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THE ROLE OF SILENCE IN EDWARD ALBEE'S PLAYS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1997

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INTRODUCTION

When Edward Albee (1928 -) began his dramatic career, he wrote plays that were set in contemporary American society. These plays present the easily identifiable situations such as an accidental encounter between two men in a park (*The Zoo Story*), a marriage whose satiric treatment reveals the hollowness between the couple (*The American Dream*), and the death of a black singer partially brought about by racism (*The Death of Bessie Smith*). Also rooted in the social setting of Albee's plays is the powerful autobiography of an adopted child that obliquely appears in *The American Dream* and his first full-length play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Within the framework of traditional realistic drama, which captures the quotidian image of life, the playwright expresses a desire to experiment with form, and to do so, he rejects the convention of revelation in realistic drama and chooses one of the key elements of absurd drama--silence.

The American realistic drama, which came into its own at the turn of the century, was idea-oriented, representing the controversial social and ideological concerns of its main practitioners, and as their ideas required clear exposition, the convention of revelation was a logical development. All the dramatic components of realistic drama are structured so as to completely reveal the mystery around which drama is built and provide solutions to problems raised in the plays. Typically, in realistic drama, the action moves towards a single climax in which meanings are illuminated, characters disclose their motives as the action progresses, the plot traces a linear curve, and language conveys chaos and mystery within a logical structure. Although the fluency which dramatic characters display in their dialogue is not normal in everyday conversation, a clearly articulated

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language serves the playwrights to drive their ideas in the theater. In the twentieth-century, major American playwrights experimented with the traditional linear development, but amidst the structural changes, the convention of revelation remained constant.[1]

The realistic theatre has its own conventions. Aiming towards verisimilitude, it tries to close the gap that exists between theater and real life by obliterating all the signs related to stage-craft and to acting. The theatre does not call attention to music and lighting, and actors efface themselves in the characters. W. B. Worthen writes that the "realistic theater works to 'attenuate the medium' by which the drama reaches its audience as a means of attenuating the audience's complicity in the performance itself" (20). According to States, an act of deception occurs in the theater which involves both the play and the audience--the play erects the illusion that the audience does not exist and the audience suspends its disbelief that the actor does (206). The deception has implications for the interpretive role of the audience who are cast as evesdroppers and are not involved in the theater as participants in the action.

With the writings of European dramatists in the 1950s, realistic drama and its conventions began to show signs of changes, yielding ground to the philosophy and techniques of "the theatre of the absurd." In 1962, Albee could state that "The Theater of the Absurd in the sense that it is truly the contemporary theatre, facing as it does man's condition as it is, is the Realistic theatre of our time" ("Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?" 329). Also, in the same essay, he describes his understanding of absurd theater

---

[1] For an analysis of the structural innovations in Eugene O'Neill's realistic drama, see Brenda Murphy's analysis of *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* in *American Realism and American Drama* 189-94.

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as "man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense--which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed" (332). A changing world view led to the emergence of absurd drama that reflected in its form and language the cataclysmic changes of modern society.

Disrupting logic and breaking language to pieces, absurd drama creates a form which expresses the content. Martin Esslin, who is the foremost critic of the "theatre of the absurd," defines the plays written in this tradition as moving "toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself"; the element of langauge, as Esslin explains, "still plays an important part in this conception, but what *happens* on the stage transcends and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters" (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 26). These changes in form and language have had an impact in the theater as it has significantly altered the role of the audience. Unlike the audience in a realistic theater who interpret meanings that are scripted in the text by the playwright and conveyed in the theater by actors, the audience viewing an absurd play fills in meanings, creates meanings of their own.

Since the objective of absurd dramatists is not to solve the mysteries and contrarities in human condition but simply to portray them within the dramatic form, they find silence an effective techniqe to present life as they see it. Silence is not to be understood as the absence of sound or noise. Unspoken meanings are conveyed in gaps, sentences begun and left fragmented, stories started and not completed that leave the motives of characters or their inner selves hidden, truths concealed or cryptically expressed. These gaps, incompletions, and silent syllables beneath

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sentences together with pauses and silences scripted in the text open the drama into the unknown and the mysterious in life. In the theater, the actor and actress have the central role of conveying verbal and nonverbal meanings, and through vocal intonations and gestures they make textual silences expressive. Gesture, which involves both movement and stillness of the actor's body, is not separated from language. Instead, language and gesture together convey meaning in a single visual and auditory image (States 138). A quasi-realistic stage also communicates meanings silently as objects lose their surface significance to function as symbols.

Albee has seized upon the modern technique of silence to subvert the realistic form of his plays and to present within the altered form his artistic vision of contemporary familial life in America. He is very aware of how dramatic conflict is created "in evasion, in silence, as well as in engagement, in speech" (Anderson and Ingersoll 172). In another interview, he pinpoints the different ways language and silence interact to produce meanings :

> . . . I think there should be in any interesting writing of drama at least three things going on at the same time. There is what is being said, what is not being said, the implications of what is not being said, and then there's the use of the character's interest and the use of language itself . . . . And they should not necessarily even be falling in the same direction--these three things.
>
> (Krohn and Wasserman 11)

The comment gives an indication of the playwright's own strategy to produce dramatic tension by using the three levels of meaning in an utterance, spoken, unspoken, and implied, with silence contradicting or reinforcing the meaning of words spoken.

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In my study of Albee's original plays, I consider the role of silence in eliciting themes and altering the dramatic form. I show how silence indicates the breakdown of communication, conveys the emptiness in familial relationships, and elicits mystery around events in the past and the present. I analyze the cyclical structure of the plays that denies conventional closure and delays cathartic experience. Finally, I discuss the altering relationship between an audience and the plays that evolves from the modifications in the structure, pointing out that these changes displace catharsis from the text to the imagination of the audience, giving them the freedom to draw upon their cultural and social experiences in the interpretations that they make. My purpose in this study is to establish that silence is necessary to evoke mystery and to create a kind of structure that Albee's drama and theater aims towards--a structure of mystification and revelation, or partial revelation.

In order to locate Albee within the tradition of nonverbal theater, I trace the use of silence in the theoretical writings of the French director Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and in the contemporary works of two major practitioners of silence, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and Harold Pinter (1930 -). Though my study does not offer a comparitive analysis of silence, I indicate here the correspondences and differences in Albee's use of silence and those of Beckett's and Pinter's to indicate that Albee is an experimental American playwright rooted in realism whose writing was changed with an adjustment to the theory and nonverbal techniques of absurd drama.

A curious split occurs in Artaud's response to silence in his artistic life and in the theater. As an artist, he fears silence that threatens to still his inner voice of inspiration and prevent him from completing his writing. When

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he sees the manifestation of silence in the theater, however, he considers it as creative in its impact on the audience's imagination and their emotions. "Silence is an ideal which Artaud strives to reach," writes Catherine Pouchard, and yet, "it is a form of evil which threatens to destroy his creativity" (68). The tension between trying "to conjure up the figure of silence, and to exorcize it" generates Artaud's visionary ideas related to the theater (69).

Artaud's *The Theater and its Double* (1958), the first English translation of essays and letters originally published in 1938, documents the theatrical ideas he had been recording since 1932. In 1935 Artaud founded the Theater of Cruelty with the intention of translating his ideas on the the stage, and wrote and produced *The Cenci,* but the innovative staging with noise, music and acting failed to move French theater-goers. Despite his attempts to change the theater of his time, he had little success, and in a career span of ten years, he produced only one full-length play and three one-act plays. In the last thirty years, however, Artaud's theoretical ideas have received new currency, and as a consequence of his influence on avant-garde playwrights in Europe and America, modern theater has become "less verbal," and this nonverbal theater has led to a "complex relationship with the audience" (Sinfield 188).

In *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud vigorously opposes the practice of contemporary French theater whose dependence on classical texts undermined mise-en-scène because it gave acting a secondary postion to language. In the Artaudian theater, silence as an absence of words creates a space in which nonverbal languages become audible, and the theater transformed into a spectacle "makes use of everything--gestures, sounds, screams, light, darkness" to create meanings ("The Theater and Its

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Double" 12). While Artaud does not suppress verbal language with silence, he emphasizes that a reliance on any one language in the theater, be it "written words, music, light, noises," spells "imminent ruin." Integrating the different essays in *The Theatre and Its Double* is the idea of a theater that breaks the confinement of "a fixed language and form," changing the flat and ordinary experiences of the audience into a lyrical one. One of the effects of Artaud's theories, which draw upon the languages of drama, dance, and music, is that it closes the distance between these different aesthetic experiences, allowing the verbal, visual, and aural to converge on the stage.

Looking for inspiration to create a nonverbal theater, Artaud found it in the Balinese theater in which the dancer's body and eye movements function as a sign or a hieroglyph. In contrast to this older form of theater that evokes emotions through gestures, the Western theater uses the verbal text to articulate psychological concerns and scrutinize a character's mind. Referring to the Western theater, Artaud argues that its preoccupation with psychology is the reason, "why we have come to long for a silence in it in which we could listen more closely to life" ("Letters on Language" 118). Rejecting the psychological theater for a physical theater, he observes, "the obsession with the defined word which says everything ends in the withering of words." The function of the theater is to stir the latent emotions in the audience, and only a nonverbal theater fulfils this aim.

Artaud searches for means to integrate the audience with the performance, revolutionizing the way it sees its role in the theater. Altering the convention of French contemporary drama, which asserted an external reality, he presents in the manifestoes his ideas of a new theater that will reveal to the audience not only an outer reality but also their internal selves, projecting as authentic their hidden dreams, cruelty, erotic desires, and

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illusions. To attain this objective, Artaud gives detailed descriptions regarding the principles around which a play must produced. Each play will use all the resources of the theater to illuminate a reality so that "between life and the theatre there will be no distinct division, but instead a continuity" ("The Theatre of Cruelty: Second Manifesto" 126). One of the ways in which Artaud tries to achieve a unity between the spectacle on the stage and the audience's experiences is by restructuring the physical space of a theater, shifting the performance from a proscenium stage to some barn or hangar, and positioning the audience in the middle so that the action can flow around them, a new idea of space creating "a direct communication" between the audience and the performance, between the audience and actors ("The Theater of Cruelty: First Manifesto" 96). Though many of Artaud's ideas have proved impractical, his theories that shatter the distance between the audience and the spectacle have had a significant impact on avant-garde theater.

In an interview with Matthew Roudané in 1985, Albee discussed his dramaturgy and Artaud's influence on him in shaping his conception of the interpretive role of the audience in a theater. Like Artaud, Albee regards the theater as "a live and dangerous experience--and therefore a *life-giving force*," which urges the audience to examine their "status quo" and change their habituated modes of thinking ("Albee on Albee" 194). As a playwright and a director, Albee does not protect the audience behind an invisible wall, but instead he smashes the wall dividing the audience from the performance. "I want the audience to participate in the dramatic experience;" he remarked. "In this sense, I agree with Artaud. Voyeurism in the theater lets people off the hook. Sometimes the playwright should draw blood" (195). Albee has not elaborated on the role of silence in his plays, and in analyzing his plays,

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we find, there is a significant difference between the way silence is defined in Artaud's theories and the way Albee uses it to convey themes and to portray characters. While silence is a liberating experience in Artaud's theories, in Albee's drama, it is a sign of blocking or repression and is symptomatic of failure. When we read Beckett and Pinter together with Albee, we can conclude that in much of modern drama, silence is a dark, negative sign.

Regarded as the truly seminal dramatist of our time, Beckett has changed our experience of modern theater with his distinctive use of silence and language. In Beckett's postwar drama, silence emerges in response to the holocaust, to what George Steiner describes as the "political bestiality of our age" (*Language and Silence* 4). For many writers in the postwar period, language was no longer a viable means of articulating traumatic experiences, and a deepening distrust of language brought about a crisis in literature. The "retreat from the word" comes from a confrontation with a gap between a world without meaning and a language that cannot convey this meaninglessness. Writing about nothingness, Beckett has to struggle with the rigour of language to voice the chaos and purposelessness of existence that language by its very nature denies. In one of his best known comments made to Georges Duthuit in 1949, Beckett described how modern existence has created the impossibility of communication in literature:

> There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.
>
> (qtd. in Gilman 80)

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Beckett feels no volition to express himself. He writes out of a moral compulsion, retreating from language to convey through silence what is non-existent, absent in the human condition.

Beckett's own philosophy, which is grounded on the knowledge that each one of us is essentially alone and searching to find a bond with the environment, deepens the note of anguish and alienation in his writings. The anguish of the dramatic characters lies in their having to deal with what Karen Stein terms "the universal, metaphysical silence, the inexplicable abyss" (424). While providing a defintion of silence in Beckett's plays, Leslie Kane distinguishes between *silences*, the spaces in between linguistic utterances, and the *Silence*, the Nothingness, the Void which is external to our self, and is the unattainable object in our search for unity (105). Within the self-reflexive structure of the plays, the empty spaces in between words resonate the silences which the characters feel with their internal and external realities, and the characters' continued effort to mean something within a purposeless environment parallels the playwright's own struggle to communicate the absurd condition of life.

