerry tries to assuage the anger of his landlady’s dog, he first attempts to befriend the dog (unsuccessfully) and then resorts to poisoning it. When the beast becomes gravely ill, however, Jerry realizes that he has true affection for it.

JERRY. I loved the dog now, and I wanted him to love me. I had tried to love, and I had tried to kill, and both had been unsuccessful by themselves . . . It’s just that . . . it’s just that if you can’t deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS! . . . And where better, where ever better to communicate one single, simple-minded idea than in an entrance hall? . . . than with A DOG.

Just that; a dog. (34-35)

As Rose Zimbardo suggests, Jerry and the Dog present “a perfect model of most human relationships” (48). Only through engagement, regardless of its relative violence, can a connection be forged. Whereas before Jerry felt that “animals are indifferent to me . . .
like people” (30), now he has a true relationship with another being. “During that twenty seconds or two hours that we looked into each other’s face,” he remarks, “we made contact” (34). For at least a short while, Jerry ceased to be alone.

Peter is still unwilling to accept any affinity with Jerry and angrily rejects the story, exclaiming, “I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANY MORE. I don’t understand you, or your landlady, or her dog” (37). After all, if he did acknowledge the truth of Jerry’s story, he would also have to accept his own isolation, his own sterile distance from his wife and children, his own inability to feel.

Jerry realizes, as he did with the dog, that kindness is not enough to make a connection with Peter. In order to force Peter to face his illusions, a violent act is necessary. He begins shoving Peter, taking more of the bench for himself. He goads Peter, ridiculing his middle-class vacuity. “You fight, you miserable bastard; fight for that bench; fight for your parakeets; fight for your cats, fight for your two daughters; fight for your wife; fight for your manhood, you pathetic vegetable” (47). Jerry urges Peter to engage, to shed his death-in-life existence.

Jerry throws a knife at Peter’s feet and browbeats him into picking it up. A terrified Peter backs away, holding the knife outstretched, at which point Jerry lunges forward, impaling himself. As he dies, he says to a hysterical, weeping Peter, “You won’t be coming back here any more, Peter; you’ve been dispossessed. You’ve lost your bench, but you’ve defended your honor. And Peter, I’ll tell you something now; you’re not really a vegetable; it’s all right, you’re an animal” (49). Finally, a true connection between the two men has been made. As Zimbardo writes, “Jerry dies for Peter. He dies
to save Peter’s soul from death by spiritual starvation” (52). For the first time, Peter has connected with someone at a visceral level and has begun to question the wisdom of mindlessly pursuing a life defined by advertising’s version of success. He is finally alive.

Bailey has labeled Jerry’s murder/suicide a “metatheatrical shock effect” (42). By forcing Peter to kill Jerry, Albee creates a vivid moment of stage violence that will be imprinted indelibly on his audience. “Not only has Jerry succeeded in implanting his story in Peter’s memory, but Albee has used The Zoo Story to duplicate the experience in the minds of his audience” (42). The hope is that the audience will be forced to re-examine its own values as Peter did. Ultimately, the playwright wants to “upset the audience enough that there will be a change” (Albee qtd. in Lask).

Some early reviewers criticized Zoo as being overly pessimistic or nihilistic. In a review of the original production (which was double-billed with Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape) one critic wrote, “Nothing of enduring value is said in either play. Each of them captures the dismal mood that infects many writers today” (Atkinson). Such a reading of Zoo suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the play. The playwright himself once commented that “The Zoo Story is neither nihilistic nor pessimistic. My hero is not a beatnik and he is not insane. He is over-sane. Though he dies, he passes on an awareness of life to the other character in the play; the play, therefore is obviously not a denial of life” (qtd. in Gelb). Indeed, Jerry’s death, though tragic, suggests, optimistically, that communication is possible if only we choose to stand up and fight for our bench.
If *The Zoo Story* represents Albee’s first volley into the world of American consumerism, *The American Dream* is all-out war. In the play, the playwright focuses on an American culture in which the Bible has been replaced with the Sears catalog. As in *Zoo*, Albee uses *Dream* to implicate his audience. “If Dostoevsky reveals the idiot in all of us,” writes Geri Trotta, “Albee unmasks the monstrous in our everyday selves” (44). Indeed, *Dream* provides scathing commentary on a society in which a mother only cares for her child if it brings her “satisfaction,” and in which the American Dream itself is revealed to be little more than a beautifully wrapped package with nothing inside.

The primary characters of the drama are Mommy and Daddy, a married couple living in a city apartment. Theirs is an “antiseptic family, whose teeth are obviously cleaned twice a year and whose souls were picked clean so long ago that no further brushing is necessary” (Kerr). From the beginning of the play, we see that their lives are consumed by the trite and the unimportant. Take this speech, in which Mommy enthusiastically recounts the tale of her trip to the store to buy a hat:

MOMMY. And then they showed me one that I did like. It was a lovely little hat, and I said, “Oh, this is a lovely little hat; I’ll take this hat; oh my, it’s lovely. What color is it?” And they said, “Why, this is beige; isn’t it a lovely little beige hat?” And I said, “Oh, it’s just lovely.”

And so I bought it. (59)
Her repetitive logorrhea continues for more than a page. Mommy is not a thoughtful human being but rather a mindless consumer. Here, Albee highlights the inanity of middle-class discourse that is increasingly centered on commerce and the acquisition of goods.

Emasculated and ineffectual to the point that even a simple maintenance call to the building supervisor is a chore, Daddy is the picture of a man disengaged from society and those around him.

MOMMY. Daddy doesn’t want to sleep with anyone. Daddy’s been sick.

DADDY. I’ve been sick. I don’t even want to sleep in the apartment.

MOMMY. You see? I told you.

DADDY. I just want to get everything over with. (70)

Perhaps cognizant of his wife’s vapidity, Daddy feels powerless to change the course of his life. As such, he becomes complicit in consumerism and moral decay.

Mommy and Daddy’s marriage exhibits no signs of love. It has been stripped of all genuine affection or mutual concern. In place of a loving partnership is a marriage that is little more than prostitution: a grotesque financial arrangement. “I have a right to live off you,” Mommy snipes at Daddy, “because I married you, and because I used to let you get on top of me and bump your uglies; and I have a right to all of your money when you die” (67). Mommy suggests, however, that the relationship no longer even includes the physical intimacy inherent in the agreement.
When the two actually express affection for one another, it rings hollow. Take this example in which Daddy assures Mommy that she will always have enough money on which to support herself, should anything happen to him:

DADDY. At any rate, you’re well provided for.

MOMMY. You’re my sweet Daddy; that’s very nice.

DADDY. I love my Mommy. (68)

Additionally, the only time such terms of endearment appear is when Mommy’s consumerist needs are being met by one of the other characters.

The third member of the family is Grandma--Mommy’s mother who lives with the couple. Throughout the play Mommy and Daddy speak to her rudely and treat her in a generally deplorable manner. She is required to do many of the household chores, including “the cooking and the housework, polishing the silver, moving the furniture” (67). In Mommy and Daddy’s household, the natural order is reversed. Rather than demonstrating care for Grandma, the offspring expect the elderly woman to “earn her keep” and take care of the house (67). Their sense that everyone in a society (or family) must be commercially productive has led to a decline in filial duty and respect.

Grandma is the one character in the play that is untouched by greed and acquisitiveness. Clear-headed and forthright, she witnesses the moral decrepitude around her but can find no refuge.

GRANDMA. When you get old, you can’t talk to people because people snap at you. When you get so old, people talk to you that way. That’s why you become deaf, so you won’t be able to hear people talking to
you that way. And that’s why you go and hide under the covers of the big soft bed, so you won’t feel the house shaking from people talking to you that way. That’s why old people die, eventually. (65)

Shown contempt by Mommy and Daddy, Grandma provides a thematic counterpoint to the couple. As Lee Baxandall writes, “Three generations comprise Albee’s archetypal family: *Then*, the epoch of a still-dynamic national ethic and vision; *Now*, a phase which breaks into several tangents of decay; and *Nowhere*, a darkly prophesied future generation” (81). Grandma is a representative of Baxandall’s “then” generation; she remembers a time before America’s descent into consumerism but now must content herself with offering commentary on the current state of affairs.

Once the play’s characters are established, much of the rest of the play concerns Mommy and Daddy’s adoption of a child that they term a “bumble of joy” (97). The story of the bumble is told by Grandma to Mrs. Barker, a representative of the Bye Bye Adoption agency who comes to call on the family. She begins the story by telling Mrs. Barker:

```
GRANDMA. The woman, who was very much like Mommy, said that they wanted a bumble of their own, but that the man, who was very much like Daddy, couldn’t have a bumble; and the man, who was very much like Daddy, said that yes, they had wanted a bumble of their own, but that the woman, who was very much like Mommy, couldn’t have one, and that now they wanted to buy something very much like a bumble. (98)
```
Albee equates Mommy and Daddy’s emotional sterility with reproductive sterility. Unable to create and care for a life of their own, the couple seeks not to adopt, but to purchase a child. The child, or “something very much like” it, is less a person than a consumer good.

Like any store-bought item, Mommy and Daddy demand consumer “satisfaction” from the bumble. When the child achieves normal infant developmental milestones such as crying or making eye contact with a parent, Mommy becomes annoyed and begins systematically mutilating it.

GRANDMA. But then, it began to develop an interest in its you-know-what.

MRS. BARKER. In its you-know-what! Well! I hope they cut its hands off at the wrists!

GRANDMA. Well, yes, they did that eventually. But first they cut off its you-know-what.

MRS. BARKER. A much better idea! (100)

Rather than showing their child care and tenderness, Mommy and Daddy treat the bumble as if it were a malfunctioning home appliance. According to Brian Way, “Albee has given us a fable of his society, where all the capabilities for connection—eyes to see, sexual organs with which to love, hands to touch, and tongue to speak—are destroyed, and the victim of the socializing process of the American Way of Life [. . .] dies” (36). Albee’s America is a society in which a child’s worth has been quantified in terms of the ways in which it serves a parent’s (or buyer’s) own materialistic needs.
Later in the play, another visitor arrives at the apartment—The Young Man. He is a beautiful youth, with a “vacant smile copied directly from any commercial or four-color magazine layout you like best” (Kerr). With little prompting, he comments on his own appearance. “Clean-cut, Midwest farm boy type,” he remarks, “almost insultingly good-looking in a typical American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful smile” (107). After considering him for a moment, Grandma eagerly labels him “the American Dream” (108).

Behind his statuesque exterior, however, lies an emotionally barren individual. He tells Grandma, “It’s that I have no talents at all, except what you see . . . my person, my body, my face. In every other way I am incomplete, and I must therefore compensate” (113). Later, he continues, “I no longer have the capacity to feel anything. I have no emotions” (115). He is an embodiment of Albee’s critique of American cultural aspirations. Devoid of feelings, abilities, or meaningful relationships, The Young Man drifts from place to place and makes money any way he can in a vain attempt to fill his spiritual void.

At the end of the play, Grandma realizes that The Young Man is exactly what Mommy and Daddy were looking for—a vacuous, defect-less version of the bumble—and gets Mrs. Barker to pass him off as a new adoptee. Grandma knows that her time with the family is over. Before turning him over to Mrs. Barker, Grandma asks for The Young Man’s help in moving out of the apartment. Ruby Cohn suggests that her exodus represents a symbolic death of the values for which she stood. “The American Dream leads but to the grave,” Cohn writes, “and Grandma, accepting her fate, goes out in
style—escorted by a handsome swain whose gallantry replaces feeling” (148). Her disappearance goes virtually unnoticed by the family, which has already become enamored of their new bumble.

In the end, nothing is learned by the play’s characters. For Mommy and Daddy, the old is forgotten and the new happily embraced. Grandma’s final speech of the play, however, suggests that theirs is a temporary, illusory happiness. “So let’s leave things as they are right now,” she says, “while everybody’s happy . . . while everybody’s got what he wants . . . or everybody’s got what he thinks he wants” (127). Endless and seemingly inescapable, Mommy and Daddy’s lives mirror the cycle of American consumerism. As the playwright once said, “Abundance produces emptiness, satisfaction unhappiness, and communication ends only in isolation” (qtd. in Lask).