Absence figures paradoxically as a haunting presence in Beckett's drama. In *Waiting for Godot*, there is an absence of nature, the absence of a saviour, the absence of hope, the absence of memory, the uncertainty of existence, and isolation. These absences engender silence, and the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, engage in games and storytelling in an effort not to succumb to silence--the "dead voices" in nature, which they imagine are murmuring and rustling like leaves. When we compare the plays of Beckett and Albee, a significant difference emerges in their treatment of the theme of emptiness. Unlike Beckett, Albee does not suggest an absence, but by using the American family as the realistic framework of his plays, he

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delineates repression or avoidance or concealment that creates silence, and this silence is a sign of what is concealed--the failures of life. Other than in *Who's Afraid of Viriginia Woolf?*, where an absent (or non-existent) child symbolizes the absences in a marriage, all of Albee's plays portray sterility in the family as a sign of something that is hidden from view, while in Beckett, absence is indicative of something that is not there. Even in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the technique of concealment, withholding, and evasion is more characteristic than that of absence as characters take refuge from the painful realities of their marriage in games and stories.

Beckett does not completely overlook private failures in his depiction of human tragedy. In *Endgame*, which is also structured around a family, Hamm recounts a story of a starving father and a child, which constitutes the play's main action, and during the storytelling he hints at his guilt for his failure in the past to respond humanely when he saw destitution all around him: "All those I might have helped." Outside Hamm's room, however, is the empty ocean unbroken by the cry of gulls, producing a mysterious silence that is unconnected to an individual's guilt. Ultimately in Beckett, silence is the " 'negative equivalent' of emptiness" which elicits "a form of emotion and anguish that has no specific derivative and no promise of surcease through the possibilities in the world" (States 74). While the dramatic characters in Albee's plays are responsible for creating their own entrapments, illusions, fears, or pain, in the end, their fate is similar to Beckett's characters as silence coils around their lives.

Closely intertwined with the theme of absence, are the motifs of waiting and listening in *Waiting for Godot*. As Vladimir and Estragon wait, they struggle with uncertainty, despairing and hoping at the same time that a "prayer," "a vague supplication" made in the past will be answered (19). The

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nonarrival of Godot leaves the two tramps with unexpressed feelings of wanting, a desire for hope whose fulfillment is delayed. Just like Godot's nonarrival that is twice announced by a messenger, the conclusion of the first act is repeated in the second, with Vladimir and then later Estragon declaring their intent to leave, "Yes, let's go." The stage-directions indicate that "they do not move." Repetitions suggest a time continuum, creating the impossiblility of a prayer that will be heard in the present. In Albee's *An American Dream*, Mommy and Daddy are waiting for the arrival of the perfect "son," in *A Delicate Balance*, Agnes and Tobias are waiting for an unknown terror to enter their threshold, in *Tiny Alice*, Julian is waiting in fear and apprehension for the unseen Alice, in *All Over*, the Wife is waiting for death, and in *Three Tall Women*, A is waiting anxiously for her son. In all these plays, waiting comes to an end, but the arrival does not create positive changes in the dramatic situation. Approaching the motif of waiting differently, Beckett creates a circular form and Albee a static one, both forms having the same effect of undermining the idea of progress and perfectibility characterizing realistic drama.

In the subversion of a realistic structure through silence and the portrayal of the theme of communication, Albee is closer to Pinter than to Beckett. The desolate landscape in Beckett disappears in both Pinter's and Albee's plays. Pinter positions his characters in an ordinary frame, suddenly altering the angle of the frame to convey an experience that is strange, out of the ordinary. When he was asked to define his dramatic technique, he said, "If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism" ("Writing for Myself" 174).

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By borrowing conventions from realistic drama and modifying them, he imbues the plays in mystery and elicts in the audience feelings of surprise, dread, and uncertainty. Kane describes Pinter's technique as "defamiliarization," which alters our experience of everyday events or situations through the "exaggeration of the familiar" (134). One of the typical ways by which the playwright defamiliarizes the familiar is with the entrance of something unknown in a room. Two strange characters whose unannounced visit poses a threat to another dramatic character in *The Birthday Party*, the dumbwaiter which sends odd messages that do not reveal who or what is behind them in *The Dumbwaiter*, and the past in the shape of a woman friend who lays claim to a former room-mate with her memory in *Old Times* remove the plays from logic and literal explanations. Before he was a playwright, Pinter was an actor, and he knows how to call attention to the theater. In Pinter's productions, actors have the scope to draw upon the subtextual force behind the pauses and silences, and they differentiate ordinary life from theatrical moments through simple gestures of reading a newspaper or crossing a leg.

Closely paralleling Pinter's technique, Albee offers only partial revelation of events and motives through his dramatic technique which he describes as "selective reality" (qtd. in Amacher 34). A comparison between his play *Tiny Alice* and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* reveals the similarities in their strategies for eliciting the strange, the violent, and the mysterious. In *Tiny Alice* information is withheld, the characters' motives are hidden, and from behind the scene, oblique messages are sent to the conspirators by the unknown Alice, all of which which ultimately end in a character's death. Confronted with the unknown, the audience is left with feelings of confusion and bewilderment. Referring to Pinter's technique,

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Rodney Simard observes that the dramatist seeks "a synthesis of the realistic mode with absurdist techniques" (25). Similarly, Anne Paolucci describes Albee's technique as a "restructuring" of a traditional form: "Shifting from realism to subjectivity, dramatizing the *process* rather than the *product*, Albee has proved himself one of the true masters of Theatre of the Absurd" ("Albee and the Restructuring of the Modern Stage" 5).

In their treatment of broken communication as purposeful avoidance of feelings and relationships, Pinter and Albee show close affinities. Pinter moves away from Beckett's philosphy, countering the comments of critics that his plays are about the so-called impossibility of communication. Rather, communication is conducted through silences as characters avoid the full creation of relationships in their indirections, cross-talks, feigned incomprehension, and strategies of diversion. Alice N. Bentson defines Pinter's silences as "withholding of something submerged" (117), which results in the plays in two distinct silences to which the playwright himself draws our attention:

> One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is employed. This speech is the speech locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of what we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls, we are still left with an echo but are nearer nakedness. (Jacket copy to *Landscape and Silence*)

Using modes of communication that are evasive, characters hide their "nakedness" or vulnerabilities.

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When Albee was asked to describe the themes and nature of dramatic conflicts in his plays, he spoke of communication in terms that were similar to Pinter's. The playwright mentions that in trying to determine to what extent people "will or are able to deal honestly and completely with each other," he finds that most people are reluctant to express their feelings (Wolf 117). In the plays, concealment and evasion are means by which the dramatic characters keep underlying feelings out of their relationships, creating in linguistic utterances a gap that is indicative of silence. In ordinary discourse, the failure of commuciation is also due to the inadequacy of words to express meanings, and the "sign of such failure is misunderstanding" (Black 121). Dramatic discourse that shares many of the conventions of spoken discourse exploits the misunderstanding around language to produce silence. Albee, however, does not refer to inadequacy and ambiguity or double meaning of words. Instead misunderstanding is itself thematized in his plays.

A close examination of the structure of language and silence shows small strategic differences in the way the two dramatists portray broken communication, creating the tonal distinctions in their plays. Unlike Albee's characters, who are rarely at a loss for words, Pinter depicts inarticuate characters, and often inarticulateness is a means to cover-up a lie, which breaks the convention of sincerity around which dramatic discourse is structured. In his analysis of Pinter's linguistic techniques, Guido Almansi writes that the playwright has no scruples as he bends and perverts language to serve his dramatic strategy: "Pinter's idiom is essentially human because it is an idiom of lies" (89). The lies serve a dramatic purpose, enlarging the meaning of the play, as at the end of *The Birthday Party* when in response to Meg's question about Stanley, "Is he still in bed?" Petey

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responds, "Yes, he's . . . still asleep." Though the audience knows Petey is lying, his lie forges an indirect connection between sleep and death, increasing the audience's fear for Stanley, reduced to speechlessness under verbal torture. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee structures the action around a lie about a fantasy child, and Martha tells a lie off-stage. In *Listening* the Girl tells a lie. But these are the few instances in Albee's plays in which an unspoken meaning is suggested by a lie, for normally his characters withhold emotions or information or they engage in denials, avoiding looking at truths themselves, which is different from telling another a deliberate lie.

Referring to Pinter's technique of silence, Esslin observes that the linguistic pauses and silences must be "meticulously *prepared*." According to Esslin, "only if the audience knows the possible alternative answers to a question can the absence of a reply acquire meaning and dramatic impact" ("Language and Silence" 161). Albee, however, creates dramatic situations in which incomplete or ambiguous revelation continues to baffle the audience. Unresolved silences evoke in the audience the same kind of disorientation that are suffered by the characters throughout the action, and in all his plays, Albee gives us at least one character whose response to the silence of the other characters on certain subjects is similar to what the audience might be experiencing. Both silence and what is concealed by silence result in an open-ended or unresolved structure. Such a structure gives rise to multiple interpretations as the spectators draw upon their theatrical knowledge and cultural experience to discover meanings concealed or partially concealed from them.

In several of his writings, Umberto Eco develops his idea of an open-ended form that contributes to an understanding of the final silences in

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Beckett, Pinter, and Albee's drama. In "The Poetics of the Open Work" he writes that all works of art create an "openness" as they possess intentionally ambiguous meanings whose interpretation requires an emotional and psychological interaction between the artist and the addressee (47-66). However, the way "openness" functions varies in works of art so as to create two distinct forms: "open" and "closed." A "closed" form indicates a finished piece of work, which engenders interpretations that are already prescribed by the artist. An open form is incomplete and suggests an artistic ambition that is different from the one indicated by a complete form. Eco defines an open-ended form in the following way: "In primitive terms we can say that they are quite literally 'unfinished': the author seems to hand them on to the performer more or less like the components of a construction kit" (49). Referring to new musical compositions that are "open," he explains the reason why they appeal to the performer who is interpreting the work::

> They appeal to the initiative of the individual performer, and hence they offer themselves, not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition along given structural coordinates, but as 'open' works, which are brought to their conclusion by ther performer at the same time as he experiences them on an aesthetic plane. (49)

Realistic drama, then, is a finished piece of work in which the audience's interpretive role is limited, whereas the silences in absurd drama create an openness, so that the audience can organize, improvise, or fill in meanings without invoking any specific or desired interpretation. In drama as in music, silence that is ambiguous, evasive, and indeterminable also leaves the audience with feelings of uncertainty.

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I apply the principle of speech-act theory to indicate how silences in Albee's text can be understood. According to H. P. Grice, our conversation is based on rules which gives it coherence and continuity. Because conversation is bound to rules, the participants in a speech-act will anticipate or understand the direction in which a conversation is flowing, but when any one of the rules is broken, then an anticipated meaning is replaced by an unsaid meaning. Grice analyzes four rules related to conversation: rules of quantity (be adequately informative), quality (be truthful), relation (be relvant), and manner (be clear) on which a conversation is predicated ("Logic and Conversation" 41-58). Implied or unspoken meanings, writes Keir Elam, are similarly produced in drama by breaking the rules of a speech situation (173). Through fragments, understatements and overstatements, repetitions, and silent responses, dramatic discourse breaks the rule of quantity; through oblique statements and lies, the rule of quality; through irrelevant utterances, the rule of relation; and finally, through imprecise, ambiguous, and wordy utterances, the rule of manner. Each absurdist playwright violates different rules of discourse, which partly explains the difference in the tonal quality of their plays.

Besides scrutinizing linguistic silences, I focus on Albee's use of narratives to generate silence around events and the characters' interior motives. As the urge to tell stories is old, it is not unusual to see narratives incorporated in the spoken text as part of the dramatic action in modern drama. In his description of narrative structures, Roland Barthes mentions the presence of narratives in literary and non-literary genres and instances storytelling as an activity "present at all times, in all places, and all societies" (*Image, Music, Text* 237). Unlike Barthes, I use the term in a narrow sense, to specify narratives told within a play by the dramatic characters of the play,

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and I show how the characters in Albee's plays frequently interrupt themselves while telling their stories, leave the stories incomplete or repeat them to intimate silence. Albee has said that when he is writing a play, he is not conscious of the importance of the narrative, but these narratives "end up being a microcosm of the play" (Sullivan 184). Comparing Luigi Pirandello's narrative technique and Albee's, Paolucci writes that Albee's use of a story "lulls us into thinking along familiar 'realistic' lines, but like Pirandello, Albee uses the story technique as an allegory very often, a way to helping us grasp what is not stated, what cannot be fully understood through statement" ("Albee and the Restructuring of Modern Drama" 13). In agreeing with Paolucci that the use of stories attenuates reality, I would point out that allegorical interpretations do not usually work in most of the stories, and the mystery remains elusive because of gaps or incompletions.

Although critics have given considerable attention to the use of language in Albee's plays, they have neglected to analyze the significant role of silence. A notable exception is Kane's *The Language of Silence* which provides a comparitive study of silence in dramatists who were writing before and after the Second World War. Amongst post-war dramatists, she includes Beckett, Pinter, and Albee, and she concludes her study with the statement: "The compatibility of theme and technique in the work of these dramatists suggests a compatibility of attitude, a unity between otherwise disparate and distinctive playwrights" (181). When tracing the lineage of Albee's silence, I arrive at a similar conclusion, but my analysis brings out differences that are not noted by Kane, and these differences help to suggest Albee's own contribution to the techniques of silence. Further, I extend the scope of Kane's study by showing how Albee set about subverting the realistic frame of his plays through silence. Paolucci is one

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of the few critics who emphasizes Albee's break with traditional realistic structure. In *From Tension to Tonic*, she mentions Albee's severance from Eugene O'Neill's "message" plays and his experimentations with realistic theater which "represents the first sober attempt to effect transformation at the core" (3). More recently, in "Albee and the Restructuring of the Modern Stage," she compares Albee's technique with those of Luigi Pirandello and subsequent playwrights in the absurd tradition (17). In these writings on Albee, however, Paolucci does not consider the innovative use of silence, and my study attempts to create the bridge between the strategies of silence and the subversion of realistic form in Albee's work. When writing on the experimentations that are taking place in modern theater and drama, critics have commented on the frequent use of narratives to indicate the psychological motivations of characters. In her study of narratives in Beckett and Pinter, Kristin Morrsion describes how narratives function: "All that talk in Beckett's and Pinter's plays is not for the sake of presenting thoughts and feelings directly, but rather for the sake of hiding them or at least disguising or distancing them" (*Canters and Chronicles* 4). Albee is another modern playwright who has narratives in all his plays, which function both to conceal emotions and to change the structure of disclosure of his plays, and these narratives and narrational silences occupy a significant place in my study.

In my analysis of Albee's plays, I observe the different manifestations of silence chronologically so as to locate the consistencies and variations in Albee's deployment of nonverbal strategies.

Chapter one. *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* depict the relationship between silence and broken communication. The plays demonstrate how silence creates a wedge between two strangers in the park and a married couple caught in a destructive relationship. In *The*

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Zoo Story, written in one act, a character uses silence to signal his refusal to listen, and the speaker, who initiates a conversation, evades his own emotions with his flow of words. Ultimately the speaker withholds his inner conflicts in a story which he does not bring to a satisfactory conclusion. Through storytelling and role playing, the characters in Albee's first full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, evade the disturbing reality of their marriage, the evasions resulting in a final silence which echoes with their fear and loneliness. With an untold story, a story which changes with each retelling, and the ambiguity generated by the concluding silences, Albee subverts realistic conventions in both the plays. In particular, he expands the frame of domestic drama in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Chapter two. *Tiny Alice* explores silence as concealment and as an oblique means of manipulating the life of a character. Silence centers around the identity of an absent character who appears to control the action, the conspiracy of three characters whose identities are unknown, and the hidden sexual aberrations of a lay Brother, suggested in the narration of his dreams. Whereas the withholding of emotions produces emptiness in individual characters in the earlier two plays, the witholding of information creates mystery in *Tiny Alice*. The play is a leap into the surreal. By evoking emotions connected to the dark, interior region of the spectators' lives, the play alters their experience of mundane reality.

Chapter three. At the core of *A Delicate Balance* is the subject of emptiness. The characters create their emptiness through avoidance of disturbing emotions, and the terror lies in having to face the emptiness. Silence functions to contradict the balance of a ritualized language and to hint at the chaos and emptiness embedded beneath a surface order. By evoking a metaphysical terror that can create self-awareness, the action

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suggests the possibilities of change, but the change does not occur. Empty gestures, a lapse into language that blocks out the recognition of emptiness, and a dramatic form that is circular emphasize the unchanging, inert life. The use of an undefined terror alters realism, hinting at truths beyond the rhythms of ordinary life, and indirectly enlarging our experience of life.

Chapter four. In *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, All Over*, and *Listening* Albee experiments with the musical properties of language and with a theater in which external action is kept to a minimum. In *Box*, there is only an empty box on the stage, which communicates the abstract theme of the disintegration of moral values in life and art, and the nostalgic memories of an acoustical voice reinforce the emptiness. The idea of emptiness connects the other plays in which, like the box, all the characters are enclosed by their empty lives, by memories that have no life-affirming quality. Interconnected with the theme of emptiness is that of the failure of communication, which is accentuated in *Quotations* where the characters speak only in monologues. Our inability as listeners to verify an experience in the past in which we did not participate is significant to the unfolding action in *Listening*. Like the silences in music, Albee use silences in these plays to create the cyclical return of themes.

Chapter five. In *Three Tall Women* Albee portrays silence in relation to memory. The process of remembering does not involve the silence of faulty memory in which past feelings have receded or the silence of stifled emotions. Instead, the playwright creates the silence of complete breakdown, which is a result of the failure of a character to cope with hurtful memories that she recalls. Linked to memory is the motif of waiting, and as in all the other plays, the absent son who is expected by the mother arrives. Although the son does not speak throughout the action, he suggests with his

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gestures that he has forgiven the mother for some untold wrong in the past. This forgiveness gives to silence a quality that it does not possess in Albee's earlier plays. Behind the mute character is the figure of the playwright who is struggling with his own feelings about the past that he depicts here. In writing an autobiographical play, Albee returns to a familiar realistic framework, incorporating within it the discoveries he made in his long career.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Zoo Story and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* were both produced in Schiller Theatre, Berlin on September 28, 1959. The double billing of the plays written by a major European playwright of the post-world war period and an unknown American playwright was a coincidence, and yet, when Esslin wrote his influential work *The Theatre of the Absurd*, he placed Albee in the same theatrical tradition as Beckett. Although Albee's one-act play, *The Zoo Story*, and his later three-act play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, share affinities with absurd theater, the playwright early in his career was still the heir of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) and Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), exploring social and psychological themes within a realistic framework. When asked in an interview about the influence of *The Iceman Cometh* on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee responded: "It wouldn't surprise me that it was influenced by O'Neill--in the same way *The Zoo Story* was affected by, again, *The Iceman Cometh* and also by Tennessee's *Suddenly Last Summer*" (Roudané, "An Interview" 38). I would argue that Albee's use of narratives, the cyclical dramatic form, and silence comes directly from American drama.

Although Albee draws his inspiration from O'Neill, he emphasizes that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* inverts the theme of the necessity of illusions in *The Iceman Cometh*. Referring to O'Neill's play, he mentions: "It's about going against the 'pipe dreams.' After all, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* just says have your pipe dreams if you want to but realize you are kidding yourself" (Roudané, "An Interview" 38). Critics take a position similar to Albee's when they offer a single affirmative interpretation of the plays. C. W.

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E. Bigsby writes that the subject of Albee's plays is "loss, desolation, spiritual redemption," and in *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* this "generates a faith in the possibility of redemption" (*Modern American Drama* 128). Referring specifically to O' Neill's influence on Albee, Roudané asserts: "Albee, beginning with Jerry in *The Zoo Story*, rejects O'Neill's vision" (*Understanding Edward Albee* 34). Further, writes Roudané, "Jerry's and Peter's sense of consciousness ultimately enables them to go beyond Willy Loman's or Blanche Dubois's worlds" (34). To me, there is ambiguity in the closing silences in the plays as the characters do not clearly communicate to the audience that they have insight into what has made life confusing or crippling. The ambiguity, however, is exciting as it gives us the freedom to read ourselves into the silences and discover our own meanings.

The Zoo Story and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* serve as a prelude to our understanding of Albee's characteristic use of silence to elicit mystery and to subvert the form of his representational drama. The collapse in conversation, the festering feelings of alienation or isolation in the individual character or in a marital relationship which go unexpressed, concealment surrounding the past or the earlier initiation of conflict in relationships, and the unclarified motives of characters during their interaction with each other are all the means of changing the convention of disclosure in Albee's plays. Both plays create mystification with the use of narrational silence. In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry tells us two stories, and we never know what it is that he implies in the first that horrifies Peter or what he withholds in the second even as he struggles to express himself. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Martha tells us several short stories which obliquely refer to marital conflicts, George recounts a story about an unnamed boy who kills his parents that

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raises curiousity in the audience about whether he is George himself. Both of them create the story of an imaginary son whom George destroys on his birthday. At the end of *Virginia Woolf?*, the enigma of George and Martha's son is solved, but though much is said, little is resolved concerning the absences underlying their relationship. The inscrutable nature of silence gives rise to the criticism that Albee's plays are puzzling and removed from the audience's sense of reality. The dramatist, however, has justified his technique as reflective of his philosophy: "If I've been accused a number of times of writing plays where the endings are ambivalent, indeed, that's the way I find life" (Flanagen 57-58).

The Zoo Story is the first literary expression of Albee's fascination with the mysteries of life. After it was first produced in Berlin, the play opened at a small Broadway theater, which had the advantage of allowing the audience to notice during a performance small gestures and shifts in mood. The play opens on a bare stage with two park benches. It creates a visual image of emptiness that blends with the stillness of mood, conveyed by Peter who is reading a book. On the stage, Peter's book stands for the unknown and unknowable text that we and Jerry cannot read. It also shields Peter from Jerry's intrusion. Constantly turning away from Jerry to his book and half listening to him, Peter communicates his wariness. Immediately upon entering the stage, Jerry addresses Peter: "I've been to the zoo," but his remark goes unheard (12). Albee scripts the silence--"Peter *does'nt notice*." To compel him to acknowledge his presence Jerry raises his voice and makes a direct request for a conversation that Peter cannot ignore; he "*puts his book down, his pipe out and away, smiling*" (14). As he conveys his readiness to talk, the silence between them is seemingly broken.

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A "reticent" man (19), Peter is nevertheless manipulated into betraying his sexual impotency with insistent questionings from Jerry and his complete disregard of privacy. As Jerry takes his measure of Peter, he detects in him a sense of inadequacy that lies behind his hesitancies and brief responses. When the faltering conversation between them turns towards the subject of family, Peter's hesitation becomes apparent. To Jerry's enquiry as to whether his children are boys, he answers: "No, girls . . . both girls" (16). In his slight hesitation is an unscripted note of regret. Watching Peter and noting the disappointment and finality in his voice, Jerry infers that he will not have any more children:

Jerry

And you're not going to have any more kids, are you?

Peter

(*A bit distantly*) No. No more. (Peter *turns to* Jerry. *Then back, and irksome*) Why did you say that? How would you know about that?

Jerry

The way you cross your legs, perhaps: something in the voice. Or maybe I'm just guessing. Is it your wife?

Peter

(*Furious*) That's none of your business! (*A silence*) Do you understand? (Jerry *nods.* Peter *is quiet now.*) Well, you're right. We'll have no more children.

Jerry

(*Softly*) That *is* the way the cookie crumbles.

Peter

(*Forgiving*) Yes . . . I guess so. (16-17)

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Nowhere in this passage is any direct allusion made to impotency, but the reference is made at a subtextual level where the conversation is conducted and meanings exchanged. With a simple "Yes" Peter confirms what Jerry implies, and the pause following the response encloses all the conflicting emotions associated with impotency--loss, regret, self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy and failure--that elude verbal expression. Analyzing Peter's silence in this passage Kane observes: "His evasive attitude is no longer one of evasion of speech, but rather an avoidance of subject. The motif of Peter's impotence, first intimated here and linked by innuendo to disease, will reiterate throughout the play" (172).

In turn, Jerry reveals his past in the story about his unstable family, his own recognition of his homosexual feelings while he was still an adolescent, and later, his sexual encounters with his strange landlady that filled him with revulsion. From the different strands of his story emerge the confusion and emotional impoverishment of his life from relationships that were never forged. What is significant is that Jerry describes the events from his past, but he fails to share with Peter what the emotional deprivation has meant to him. The restless pacing, the abrupt and unconnected questions, the suppressed tension, and the swings in mood--all point to a character who does not understand his emotions.

As Jerry recounts a story to Peter about an incident when he tried to win over a dog with alternating gestures of violence and friendliness, his continuous "*pacing*" on the stage conveys an intense anxiety (21). Other than providing stage-directions for Jerry's movements, Albee does not indicate how the story must be told, which leaves most of the interpretation of the action to the discretion of the director and actor. Critics have carefully examined the story for the arbitrary juxtaposition of words and images and

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breaks in linguistic coherence. Kane notes the linguistic peculiarities in the narrative in Jerry's frequent interruptions of his thoughts with "and" and "Oh, yes," his use of the linking word "so" to connect fragments, and his repetition of the phrase "It's just that . . . " as he tries to discover words for intangible emotions (174). Brian Way analyzes the "pseudo-crisis" built in the content and structure of the narrative, where the lack of resolution in the content is reflected in the language structured around "conditional" sentences: "It would be A START! Where better to make a beginning . . . to understand and just possibly be understood . . . " (70). The language is odd as Jerry yokes discordant objects into a relationship: "Don't you see? A person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people . . . if not with people . . . SOMETHING. With a bed, with a cockroach, with a mirror . . . no, that's too hard, that's one of the last steps" (34).

At the end of the story, Jerry's physical movements, tone, and hesitant speech communicate his struggle to find a connection with some animate object: "I hoped . . . and I don't really know why I expected the dog to understand anything, much less my motivations . . . I hoped that the dog would understand" (34). As Jerry sits next to Peter after the end of his story, he hints at his need to breach their physical distance, expressing obliquely his motive for telling his story. Perhaps what is left unsaid but implied in the ellipses in his statement is Jerry's hope that Peter--to whom the story is directed--will respond to him. The response he has is different from what he had probably anticipated, for at the conclusion of the narrative Peter is "*silent*," "*disturbed*," and "*numb*" (36). With his silence Peter communicates to Jerry his recognition of the unspoken content of the story and his spontaneous rejection of it, but this meaning eludes the audience. This reverses traditional dramatic irony, for typically, a play creates irony when

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the audience perceives meaning unknown to the characters. The mutual recognition between Jerry and Peter of what is signified by the unspoken escalates the existing dramatic tension.