*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

In an op-ed piece written before the original Broadway opening of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* Albee commented that “this play is going to be the ‘big test’ for me, but I don’t know why” (“Wants”). The play, his first full-length, and his first on Broadway, was met with great expectation by a theatrical press which had come to know the young playwright as an Off-Broadway maverick. Critical response was stunning and diverse. One critic called the play “a wry and electric night at the theater” (Taubman), while another referred to it as “a calculated exercise in depraved obscenity” (Chapman). In later days, a number of critics have labeled Woolf “A Long Night’s Journey Into Day.”
Indeed, this play, which introduced many Americans to Edward Albee for the first time, stands as the greatest artistic success of Albee’s early career. In many ways it is a mature, thematic culmination of his previous work that marks the end of the first phase of his oeuvre. Woolf provides a subtle examination of what is lost in the pursuit of the American Dream and asks its audience to face the terror of living a life free from illusions.

Martha, Woolf’s formidable leading lady, is alternately frustrated and disappointed with what her life has become. As she looks around her home in the play’s opening scene, she exclaims, “What a dump” (3). More importantly, she is disappointed with her husband, George, whom she denigrates whenever she has the opportunity. “What a cluck you are,” she tells him (3). Later, she comments, “you make me puke” (13). As we soon find, however, Martha’s dissatisfaction with George reflects an underlying self-loathing. Martha is The American Dream’s Mommy made flesh. While her marital aims were not nearly as materialistically self-serving—she did not just hope to “mahwy a wich old man”—Martha has “wittingly sought her identity and self-esteem in the person and life of the man she married and in the career she planned for him” (Stenz 40). Patronized by her father and given a girls’ school education that left her woefully unprepared to create a meaningful professional life of her own, Martha has wagered her own self-worth on the success of her husband.

Much like Dream’s Young Man, Martha seeks money, recognition and power as a way to compensate for her own emotional inadequacy. Near the end of the play’s first act, Martha outlines what her hopes had been for her husband and how he had failed to
live up to them. When she, the daughter of a college president, met George, a young professor in the school’s history department, she became enamored of him and saw him as a potential protégé for her father. George’s ambition did not match hers, however, and he failed to advance beyond the position of Associate Professor.

MARTHA. He didn’t have any . . . personality, you know what I mean?

Which was disappointing to Daddy, as you can imagine. So, here I am, stuck with this flop . . . this BOG in the History Department . . . who’s married to the President’s daughter, who’s expected to be somebody, not just some nobody, some bookworm, somebody who’s so damn contemplative, he can’t make anything out of himself, somebody without the guts to make anybody proud of him. (85)

Rather than create an authentic, independent identity for herself, Martha becomes hopelessly dependent on her husband. Her inclusion of herself in the narrative as “the President’s daughter” intimates that her status and personal success are the focus of the story, not George’s career. When he fails to live up to her expectations, she fails by extension and, as a result, she lashes out.

George is an intellectual and a student of history. He is, as Martha asserts, passive and contemplative, and he lingers on events, analyzing past actions. As C.W.E. Bigsby writes, he is a “defeated liberal who has largely opted out of a world whose values he does not share” (Albee 49). He is also a career academic, a choice of which he seems to question the wisdom. At one point, he remarks, “I am a Doctor. A.B. M.A. PH.D. . . . ABMAPHID! Abmaphid has been variously described as a wasting disease of
the frontal lobes, and as a wonder drug. It is actually both” (37). Although George feels that his life has stagnated, to an extent, he refuses to compromise his integrity by becoming mindlessly ambitious, as his wife would like.

GEORGE. Martha’s father expects his . . . staff . . . to cling to the walls of this place, like the ivy . . . to come here and grow old . . . to fall in the line of service. One man, a professor of Latin and Elocution, actually fell in the cafeteria line, one lunch. He was buried, as so many of us have been . . . It has been said . . . and I have no reason to doubt it . . . that we make excellent fertilizer. (41)

Nevertheless, he remains unengaged, unwilling (or unable) to communicate his true feelings to his wife. Instead, he is passively resentful, slinging hurtful barbs back and forth with Martha in a demonic tennis match that Ben Brantley has called “Marriage as Blood Sport.”

Tossed into the middle of George and Martha’s “fun and games” are Nick and Honey, a young couple that is new to the college. In the first act, Nick and Honey arrive at George and Martha’s for drinks after another faculty party. On the surface, Albee’s juxtaposition of the younger couple and the older one (a device that he will revisit throughout his career) suggests that Nick and Honey could very well be a version of George and Martha from twenty years past. The truth proves to be much more insidious.

Nick is “a more sophisticated, intelligent, elaborately detailed, more sinister extension of” Dream’s Young Man (Roudané, Necessary Fictions). He is young and ruggedly handsome in an almost stereotypical way. George even comments on the
younger man’s “steely blue eyes” and “solid gold groin” (111). Also, like The Young Man, Nick is spiritually empty. He married a woman with whom he shares no passion, partly as a result of a “hysterical” pregnancy, but also because of her money. He is remarkably ambitious and will not be satisfied with an Associate Professor’s position. Driven by a desire for power and advancement, he plans to “plow prominent wives” in the hopes of getting ahead, even setting his sights on Martha (113).

NICK. And I’ll bet your wife’s the biggest goose in the gangle (sic), isn’t she? Her father president, and all.

GEORGE. You bet your historical inevitability she is!

NICK. . . . Well now, I’d better get her off in a corner and mount her like a goddamned dog, eh?

GEORGE. Why, you’d certainly better.

NICK. You know, I almost think you’re serious.

GEORGE. No, baby. You almost think you’re serious, and it scares the hell out of you. (114)

Although this is, ostensibly, a conversation spoken in jest, it reveals Nick to be an amoral opportunist. Just like The Young Man who lets people touch him and “draw pleasure from [his] groin,” Nick will relentlessly pursue advancement in the college by any means necessary.

Nick represents everything that Martha purports to want from George. Superficially, he appears to be the kind of ambitious man that would “make anybody proud of him.” Martha even suggests that he is more virile and sexually potent than her
husband, cooing seductively, “You don’t need any props, do you, baby?” (61). George recognizes the danger Nick poses and tells him, “You represent a direct and pertinent threat to my lifehood, and I want to get the goods on you” (111). Ultimately, however, in what may be a foreshadowing of Martha’s eventual acceptance of George, Nick falls short, sexually (and emotionally). After attempting to commit adultery with him, Martha acknowledges that he does not live up to expectations, that he’s just a “houseboy” (196).

Despite her near-infidelity, Martha truly loves George, commenting later that he is “the only man in my life who has ever [...] made me happy” (189). As The Zoo Story’s Jerry says, though, “sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly” (21). Although hints of true compassion and love do surface throughout the play, the couple almost exclusively speaks to wound. Their marriage is a further dramatization of Albee’s preoccupation with a lack of true communication in American society. As the play builds in intensity, the two call each other names, hurl insults, and inflict emotional embarrassment on one another, all while assiduously avoiding communicating their feelings of inadequacy, loss, and sadness.

Instead, to compensate for the hurt, and to shield themselves from the truth of their own pain, George and Martha create their own “bumble”: an imaginary, “blond-eyed, blue-haired” son (72).

“Sonny Jim,” as he is called, was initially created as an emotional bridge between husband and wife. Through imagined reminiscences of the child’s life, the two created an idyllic fantasy life in which they needed not face their own sterility. In one such illusory memory, Martha speaks of her son’s value:
MARTHA. He walked evenly between us . . . a hand out to each of us for what we could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love . . . and these hands, still, to hold us off a bit, for mutual protection, to protect us all from George’s . . . weakness . . . and my . . . necessary greater strength . . . to protect himself . . . and us. (221-222)

In this child, George and Martha, like Dream’s Mommy and Daddy before them, sought a measure of satisfaction. “Sonny Jim” gave George and Martha something pure to love: something outside of Martha’s self-loathing or George’s melancholy stagnation.

The illusion proved to be a damaging one, however. Bigsby writes that “far from acting as consolation, the fantasy child serves rather to exacerbate their plight and isolate them still further from the real contact which they so desperately need” (Albee 41). The child becomes a weapon used to maim. At one point, George uses a recollection of their son to paint a monstrous picture of Martha. “The real reason our son used to throw up all the time [. . .] was nothing more complicated than that he couldn’t stand you fiddling at him all the time, breaking into his bedroom with your kimono flying . . . with your liquor breath on him, and your hands all over his” (120). The illusion has become little more than a vehicle for spite: an increasingly hurtful distancing mechanism.

As the two drift further into fantasy, the hurtful stories continue to escalate to a breaking point. As the second act closes, George has a realization:

GEORGE. It’s very simple . . . When people can’t abide things as they are, when they can’t abide the present, they do one of two things . . . either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they
set about to . . . alter the future. And when you want to change something . . . YOU BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! (178)

He realizes, like Zoo’s Jerry, that if he is to have any hope of altering the future for the better, he must destroy his illusions with a violent act. He decides to kill “Sonny Jim.” Throughout the act, entitled “Exorcism,” Martha is forced to come to terms with the unilateral abandonment of their shared illusion. Her initial reaction is one of unadulterated horror, as she shrieks, “NO! NO! YOU CANNOT DO THAT! YOU CAN’T DECIDE THAT FOR YOURSELF! I WILL NOT LET YOU DO THAT!” (232). What she slowly comes to realize, though, is that this symbolic murder, this exorcism, was a necessary one.

Only through abandonment of illusion can George and Martha attain emotional honesty, candor, and well-being. Near the play’s end, husband and wife both reveal, with a “hint of communion,” their mutual inability to have children (238). This is perhaps the first moment in a marriage renewed, the first signs of true connection in a previously poisoned relationship. Of course, Albee is loathe to give his characters a pat ending. Instead, he acknowledges the dread of facing life with out protective illusions. In the play’s final moments, George and Martha are alone on stage.

MARTHA. Just . . . us?

GEORGE. Yes.

MARTHA. I don’t suppose, maybe, we could . . .

GEORGE. No, Martha.

MARTHA. Yes. No.
GEORGE. Are you all right?

MARTHA. Yes. No.

GEORGE. Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf.

MARTHA. I . . . am . . . George. (242)

Albee reminds us of the temptation of illusion, the ease of recidivism. George and Martha’s “Long Night’s Journey Into Day” may be over, but the audience’s may be just beginning.

_Closing Thoughts_

From the absurd to the naturalistic, the political to the philosophical, Edward Albee’s early canon is “a grand lament for a loss of love, a loss of humane values, a loss of the self and the other” (Roudané, _Necessary Fictions_). For the playwright, the American Dream itself is a finely orchestrated deception designed to protect us from potentially painful engagement in our lives. His early characters attempt in vain to fill emotional voids by attaining the perfect executive position, acquiring a “lovely beige hat,” or seeking political power. In each case, though, the pursuit leaves the pursuer spiritually bereft. A prototypical upper-east side existence brings Peter only numbness and isolation. For Martha, a life of status-seeking and vicarious ambition brings seething self-hatred and an inability to connect with the only person she truly loved. Still, Albee’s early plays, though critical of false optimism, are at their core hopeful and life-affirming.
Only through the confrontation of painful truth can his characters escape the living-death of a life disengaged.
CHAPTER III: THREE TALL WOMEN

The 1970s and ‘80s were remarkably unkind to Edward Albee. After producing a spate of “exceedingly cerebral” plays, the playwright found himself abandoned by critics (Richards). With the exception of his second Pulitzer Prize-winning play, 1975’s *Seascape* (he won his first in 1966 for *A Delicate Balance*), Albee’s mid-career plays were universally skewered by the same critics who previously had lionized work such as *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Robert Brustein dismissed 1980’s *The Lady From Dubuque* as “really quite awful” (“Self-Parody” 26), and Frank Rich referred to 1983’s *The Mad Who Had Three Arms* as a “painful, embarrassing spectacle.” Still, Albee persevered and, in 1991, wrote *Three Tall Women*, a play that would mark his creative rebirth or, as Bruce Mann puts it, the playwright’s “return to the muses” (6).

With its fractured narrative and expressionistic second act, *Women* is one of Albee’s most stylistically experimental plays. At the same time, its story of an elderly woman’s reminiscence of regret and compromise is wholly believable. As the playwright commented, “*Three Tall Women* is an absolutely naturalistic play about three ages, three women who happen to be three ages of the same woman in an impossible but realistic convention with each other” (“Aggressing” 8).