Indirectly expressing his understanding of what the story conceals, Peter implies his rejection of what is left unsaid with his statement: "I . . . I don't understand what . . . I don't think I . . . (*Now almost tearfully.*) Why did you tell me all this?" (36) Pauses inserted in between words suggest the incoherent emotions in Peter as he is confronted with a content he wishes to distance himself from. According to Roudané, Peter rejects not only "a crazed man," but as "Albee suggests, all experience associated with the visceral, mysterious, nonrational" (*Understanding Edward Albee* 39). Containing his anger at rejection, Jerry attempts to clarify the feelings he had earlier screened in his story: "I tried to explain it to you as I went along. I went slowly: it has all to do with . . ." (36). Peter's violent outburst--"I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANY MORE"--constitutes a crucial interjection, for it ensures that the narrational silence is left intact (37). With silence forced upon the speaker who preempts the verbalization of the unsaid, the audience is provoked into asking: "Can we make this silence speak? What is the unspoken saying? What does it mean?" (Macheray 86). Perhaps silence speaks of the persistent loneliness in Jerry, for which he seeks some empathy. Or, silence speaks of the pain and alienation of the homosexual reflected in his weariness. Or, silence speaks of the violent feelings of a disoriented character who demands emotional gratification and would be willing to commit an extreme act for it. We do not know, and we cannot find out.

With his failure to gain Peter's understanding, Jerry turns from speech acts to physical acts that serve to dissimulate his pain and anger. Albee

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foregrounds action that compels our attention in the precision of its escalation from mild aggression to actual assault. The park bench becomes unusually prominent in the conflict as Jerry "*tickles*," "*pokes*," "*punches*," and "*pushes*" Peter off it (38-42). Taunted by Jerry, Peter denies in his response that the possession of the bench is indeed a "question of honor" (44). But his anger at Jerry's encroachment contradicts his statement, and his effort to protect the bench implies that it has assumed an abstract meaning for him. In his turn, Jerry manipulates this "absurd" (44) confrontation over a bench to deflect attention from the despair he feels before he forces Peter to pick up a knife and then runs into it. The silent weapon is a sign of his submerged sexual emotions that are intermeshed with other feelings.

Albee combines language, silence, and stage objects as the play progresses, and in this fashion, he scripts Jerry's final silence in "the zoo story." This story acts like a refrain in a musical score, for at every turn in the conversation Jerry refers to the zoo, promising to describe what took place there but always leaving the telling suspended, and thereby provoking curiosity in Peter and the audience. Oscar Lee Brownstein distinguishes Albee's narrative technique as an example of "prospective" strategy that engages our interest in the future, but unlike the dramatic strategy of "foreshadowing," it does not allow the audience to anticipate the outcome (25). With repeated references, the story is kept alive in the dialogue, but without any details, the audience is unable to predict what shape it will assume. By adopting a strategy of incomplete or partial telling, Albee creates an ending that takes the audience by surprise.

Albee's technique of withholding emerges with Jerry's failure to provide us with a fully developed narrative of the zoo episode. Paolucci suggests that he is in this respect similar to Hamlet, Lucky and Pozzo in

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Waiting for Godot, and Brother Julian in *Tiny Alice*, in all of whom "what we the audience witness is a frustrated consciousnesss struggling for expression and recognition" ("Albee and the Restructuring of the Modern Stage" 7). While Jerry searches for words to explain the event at the zoo and its signifcance for him--"And now I'll tell you what happened at the zoo" (48)--the explanation disappears in the holes in his narrative: "and I decided that I would talk to you . . . I would tell you things . . . and things that I would tell you would . . . Well, here we are. You see? Here we *are*" (48). The zoo story is, perhaps, a figment of Jerry's imagination, and hence he pauses, repeating the words "I think" without filling in the bare outline of his story. While he was at the zoo, however, he had decided on a course of action, to tell a story that would allow him to unburden himself. The narrational language, however, with its omissions, fragments, disjunctions, and repetitions leaves unsaid the "things" Jerry may have wished to verbalize, the ellipses pointing instead to a subtext where the primary conflict of the play is located. What the consequence of his verbalization would be was unknown to Jerry, but the unspoken meaning identified by Peter produces an effect, and hence Jerry's remark: "Here we *are*." Shifting from the zoo story to a contemplation of his death, he first expresses doubt and then asserts that he had plotted a script where he would kill himself: ". . . could I have planned all this? No . . . no, I couldn't have. But I think I did" (48). Because of the confusion in his language, it is difficult to determine with any certainty whether Jerry had acted knowingly and not simply in response to Peter's reaction. Because Jerry fails to the end to tell his own story or to communicate the mystery at the zoo, the closing silence in the play continues to puzzle us with a content that is unknown.

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Critics have left no stone unturned in their attempt to read Jerry's silence. They have interpreted in the silence a religious undertone,[2] evasion of homosexual feelings,[3] and a suicidal wish.[4] Way considers to what extent *The Zoo Story* can lay claim to the theatre of the absurd, and he concludes: "Jerry spent his dying breath telling us what the play means as does Lona Hessel at the end of *Pillars of Society*" (71). The narrational gaps in the text, which leaves the meaning of the inner conflict ambiguous, contradict Way's statement. Albee makes the following interpretation of Jerry's suicide: "Had Peter understood, had he not refused to understand, then I doubt the death would have been necessary. Jerry tries all the way through the play to teach and fails. And finally makes a last effort at teaching, and I think succeeds" (qtd. in Rutenberg 220). In order to "teach," Jerry must possess self-knowledge, and while we "hear" his silent screaming, we are unsure whether he has gained any insight of the chaos in his life. Nor does Peter's "pitiful howl" (49) reveal an empathy with Jerry or his conflict except to suggest his recognition of the close proximity between life and death. *The Zoo Story* suggests what will be true of all Albee's plays, and that is, interpretation is balked when one the play is structured around silence and that the dramatic significance of the play lies in a hidden mystery that is never revealed.

In their analysis of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* critics have focused on the different ways Albee experiments with language to undermine realistic conventions. Comparing Albee's play to of Alfred Jarry's *King Ubo* (*Ubo Roi*, 1896). "an anti-realistic farce of marital brawling," Jeannette Malkin writes: "Like Jarry's, Albee's language is subversive: it

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2 See Cohn, "The Verbal Murders" 133.
3 See Hirsch, "Evasions of Sex" 130.
4 See Gabbard, "At the Zoo" 370.

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subverts the generic expectations of salon realism and of psychological realism" (191). Charlene M. Taylor refers to the three levels of language in the play, natuaralistic, childish, and lyrical, and she shows how language that makes use of nursery rhymes undercuts realism (53-65). Ruth Meyer emphasizes the use of ambiguity in language in relation to the theme of truth and illusion (60-69). Along with language, silence plays an important role in deconstructing the realistic frame in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Throughout the play, the characters mask their identities or emotions in the roles that they assume. Albee's masking technique breaks the consistency of realistic characterization, confusing the audience who must accept one of the fictive identities as "real" and the others as "fictive" (Schlueter 14). Martha impersonates a disappointed housewife from a movie and also projects herself (falsely) as a powerful earth-mother, fertile and seductive; George splits his identity as a gangster from a movie and a flower-seller, and also a son-murderer and a priest reciting a Latin Mass for the dead; and to avoid the imposed role of a houseboy, Nick pretends to be a stud. Above all, in the process of telling stories or role-playing, George and Martha reinvent themselves as parents of a fictitious son awaiting his twenty-first birthday. As dramatic characters they already possess a fictive existence, and hence their second role as parents endows them with a "duality" (14). Albee scripts these dual roles for an actor with a purpose: to convey the conflict between the revealed and concealed selves, to suggest the life underneath the layers of a protective facade. Like story telling, role-playing is a technique of theatrical foregrounding--"the framing of a bit of the performance" (Elam 18)--that is distinguished from the rest of the acting when the actor assumes a new personality with the use of masks, stage-props and tonal changes. Since so much of the play involves

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avoidance and protection of an inner life, acting becomes significant in communicating to the audience a sense of the characters' past, of emotions and thoughts that are being disguised.

Silences conveyed through acting and storytelling generate mystery. In trying to get to the heart of the mystery, the audience is in a powerful emotional interchange with the characters on the stage. Richard Dutton, however, argues that the audience is distanced from the action as a consequence of the intermediary roles Albee assigns to Nick and Honey: "It is as if they experience the strangeness on our behalf, being bewildered and affronted while we are able to remain rather more detached, to see the dramatic process essentially from the outside" (114). I believe that Albee uses Nick and Honey to draw the audience into the action. We try to understand the strange games of the hosts, George and Martha. Like "repousseoir" or linking figures in Flemish and Italian paintings, who often stand with their backs to the viewers watching an action on the canvas and drawing the viewer's eye into the inner perspective, Nick and Honey take us close to the periphery of George and Martha's marriage.[5] We share with the guests their bewilderment with the happenings of the night, and like them we are entrapped once we enter the theater, participating in the action till curtain-fall.

When *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was first performed in 1962 at the Billy Rose Theatre, New York, Alan Schneider, the director, and William Ritman, the stage designer, created a set that would immediately evoke the image of a "living room of a house on the campus of a small New England

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5 For insights into the function of the "repousseoir" figures, see the Italian painting by Masaccio, *Der Zinsgroschen* (1427). Also , see the Flemish paintings by Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *Der Genter Altar* (1432) and Jan van Eyck, *The Madonna of the Chancelor Rolin*.

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college." The familiar outlines of the setting, however, tend to recede in George's identification of the campus with New Carthage (40). The setting increases the sense of disorientation with the identification of the location to Illyria, a mythical island in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (40). Employing a defamiliarization technique that is similar to Pinter's, Albee transforms the realistic details of structure into a ghostly one. The unreality of strange games, of witches' Sabbath, and of ritual sacrifice that lead to a nightmare world are reflected in the titles of the three acts: "Fun and Games, " Walpurgisnacht," and "Exorcism."

In the opening act Albee immediately strikes at the theme of broken communication. The audience feels the tension in the conversation between George and Martha as they cut off one another in the middle of an utterance and then continue to talk from the point where they were interrupted. The pauses in the dialogue lead to the formation of a contrapuntal structure in which pauses evoke an inner loneliness. Each character speaks, and there is no one who listens:

> George: Well, just stay on your feet, that's all. . . . These people are your guests, you know, and. . . .
>
> Martha: I can't even see you . . . I haven't been able to see you for years. . . .
>
> George: . . . if you pass out, or throw up or something. . . .
>
> Martha: . . . I mean you're a blank, a cipher. . . .
>
> (16-17)

Later, George visualizes Martha in a state of stasis, prevented from movement and speech: "In my mind, you are buried in cement, right up to your neck . . . No . . . right up to your nose . . . that's much quieter" (64). The silence evoked by the image serves as a commentary on the

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relationship in which dialogue is replaced with the ". . . monologues by two deaf people trying to hide their infirmities from one another" (Debusscher 56). While in moments of silence an inner life can be audible, these moments are rare in the play, where silence is used by the couple to attack one another or to shield their disappointment with the marriage and their feelings of inadequacy.

Silence assumes a conspiratorial role in the games played between the hosts and the guests. When the guests are "joshed" upon their entrance (22), the audience becomes increasingly aware that there will be no light-hearted fun in the games played between the hosts and the guests. Nick's comment on a painting on the wall puts George in a baiting mood:

> Nick: It's got a . . . a . . .
>
> George: A quiet intensity.
>
> Nick: Well, no . . . a. . . .
>
> George: Oh. (*Pause*) Well, then, a certain noisy relaxed quality, maybe?
>
> Nick: (*Knows what* George *is doing*, *but stays grimly*, *coolly polite*) No. What I meant was . . .
>
> George: How about . . . uh. . . a quietly noisy relaxed intensity. (22)

The strained note in the social exchange turns the dialogue into a duel. George's communication strategy is not unusual in "discursive language games" in which players who are unfamiliar with one another begin conversational gambits that would facilitate them to "negotiate" and to "manipulate" relationships (Kane 20). Typical of language games are the loss of words that occurs as Nick tries to express his anger and uneasiness at not being able to determine his host's motive and George cuts him before

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he can finish his sentence. Behind George's assertion of verbal superiority is his fear of the dual threat Nick poses. As a scientist, Nick threatens to end history, replacing "the surprise, the multiplexity" of existence with "order and constancy" (67). Hence, the conflict over words signals George's attempt to protect history, and to protect his own hidden inadequacies. As a potential "stud" (203), Nick increases George's sexual anxiety, the sense of vulnerability he feels in his impotency. He is the "sonny" who arrives home (195), destroying George's defences with his greedy, adolescent-like incest. The sexual fear that is unspoken later finds an outlet in a Latin Mass in which the absent son and the sons who are guilty of matricide and incest are simultaneously exorcised.