The play’s protagonist, A, is a fictionalized representation of Albee’s own adoptive mother, Frankie. Written less than two years after her death, *Women* served as an exorcism for the playwright. In life, Frankie had been stubborn, bigoted, and emotionally abusive. On stage, her analog is no less. For Albee, writing about his
mother was a way to “get her out of [his] system” (Albee, “On Three” 167).

Nevertheless, he is quick to assert that Women is not a revenge piece. At once appalled and fascinated by Frankie’s character, Albee set out to write

as objective a play as I could about a fictional character who resembled in every way, in every event, someone I had known very, very well. And it was only when I invented, when I translated fact into fiction, that I was aware I would be able to be accurate without prejudice, objective without the distortive folly of ‘interpretation.’ (“On Three” 167)

While A is prejudiced, embittered, and callous, she also retains a certain steadfast dignity, what The American Dream’s Grandma might refer to as a “pioneer spirit.” It was this multifaceted persona, a portrait of the “survivor, the figure clinging to the wreckage only partly of her own making, refusing to go under,” that Albee sought to capture with the play (“On Three” 167).

In many ways, Women owes a debt to Albee’s early plays. When asked about the work’s thematic through-line to pieces such as The American Dream or Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the playwright remarked, “I find that people spend too much time living as if they’re never going to die. They skid through their lives. Sleep through them sometimes. Anyway, there [are] only two things to write about—life and death” (qtd. in Richards). Indeed, shades of Martha can be seen in the illusions A creates for herself to escape the reality of a loveless marriage and son with whom she is unable to communicate. Also, the numbness with which A careens through a life built on the desire for financial security harkens back to Peter and Mommy.
Women represents a decided shift in the playwright’s thematic focus, however. Rather than symbolically examining general social problems such as consumerism and acquisitiveness, Albee portrays their effects on a realistic individual. As he once commented, the play is “an examination of what we let ourselves become, as a result of outside forces and our own weaknesses and failures” (“Edward Albee,” The Playwright’s Voice 17). Albee’s protagonist is a woman immersed in a culture that values the appearance of happiness and prosperity over actual fulfillment, and which relegates wives and mothers to the passive “hearth and home” role dictated by advertising. By splitting A into three people at different stages of life, Albee is able to depict, graphically, the evolution of one woman’s identity. Through juxtaposition of the three women’s attitudes, the audience becomes privy to A’s life of escalating personal compromises and infidelities, her descent from blindly idealistic youth to jaded, regretful elder.

The play’s first act consists largely of exposition in preparation for the philosophical, yet emotionally-charged second act. In this highly naturalistic first half, Albee introduces his audience to his protagonist. Through cloudy, half-recalled memories we learn of A’s personal history and gain insight into the development of her indomitable character. When we meet A in the first act, she is dying. Frail and deteriorating physically, she is confined to a sickbed in her “wealthy bedroom.” Immediately, Albee paints her as a woman of intense prejudice and bigotry. To her, Italians are “wops,” and her sister’s husband is referred to, diminutively, as a “smart little Jew” (37). At one point, she reflects on a visit to a friend’s house, commenting that “I’ve never known any colored—well, help, yes. In Pinehurst they had colored help and we
used to visit them there. They knew their place; they were polite, and well-behaved; none of those uppity niggers, the city ones” (46). She is a product of another time, her racism a creation of the society which bore her. When C, the young legal representative, balks at her persistent use of vulgar epithets, B says, “She doesn’t mean anything by it—or if she did, once, she doesn’t now. It just falls out,” and blames the older woman’s prejudices (with more than a hint of irony) on her “strict, but fair parents” (37).

Like Woolf’s Martha, everyone in A’s life is a “flop.” As she sees it, her estranged son is not nearly dutiful enough, choosing to visit her solely out of responsibility, as opposed to love. Her husband is a useless “penguin” of a man. Her lawyer ruthlessly exploits her and her great wealth. Even her friends have the temerity to grow old and move away or die, thus violating the supposedly sacrosanct contract of friendship. “[They have] no right!” she exclaims. “You count on them! And they change. The Bradleys! The Phippses! They die; they go away. And family dies; family goes away. Nobody should do this!” (41). Unwilling to face the reality of life’s inevitable changes, and unable to accept the deficiencies of her own character, A takes no responsibility for the path her life has taken.

A is a woman defined by her wealth. She was brought up poor, the daughter of an “architect” who designed furniture. When she married into money, she learned to guard her finances jealously. Her marriage to the short, one-eyed “penguin” is a less-caricatured version of Mommy and Daddy’s. As she begins to reminisce about her life, A reveals that the union was loveless—little more than a business relationship. The most she can say of her affection for her husband was that “He gave me pretty things; he gave
me jewelry” (53). She relished his riches and the status they provided and revels in the ephemeral joy brought by her past notoriety and esteem at their country club and horse-racing track.

The marriage is a hollow one in which sexual intimacy is inexorably linked with commerce. In one particularly memorable example, A relates a story in which her naked husband approached her in her dressing room with an expensive bracelet hung on the end of his erect penis.

And he came closer, and his pee-pee touched my shoulder . . . Do you want it? he said, and he poked me with it . . . and there was the bracelet on it, and he moved closer, to my face, and Do you want it? I thought you might like it. And I said No! I can’t do that! You know I can’t do that! . . . and his pee-pee got, well, it started to go soft, and the bracelet slid off, and it fell into my lap. Keep it, he said, and he turned and he walked out of my dressing room. (56)

The gift, which A calls “the most beautiful bracelet I ever saw,” was far more important to her than the man presenting it. Husband and wife could not connect. Instead the marriage degenerated into a grotesque display of unfulfilling spousal prostitution. In the first act, A is unable to reflect upon the emotional void created by this marriage. She merely tells the story to her companions, free of emotional response. According to Bruce Mann, she is motivated solely by “an abiding concern for her social identity; she cannot see beyond it and does not realize that this limits her and makes her unhappy” (12).
As she aged, her independence and sense of self increasingly revolved around maintaining her wealth to the point that she has become paranoid, sure that everyone in her life (from her son to her housekeeping staff) is robbing her “right and left.”

“Everybody steals,” she snipes. “Everybody steals something” (49). As David Savran writes, her materialism is debilitating. “For living under a regime of private property, the self, like the things around it, is always defined by the possibility of its being purloined. One is always threatened by the knowledge that one can never be fully self-possessed” (3). A lives under the constant worry that her very identity may be stolen at any moment.

As such, she clings fiercely to her independence, even in the face of increasing physical decrepitude. Initially, her defiance is a small one—she takes one year off her age, telling people that she is ninety-one, as opposed to ninety-two. As C remarks, “I suppose one could lie about one year—some kind of one-upsmanship, a private vengeance, perhaps, some tiny victory, maybe. I don’t know, maybe these things get important” (11). As the play progresses, however, A’s denial of time’s ravages escalates. Despite being incontinent, she refuses to wear an adult diaper, choosing instead to suffer painful walks to the bathroom and the indignity of wetting herself. Additionally, her arm, which was broken years before, cannot heal, and surgeons have urged its amputation. A, however, refuses to submit to the procedure and lives with chronic pain. She is a survivor, cleaving desperately to the vestiges of a life that is deteriorating around her.

A’s companions, B and C, are significantly less fully formed characters. They are “important mainly as indexes of attitudes toward [A] that are available to the audience, though they are mainly divided by age and experience, and their responses remain at the
level of cliché” (Murphy 103). C represents youth’s lack of perspective. Her rose-colored view of the world renders her unable to appreciate A’s survivor nature. For much of the first act, C demonstrates intolerance to any of A’s insights about life, instead choosing to snipe at her under her breath.

Not given any back-story of her own, C symbolizes the same wide-eyed liberal myopia that Albee has critiqued throughout his career—at one point she remarks, “I’m a Democrat. I notice lots of things” (37). Additionally, the youthful C is the play’s steward of protective self-delusion. Too young to appreciate the instructive value of painful life experiences, her response to unpleasant memories is to deny them:

A. Why can’t I remember anything?
B. I think you remember everything. I think you just can’t bring it to mind all the time.
A. Yes? Is that it?
B. Of course!
A. My gracious! (To C.) I remember everything!
C. Gracious. That must be a burden.
B. Be nice.
C. Isn’t salvation in forgetting? (51-52)

Like all of Albee’s characters for whom illusion is a way of life, C is set up for a fall, and her attitudes manifest themselves again when she becomes one of A’s younger selves in the second act.
B, on the other hand, provides a much more mature view of life. Perched on the “mountaintop” of middle-age, she offers a counterpoint to C’s youthful intolerance. B cares for A dutifully, often comforting her and offering reassurance. Her attitude towards A is one of detached understanding. While she may not approve of A’s bigotry or personal intractability, she accepts it. For example, when she recounts the story of A’s decaying arm and her repeated visits to the surgeon, she resists the temptation to editorialize, instead simply relaying the facts and encouraging compassion and equanimity.

She constantly urges C to take a relativist view of A’s character and becomes furious when C remains callously inflexible. “Since she’s here from the lawyer,” B exclaims, “why should she behave like a human being; why should she be any help; why should she . . .” (29). As the act progresses, B admonishes C to “grow up” and to realize the peril of her illusory worldview (14). At one point, when C begins to feel attacked by the two older women, she protests, “There’s nothing the matter with me.” B responds, with a “sour smile,” “Well . . . you just wait” (18). B has the maturity to be honest with herself and is a more balanced person because of it.

As B urges A to delve further into her personal history, the first act builds to its emotional climax. A’s physical pain continues to mount while her psychic pain keeps pace. She reflects on her son’s flight from the family home, her husband’s prolonged illness, and her sister’s alcoholism with sheer anger, lashing out at her family members for their supposed abandonment of her. “I think they all hated me, because I was strong, because I had to be. Sis hated me; Ma hated me; all those others, they hated me; he left
home; he ran away. Because I was strong. I was tall and I was strong. Somebody had to be” (60). Once again, Albee portrays his protagonist’s conflicting dual-nature. While still fundamentally unwilling to accept any personal responsibility for her own sadness, A remains ever resilient. Though she wails “I’ve shrunk! I’m not tall! I used to be tall! Why have I shrunk?!” she refuses to be crushed under the weight of her life’s baggage (46). Like Martha, she is the “Earth Mother,” the picture of a tall woman who will not be defeated. As the curtain closes on the first act, A suffers a stroke and falls silent, mid-line. In the second act, as she lies comatose at center stage, the work of unifying her fragmented identity begins.

When the second act opens, A’s corporeal self has been left behind. Now, lying in her bed at center stage is a mannequin, dressed in her first act attire. When the three women reappear, they are vivacious, and are costumed in “lovely” dresses. They have become A at three distinct points in her life. One critic likened Albee’s approach in the second act to visual art, calling the women’s reappearance a “cubist stage picture” that allows for a postmodern examination of the subjective multiplicity of A’s character (Lahr 104).

The physical deterioration of the play’s first half has been forgotten and we see that A’s ailments were largely a symbol for the moral decay that overtook her as she aged. As Thomas Adler writes, “If Act One of Three Tall Women concerns the physical diminishment or shrinking, Act Two focuses squarely on moral shrinkage or slippage: the realization, like Krapp’s, that in the process of living, accommodations, compromises,
bad choices and decisions have been made” (171). As Albee further explores the road
traveled from C to A, he dwells firmly in the realm of the spirit.

While still displaying many of the attitudes espoused by their first act
counterparts, aspects of the three women’s personalities that had previously been
presented as symbolic or cliché are now concretized. C, for example, remains blindly
idealistic. At twenty-six years old, she is beautiful and luminous, living at the peak of her
sexual power as a Bergdorf model. She believes in the fantasy of the perfect marriage, a
man to sweep her off her feet, a life of satisfying ease. Hers is an illusory view in which
she denies A’s very existence and cannot conceive of becoming her.

    C. I won’t. I know I won’t—*that’s* what I mean. That . . . (points to A)

    ... *thing* there? I’ll never be like that. *Nobody* could. I’m twenty-six;

    I’m a *good* girl; my mother was strict but fair—she still *is*; she loves

    me and Sis, and she wants the very best for us. We have a *nice* little

    apartment, Sis and I, and at night we go out with our beaux, and I *do*

    have my eye out for . . . for what—*the* man of my dreams? And so

    does Sis, I *guess*. I don’t think I’ve been in love, but I’ve been

    loved—by a couple of them, but they weren’t the right ones. (70)

At this point in her life, C does not have the maturity to be a fully actualized person. She
denies unpleasant reality and still believes in the supposed panacea of wealth and
heightened social position.

    B, meanwhile, is significantly more war worn and embittered than her first act

person. Fifty-two years old and firmly in the throes of middle-age, she has begun to
realize the damaging potential of C’s illusions. After spending nearly twenty-five years with her husband, she thinks of him less as “the man of your dreams” than as “the man you’ll dream about” (78). Marriage to him does not yield happiness and satisfaction. He brings with him the riches and accoutrements of the affluent lifestyle, yet none of the affection or genuine mutual concern of a healthy union. Indeed, B’s dreams have not kept pace with reality. Over the course of their marriage, her husband engaged in countless infidelities. In a desperate attempt to fill her emotional void, B undertakes her own affair. She does not, however, allow her extra-marital relationship to take emotional root out of concern that it would jeopardize “the good deal I’ve got with the penguin, a long-term deal in spite of the crap he pulls” (94). Though disillusioned with the state of her marriage and the spiritual emptiness it has brought, B remains mired in the desire for money and power. She, like C, is incomplete.

At the same time, she has a level of perspective that C lacks. Her life, and her belief in the power of that life, have left her unsatisfied. As she comments:

B. You’re growing up and they go out of their way to hedge, to qualify, to . . . to evade; to avoid—to lie . . . You don’t tell us things change —that Prince Charming has the morals of a sewer rat, that you’re supposed to live with that . . . and like it, or give the appearance of liking it.

Chasing the chambermaid into closets, the kitchen maid into the root cellar, and God knows what goes on at the stag at the club! They probably nail the whore to the billiard tables for easy access. Nobody tells you any of this. (93-94)
Although still partially clinging to her own paralyzing need for the “good” life, B has begun to realize the potently destructive power of illusion, of believing in the dream. She has compromised her need for love, compassion and emotional honesty, and has been left wanting.

Much of the second act focuses on B and C, detailing the path their lives took, while A offers detached, often snide, commentary. More so than in the first act, A is cynical and jaded. Harboring few remaining illusions about the happiness of her seemingly idyllic life, she comments bitterly on the nature of infidelity.

B. Calm down; adjust; settle in. Men cheat; men cheat a lot. We cheat less, and we cheat because we’re lonely; men cheat because they’re men.

A. No. We cheat because we’re bored, sometimes. We cheat to get back; we cheat because we don’t know any better; we cheat because we’re whores. We cheat for lots of reasons. Men cheat for only one—as you say, because they’re men. (82-83)

Still, her speech is characterized by a lack of engagement. She remains the steadfast victim—strong, but battered by the weakness of others’ character. She meditates on her life with a sense of paranoia, wondering when the servants are going to come up behind her and slit her throat. Of her infirm, bedridden mother, she recalls, “She becomes the enemy” (86).

Despite having shed many of her acquisitive self-deceptions, A is a detached, virtual non-participant in her own life. At this point in the play she is still unable to stop
abdicating any responsibility for her own pain and isolation. Most importantly, though, she is unable to face her role in the estrangement of her homosexual son whom she insists does not love her. “He doesn’t!” she protests. “He loves his . . . he loves his boys, those boys he has. You don’t know! He doesn’t love me and I don’t know if I love him. I can’t remember!” (59). Soon, however, through an act of theatrical prestidigitation, A is forced to resolve her own inner conflict.

Late in the play, A’s son appears onstage. Silent and solemn (and unaware of the three women), he arrives at “A’s” hospital bed and sits beside her, taking her hand in his. Each woman has a different response to his arrival. C is excited by the chance to see the son to whom she has not yet given birth. A is coldly detached, yet acknowledges his dutiful visit. B reacts violently, running to him and screaming “Get out of my house!” (89). The young man is, of course, the playwright’s surrogate, a mute participant in the drama of his mother’s life.

We find that, after a twenty-year estrangement, the young man re-connected with his mother, at least superficially, after she suffered a heart attack. A describes their new relationship:

A. He comes; we look at each other and we both hold in whatever we’ve been holding in since that day he went away. You’re looking well, he says; and, You too, I say. And there are no apologies, no recriminations, no tears, no hugs; dry lips on my dry cheeks; yes that. And we never discuss it? Never go into why? Never go beyond where
we are? We’re strangers; we’re curious about each other; we leave it at that. (91)

Unable to communicate honestly with her son, and unwilling to face the painful possibility that she drove him from the house, A remains detached. Here, Albee draws a line across more than thirty years of playwriting, connecting A’s relationship with her son to that of The Zoo Story’s Jerry and the Dog. In that play, Jerry comments, “we neither love nor hurt because we do not try to reach each other” (36). Rather than face the terror of emotional honesty and a life without excuses, A holds her son at a safe distance.

Witnessing the awful sterility of the relationship and horrified by what the future holds, C exclaims, “No! How did I change? What happened to me?!” (92). For the first time, the two older women are forced to examine the choices they made and the role they played in the formation of their identity. According to Mann, the characters assume “metastance,” which he describes as “step[ping] back from [their] social identity to see everything in a much larger context” (12). B realizes that her belief in the power of money and social standing was “just glitter” that brought little satisfaction (103). She also discovers that, just as it had been within her power to chase the illusory dream of affluence, it is also within her power to change. “This must be the happiest time,” she declares. “Old enough to be a little wise, past being really dumb . . . It has to be the happiest time. I mean, it’s the only time you get a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view—see in all directions. Wow! What a view!” (109). Free of the need for recriminations, B finds hope in a life renewed.
For A, the realization is even more profound. Only here, at the end of her life, does she recognize the need for self-reflection and emotional candor. As she puts it, she has arrived at the point where she can “think about [herself] in the third person without being crazy” (109). What had previously been a reflection on personal regret becomes a meditation on death. For the first time, A faces her deficiencies, bad choices, and resentment because she realizes that death renders them meaningless. Her prior rejection of death had been the true illusion. In her final speech, she opines:

A. The happiest moment of all? Really? The happiest moment? Coming to the end of it, I think, when all the waves cause the great woes to subside, leaving breathing space, time to concentrate on the greatest woe of all—the end of it [. . .] There’s a difference between knowing you’re going to die and knowing you’re going to die. The second is better; it moves away from the theoretical . . . So. There it is. You asked after all. That’s the happiest moment. When it’s all done.

When we can stop. When we can stop. (109-110)

In “stopping,” A removes herself from a cycle of protective self-deception and takes responsibility for her failures. She is finally able to embrace her life and accept her death.

Ultimately, even though empathy is created for A, she never becomes totally loveable. Rather, the play presents an almost scientific dissection of character in an attempt to better understand her. For Albee, the process of writing the work brought no newfound affection for his mother. It instead created what he referred to as a “cold admiration” for her (Gale). A, like her inspiration, was of such great interest to the
playwright primarily because of the seeming paradoxes she embodies. She is prejudiced, yet endearing; strong, yet victimized; independent, yet hell-bent on keeping up appearances. Above all, A is a woman of fierce will who denies her own vulnerability.

Once, when recalling his last visit to his mother’s hospital room, Albee commented, “It is my ironic memory that I breathed on her and killed her. That was not necessarily my intention. After I left, it did occur to me that perhaps I shouldn’t have gotten so close to her. She was so fragile” (qtd. in Gussow 341). It is this same latent fragility with which he imbues A. When the play begins, her identity is fragmented, spread thinly across chasms of age and experience. When the play closes, and the three tall women clasp hands for a final tableau, fragility joins with strength, age with youth. At last, three separate narratives become a single coherent personality, a portrait of the quintessential survivor.
CHAPTER IV: THE PLAY ABOUT THE BABY

Throughout his career, Albee’s plays have been characterized by a hunger for communication. His characters, driven by materialistic desires and hindered by a death-grip on the “peachy-keen,” approach one another tentatively, across an existential void. Though isolation persists, occasionally there is a breakthrough. As Jerry comments in The Zoo Story, “every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk to get to know somebody, know all about him” (17). Likewise, the playwright has spent forty years trying to get to know his audience, to talk to them, and to make them understand the common ground they share with the characters on stage. Perhaps concerned that his message had not been clear, or that his acts of “aggression against the status quo” had been unsuccessful, he wrote The Play About the Baby, a work that stands as his ultimate attempt to communicate. No longer content with the wistful recollection and intellectual story-telling that marked many of his middle-career plays, Baby’s characters stare out across the proscenium arch, directly implicating their audience and violently urging change.

The play, which represents a return to the stylistic form of earlier works such as The American Dream, appears deceptively simple. In it, a young, beautiful couple (Boy and Girl) revels in their love for one another and for their new baby, oblivious to the cares of the world and ignorant of the pain of living. The play’s name reinforces this sense of simplicity. As Mel Gussow writes in his biography of the playwright, “[Albee] was pleased with the title. When people would ask him about his new play, he could say, ‘The Play About the Baby?’ And they would answer, ‘But what’s the title?’ The
dialogue would become and Abbott and Costello routine” (388). What lies beneath the piece’s idyllic façade of youthful sexual exuberance and familial bliss is much more complex and insidious.

As the play progresses and the young lovers are visited by a mysterious older couple (Man and Woman), the play takes a dark twist—the new arrivals have come to take the baby. “Imagine,” writes Steven Drukman, “the demons of Rosemary’s Baby enacting their rituals in the manner of Vladimir and Estragon, and you begin to get a sense of the vaudevillian theatre of cruelty that surrounds the play’s action.” Indeed, Man and Woman’s planned kidnapping of the baby is a further extension of Jerry’s “teaching emotion”—a seemingly cruel act designed to educate. As Man repeatedly reminds Boy and Girl throughout the play, it is only through pain that one can truly live. Grasping for pleasure and ignorance merely prolong one’s awakening.

At a more fundamental level the play further explores the question asked by Martha in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, namely “Truth and illusion, don’t you know the difference?” In Baby, however, the line between fact and fiction becomes ever more blurry, and Albee questions the very nature of objective reality. Through Rashomon-like retellings of events from the characters’ lives, the playwright interrogates the reliability of memory. In a world in which Boy and Girl’s notions of self and identity are constructed around being parents to the titular baby, Man and Woman remove the child from the equation and force the younger couple to consider the possibility that it never existed in the first place. In an effort to shield themselves from the pain of loss, Boy and
Girl ultimately accept this conceit. It is Woolf’s ending, absurdly inverted. For them, as for many of Albee’s characters, reality is determined by their need.

The play opens with the baby’s birth. After nonchalantly delivering her first line—“I’m going to have the baby now”—Boy and Girl leave the stage. From offstage we hear the sounds of a painful labor: screams, moans, commands of a surgeon. When the two reappear moments later, Girl is happily carrying a baby bundle. She sits and begins nursing. As if to head off the inevitable comparisons to Woolf, Albee wanted to make it clear from the play’s beginning, that this baby is a real one, and not an illusion created by its parents. “We see its blanket,” the playwright remarked. “She’s not nursing a blanket. She’s not crazy. And she has mother’s milk, so obviously she has had a baby” (qtd. in Gussow 398). Nevertheless, the stage directions specify that the audience never actually sees the baby, but only its blanket. The child, like its unnamed parents, remains an abstraction, a symbol of youthful love.

Feeding time completed, Girl deposits the baby off-stage and we begin to understand the young couple’s relationship. The two are preoccupied with sexual expression of their love for one another. “I love your body; I really do,” Girl tells Boy. “When you let me lick your armpits I almost faint, I really do [. . .] You start getting hard . . . I like your left armpit better than the other” (9-10). Their sexual desire is amusingly all-encompassing. To punctuate their carnal zest, the two chase each other across the stage multiple times over the course of the first act. They are naked and run playfully from side to side, giggling and reveling in their pleasure. Unaware of the rest of the
world—and non-plussed by the unexpected arrival of Man and Woman—Boy and Girl are a re-fashioned Adam and Eve.