When confronted with the conflicts and incompletions in their marriage, George and Martha maintain a silence, displacing their emotions in the stories they tell. The primary story surrounds the "son" who is a symbol of the absences in a disintegrating marriage relationship. While all the stories obliquely refer to the conflicts in the marriage, they are also connected to Albee's primary theme of communication. As listeners we have no means of verifying experiences in which we did not participate in the past and to determine who is speaking the truth.[6] The play exploits our inability to determine truths in order to intimate mystery. When Martha mentions the fictitious son to Honey, she breaks the conversational rule of quality that prescribes that a speaker should not "say what he knows to be false" (Elam 171). While it is unclear why she confides her secret to Honey, her remark sets the action in motion, unknowingly leading to the destruction of her

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6 See Meyer's "Language: Truth and Illusion" where she makes a similar point about the role of communication (69).

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imaginary motherhood (Schlueter 82). In the following dialogue, we see the effect of her remark as Honey repeats the off-stage conversation:

> Honey: (*To* George, *brightly*) I didn't know until just a minute ago that you had a son.
>
> George: (*Wheeling, as if struck from behind*) WHAT!
>
> Honey: A son! I hadn't known.
>
> George: (*To* Honey) She told you about him?
>
> Honey: (*Flustered*) Well, yes. Well, I mean. . . . (44)

Honey's words act like a blow. The stage-directions that have George turn violently towards Honey convey his attempt to absorb the implication of Martha's public disclosure of their private game. Instead of giving her a direct answer, he withholds information through counter question. His reaction to what would seem a natural inquiry is puzzling to the audience. Later, Martha tells Nick and Honey a story of a boxing-match in which George fails to deliver a punch and she knocks him out: ". . . and George wheeled around real quick, and he caught it right up in the jaw . . . POW!" (56), and the re-enactment of the knock-out punch shows how her words about their son reported through Honey had affected him earlier. Caught by surprise by Martha's moves, he settles the score in the course of the night.

Through a series of unexpected counter-moves, which involves playing roles and telling his own fantastic lie about the son, George enters the game in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and he becomes responsible for changing the audience's response to what they thought was a domestic comedy. As Martha continues with her story about the boxing-match, George leaves the scene "with a sick look on his face" (54). He returns

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silently while Martha is explaining that the punch was an accident. Like an actor, he takes a short-barreled gun from his back "*and calmly aims it at the back of* Martha's *head.* Honey *screams . . . rises.* Nick *rises, and simultaneously* Martha *turns her head to face* George. George *pulls the trigger*" (57). This highly tense situation, where physical gesture seems appropriate to the violent, realistic context of the play, is suddenly reversed as George imitates Martha's "POW!" and "*From the barrel of the gun blossoms a large red and yellow Chinese parasol*" (57), and the potential violence is deflated into a comic trick. With the unexpected transformations brought about by a non-verbal technique in which a stage object has a prominent role, the structure of the play also undergoes a change from realism to absurdity, dislocating the audience from the realistic position from which they customarily watch performances. The action of the play is structured around such role-playing or pantomines that have an element of violence in them that first provokes the audience's attention, and then, abruptly, loses its potency and becomes absurd or farcical. In a similar dramatic situation, fraught with danger and absurdity, Beckett's two tramps will contemplate suicide in *Waiting for Godot* and will repeatedly fail.

Albee gives the second act the title "Walpurgisnacht." The association of the act with Teutonic myth creates anticipation of strange, fearful happenings that distance the audience from everyday realism. The spectres from the past are invoked, but in the mystery that surrounds the past, the exact complicity of the characters in the events narrated remains unknown. The event related to Honey's past, her childless situation, unfolds in stages. Plyed with liquor and predisposed to indiscretion, Nick reveals to George the secret about Honey's "hysterical pregnancy" (10). When it comes to his turn to play the game, "Get the Guests," George alters a

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drunken confession into a parody of a "puffed" up mouse (146). The recitation is both cruel and funny, for even when Honey hears herself ridiculed, she prompts George in her drunken stupor to continue with his story:

> Honey: (*Hysteria*) WHAT? . . . and then; WHAT?
>
> Nick: NO! NO!
>
> George: (*As if to a baby*) . . . and then the puff went *away* . . .like magic . . . pouf!
>
> Nick: (*Almost sick*) Jesus God . . .
>
> Honey: . . . the puff went away. . . .
>
> George: (*Softly*) . . . pouf. (146-147)

Borrowing the language of a fairy-tale, George deflates with a "pouf" a critical situation between the younger couple, and mesmerized by the recital, the audience initially accepts as fact George's implications. As Honey listens to George's story, she expresses her tension in her tone, but curiously enough she does not confirm or deny the details surrounding the pregnancy. Even when she later blurts out her fear of childbirth, she is quiet about her past. Her silence creates scepticism about the parody and provokes questions whose answers could contradict George's insinuations. Does Honey take "pills" secretly to avoid childbirth? Or does the responsibility for the couple's childless situation lie with Nick, the "stud" who in reality is a "houseboy" who fails in his attempt to "hump the hostess?" Around such silences that provide no simple answers, the play creates mystery and departs at the same time from psychological realism. There is no probing, no attempt to penetrate the psychology of a character. Instead the playwright frames Nick and Honey's narrative within the larger narrative of

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absences, and the audience experience for themselves the reverberations of loss surrounding the younger couple.

Immediately after Nick's disclosure about Honey's pregnancy, George recounts a narrative about an event in a New York pub that he remembers as the "grandest day" of his youth (95). The narrative structure is ingeniously split into separate tales, and only when they intersect and coincidences emerge does the absurdity of the story become apparent. The story is seemingly gratuitous. It is about George's friend who ordered "bergin" (95) and caused the pub to break into laughter, and as he relates the story George slips in the remark that his friend had "accidentally" killed his mother with a shotgun (94). Although George focuses on the laughter that brought the pub together, his brief remark is more significant to the audience than the "bergin" incident. It draws attention to the narrative persona whose shadowy presence is overlapped by another image--that of George aiming a gun at Martha. The covert link between the speaker and the narrative persona leads the audience to wonder if there may not be more to the story than what is said. When Nick asks George: "What . . . what happened to the boy . . . the boy who had shot his mother," he responds: "I won't tell you" (95). In her discussion of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Morrison mentions that the dramatic convention that distinguishes the storyteller from the character in a story allows evasion as "the speaker, the character, as 'author' never really has to say 'I' " (52). While George uses the convention to avoid any direct complicity in the story he tells Nick, the association of images and incompletions in the story raises questions as to whether the "teller and told" are not the same (52). "The following summer," George continues, the friend kills his father in a road accident, driving into a tree while trying to avoid a porcupine, and he ends up in a mental hospital

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(95). The following interaction between Nick and George adds to the audience's incredulity about the friend's fate:

> Nick: Is he . . . still there?
>
> George. Oh, yes. And I'm told that for these thirty years he has . . . not . . . uttered . . . one . . . sound.
>
> (*A rather long silence: five seconds, please*) (96)

George negotiates a tricky bit of story-telling. He gives precise details of the road accident, but there is no authentic ring to the story. Instead the whole story borders on absurdity. The strangeness, however, matters less than the reference to the boy's muteness. Because of the hints in the text that George is the "boy" himself, the muteness he describes could be seen as a sign of his tormented emotions, repressed and interiorized for the last thirty years of his life.

The pub story re-emerges a second time in Martha's account of "something funny" in George's past (133). She tells Nick and Honey about his autobiographical novel whose content is similar to what the audience has heard in the dialogue between George and Nick, but in her critical comment on the book she alters the perspective from which the events should be viewed: "Imagine such a thing! A book about a boy who murders his mother and kills his father, and pretends it's all an accident!" (136). Her modification of the story from an accident to a murder causes surprise, especially when she discloses George's supposed confession that the events actually occurred to him. Despite her comment that erupts in a physical struggle between her and George, the confusion involving the identity of the narrative character is not completely dispelled, for neither George nor Martha is presented as a reliable narrator, and textual certainties that would support either version of their stories are missing. Mystery clings

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to the past. There is no knowing whether the parents' deaths were accidental or deliberate, whether they actually happened the way they are described, or whether the narrative is a projection of an oedipal guilt in George. The pub story functions like an unsolved mystery story with a content that is strange and a character whose identity is elusive, and where traces of guilt and the unmooring of dark, violent passions subvert a realistic structure.

By withdrawing into silence, concealing his emotions beneath words or disguising them in his acting, George also creates a chasm between himself and Martha. At the height of their verbal conflict, he admits to Martha that he does not "listen" to her; he does not "hear" her (155). The frustrations of broken communication and emotions that have been warded off in the twenty-two year marriage bring the act to its climax. When Martha plays her role of the earth-mother who is irresistible and seductive, she has a covert purpose--to "cut through all this crap" that separates her from George (157). The signal to repair a broken communication is generally ignored, and characters respond to the signal by retreating or withdrawing in silence. George repeats Peter's strategy in *The Zoo Story* when he indicates his resistance by picking up a book and reading it. The silence on his part is purposeful, a deliberate refusal to see Martha's anguish beneath her staged flirtation. Unable to understand himself or the complex, distorted emotions that drive them apart, he utters a cry that is "*part growl, part howl*" and "*hurls*" the book towards the chimes (174).

In scripting a plot to avenge himself, George resorts to a "prospective strategy" that Jerry had earlier used to create suspense by withholding information. Honey provides him with an idea for his plot when she enters the living-room and announces: "Bells. Ringing. I've been hearing bells"

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(174). She had actually heard the chimes ring, which she misidentifies in her alcoholic state, and George who in his feverish imagination hears only the "sound of bodies" in the kitchen (175) dismisses her remark. Ultimately, when he hears her remark he leaps upon the association between chimes and bells, and he knows in a flash the end to his story. The chimes turn into bells that ring the death knell of the absent son. At the end of the act, George addresses Martha who is off-stage:

> It's about our . . . son. He's dead. Can you hear me, Martha? Our boy is dead.
>
> (*He begins to laugh, very softly . . . it is mixed with crying*)
>
> (181)

Even though the audience participates in the formative process of a narrative, witnessing a rehearsal on the stage, they are unable to see George's motive. His excitement at the death of the "son" who is real to them, his laughter and tears leave them baffled and mystified.

In the final act, "The Exorcism," a ritualistic sacrifice and the invocation and destruction of the absent son in the medium of absurd narratives all evoke discordant feelings and contribute to the sense of estrangement from the known and the familiar. The exorcism is dependent on strange rites, and it is intended to put the ghosts of past conflicts to rest. The silence, however, scripted at the close of the play leaves the issue open-ended.

A series of role-playing serves as a prelude to Martha's recital of her "son's" birth and George's final narrative. George shifts his roles in succession from a Spanish flower-seller to a parent embracing Nick as "sonny" with a "gleeful" expression on his face (195), and then to a shy suitor offering Martha a bouquet, and in his multiple roles he adds to the

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audience's sense of disorientation. Exploiting the confusion that the characters on the stage experience with his changing roles, he asserts his control over them, alters their fixed relationships, and puts them at a disadvantage. Forced to retreat into silence or humiliated in his primary role, George discovers a way to manipulate action and characters in his secondary roles. Like the playwright who works behind the scene, "he is creator, controller, and destroyer" (Schlueter 86).

The stage-directions indicate that George enters the doorway, a bunch of snapdragons covering his face, speaking in a "hideously cracked falsetto:" "Flores; flores para los muertos. Flores" (195). While his imitation of the blind Mexican woman who offers tin flowers to Blanche in Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* suggests the rupturing of an illusion, it is unclear at the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* whether illusions have been completely destroyed. Throughout the play, Albee makes extensive use of stage props that indirectly convey emotions or intentions concealed in the text. Initially, the snapdragons are a part of George's disguise as a flower-seller, but they assume an independent function. They lose their surface meaning to communicate a symbolic meaning that emerges in George's challenge to Martha to play the last round of game: to recite for the listeners the story of the "son's" birth. Thrown "spear-like" at Martha (203), the snapdragons assume a menacing form, and as they contradict the meaning of defeat and impotency suggested by the reversal of the gun into a parasol, George's control over characters and situations becomes more secure.

Manoeuvred into telling the story of their imaginary son, Martha begins with his birth, and the lyrical echoes in the language--"Our son was born on a September night, a night not unlike tonight, though tomorrow, and

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twenty . . . one . . . years ago" (217)--transpose and dislocate the birth from reality to the realms of a myth. Embracing the imaginary son in her story as real, she inverts in the subtext her loss and unfulfilled longing.[7] As Martha backs her story up with believable contextual details, tracing the life of her imaginary son and her participation in his growing-up ritual, the audience do not realize she is playing a role, and they fail to hear the note of unreality that creeps into her description of him: "So beautiful; so wise" (222). Nor do they cue into George's quiet laughter or ironic comment: "There's a real mother talking" (222). The breakdown of sincerity condition is not unusual in classical or Shakespearean drama in which a dramatic character deceives or dupes other characters on the stage. Since the audience is acquainted beforehand with the schemes, they recognize the deception when it is enacted on the stage. Albee, however, carefully scripts a silence of conspiracy that misleads both the dramatic characters and the audience. This technique of coding silence denies the audience any privileged vantage point. Their response to the unfolding action that manipulates realistic detail with submerged mystery and absurdity is similar to what the characters experience who are outside the scheme.

George recites a Latin prayer for the dead that coincides with Martha's conclusion of her narrative, and the Mass signals the end of the "son" myth. The strange words evoke an atmosphere of mystery while the unspoken motive in the act reinforces the estrangement process, replacing easy familiarity with awe and fear. With his incantation, George is either trying to score a victory over Martha for her betrayals or he is releasing her

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7 See Louis Paul for an analysis of the linguistic games. The game of "Our Son the Pretend Child" is of particular significance because "it points to a major defect in identity, the lack of procreation and generativity, which is repaired by imaginary restitution, and that this game or life project or script represses a core of grief" (47).