Their relationship is deeply rooted in the physical, and the two exist to please one another. Albee soon reveals that their love is a shallow one, built solely on a foundation of lust and empty romantic clichés. “You’re my goal,” Boy proclaims. “You’re my destination. You are my moon and sun and earth and sky and . . . on and on, and so on and so forth . . . You are my goal; you are my destination” (26). For Boy, Girl is less a real person than a romantic aspiration. He “met” and fell in love with her, in fact, while she was lying unconscious in a hospital bed. His life’s sense of purpose has become entangled in an illusory realization of her as the ideal.

Additionally, the couple’s quest for sexual expression obscures a basic inability to communicate about anything emotional or painful. As Boy relates the story of his beating at the hands of a group of thugs, seeking Girl’s support, she continually interrupts him. Rather than responding to Boy’s pain or exploring the meaning behind his experience, Girl talks about how much she enjoys having sex with him, eventually silencing him, mid-sentence, by baring a breast and thrusting it into his mouth. Despite Man’s suggestion that, “You’d think it was Eden, wouldn’t you,” Boy and Girl’s paradise is about to be destroyed by not one, but two uninvited guests (22).

On their arrival, Man and Woman begin to interject themselves spontaneously into the younger couple’s world. For scholar Linda Ben-Zvi, they become the catalyst for the play’s subsequent action, controlling participants in:
that most common of vaudeville routines, the disappearing act, in which a
male magician and his comely female assistant continue a running
dialogue with each other and the audience in order to win the spectators’
confidence, divert their attention away from the preparations for the trick,
and build expectation for some spectacular climax. (192)

Here, the “spectacular climax” is the disappearance of the baby at the play’s conclusion.

Man acts as a master of ceremonies, a charismatic raconteur manipulating the
story’s progression. When he first appears, he directly addresses the audience with a
meandering speech reminiscent of Jerry’s comment that “sometimes a person has to go a
very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly” (21). “Have
you ever noticed,” he begins, “when you’re driving somewhere you’ve not been before—
directions, of course—it always takes longer than you think it should . . . and yet, when
you’re coming home . . . you’re amazed at how much shorter the trip is?” (13). From this
moment on, the audience cannot escape. By engaging them with a direct question, he has
made the audience members inhabitants in the world of the play.

They are put on notice that Boy and Girl’s impending struggle is also their own.
As he concludes his opening aria, Man puts the play’s most fundamental question to his
captive observers. “Who was it said ‘Our reality—or something—is determined by our
need? The greater the need rules the game.’ . . . Pay attention to this, what’s true and
what isn’t is a tricky business, no? What’s real and what isn’t? Tricky. Do you follow?”
(15). Before the play concludes, the audience will be required to confront its own
necessary illusions, to question the authenticity of its memories, and to determine its own need.

Woman appears on stage soon after the completion of Man’s speech, and we begin to see that Man and Woman may be a more aged, weathered version of Boy and Girl. Having already been battered by the life Boy and Girl have yet to experience, the older couple has returned to educate its younger counterpart. As Man interjects commentary and jibes, Woman recounts a story from her youth, in which her conception of love was very similar to that of Boy and Girl. She tells of carefree summers in Europe, passionate affairs with polo players, and a painter who used her as his muse. Like Boy and Girl, her younger self believed exclusively in the power of physical intimacy, even forsaking a young man who truly cared for her in the name of heightened sexual gratification.

Ultimately, though, she realized that these passionate, yet empty, loves were fleeting and unsatisfying. As she laments, “Suddenly I knew that I hadn’t gained the days, but I’d only lost the nights . . . And so I broke it off. ‘You’re using me,’” I shrieked at him, pacing his studio, knocking things over. “You don’t even love me; you love the fact of me” (44). Just as Girl is to Boy, Woman represented little more than the painter’s ideal. She was his “destination.” As she aged, she gained the knowledge that passion must yield to reason and that pursuit of the ideal, while momentarily electrifying, only delays the inevitable education of heartbreak.

Woman’s story completed, Man asks Boy and Girl, “Did you like our little performance?” (45). Indeed, the older couple’s monologues, like that of Jerry and the
Dog, represent a performative initial attempt at communication. Man and Woman present Boy and Girl with a series of escalating allegories—tales of innocence lost, meditations on self-deception, reminiscences of the pain of living—in an effort to alert the younger couple to what lies ahead.

Boy and Girl are unwilling to hear the lesson being delivered, however. The monologues are met with little, if any, reaction, and the young lovers protest that they do not understand why Man and Woman have come. All they know is that the older couple brings with them pain—something with which they are woefully unequipped, and unwilling, to deal. As Boy exclaims, “I can take pain and loss and the rest later—I think I can, when it comes as natural as . . . sleep? But . . . now? We’re happy; we love each other; I’m hard all the time; we have a baby . . . Give it some thought. Give us some time. O.K.?" (38). Boy and Girl’s idyllic reality is a protective shield—a product of their need to remain free of the scars and pain of age.

As the first act builds to its climax, a sense of paranoia begins to mount within Boy and Girl. Purportedly unsure of the true reason for Man and Woman’s visit, they begin to fear the worst. Just as Three Tall Women’s A lived under the crippling worry of her material possessions being stolen, Boy and Girl begin to fear the theft of their baby. They are parents and the baby is a key building block of their identities. It is also the only way, outside of sexual congress, that Boy and Girl can define their relationship with one another. “Maybe they’re Gypsies,” Girl shrieks, “come to steal the baby! . . . To hurt us? To injure us beyond all salvation?” (38). For characters with such a tenuous sense of self, the loss of the child would be devastating.
Their evaluation of Man’s and Woman’s intent is incorrect, however. While Man
does admit, near the end of the act, that he and Woman are there to “take the baby,” the
theft is born not out of malice, but of compassion (47). Seeing that their “gentle”
attempts at communication through story-telling failed to awaken Boy and Girl to the
harm of their optimistic self-deception, Man and Woman must resort to more violent
means. Just as Jerry impaled himself on Peter’s knife as a means of effecting
interpersonal connection, Man and Woman must take the baby in order to spur the
emotional growth of the younger couple.

Additionally, the seizure of the child serves as an emotional experiment, a way to
test Man’s belief that need determines reality. As he asks the audience earlier in the act,
“Have you seen the baby? Cute, no? They love it, don’t they—the baby. They really
love it. I wonder how much they love it? How much they need it? Perhaps we should
find out” (27). Taking the child is merely prelude to what follows in the second act. Just
before the curtain falls, Girl runs on stage, hysterical after finding that the baby is
nowhere to be found.

GIRL. WHERE’S THE BABY?! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH
THE BABY"?!

(Silence)

MAN. What baby?

(Silence)

WOMAN. Yes; what baby?

The terrifying portion of the vaudevillian spectacle has begun.
As the second act opens, Man enters and addresses the audience once again, welcoming them back from intermission. “Hurry back in now,” he chides, “you don’t want to miss the exposition. Well, maybe you do. ‘Honestly! You’d think they’d have it in the first act!’ No; you couldn’t possibly [. . .] Did you enjoy yourselves while you were out for your cigarettes, or whatever?” (49). A break in the action has not absolved the spectators of their stake in the play’s resolution. To punctuate this point, Man continues, “Don’t smoke; bad for you. Half a million die of it every year. In this country alone, subsidized murder. Not you of course—someone you know” (49). Here, Man recognizes an audience’s inherent tendency to distance itself from the dramatic narrative but admonishes it not to do so. It must endeavor to share the experience as Boy and Girl’s terror continues to unfold.

What follows is an escalating, seemingly cruel, series of verbal and emotional games designed to test the limits of Boy and Girl’s memory—to cause them to question themselves and each other. As the two become increasingly dismayed, repeatedly asking what Man and Woman have done with the baby, the older couple is coy and evasive. They use semantic tricks and tangential stories (such as Man’s tale about his six children—“two black, two white, one green, and the other . . .”) to confuse and distract Boy and Girl (56). Finally, Boy becomes enraged and attempts to subdue Man physically. Man gets the upper hand, however, and performs a “judo flip,” pinning Boy to the floor. “I said I’d be careful if I were you,” he spits. “Are you going to try something, too? (Girl sobs, shakes her head) Good; the lady here is adept at things as well” (59). Boy’s physical inadequacy suggests an underlying spiritual impotence. He
and Girl are powerless subjects in the game orchestrated by the emotionally superior Man and Woman.

Man and Woman begin to interrogate, relentlessly, the reliability of Boy and Girl’s memory. We discover that even though Boy’s arm had been broken disastrously by a group of thugs, he has no scar; despite her caesarian section, Girl shows no sign of a surgical incision. Man then questions the relative authenticity of an identity based upon such potentially false recollections and, in the process, states one of the play’s central theses. “If you have no wounds,” he ponders, “how can you know if you’re alive? If you have no scar, how do you know who you are? Have been?” (61). To this point, Boy and Girl’s life has held a surfeit of physical pleasure and empty gratification. Without the pain brought by age and experience, however, they are unable to fully appreciate life or fashion meaningful identities. Still, the young couple denies Man’s message and remains steadfast in their unwillingness to abandon their optimistic illusions. As she begins to cry, Girl entreats, “Leave us alone? Please, let me have my baby?” (63). Their lesson still unheeded, Man and Woman must, to be kind, be even more cruel.

The game’s intensity continues to mount as Man and Woman parrot lines to one another that had previously been spoken between Boy and Girl in seeming privacy. “We lay there, you and I, true spoons, the two of us, mouths on each other,” Woman says. “We are each other’s destination,” Man replies (65). At once, past and present merge, forming a fluid, organic entity until it becomes unclear whose memories belong to whom. As C.W.E. Bigsby writes, “[Man and Woman’s] ironies replace the passion of those they visit until the question becomes who intrudes on whom. Is it the older couple who bring
news of loss and abandonment, or are the younger couple conjured up as a memory
which taunts, a reminder of what was and is no longer?” (“Better” 159). With memory
no longer a reliable milestone, identity is once again brought in question.

For Boy and Girl, the multiplicity of memories, combined with Man and
Woman’s relentless taunting, and the ever increasing speed of questioning are too much
to bear. They can only respond to the older couple’s assault with a mixture of
bewilderment and anger. Take this exchange that comes after Man insinuates an
ambiguous prior relationship between himself and Boy.

BOY. (Hands to ears) Stop it!

GIRL. (to Boy) Did you write him a letter?

BOY. (Exploding) I don’t know the man!!

MAN. A fan letter; fans often write to those they’ve never met. Hope;

    hope!

WOMAN. Hope.

GIRL. Did you?!

BOY. (To Girl; pleading) Of course not! I love you. (70)

Hopelessly unsure of themselves, Boy and Girl begin to doubt the accuracy of their own
recollections and, by extension, the strength of their relationship to one another. This
insecurity is, of course, Man and Woman’s intent. By emotionally draining their
unwilling young counterparts, they hope to render them unable to withstand their final act
of educational terrorism.
Despite their growing exhaustion, Boy and Girl remain unable to loosen their grip on illusion. The angst evoked by memory is still too great for them to face. At one point, Man and Woman goad Boy by re-inventing themselves as the thugs who broke his arm, forcing him to relive the experience yet again. This time, however, the two get to a point in the story where one of the attackers unzips his fly as if to urinate on Boy and infuse it with new meaning—imbuing the story with homosexual overtones.

WOMAN. And I came up to you, and I undid my fly and what was I going to do?

BOY. I don’t know. You’re going to piss on me?

MAN. Or maybe it was me, and you know what I wanted, what you wanted.

WOMAN. What you wanted.

BOY. Or maybe . . . or maybe . . .

GIRL. (Offers her breast to Boy) Here; here.

BOY. Maybe he wasn’t going to piss on me. Maybe he was going to . . .

GIRL. Here!! (Boy takes her breast in his mouth) (72)

Rather than face the trauma of the assault or the potential implications of Boy’s unresolved sexual identity, the young couple retreats into a grotesque caricature of maternity. Girl again becomes an ideal—a Madonna figure that shields Boy (and the couple’s relationship) from the frightening reality of memory.

Nevertheless, Man and Woman perceive the weakness in Boy and Girl’s resolve and begin preparations for their grand prestidigitation. The younger couple pleads
repeatedly for the return of their child, but Man and Woman, as they did at the end of the first act, continue to assert that the baby never existed to begin with. Man even suggests that Boy and Girl themselves are the very thieves of whom they had previously been afraid. “If there is a baby,” he posits, “who is to say it has ever been yours? Who is to say you have a right to it? Or that you didn’t steal it? Gypsies do steal things” (77). The question he poses to the couple forces them to consider whether or not they saw their child as a real person—a growing human being to be nurtured and supported through its painful ascent from infancy to adulthood—or merely as a vehicle for the preservation of their own idyllic innocence. As he continues, “[If the baby] belongs to you, and belongs with you, then your interest in seeing it ever transcends your need to see it now. No?” (78). Until Boy and Girl are able to forge a meaningful relationship with one another, and shed the illusion of a life in which their baby’s sole purpose is to make them whole, they are unfit to be parents.

What follows is a prelude to the coup de théâtre yet to come. Boy and Girl, eager to convince Man and Woman (and themselves) of their baby’s physical reality, relive its birth, in considerably more detail than the play’s opening scene. As Boy recalls:

BOY. And she howled . . . and she howled . . . and she howled . . . and the sound was terrible, but I held on, we held on . . . the doctor and the nurses were all there . . . and the blood . . . and the blood came, and I’d never seen so much . . . blood, and the baby came, the baby’s head came . . . and the rest of it . . . and there it was; there was our baby. (84)
The baby still exists in Boy and Girl’s memory. This visceral recollection binds the young couple together—it is the defining moment of their lives. Unsure of all else, the birth story persists as the last vestige of their life before Man and Woman’s appearance. In a matter of minutes, however, this very real memory will be abandoned. Unwilling to let the couple backtrack, Man dismisses the story with a wave of his hand, saying that it’s “Just like in the movies . . . all the trappings,” and distracts Boy and Girl with another story about his “green” child—a final moment of misdirection (85).

After a final plea on the part of Boy and Girl, Man announces the start of the main event. “Time for the old blanket trick,” he remarks (87). Woman leaves the stage briefly. When she returns, she is carrying the baby bundle from the beginning of the play. Boy repeats his earlier speech, begging Man and Woman for more time. Man’s response is grave: “Time’s up” (88). The act has run its course, attempts at education have failed, and the young couple still clings to their illusory happiness. Ever the ringmaster, Man barks to Boy, Girl, and the audience, “Ladies and Gentlemen! See what we have here! The baby bundle! The old bundle of a baby!” (88). With a terrifying flourish he violently unfurls the blanket towards the audience only to reveal that there is nothing inside. The baby is truly gone.

As all of Albee’s characters eventually do, Boy and Girl face an important choice. On one hand, they can be exiled from Eden by choosing to accept the pain that accompanies the loss of their child and by facing the agonizing road of emotional growth ahead. On the other, they can choose to fashion a new illusion for themselves—one in which they are shielded from the horror of loss by pretending that the baby never actually
existed. After a protracted period of denial, they choose the latter, and Man and Woman exit the stage with little fanfare.

In a final tableau, eerily reminiscent of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Boy and Girl are left alone together onstage. As they weep silently, they exchange the play’s final lines:

BOY. No baby?

GIRL. No.

BOY. I hear it crying!

GIRL. No; no, you don’t.

BOY. No baby.

GIRL. No. Maybe later? When we’re older . . . when we can take . . .

   terrible things happening? Not now.

BOY. I hear it crying.

GIRL. I hear it too. I hear it crying too. (94)

Unlike George and Martha, Boy and Girl do not seek deliverance from their illusions. Instead, they embrace them. Their need for emotional safety has determined their reality. Though they hear their baby crying in the distance, the agony of truly living is still too much to bear.

Will the audience make the same choice as Boy and Girl? The playwright hopes not. As in many of his plays, Albee asks theatre-goers to put themselves in the shoes of the work’s characters. Some critics took issue with his excessively abstract approach to the play. As Brustein writes, “The moment a playwright decides to call his characters
Man, Woman, Boy, and Girl, he is destined to lose our confidence in them” (“The Play”). Perhaps that is just the point, however. By leaving his characters nameless, and by having Man directly address the onlookers, Albee encourages identification with Boy and Girl. They are not separate, fully formed stage personalities—they are us.

At the same time, the seeming heavy-handedness of various portions of the play’s critique makes it fall short of the furiously acerbic, yet delicately drawn, satire of early plays like The American Dream. Comments such as “If you have no wounds, how can you know you’re alive?” seem almost laughably obvious by comparison. Nevertheless, The Play About the Baby stands as a work of significance in Albee’s storied career. In hearkening back to an earlier style, the playwright draws a parallel between the overly optimistic consumer culture of the 1950s, in which Dream was written, and the dot com boom-time of the late 1990s, when Baby was first performed. Then, as before, Americans lived in a veritable Garden of Eden, except that Ozzie Nelson had been supplanted by Bill Gates, and household ownership of computers, rather than televisions, was on the rise. With his play, Albee reminds us that, though the accoutrements of success may have changed, the problem remains the same. Americans still cling to the illusion of prosperity as an anesthetic balm for the pain of living. If we do not shed our deceptions, we will suffer the same fate as Boy and Girl—blithe ignorance that places ultimate satisfaction and emotional authenticity out of reach. For us, too, the baby will be forever crying offstage.
CHAPTER V: THE GOAT, OR WHO IS SYLVIA?

By the time audiences sat down for performances of The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?, many were already familiar with the play’s controversial plot. In the weeks leading up to its Broadway premiere, news of the work’s central conceit spread through New York theatre circles like a bawdy barroom joke. Theatre-goers clamored to see the play in which all hell breaks loose in a suburban home when a woman finds out that her adoring husband has been having an affair . . . with a goat. Although Edward Albee has never been a stranger to taboo subject matter, he knew that Goat’s tale of interspecies amour might strike an unusually dissonant chord with its audience. While writing about the play’s genesis, the playwright commented, “I mentioned the idea of the play to a number of people whose opinions I respect and I was shocked by the hostility and condemnation I received for even considering writing about such a matter. Clearly, I was on to something” (“About” 261).

Goat’s critical reception, while generally positive, often treated the work facetiously or dismissed the play as an extended bit of shocking vaudevillian humor. For Robert Brustein, the play was little more than “a sex comedy about bestiality” (“The Audience”). Another reviewer took this line of criticism a step farther, remarking that the play, while relatively superficial, was “Not BA-A-A-D” (Barnes). As word-of-mouth spread, and a production was mounted in London’s West End, misunderstanding of the play’s underlying questions deepened. In her review of the London production, Tanya Gold writes that the play is a veritable call-to-arms for bestiality-rights activists, a paean
to zoophiles around the globe. So much of the critical discourse surrounding the play was focused on the bestial act itself that Albee became discouraged. In an interview after the play’s premier, Albee exasperatedly exclaimed, “The play isn’t about goat-fucking!” (“Borrowed” 284). Later, in a calmer state of mind, he wrote that its story of true love between man and beast is a parable—“a generative matter rather than the ‘subject.’ The play is about love, and loss, the limits of our tolerance and who, indeed, we really are” (“About” 262). In Goat, Albee creates another of his trademarked suburban paradises and shatters it through an act of taboo sexuality, thereby forcing his audience to face its own superficiality and intolerance.

It is important to note that, in the published version of the play, the work is given a parenthetical subtitle—“Notes toward a definition of tragedy.” In so doing Albee hopes to elevate Goat, albeit in tongue-and-cheek fashion, from the baseness of a vulgar punchline to the heights of pathos. After all, the inclusion of Sylvia, the goat, as the play’s fifth character slyly reminds the audience that tragedy derives from the word “tragoidia,” meaning “goat song.” Rather than featuring a formidable Greek king or politician, however, Albee’s modern tragedy documents the fall of a big-hearted architect (Martin) whose hamartia is his love for a pastoral American ideal, manifested by a goat named Sylvia.

The real tragedy of the play lies not in Martin’s bestial infidelity, or even in the subsequent dissolution of his marriage to the intelligent, devoted Stevie, but in his treatment at the hands of his lifelong best friend, Ross. After Martin confides in his friend about his affair, Ross responds with revulsion and moral indignation—instantly
condemning a man he had long admired. While there can be no doubt that Martin’s act is a transgressive one, Ross’s betrayal, and what one critic called “sham morality,” is no less stunning (Hurwitt). Albee creates Ross as a surrogate for the audience—he is an outspoken judge of character whose attitudes are a litmus test for our own. Rather than sympathize with Ross, however, we revile him. His professed concern for his friend’s marriage is couched in a preoccupation with keeping up appearances, and his inability to comprehend Martin’s painful alienation suggests our own barely concealed intolerance.

Additionally, Albee uses the play to re-examine the basic questions of identity posed in The Play About the Baby. Martin’s bestiality throws his well-ordered life into chaos and dislocates each family member’s sense of self. Stevie, for example, when confronted with her husband’s unimaginable act, must ask herself if Martin is still the same caring, morally forthright man she married, or if he simply has become a “goat-fucker.” Further, she must question her own self-worth and definition as proud mother and supportive wife when her husband’s love becomes equally shared between woman and four-legged beast. Fundamentally, Goat asks us how sound our grasp on personal identity is, and urges us to sympathize with, not distance ourselves from, the struggles of its characters.

The play opens in Martin and Stevie Gray’s lushly appointed suburban drawing room—a twenty-first century Garden of Eden in which we find all the accoutrements of accomplishment and success. By all outward appearances, Martin is at the height of his powers, both personally and professionally. His best friend, and local broadcast journalist, Ross, has arrived to interview him for a television segment in commemoration
of Martin’s acceptance of the Pritzker Prize for architecture. As Ross remarks, “Some people matter in extraordinary ways, in ways which affect the lives of the rest of us—enrich them, inform them. Some people, I guess, are, well . . . more extraordinary than others. Martin Gray—whom you’ve met on this program before—is such a man, such a person” (24). In Ross’s estimation, Martin has arrived.

At fifty, he is, like Three Tall Women’s B, perched on the mountaintop of middle age. He is a financially successful family man with an adoring wife and an intelligent, thoughtful son, Billy. Billy, who is homosexual, helps complete the portrait of the hip, modern family. As Martin is quick to point out to Ross, Billy is a “real cute kid . . . bright as you’d ever want, gay as the nineties” (21). Unquestionably, Martin and Stevie’s relationship with their son is a loving, supportive one—by his own admission, his parents are “about as good as they come” (100). At the same time, the two pride themselves on their progressive political views, and his homosexuality provides a stylish ornament for their liberal image.

Just as Billy is an ideal child, Martin and Stevie’s marriage seems to be without flaw. Unlike most of Albee’s married couples, they share an authentic bond. They truly care for one another. As Stevie comments later in the play, “You’d never imagine that a marriage could be so perfect” (75). Their relationship has, to this point, been open and communicative, filled with the mutual regard and affection that characters such as The American Dream’s Mommy and Daddy lack. Stevie continues: “I rose into love with you and have—what—cherished? you all these years, been proud of all you’ve done . . . been . . . well, happy. I guess that’s the word. No, I don’t guess; I know . . . I’ve married the
man I loved and I’ve been . . . so . . . happy” (77). In short, the two have been good together. They share neither the fundamentally destructive illusions of George and Martha, nor the emotionally crippling optimism of Boy and Girl. Nevertheless, their happiness is short-lived.

Though generally honest with one another and always respectful and loving, Martin and Stevie’s marriage is characterized, at least in part, by an unwillingness to fully engage with painful truth. Throughout their opening exchange, the two trade playful semantics, humor, and wordplay as a means of side-stepping potentially difficult issues such as aging and mental deterioration. Take this example, which comes after Martin expresses concerns about losing his memory.

STEVIE. Your mind, darling; it’s not going . . . anywhere.

MARTIN. Am I too young for Alzheimer’s?

STEVIE. Probably. Isn’t it nice to be too young for something? . . . The old joke is, if you can’t remember what it’s called you don’t have it.

MARTIN. Have what? (12-13)

Rather than exploring the underlying cause of Martin’s anxiety, the couple turns his concerns into a clever joke. Even later in the play, after Stevie’s discovery of Martin’s affair, as their marriage—and living room—lie in shambles, the two revel in their own wit, and use their linguistic acumen to deflect pain and confrontation.

The ultimate disconnect, however, comes when Stevie detects an unfamiliar scent on her husband. When questioned about it, Martin becomes evasive, and launches into a
mock confession of his affair, which Albee describes as being delivered in a playful, “greatly exaggerated Noel Coward manner” (16).

STEVIE. I suppose you’d better tell me!