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from her illusions, or he is simultaneously doing both. Because George's motive is obscure and hidden, it is difficult to come to any conclusion about his reason for destroying the imaginary child. In the end, the mystery of exorcism is impenetrable, the alien words producing a disconcerting effect on its listeners. Added to mystery is the element of absurdity in the play that emerges as George tries to recapture the moment when the doorbell chimed and "crazy Bill" delivered a telegram with the news of their "son's" death (230):

> Martha . . . (*Long pause*) . . . our son is . . . dead.
>
> (*Silence*)
>
> He was . . . killed . . . late in the afternoon . . .
>
> (*Silence*)
>
> (*A tiny chuckle*) on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a . . . large tree. (231)

Scripted silences are strategically inserted between George's statements to accentuate the effect of the words spoken. Against the backdrop of silences, the words stand out sharper to create an effect of shock, but the laughter that is indicated in the stage-direction strikes a discordant note, alerting the audience to something amiss in George's account. The coincidences between an earlier story in which the "boy's" father dies in a road accident and the contents of the telegram suggest the possibility of fabrication in George's story. Albee's technique here is similar to the gun-parasol incident where a tense situation is resolved in farce. The narrative becomes pronouncedly more absurd as Martha insists on seeing the telegram, and George declares he has eaten it:

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Martha: (*Up; facing him*) Show it to me! Show me the telegram!

George: (*Long pause; then with a straight face*) I ate it.

(234)

The "long pause" enables George to think of a fantastic response, and even as Martha voices her protest, he obliterates the "son" who was created by words:

Martha: HE IS OUR CHILD!

George: AND I HAVE KILLED HIM!

Martha: NO!

George: YES!

(*Long silence*) (235-236)

The verbal exchange is totally confusing to the listeners, who have yet to make an emotional adjustment to the sudden turn in the plot that is revealed to them through Nick, who realizes that there is no son. The "long silence" scripted at the end enfolds the mystery in the life of the childless couple.

In the closing section, the silence becomes audible as the couple bring the strange events of the night to a conclusion, and the sharp tone heard at the beginning of the play changes to a gentler one. Albee's stage-direction is explicit: "This whole last section very softly, very slowly:"

Martha: (*Pause*) I'm cold.

George: It's late.

Martha: Yes.

George: (*Long silence*) It will be better.

Martha: (*Long silence*) I don't . . . know.

Martha: I don't suppose, maybe, we could. . . .

George: No, Martha.

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Martha: Yes, No.

George: Are you all right?

Martha: Yes. No. (240-241)

In contrast to the continuous stream of invective, the dialogue here consists of monosyllabic exchanges and scripted pauses and silences that seems to suggest that the two characters are striving to communicate with one another. George's silence and his statement expresses a determination to live a life unhindered by illusion, but the death of the illusion leaves Martha numb. After a "*long silence*," Martha expresses her doubts about the future, and in the second instance, as she starts to speak--"I don't suppose, maybe, we could. . . ."--George interrupts her. Is she suggesting that they create another myth of a dead son to replace the living son? Is communication between Martha and George possible because the son is destroyed? In Martha's voice is uncertainty, and silence becomes the locus of both yes and no. Albee's technique of coding silence in which meanings are hinted at but not clarified invites multiple interpretations,[8] but because the hints on which these differing interpretations are based are ambiguous, the readings are often contradictory. Loss, hope, mystery, and absurdity are the contradictory experiences of life that are evoked by an "open-ended silence." Silence does not promise to fulfil hope, nor does silence negate the possibility of hope and harmony. The undefined silence indicates the scepticism that is characteristic of modern, anti-realistic theatre.

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8 Gilbert Debusscher offers an optimistic reading of the play: "after the continual noise which filled their void, comes hesistant monosyllabes separated by long pauses. But their brief words and long silences are filled with meaning, real life, evidently the beginning of a dialogue at last . . . " (56). Louis Paul arrives at a strikingly different conclusion: "At the end it is uncertain whether anything will be different. They both answer yes and no. The nausea and self-loathing of the previous scenes give way to emptiness, anxiety, and cold despair" (51).

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CHAPTER TWO

Tiny Alice

Albee's second full-length play, *Tiny Alice*, was performed at the Billy Rose Theatre, New York, in 1964 with John Gielgud and Irene Worth in the main roles. The play proved to be controversial. Some of the leading theater critics dismissed it as pretentious and confusing while others regarded it as a significant achievement in modern theater.[9] When Albee discussed the play with Gielgud, he claimed that he had not meant to be intentionally confusing, but rather he had wanted to provoke the audience with a new kind of theatrical experience (Stewart 68). The play produces confusion because of the silence around the subject of homosexuality or rather the indirect allusion to homosexuality in the subtext. It also creates difficulties because Albee completely dismantles the realistic form, and one of the reasons he may have done so, is to introduce the experience of the homosexual character in the play. By locating the homosexual character within a frame that was more absurd than real and by using ambiguous silence, Albee could write a gay drama.

While Albee is partially indebted to Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* for the narratives in *The Zoo Story*, he may have also been influenced by the same play in his treatment of homosexuality in *Tiny Alice*. In Williams's play, Sebastian is an absent character whose homosexuality is revealed only after his death. The play creates an indirect connection between homosexuality and death, in the fascination Sebastian expresses with a god whom he sees as devouring and his own death in a cannibalistic act, which suggests a

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9 Reviews of the 1965 Billy Rose Theatre production of *Tiny Alice* are reprinted in Clurman, *The Divine Pastime.*

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punishment by an unknown god for deviant sexuality. Similarly in *Tiny Alice*, sexuality has a destructive meaning, stemming from something unresolved in Julian's character. Indirectly, through his narration of his dreams that have a sexual content, he conveys his conflict, and at the end of the play, he is devoured by Alice, God, or his own sexual fears--the unknown that has been waiting for him all his life. Unlike Sebastian's homosexuality which is related by another dramatic character in the play, Julian's homosexuality is never stated in the text.

According to John Clum, writing about homosexuality in an elliptical way allowed playwrights to create "closet" plays. He defines the term closet as "less a place than a performance--or series of performances, maintained by the heterosexist wish for, and sometimes enforcement of, homosexual silence and invisibility" (88). In Williams's plays, the oblique writing "freed him from the conventions of narrative realistic drama and also gave him the 'out' of claiming that his openings of the closet door were part of theatrical, poetic fantasies" (174). Albee does not acknowledge that any of his plays are about homosexuality, and through elaborate strategies he has tried not to create any crack in the "closet door," though the cracks that appear in the play despite the playwright's intention are our entry into the concealed subtext that deals with the protagonist's conflict. Identifying the "sexual drives" in Albee's plays as homosexual, Forster Hirsch writes: "Typically, sexual drives in Albee becomes transfigured into mock-religious acts of sacrifice, penitence, immolation; sex is incorporated into a lofty, symbolic framework. . . ." (Kolin and Davis, *Critical Essays* 130). Because of the transfigurement, it is difficult to connect Albee's treatment of homosexuality in *The Zoo Story* or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *Tiny Alice* to his own experiences. Hence Hirsch observes, "Albee's work masks much of his own

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personality: we cannot 'read' Albee through his writing" (*Who's Afraid of Edward Albee* 11).

Both as a text and as a performance, *Tiny Alice* is more strange, more daunting than the earlier one-act plays and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Most of the dramatic components are subject to unusual treatment. The locale is undisclosed, linear time is suspended, all the characters other than the protagonist are mysterious, bereft of pasts and of psychological profiles. Along with the motives of characters, the teleological purpose of the play is hidden from view. Albee also exploits more fully in *Tiny Alice* than in the earlier plays the visual properties of a theater, minimizing dialogic exchanges, capturing the action in a few effective strokes, and cueing the audience to the emotions of the protagonist through the use of stage-props. Elam writes that the use of stage-props is one of the simplest strategies of communication without words, that of "ostension" or "*showing* of objects and events (and the performance at large) to the audience, rather than describing, explaining or defining them" (30). In *Tiny Alice*, two stage-props, a huge model of a castle situated in the center of the stage and a phrenological head set on a table, dominate the setting, distancing the audience from a familiar world by engendering feelings of awe and apprehension. The model castle is animated by a hidden presence who emerges from its lair in the form of a dark, moving blot to devour Julian, and the phrenological head, which he apostrophizes as his bride, mocks human desire with its "unblinking" eyes (95). Like the stage-props, the tableaux rely on silence more than words to depict the developing action. For instance, the woman collaborator strikes the pose of a predatory bird as she seduces Julian, and later she assumes a Pieta figure in a travesty of

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maternal love. The play ends with Julian's death delineated amidst a strange display of sound and light.

In an interview, Albee specifically characterized *Tiny Alice* as a mystery play that operates on two levels: "That is, it's both a metaphysical mystery and, at the same time, a conventional 'Dial M for Murder'-type mystery" (Meehan 16). The metaphysical mystery is suggested by the questing protagonist who is in search of a god uncorrupted by human desire. He is also a man fleeing from his own dreams of sex and martyrdom, and his imminent sense of destruction. Parallel to the quest is the "Dial M" mystery of three conspirators or players--Lawyer, Butler, and the woman. Pursuing a strange plot and speaking a coded language, the conspirators maintain a purposeful silence, partially communicating to the audience the "task" (83) that has been set for them. The incomplete telling and the obscurities in telling are more disturbing than complete tellings, evoking in the audience a sense of apprehension about what might befall Julian. Julian's failure to fully understand his dream, fantasy, or hallucination, to determine the meaning of linguistic evasions, games, and disguises, and to take heed of supernatural occurrences by questioning and rejecting Miss Alice's evasive answers contribute to our uneasiness and fear.

A lay Brother and a secretary to Cardinal, Julian is assigned to perform an errand at the castle of a benefactress of the Church--"to clear up odds and ends" as Lawyer puts it (17). At the castle, he is an outsider who enters the space of his hosts, Lawyer, Butler, and a woman who pretends to be the benefactress, Alice, and is her namesake. Like all other plays by Albee that are structured around similar entrances or intrusions, Julian's arrival initiates the action. Upon entering Alice's castle, Julian is subjected to the games of three players who know the rules and bewilder him with their

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silent conspiracy. Albee calls Julian "the innocent coming into this rather extraordinary assemblage of people" (Stewart 68). In order to overcome the frustration of not following the game of the three conspirators, he suggests that the audience watch the performance from Julian's perspective: "Brother Julian is in the same position as the audience. If you see things through his eyes, you won't have any trouble at all" (qtd. in Wasserman 85). The dramatist's suggestion is misleading, for Julian is completely baffled by the intrigue of the collaborators and has no clue as to whether he is being tempted or tested or why. The unfolding action creates a disorientation in the audience that is similar to what Julian suffers in response to the enigmatic silence of Alice and the silence of the three players.

The audience feels the presence of Alice who silently directs the collaborators and the action from behind the stage. Albee's dramatic skill lies in communicating her unspoken wishes, making her unseen presence known. When Julian enters the stage and sees the model, he registers his surprise with his first word, "Extraordinary" (18), and Butler draws his attention to a hidden presence who resides in it:

> Julian. (*Peers at model*, L. of C.) It's . . . it's this *room*! This room we're *in*!
>
> Butler. Yes.
>
> Butler. Is there anyone there? Are we there?
>
> Julian. (*Briefly startled, then laughs, looks back into the model.*) Uh . . . no. It seems to be quite . . . empty.
>
> (18)

Subsequent acts in the play show Alice's seemingly empty castle to be full of clues that prove Julian wrong. In the second act, a fire begins to burn in the chapel of the model, and it mysteriously reaches out from the enclosed

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space to the off-stage chapel. In the final act, in response to Julian's cry in the silence, a penumbra of light travels down the staircase of the model and then a dark presence "*fills the stage*" (96). Through unusual events Albee personifies Alice, and to shroud her in mystery, he adopts the theatrical techniques of absurdist drama--"the hints of other dimensions beyond the real or visible" (Knepler 275). Alice also asserts her presence through the collaborators whose repeated invocations of her name and ceaseless interpretation of her unspoken directives transforms her from an insubstantial form into a power. Whether Alice's power is malignant or benign is unknown, for she creates in Julian conflicting feelings. Informed by the collaborators that he is married to Alice and not to her namesake as he imagined, he recoils from the model. "*Pointing to the model*" he tells the assembled group: "There is nothing there! We are *here*! There is no one *there*!" (83). Initially, Alice signifies the danger of an empty house, but later she becomes a more complex figure when Julian addresses her dark moving form as God-Alice and also as Nothingness. Because of the contradictory responses she engenders in Julian, Alice is an enigma.

Not only Julian's relationship to Alice, but also the collaborators' relationships to her are fraught with contradictions despite their acknowledgment of her power. The "dedicated" service of the three to Alice leads to images of entrapment and stasis, the negation of choice (54). All of them voice their weariness with the repetitions, the oppressive cycles of their hidden life. Butler observes to Lawyer, "On . . . and on . . . we go" (54), and at the end of the play, the woman repeats his words, "The years of it . . . to go on? For how long?" to which Lawyer responds: "Until we are replaced" (89). Just before the three are about to exit, Butler confesses to the woman collaborator that it is she whom he loves and not Alice--"I love you . . . not

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her. Or . . . quite differently"--revealing the possibility of some volition amidst absolute obedience which their service seems to demand (91). None of them comes to Julian's aid after he is sacrificed to the absent Alice, and yet each one in his or her own way displays pity for the victim in the final act.