MARTIN. I can’t! I can’t!

STEVIE. Tell me! Tell me!

MARTIN. Her name is Sylvia!

STEVIE. Sylvia? Who is Sylvia?

MARTIN. She’s a goat; Sylvia is a goat! (Acting manner dropped; normal tone now; serious, flat) She’s a goat.

STEVIE. You’re too much! (Exits)

MARTIN. I am? You try to tell them; you try to be honest. What do they do? They laugh at you. (17)

Martin, though obviously longing to unburden himself, is horrified of being made a joke. As a result, he is unable to convey anything to Stevie other than the absurdity of the situation. Likewise, Stevie cannot imagine the truth, even when all affectations are dropped. Martin’s inability to communicate honestly with the one person whom he professes to love above all others renders the exchange only uneasily humorous and underscores the domestic tragedy yet to come.

Like his seemingly idyllic family life, Martin’s career is at its zenith. He is a world-renowned architect who, in addition to his prestigious prize, has been commissioned to design the two hundred billion dollar World City, a “dream city of the future, financed by U.S. electronics technology and set to rise in the wheatfields of our
Middle West” (24). This potentially ominous, if absurd, architectural project marks Martin as a creator and modern-day alchemist. He has been charged with the material realization of the American Dream—a utopian melding of the urban and the pastoral in the country’s heartland, a synthetic, stately pleasure-dome of epic proportions. As we shall soon see, however, Martin is uneasy with his role as architect of the American imagination and feels an intense spiritual disconnect from the society which he is, ostensibly, helping to shape.

In the ensuing lead-up to Martin’s shocking confession, Albee foreshadows his protagonist’s precipitous fall. As Ross desperately attempts to keep the interview afloat despite Martin’s increasing melancholy, he comments, “What an honor! What a duo of honors! You’re at the pinnacle of your success, Martin.” To which Martin responds, “You mean it’s all downhill from here?” (26). This line is an echo of an earlier one in which Stevie asks Martin about his feelings of foreboding—“The sense that everything going right is a sure sign that everything’s going wrong?” (10). Martin sees the destruction he is about to bring. For him, a professional pinnacle is merely a harbinger of unavoidable decline. His material success, of which Ross is in constant awe, is merely a mask for his growing sense of isolation and lack of emotional fulfillment.

Like Stevie, Ross also detects that something is the matter with Martin. As he comments during the interview, “[This is] probably the most important week of your life . . . and you act like you don’t know whether you’re coming or going, like you don’t know who you are” (30). He cannot fathom why Martin would have such discontent. For Ross, a man who longs for the television spotlight, success is defined through awards
and acquisitions, and friendship is demonstrated by one’s ability to boost another’s ego. His values are dramatically out of line with Martin’s. Consumed by superficiality, Ross neither knows nor understands the man with whom he is supposed to be best friends. Nevertheless, Ross provides the audience with its entrée to the world of the play. He interviews Martin without a camera crew, instead working the video camera himself. Thus, his initial view of his friend parallels that of the audience, whose own view is framed by the theatre’s proscenium arch.

As the two men continue talking, Martin reluctantly admits, much to Ross’s surprise, that he has been having an affair. Intrigued, Ross presses his friend for more information. Martin recounts a trip to the country in which he reveled in the exquisite beauty of the farms he passed. It was on this trip that he embraced the countryside as a place of solace. For Martin, this rural wonderland is a utopia that mirrors his planned development of the World City. It represents an escape from the problems of urban life to the paradise of “the roadside stands, with corn and other stuff piled high, and baskets full of other things—beans and tomatoes and those great white peaches you only get late summer” (41). In Sylvia, Martin finds the realization of that pastoral ideal. The supposed simplicity and honesty of her love for him is overpowering and he yields to passion.

Ross does not condemn Martin for his infidelity. Rather, he appears proud of Martin’s sexual exploration and happily reminisces about a past extra-marital affair of his own. When Martin reveals that he found the object of his affection on a farm, Ross hungrily imagines a fantasy scenario. “Daisy Mae,” he says, “Blonde hair down to her
shoulders, big tits in the calico, bare midriff, blonde down at the navel, piece a straw in her teeth . . .” (42). Dismissive of Martin’s professed spiritual awakening, Ross dwells in the carnal. Even when his friend ecstatically protests, “Yes! Yes! I am! I’m in love with her. Oh, Jesus! Oh, Sylvia! Oh, Sylvia!” Ross can only imagine a lurid fantasy (44). It is not until Martin presents the other man with a picture of his paramour that the reality sinks in. “THIS IS A GOAT,” he exclaims, “YOU’RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT! YOU’RE FUCKING A GOAT!” His secret now laid bare, Martin can only respond, “Yes” (46). Though he urges Ross to be discreet about their conversation, his friend’s sanctimonious hypocrisy is overwhelming. In the following scene, Martin must face the consequences of his affair. The damage is irreparable.

Whereas the first scene concerned the revelation of Martin’s infidelity, the second is one of confrontation and fallout. As the curtain rises, we find the Gray family in the midst of a heated exchange. Ross has written Stevie a letter detailing the affair with Sylvia. Stevie reads portions of the letter aloud, subsequently illustrating the superficiality of its author’s character. “Because I love you both—respect you, love you—I can’t stay silent at a time of crisis for your both, for Martin’s public image and your own deeply devoted self” (56). Rather than demonstrating concern for the state of their marriage or for the emotional ramifications of Martin’s affair, Ross acts solely as a guardian of his friend’s career and public persona. For him, a successful career and the appearance of domestic serenity are of paramount importance. It is no mistake that Ross’s last name, Tuttle, comes suspiciously close to the word “tattle.” Though couched in terms of love, Ross’s letter is the acme of unfeeling duplicity.
Over the course of the family’s verbal battle, passions run high. Billy and his father begin to trade epithets. Exasperated and trapped, Martin calls his son a “fucking faggot” (48). Here, Stevie questions her previously unwavering perception of her husband. “Your father’s sorry for calling you a fucking faggot,” she muses ironically, “because he’s not that kind of man. He’s a decent, liberal, right-thinking, talented, famous, gentle man who right now would appear to be fucking a goat; and I would like to talk about that, if you don’t mind” (49). As she continues, she ponders aloud as to whether our actions alone determine our identities or if there is something primal and immutable about who we are. Over the course of the scene, each family member will be forced to grapple with the same question.

Though Albee delves into Martin and Billy’s predicaments later in the play, Stevie’s struggle is the focus of the second scene. Having been forsaken by her husband for a barnyard animal, she interrogates the validity of her own identity. Her confusion deepens when Martin protests that he still loves her.

STEVIE. You love me. Let’s see if I understand the phrase. You love me.

MARTIN. Yes!

STEVIE. But I’m a human being; I have only two breasts; I walk upright; I give milk only on special occasions; I use the toilet. You love me? I don’t understand.

MARTIN. Oh, God!

STEVIE. How can you love me when you love so much less? (52)
Her husband’s insistence of his love for her falls on deaf ears. Stevie is less concerned with the actual act of bestiality than by its implications for her sense of self. She wonders, if Martin could so cavalierly cavort, sexually, with a goat, what does that say about her relative worth—her value as a wife and partner?

She also questions the very foundation of their marriage. What had previously appeared to be a union free of illusion—one built on honesty and tenderness—may have been the ultimate deception. She comments, “We all prepare for jolts along the way, disturbances of the peace, the lies, the evasions, the infidelities—if they happen . . . we think we can handle everything, whatever comes along, but we don’t know, do we?” (59). In the span of a single afternoon, more than twenty years of marriage can be called into question. So ephemeral are the paradigms we create for ourselves. Additionally, Stevie delivers an indirect admonishment to the audience. Just as Baby’s Man commented on our tendency to disassociate ourselves from the painful experiences of others, Stevie reminds us that, regardless of one’s progressive self-image, there are times when we will be utterly unprepared for the ways in which our tolerance is tested.

Husband and wife are working at cross-purposes. For Stevie, the conversation centers on the pain she feels and the utter abandonment and disillusionment her husband’s affair has caused. For Martin, however, the desire to make Stevie comprehend his actions is at issue. He seems unable to see how his actions have caused his wife so much suffering. To his mind, his love for Sylvia was an inescapable force, and their sexual congress was a near-religious experience. He has become a quintessentially isolated Albee character. Alone in his passions and seemingly rejected by his wife,
Martin’s only hope is to be understood. He and Stevie stare at one another across the abyss of their shattered marriage, unable to make the other understand the loss they both feel.

In an attempt to explain his actions, Martin tells his wife of a zoophile support group that he attended. Incredulous, Stevie angrily labels the group “Goat-Fuckers Anonymous” (66). As his story proceeds, it becomes clear that Martin is not seeking forgiveness from his wife, nor does he attempt to justify or rationalize what he has done. He simply seeks understanding. He tells of a man in the group who bedded a pig and a woman who loved a German Shepherd. Despite Stevie’s growing revulsion, Martin continues and explains that each member of the group found themselves in the arms (or hooves) of animals as a result of profound unhappiness and dissatisfaction with their lives. “Not everyone is satisfied in that way,” he comments, “No matter. And I was unhappy there, for they were all unhappy” (73). Each of the group members had their own, very human, story.

So, too, does Martin, as he begins his relationship with a goat. Stevie continues to listen in disgust as her husband describes his first meeting with Sylvia. For Martin, Sylvia represented a singularity of feeling and intent the likes of which he had never before experienced. As he says, “I’d never seen such an expression. It was pure . . . and trusting . . . and innocent; . . . so guileless” (80). In a world where he was pressured to design a grotesque, artificial, mechanical utopia, in a society where a man betrays his closest friend in the name of protecting his social status, Sylvia was an oracle of truth. Martin’s union with her becomes an act of ecstatic spiritual possession.
MARTIN. It was as if an alien came out of whatever it was, and it . . . took me with it, and it was . . . an ecstasy and a purity, and a . . . love of a . . . un-i-mag-in-able kind, and it relates to nothing whatever, to nothing that can be related to! Don’t you see!? Don’t you see the “thing” that happened to me? What nobody understands? Why I can’t feel what I’m supposed to?! Because it relates to nothing? It can’t have happened! (81)

Entering an emotional territory for which there are no rules, Martin stands hopelessly alone. His previous identity as father, husband, architect, Democrat, has been torn asunder by this spiritually transformative act. His tragedy lies in his inability to make himself understood by a woman whom he still professes to love deeply.

Equaling his tragedy, however, is Stevie’s. While Martin laments being misunderstood, he is also unable to understand. He is unashamed of his love for Sylvia and wonders why people in his support group were so “unhappy; what was wrong with . . . with . . . being in love . . . like that” (70). He also naively suggests that “No one [gets] hurt” as a result of man-beast relationships (71). Even as Stevie begins smashing all of the couple’s fine china and objects d’art Martin remains unable to grasp how his affair with Sylvia could have affected her so. “How much do you hate me,” she asks (82). At the end of the scene, she reinforces the point, howling at Martin for failing to understand how he wounds her. Just before exiting, she cries out, “You have brought me down, you goat-fucker; you love of my life! You have brought me down to nothing! You have brought me down, and, Christ! I’ll bring you down with me!” (89). Her identity effectively obliterated, Stevie is now just as isolated as her husband. For her,
Martin’s cold lack of understanding is the final act of betrayal and a sign that their marriage, like the precious objects littering the stage, is in utter ruin.

To this point Billy has been a virtual non-participant in Martin and Stevie’s clash. Though nearly an adult himself, his parents consistently treat him as a child. Stevie even admonishes him to “Go away, Billy. Go outside and play” (83). Nevertheless, he has shown himself to be a mature and sensitive observer. After being summarily dismissed from the living room near the beginning of the second scene, he says:

  BILLY. I will probably go to my room, and I’ll probably close my door, and I’ll probably lie down on my bed, and I’ll start crying and it’ll probably get louder and worse, but you probably won’t hear it—either of you—because you’ll be too busy killing each other. But I’ll be there, and my little eight-year-old heart will for certain be breaking. (54)

He sees the destruction around him, but is rendered powerless to stop or even try to mitigate its effects. His parents, perhaps out of a need to protect him, or perhaps out of a refusal to face his emotional response to Martin’s infidelity, attempt to deny his place in the family drama.