The traces of individuality that seem to linger in the characters puzzle critics. Leonard Caspar poses a series of questions that relate to the complex relationship between Alice and the collaborators and also Cardinal:

> *Something of self is retained by all these four agents of* causes/missions larger than themselves. Is this their flaw, or even in the worst of them is this some sign of grace, of a superior love that allows them a measure of freedom from complete depersonalization? Does omnipotence require impotence? (87)

The inscrutability of Alice's silence blocks the clarification of meaning, and the contradictions in the collaborators' words and act--in the feelings of entrapment and devotion--keep conflicts unresolved. Alice's silence appears to extend from the collaborators who are committed to her to Julian himself. When Gielgud played Brother Julian, he recognized the identity and function of the mute character to be one of the most "difficult" aspects of the play: "I think that the more difficult things are when you begin to wonder whether it's Alice who is also directing the three protagonists--the woman, Lawyer, Butler--as well as presumably directing *my* steps to come to her, which is what she really wants and what they really want" (Stewart 68). The action is theatrically exciting because Alice's role is undefined, and it is undefined because her motives are unspoken.

The three collaborators are as intriguing as Alice. Unlike Cardinal and Brother Julian, who are familiar to the audience as members of a

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religious order, Lawyer, Butler, and the woman cannot be put in a social context. Two of them are known by their professions, but this tells the audience very little as to who they are. The initial impression of realism that they convey as a reclusive woman, an aggressive Lawyer, and an unobtrusive Butler is destroyed in the suggestion of masked identities, and the gap between them and the audience is increased in their identification of themselves as agents of an off-stage character, Alice. Gesture and indirect language hint at the duality of the characters, subverting realism.[10] The stage-direction draws attention to the duality of Butler who displays an informal manner that is not associated with his rank: "He moves about with a kind of unbutlerlike ease" (18). Within the dialogue there are other oblique hints to suggest that the characters may be playing secondary roles in the theatre. When Julian describes Lawyer as intimidating, the woman remarks--"but he *is* a professional" (32)--and her choice of the word "professional" has the ring of a hired killer. Also, the woman describes herself with an allusive comment: "It may be I am . . . noticeable, but almost never identified" (35). In their response to Julian, the three adopt varying attitudes: Lawyer is menacing, Butler friendly, and the woman both seductive and maternal, and in the end they are all murderers or implicated in an intricate plot. Appearing mysteriously in the theatre, with no clue as to their past or to their motives, they also vanish like some distant figures in a dream: "We are leaving you now, Julian; agents every one of us--going" (82).

The dramatic purpose and the motives of characters form the backbone of a play or "the crucial structuring principles": these two "mental

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10 For an allegorical interpretation of the three characters, see Campbell, "The Tempters." For an allegorical approach to the play's structure, see Campbell, "The Statement of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice*."

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constraints" in the action are different from one another in that purpose determines the teleological design in the structure and motives relate to external acts undertaken by characters to attain a desired end (Elam 122-123). To a degree, *Tiny Alice* conveys its purpose and the motives of the characters, for the action moves towards a defined objective, the "sacrifice" of the protagonist that is fulfilled in an "intended action sequence" (123): Lawyer strikes a deal with Cardinal and pays him a fabulous sum of money on behalf of Alice; Cardinal sends Brother Julian to Alice's castle to tie up loose ends; and subsequently, the conspirators seduce and murder him. While the meaning of individual acts can be identified, the relationships among them are missing, disrupting logic, and because of the disruptions, the entire sequence is made strange. At the end of the play, there is no clear clue as to why Julian is destroyed. In its refusal to impart information, to fully reveal purpose and intentions, the play challenges the audience who no longer know what construction they are to put upon the action.

The game that the conspirators play is a predatory one. Julian is the "bird of prey" caught in a trap by the Lawyer who tears at the vitals like a hyena (28). The woman is an exotic, dangerous bird who lures him towards death. Throughout the play, the woman impersonates different characters--a wealthy donor, a crone, Julian's bride, and the Virgin Mary--and she harbors a threat that Julian cannot predict. The game motif is developed through tableaux and role-playing that facilitate concealment, allowing the players or collaborators to hold on to their advantages over Julian. At the outset of the plan, the woman pretends to be a crone who is "terribly hard of hearing" (29). As she rises to face him, the first shock he experiences is with her physical appearance, for instead of a striking woman whom he had expected to greet him, he sees "*a withered crone.*" Her hair and her two canes

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emphasize her aged appearance. His second shock comes when, after a brief exchange, she speaks to him in her "*normal voice*," drops her canes, takes off her wig and mask, and assumes her natural self. The response of the audience to this unexpected game is similar to what Julian undergoes:

> Julian. (*Slightly put out.*) I . . . don't understand.
>
> Miss Alice. Are you annoyed?
>
> Julian. I suspect I will be . . . might be . . . after the surprise leaves me.
>
> Miss Alice. (*Smiling.*) Don't be; it's only a little game.
>
> Julian. Yes, doubtless. But why?
>
> Miss Alice. (*Crosses to C., extends hand.*) Oh, indulge us, please. (31)

Surprised by the woman's disguise, Julian questions the woman, and his enquiry is what drives the play onward: "But why?" This is a question also asked of Albee by theatre-goers who want to discover the meaning behind motives and unravel the mystery. An answer is not given, and, in fact, none is possible, for the evocation of this mystery is conscious and deliberate. The aim of the dramatist is to sustain the structure of mystification, to pose problems, and to withhold solutions. In Albee's opinion, should a playwright attempt to provide answers, "almost inevitably he is going to present a far less puissant drama" (Diehl 72). In other instances, Julian interrogates the woman and Butler. But as in this instance, speaking allusively, the characters imply silence through evasions or withholdings.

Concluding the first act is a short exchange between the woman and Lawyer that takes place after Julian leaves the scene:

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Miss Alice. (*Seriously.*) Tell me honestly, do you really think we're wise?

Lawyer. Wise? Well, we'll see. If we prove not, I can't think of anything standing in the way that can't be destroyed. (*Pause.*) Can you?

Miss Alice. (*Rather sadly.*) No. Nothing. (*Rises, crosses L. to mirror.*) (40)

The oblique dialogue fails to reveal the original plan, and it also makes no object reference that may clarify who or what can pose an obstacle to the plan and will be prevented from jeopardizing it. By engaging in indirections and ambiguity, the speakers elicit a mood of danger that is reinforced in the language. In the context in which the dialogue is conducted, the audience feels apprehensive about Julian's safety. Lawyer's pause scripted in the dialogue expresses a simple query or a challenge to the woman; her acquiescence suggests that the unspoken plan will follow its intended course.

Bernard Dukore criticizes Albee's technique of withholding information as specious--a means merely to elicit applause--and he cites the fire episode in act 2, sc. 1 to demonstrate his point (61-62). Astonished by the fire that begins to burn simultaneously in two chapels, in the model and on the castle grounds, Julian questions the woman collaborator about the relationship between the two events: "Miss Alice? Why, why did it happen that way--in both dimensions?" (52). Although the woman had prayed fervently to an unseen presence during the unusual event, she denies any knowledge of what is happening. In response to Julian's query, she invites him to stay in the castle, and her irrelevant response, like her earlier evasions, implies silence. The scene ends with the following brief exchange:

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> Julian. (*Knowing there is.*) Is there anything to be frightened of, Miss Alice?
>
> Miss Alice. (*After a long pause.*) Always.
>
> (Julian *turns R., steps U.* Miss Alice *steps to him.*)
>
> (52-53)

Dukore calls the closing scene "claptrap" (62), and he makes a pointed objection to the structural incoherence and lack of clarity in the theme. The scene, however, fulfils its dramatic intention to evoke a mood, to foreshadow a lurking danger that is inexplicable. Any answer explaining such a surreal spectacle would make the whole scene banal.

In act 2, sc. 2, Lawyer and Butler engage in role-playing without any other dramatic character on the stage. Interrupting their role-playing, they debate about the information they will share with Cardinal. Their language is perilously close to a revelation that is checked, and subsequently in the action, their reference to the plan or the "whole thing" is never disclosed:

> Butler. (*Musing. Crosses to L. of L. chair*). Shall we be dishonest? Well, then, I suppose you'll have to tell him more. Tell him the whole thing.
>
> Lawyer. (*Himself. U. of R. C. chair.*) I will like that. It will blanch his goddamn robes . . . turn 'em white.
>
> Butler. (*Chuckles.*) Nice when you can enjoy your work, isn't it? Tell him that Julian is leaving him. That Julian has found what he's after. (*Walks U. C. to the model, indicates it.*) And I suppose you'd better tell him about . . . this, too.
>
> Lawyer. The wonders of the world? (56)

Although in the final act, there is an indication in Cardinal's remark to Lawyer--"Then it is . . . really true? About . . . *this*? (*Points at the model.*)"--

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that the information has been shared with him and that it has some connection to the model castle, the audience remains in the dark. In withholding complete information that the audience anticipates, the dialogue breaks the rule of quantity on which a meaningful interaction is constructed, and the partial or quasi-information that characterizes the conversation between the two speakers constitutes deliberate mystification.

As the two collaborators improvise on their original plan during their role-playing, the audience hears a part of a strange, conspiratorial discussion. For the first time, Lawyer and Butler make a distinction between the woman, Miss Alice, and an absent character Alice, the hidden life in the chapel. The unnaturalness of the plan in relation to Alice, an abstract presence, and Julian, subverts reality:

> Butler. . . . I think it would be a lovely touch were the Cardinal to marry them, to perform the wedding, to marry Julian to . . .
>
> Lawyer. (*Looks at the chapel.*) Alice.
>
> Butler. *Miss* Alice.
>
> Lawyer. (*To Butler.*) Alice!
>
> Butler. Well, all right; one through the other. But have him marry them. (56)

According to Richard M. Coe, "Dramatic irony builds tension as the audience discovers a lot about what is in store for Julian which the protagonist himself does not know" (377). But even though the external act is known to the audience, the underlying motive continues to perplex. The surprise and mystery in the collaborators' plan lie in arousing curiosity in the audience that is not satisfied in the obscure statements, partial statements, hints and suggestions.

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The final act delineates a physical silence that reverberates with the loneliness of the protagonist left "quiet alone, in the . . . echoes" (68). Julian had not anticipated his isolation immediately after his marriage, and the disappearance of Miss Alice elicits his uneasy query to Butler, "Is something being kept from me?" (71). The question is ironic, for the audience knows Julian is married to Alice and not to the woman whom he imagines. Comparing Julian's situation to that of a little boy who is locked in an attic, Butler connects his isolation to a transgression on his part and also to the failure of those outside the attic to hear and to respond: "And it's always remote, an attic closet, where one should not have been, where no one can hear, and is not likely to come . . . for a very long time" (69). The statement which blends the two motifs of entrapment and deafness running through the play is an attempt on the part of the Butler to indirectly enlighten Julian. "When you're locked in the attic, Julian, in the attic closet, in the dark," he asks him, "do you care who comes?" Before he responds, Julian "*steps back*," and then answers: "No. But . . ." (72). Verbally agreeing with Butler that he may have no choice as to who or what may open the attic door, he hints at his emotional resistance with his physical retreat, and the word "but" is significant, reflecting a directional change in thought and feelings; his incomplete answer retains the suspense as to how he will react when his imprisonment in "the metaphorical attic closet" finally dawns upon him (Coe 379). An awareness of the silence enclosing him comes slowly to Julian. In the stage-direction, Albee scripts the movement and facial expression of actors who communicate to Julian their physical separation from him. Taking a cue from the actors, the auditors respond to the changing mood on stage: "Something of a silence falls . . . Julian will grow to knowledge of it, will aid us, though we will be aware of it before he is" (77).

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For an unnerving moment there is complete silence in the theater, a hiatus, followed by the chorus of the collaborators rejoining Julian in "the ceremony of Alice" (78). The "ceremony" is an elaborate subterfuge that Lawyer compares to a game where children explore each other sexually while all the time they "talk of other things" (81). The analogy also serves as a commentary on Albee's technique in *Tiny Alice* where words are used both by the protagonist and the collaborators to deceive and to dissemble. Towards the end of the act, however, Miss Alice rejects evasions and speaks explicitly as she confronts Julian with his marriage to Alice. Her statement induces a deafness in Julian that is similar to that of Peter in *The Zoo Story* who hears the meaning behind Jerry's unspoken words but deliberately chooses not to acknowledge it. "*Refusing to accept what he is hearing*," Julian is shot by the Lawyer whereas Peter is made to kill Jerry (83).

Julian evokes the mystery surrounding events in the past with narratives he relates to Miss Alice in the first two acts. The celibate priest engages in ambiguity with his remark about his single sexual experience with a woman--he might be referring to the single sexual relationship with a woman as opposed to a man. The content of his first narrative is made strange with the comment that the encounter, which was with a woman in a mental asylum, where he had been an inmate for six years, may or may not have occurred (36). Through his uncertainty he distances himself from a sexual situation that took place in the past and which he associates with death. To flee from destruction in the present, he chooses the celibate life that offers him faith and sanity. Because of the separation Julian forges between himself and his past, the "I" in the narrative does not appear to be the narrator himself but some other fictive persona who had an unusual experience. Simultaneous displacement of erotic desire and over-

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articulation of dreams about martyrdom are narrational techniques Julian uses to conceal his self-doubts about his religious faith and his fears of his own death. When he speaks of martyrdom, Julian resorts to deliberate phrases, prompting Miss Alice's teasing comment: "You phrase it so; I suspect you have said it before," and a counter-response by Julian: "Articulate men often carry set paragraphs" (63). The articulate, well-turned phrase is often a ploy of dramatic characters who hide behind words their feelings or motives; referring to the ghost in *Hamlet*, Paolucci points out the dramatic technique Albee shares with Shakespeare and with contemporary playwrights: "Here as in so many plays of Pirandello, Beckett, Albee, Ionesco, and others, words themselves are a mask, a deceiving posture. What is said does not correspond to an emotional correlative" ("Pirandello and the Waiting Stage" 108). Although Julian's narratives relate to an event in the past and a childhood vision, they resonate with a subtext of sexual desire that is relevant to the action in the present. The subtext calls into question Julian's commitment to his vow, suggesting that he has not recovered the faith that he lost and for which he suffered six years ago.

In the role of a narrator, Julian can clearly arbitrate what he will say and what he will leave unsaid, and as he tells his story, the audience's view of him shifts from a victim who is subject to an unspoken conspiracy to a protagonist who exercises some degree of control over his fate. The contradictions in telling create the mystery as to whether Alice directs his steps or he wills his steps towards her, succumbing to his emotions and thereby courting his inevitable destruction. Beneath the outer stratum of faith portrayed in the spoken words, there is in an inner one in Julian waiting to be excavated, and Miss Alice voices the audience's feelings when she exclaims: "Oh, my Julian! How many layers! Yes?" (61). The layered

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meaning, the constrained emotion, the unspoken conflict shift the focus of the action from the conspiracy of the collaborators to Julian himself, so that the narrative units are not mere interruptions to the play's actions, but in actuality are a microcosm of the whole play.

Silence takes the form of repression in Julian's fear to reveal to himself his buried memory, to recognize openly the conflict he is undergoing. At the urging of the woman he recalls the six silent years of his life; the recollection is also motivated by an inner prompting to know, to retrace the origin of his conflict, and to bring it to a resolution. Parallel to the larger action in the play, the action in the inserted narratives is also propelled by a hidden motive that moves towards an end, a motive that is described by narratologists as "narrative desire" (Brooks 37). The desire to know, to discover hidden truths has its roots in Oedipus. "Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus?" asks Barthes. "Isn't every storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflict with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred?" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 47). Although Julian conceals his motive, the impulse behind his narratives is similar to that in the classical tragedy; the visions recounted in the narratives and enacted in the final act signify a past origin and a future end. Left unclarified in the narratives and in the final performance, however, is the insight that Julian gains or does not gain in the process of remembering and telling.

The setting of the first narrative is like a dream. Julian describes it as a "fog" and a "milkiness, " and against this hazy setting, the night, gardens, a pool, sounds, and sobs stand out in sharp relief (36). The garden that Julian remembers--"rather overgrown, a formal garden once"--also forms the setting for a later experimental play *Listening,* in which the Man's indistinct

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memory of the past results in a similar subversion of reality and leaves sexual relationships unverified. Unlike the Man, who is intent on knowing the truth about his past but is unable to discover it because of lapses in memory, Julian does not express any curiosity about establishing the veracity of the event. Telling his stories, he relives his erotic memories, and at the same time, he creates a mystery around the past with surreal descriptions.

Julian's hallucinations are accompanied by deafness, a ringing in the ears, enclosing him in physical silence so that the outside world no longer impinges on his inner self.[11] His meeting with a woman, a patient in the asylum, results in a similar sensation, a deafness that blocks external strictures of faith from intruding upon feelings that erupt from within his buried self: "I . . . I came closer, and the sounds, her sounds, her words, the roaring in my ears, the gossamer and the milk film, I . . . (Kneels.) A ROAR; AN OCEAN!" (36). Sex and ejaculation are more oceanic than any feelings connected to religion. The language elicits the following comment from Cohn: "Not only does Julian speak of ejaculation; he speaks *in* ejaculation" (*Edward Albee* 30). The broken rhythms in his recital hint at a disjunction between the spiritual and the physical selves, a fragmentation in the life of a celibate priest. In recounting his real or imagined sexual transgression, Julian displaces his own death, for the woman dies within a month from cancer of the womb, suffering under a delusion that she was pregnant with the son of God. Sexuality is acceptable to the conscious self of the narrator only when it is seen in terms of a religious miracle.

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11 See Valgamae's comment on deafness as a recurring image in *Tiny Alice* (106: n. 6).

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The second narrative returns Julian to childhood dreams about martyrdom that continue to obsess him even as a priest. Mary Castiglie Anderson offers a Jungian study of Julian's psyche: "Julian's image of himself as martyr does not eliminate or even substitute for his other needs; it simply displaces them. This repression accounts for their perverse eroticism which fills the stage each time Julian divulges his fantasies" (181). Speaking with passion of his desire to serve and envisioning himself as a Christian martyr, Julian blocks his sexual feelings, but as he shifts his identity in the process of telling from "a child, both lion and gladiator, then saint and the hallucinating self of Act 1 monologue," he gives hints of his submerged self, producing a narrative of "eroto-mystical, multi-personal martyrdom" (Cohn *Edward Albee* 31). All these images culminate in "the coming dark and the silence" that Julian experiences throughout the play (66).

Discordant motifs coalesce in Julian's narrative to produce a single dominant sexual overtone. Invoking the groom's thumb which fascinated him as a child, Julian places it between the gladiator and the lion, recalling, simultaneously, the woman from the asylum:

> Bathed . . . my groin. And as the thumbs of the gladiator pressed . . . against . . . my neck, I . . . as the lion's belly pressed on my chest, I . . . as the . . . I . . . or as the woman sank . . . on the mossy hillock by the roses, and the roar is the crunching growl is the moan is the sweat-breathing is the . . . (66)

A concealed homosexual motif is hinted in the groom's thumb and the lion's fangs entering Julian. But with the sudden transformation of the lion into the

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woman, the attention from the motif is diverted--or rather, it is erased. Because of the shift in the motif and an implied identification between the beast-woman, Morrison arrives at the conclusion that Julian's subtext hides his "fears and hostilities" towards woman ("Pinter, Albee" 264). Whether Julian is narrating an odd sexual experience with a woman or is disguising a homosexual experience in terms of a Christian martyrdom, he is avoiding an overt confrontation with his underlying emotions. The descriptively sharp viscerality of the violence conceals his desire for self-annihilation in a sexual union. While entangling images of martyrdom and orgasm in his description, Julian further confuses the narrative preterit, the tense for what happened, with the present tense, the tense of the drama's enactment, and thereby delineates the immediacy of his experience. His narrative becomes a performative act that has an effect on events in the present. Interrupting his storytelling, Miss Alice asks him to marry her, and Albee's stage-direction indicates that she speaks "softly, into his ear, he does not hear it " (66). Julian's failure to listen and to recognize the past stealthily moving into the present is signified by his withdrawal, self-absorption, and engulfment. Albee portrays in a tableau the startling conclusion of the narrative. Circling around Julian, Miss Alice recites the hyponotic words: "Come to Alice, Julian, in your sacrifice . . ." (67). The stage-directions indicate the woman enclosing Julian: she opens her gown and spreads her arms slowly, and the act is like "the unfurling of great wings." Albee creates a discrepancy between the audience's understanding of an unspoken meaning and Julian's response to it. From the woman's words, the audience knows that it is the abstract figure in the model who will marry Julian and not the woman, but in his trance, Julian does not hear the difference or chooses not to hear it. His "dying cry" nevertheless suggests that in the deep core of his self he

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realizes that he is surrendering to desire and through desire to his destruction.

The tension in the final moments of the play is created by the building up and breaking down of physical silence. Abandoned by Cardinal and the three collaborators, Julian finds himself in the attic that Butler had warned him about. In his locked state, he imagines himself as the bridegroom of Alice, a child, and the bride of God. He calls out to several persons for succour, and his cry is met with silence. Albee attributes the image of deafness to unseen listeners, and the silence that is heard poignantly conveys the loneliness of the protagonist as he confronts his impending death.

Julian calls out to the collaborators as they exit, addressing in particular the woman whom he thinks he has married: "Help me . . . come back, help me (*Pause*) " (93). His language echoes that of the female inmate in the asylum, while the scripted pauses and ellipses no longer suggest evasions or suppressions but the agony and despair of the dying character. His mind plays tricks with him. He deludes himself into thinking that Miss Alice would not have willingly abandoned him, trying to think of conditions under which she could be persuaded to stay. The incompletions signify that there will not be any fulfilment of any conditions, and the isolation Julian dreads is absolute:

> COME BACK AND HELP ME! (*Pause.*) If only to stay *with* me, while it . . . *if* . . . while it happens. For . . . you, you would not have left me if it . . . were not . . . would you? No. (*Calling to them.*) (93)

Interpolated in the monologue is an episode from his boyhood, and as his memory transforms him into a child, he recalls a bleeding cut in his leg

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and calls out to his grandfather; past and present cruelly mimic each other, for the boy's cry, like the adult priest's, goes unheeded. In succession, Julian cries to the void, the god of his culture, and an imaginary listener who stands outside the attic door. The listener is girlish and teasing, and he imagines her silence is a game she plays with him:

> THERE IS NO ONE! (*Turns his head toward the closed doors, sadly.*)
>
> Unless you are listening there. Unless you have left me, tiptoed off some, stood whispering, smothered giggles, and . . . silently returned, your ears pressed against, or . . . or one eye into the crack so that the air smarts it sifting through.
>
> (94)

The scripted pause that follows the portrait registers a reversal of mood, a recognition that there is "No, No one." Despair and faith comingle in Julian's repeated cry to Alice, the use of liturgical and intimate language creates the ambiguity as to whether he is referring to the hidden presence in the model or his bride. The unbroken silence signifies nothingness: "There is nothing; there is no one." The response of the protagonist lends support to the sceptical note in Paolucci's analysis of *Tiny Alice*: "God is Alice and Alice is an incomprehensible Nothing" (*From Tension to Tonic* 96).

The breaking of silence is accompanied by a series of bizarre events as the chapel lights up suddenly, and the unseen listener finally makes its presence felt amidst sound, interpreted as both "heartbeat and footsteps" (Morrison, "Pinter, Albee" 273). Albee's technique here corresponds with O'Neill's expressionistic technique in *The Emperor Jones*, where the drumbeats represent the pulsating heartbeats of Jones and the audience.[12]

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12 See Valgamae, "Albee's Great God Alice" 105.

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Critics offering a psychological reading of *Tiny Alice* see the entire play as a projection of Julian's mind. Albee, however, offers an alternative analysis of the final scene: "The sound of hearbeats and heavy breathing as the doors open have widely been misinterpreted as being those of an increasingly terrified Julian . . . they are meant to belong to whatever comes through the door" (qtd. in Anderson, "Staging the Unconscious" 190). Alice is an unknown presence whose existence is outside Julian's mind, in the model house from which he recoils as he had earlier from the "unblinking" eyes of the phrenological head wearing Miss Alice's wig (95). Towards the end of the play, a moving blot of ink spreads on the stage accompanied by an "enormous" sound, a magnification of the orgasmic echoes in the earlier visionary experiences. Julian's final cry is to "ALICE . . . GOD?" as he watches himself swallowed in darkness and silence and nothingness (96).

The open-ended silence is typical. As in the earlier plays, *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, we do not know what to make of the silence in *Tiny Alice* that leaves us in doubts and uncertainties, providing at the same time an opportunity to interpret the play from different directions. Critics have offered interpretations ranging from the allegorical, tragic, Jungian, and feminist to those which avoid any single point of view and see the play as an unresolvable mystery. Thomas B. Markus calls the play a tragedy: "The tragic is an optimistic vision, in which the hero's relationship with his world is re-evaluated . . . Julian's perception of his world and his place in it is precisely such a re-evaluation" (233). Anderson approaches the play from a Jungian perspective, asserting that in the final act Julian's rejection of help from others "underscores the dawning of his understanding of autonomy and acceptance of responsibility" ("Staging the Unconscious" 190). Adopting a feminist viewpoint, Naomi Conn Liebler expresses doubt

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about the protagonist's insight into himself and the nature of mystery: "But Julian never becomes that autonomous individual, never penetrates the mysteries, there is no sense by the play's end that he has been reborn or that he will be" (198). Caspar sees an inviolable mystery at the center of the play, and he recognizes that the mystery permits both a pessimistic and an optimistic reading of the final silence: "A variety of critical responses to his [play] not only is to be expected by Albee and tolerated; it is, in fact, invited and essential to his theme" (91).

Albee's own silence is as enigmatic as that of his dramatic characters. His silence is in part a conscious awareness of his own limitations in knowing a complex, intricate world. In the process of writing, a character takes life of its own, and the dramatist ceases to be an omniscient creator who can discover inner emotions, thoughts, or motives or convey them to the audience authentically. Therefore, in *