In the play’s third and final scene, Billy assumes a tragic position alongside his parents. Additionally, the scene illuminates the relationship between father and son and allows Martin, for the first time, to understand the consequences of his actions. As the two men stand together in the decimated living room, they reflect, metaphorically, on all that has occurred during the day.

  MARTIN. You destroy me—I destroy you.
BILLY. Yes, I see. *(Indicates wreckage)* Then there’s no point in setting this all right.

MARTIN. It does look pretty awful, doesn’t it.

BILLY. Let’s do it anyway. (97)

Though Martin and Stevie’s relationship may be irreparably broken, Albee leaves hope for the relationship between Martin and Billy.

What allows this connection is the peeling away of identity that has accompanied the play’s action. Billy remarks, “I know you’re my father. I know who you are, and I know who you’re supposed to be, but . . .” To which Martin replies, “You don’t know who I am anymore” (93). Billy’s previous conception of Martin as father, hero, and infallible guardian, has been replaced with a blank slate—Martin is simply a man with whom Billy must reacquaint himself. Likewise, the son has ceased to be the eight-year-old boy Martin and Stevie still see him as. He has witnessed the figurative murders of two people whom he worshipped and has emerged deeply troubled, but more mature.

The way will not be clear and easy for father and son, however. On one level, Billy is quite lucky. As he says, “You’ve figured out that raising a kid does not include making him into a carbon copy of you, that you’re letting me think you’re putting up with me being gay far better than you probably really are” (100). He is the son that Mommy and Daddy or Boy and Girl could never have—a fully actualized person who does not live solely to gratify his parents’ desires. On another level, Martin’s affair with Sylvia has destroyed a piece of Billy’s psyche. “The Good Ship Lollipop has gone and sunk,”
he laments (101). For the first time, Martin sees the impact of his affair with Sylvia. Billy’s “great Mom and great Dad” are great no more (101).

As Billy cries, he reaches out to Martin, puts his arms around him and gives him a “deep, sobbing, sexual kiss” (102). In a moment of confusion in which traditional family relationships have been dismantled and renegotiated, a moment in which the present is just as unsure as the future, father and son blur the line between the familial and the sexual. As J. Ellen Gainor writes, “[Albee] confronts the dominant, hetero-normative culture with its designation of gay sexuality as aberrant, and challenges it to rethink not only these categories, but also the impossibility of making clear distinctions among the manifold, polymorphously perverse expressions of sexual desire” (213). Though this “perverse” act is an entirely logical expression of communion at a time when (as Stevie says) the rules governing “The Way the Game is Played” have been abandoned, our sense of tolerance is challenged yet again (59).

Albee was surprised at the reaction the kiss elicited. In one interview he remarked, “A lot of people got hysterical and walked out. People didn’t walk out at the revelation that [Martin] was having an affair with a goat, but when the gay son kissed his father. What kind of a country do we live in?” (“Albee, Unafraid”). Hoping that kiss would act as a catalyst for audience self-examination rather than disgust, the playwright has Ross re-enter soon after the two men break their embrace. His immediate, snarling response is that Martin is “sick, sick, sick” (106). Once again, his revulsion provides an index for our own reaction.
ROSS. This isn’t . . . embezzlement, honey; this isn’t stealing from helpless widows; this isn’t going to whores and coming down with the clap, or whatever, you know. This isn’t the stuff that stops a career in its tracks for a little while—humiliation, public remorse, then back up again. This is beyond that—way beyond it! . . . Somebody will catch you at it.

(108)

Marking himself, and by extension, the audience, as hypocrite, Ross creates a moral distinction between what he has just seen, Martin’s extra-marital dalliance with Sylvia, and infidelity with a prostitute. While all three can be equally destructive to a family, whoring is no longer considered taboo. At the same time, he reinforces his belief that image and public perception are far more important than the act itself. Ross is undeniably cast as the villain of the piece. Hopefully, the audience will recognize the common ground it shares with him and re-examine its own attitudes.

As the three men stand on stage, separated by chasms of morality and intolerance, Stevie returns. As the stage directions specify, she is “dragging a dead goat. The goat’s throat is cut; the blood is down Stevie’s dress, on her arms” (109). She has committed the ultimate transgression—she has murdered Sylvia. The image is a classically lurid Albee tableau. Martin is devastated.

STEVIE. Why are you surprised? What did you expect me to do.

MARTIN. What did she do!? What did she ever do!? I ask you: what did she ever do!?

STEVIE. She loved you . . . you say. As much as I do.
MARTIN. (To Stevie) I’m sorry. (To Billy) I’m sorry. I’m sorry. (110)

Still unable to grasp the effect of his actions on his wife, Martin remains disconnected. For him, his simultaneous love for Stevie and Sylvia is not a mutually exclusive condition. For Stevie, however, the wound is far too deep. Ultimately, Sylvia is not the play’s only murder victim—Martin and Stevie have destroyed one another. Earlier, Stevie’s sense of self was decimated when her love was equated with that of a goat. Now, Martin experiences loss as his new spiritual identity with Sylvia is destroyed.

As in any Albee work, this play’s characters are not given solutions to their problems. In Woolf, the audience is left, despite a final note of hope, to wonder what the future holds for George and Martha. Has the banishment of illusion truly paved the way for a renewed marriage of honesty and communication, or will the two give in to the facile temptation of protective self-delusion? In Goat, the future is no less uncertain for the Gray family. While Stevie’s murderous act, with its awful finality, is a terrible one that suggests an irreparable divide between she and Martin, there may be room for salvation. Just as father and son recognized the need to approach one another with a tabula rasa—to renegotiate their relationship in the spirit of love and understanding—perhaps the death of Sylvia will wipe the slate clean for Martin and Stevie. The goat’s death may be the ultimate act of marital purification. On the other hand, Martin and Stevie’s journey may be over, with both the victims of a divine tragedy. Instead, the audience is given the opportunity to change—to re-evaluate its own self-definition, and to question visceral moral judgments, which are all too perilous (and easy) to make.
CONCLUSION

Edward Albee’s body of work spans a formidable spectrum of stylistic and thematic concerns. In his ongoing effort to communicate with his audience, his plays often shift from the tragic to the comic or from the realistic to the absurd within the space of a single page. Take *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia*, in which the playwright deftly combines bathos and pathos in its story of one man’s love-affair with a barnyard animal and his family’s subsequent disintegration. Or witness *Three Tall Women*, a play that elegantly blends a naturalistic character study of one entirely concrete woman with an abstract fracturing of the same woman’s identity into three separate people. Albee’s daring, combined with his refusal to be pigeonholed, has earned him three Pulitzer Prizes . . . and two decades of relative obscurity in the middle of his career. When asked about his penchant for eclecticism, Albee once remarked, “The plays fairly give the illusion of being written in different styles, different removes from reality. I move around dramatically. I hope I’m eclectic because it means I’ve learned from other people, other styles. It doesn’t mean imitative, it means using whatever methods are most effective for what you’re after” (qtd. in Savran 21). Albee’s unique mix of styles is a set of diverse tools used for a singular purpose—the awakening of his audience to a life lived disengaged.

Since his earliest theatrical acts of “aggression against the status quo” in the late 1950s, the playwright’s over-arching artistic agenda has not changed appreciably. As he said in a 2004 interview, “A good play can make us more aware of our failings, our
responsibilities to ourselves and others . . . It may be able to change us into better people” (“Edward Albee,” Theatre Voices 69). In each of his plays Albee explores the ways in which Americans remain disconnected from one another, aimlessly seeking deliverance from a death-in-life existence.

In one sense, critics who assert that Albee continues to retread familiar thematic ground are entirely correct. Despite intervening periods of war, social upheaval, diverse presidential administrations, and economic development, any cursory comparison of the 1950s American cultural moment and that of the early twenty-first century reveal striking similarities. In short, the social canvas on which Albee paints remains the same—the materialistic, potentially damaging myth of the American Dream is alive and well. One need only look at the aftermath of President George W. Bush’s 2001 tax cuts to see that the American drive for acquisition persists. In a 2003 analysis, economist Lou Dobbs estimates that an overwhelming amount of the money individuals received through the 2001 cuts was spent immediately on discretionary and luxury items. At the same time, the cuts did nothing to stimulate personal investment, job growth, or ostensible equity between disparate socio-economic classes.

The drive to consume, spend, and accumulate is heightened by the administration’s plan to create an “ownership society” through increased housing subsidies, and personal management of health savings accounts and retirement funds (among other things). Without becoming overly partisan, such a plan represents an abrogation of an American communal investment in economic and social security in the name of profit and economic efficiency. As magazine columnist Robert Schiller writes,
“If we get an ownership society wrong, growing inequality and social unrest are likely to follow.” In such a potentially divisive society, in which an individual’s long term health and prosperity is governed by the motto “every man for himself,” Edward Albee’s ongoing artistic quest for interpersonal connection and compassion has great currency.

What has changed over the course of the playwright’s career is the scope of his critique. His early plays are generally focused on a general social ill. *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story* examine an increasingly consumerist America. In these plays Albee confronts a nation diseased—one in which people’s belief in the spiritually curative power of money, power, and image compromised their morals and left them hopelessly isolated from one another. In *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee begins a career-long preoccupation with destructive American self-deception.

His late career plays extrapolate, philosophically, on the thematic material of the early work while adding a new dimension—the interrogation of personal identity. From *Three Tall Women*’s meditation on one woman’s moral decline to *The Goat*’s examination of a family’s forced re-definition, Albee’s later plays ask us to question whether or not we can ever truly know who we are.

While never providing his characters with simple solutions to often terrifying problems, he rejects nihilistic readings of his plays. As he once commented, all of his plays are about “the way we are and the way we could be. They’re two different things” (“Borrowed Time” 245). With this idea in mind, an important area of study open to Albee scholars is the renewed exploration of the playwright’s largely forgotten middle career plays. Lambasted by critics for being overly cerebral and pessimistic, works such
as The Man Who Had Three Arms, All Over, and The Lady From Dubuque have not been given their critical due.

Part of the blame may fall on the shoulders of the people who mounted the original productions. Albee once referred to the Broadway production of Man as an “atrocity,” the execution of which was far divorced from the playwright’s original intent (“Borrowed Time” 236). The real reason may be simply that they were viewed, in their time, as discrete endpoints in Albee’s career, as opposed to way-stations on the journey of a constantly evolving dramaturgy. Scholars must look deeper to establish meaningful connections between the plays. For example, when viewed in the context of an entire career, The Lady From Dubuque’s pedantic, unnamed visitors provide an intriguing thematic counterpoint to those of The Play About the Baby. Likewise, All Over’s examination of the self-knowledge found in preparing for one’s own death is lent new perspective after a reading of Three Tall Women. Scholarship surrounding Albee’s career may yield the best illustration of needing to go a very long distance out of the way to come back a short distance correctly.

None of this is to say that Albee’s career is over. As of the writing of this piece, the septuagenarian playwright is working on another new play. Still driven by the same thirst for communication that powered his first pieces, he is loath to think that he has received his last Pulitzer. For the playwright, there is still much work to be done. On top of continuing to urge his audiences to realize “the way [they] could be,” Albee remains optimistic about being able to challenge the theatrical status quo. Disturbed by Broadway’s perceived lack of risk-taking, Albee continues to make theatre that forces
audience members out of their comfort zones. “People don’t want to go see [plays] because they are real experiences,” he remarked. “They’re not safe fantasy experience. There’s something about the reality of a play that’s disturbing to a lot of people” (“Edward Albee,” Theatre Voices 68). As always, the playwright regards safety as something a stone’s throw from death.

If recent, successful Broadway revivals of Seascape and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? are any indication, mainstream theatre may no longer be afraid of Edward Albee. In an interview given before the opening of The Play About the Baby, he was asked to name what he deemed his best play, to which he responded, “You know, it would be an awful, terrible thing to think that you’ve done your best work. I like to think that maybe it’s three plays down the line” (“Edward Albee,” Speaking on Stage 93).
REFERENCES


---. “Interview with Edward Albee.” Interview with Bruce J. Mann. Mann, Edward Albee 129-144.


Harris, Wendell. “Morality, Absurdity, and Albee.” Kolin and Davis, Critical Essays 117-121.


Murphy, Brenda. “Albee’s Threnodies: Box-Mao-Box, All Over, The Lady From Dubuque, and Three Tall Women.” Bottoms 91-107.


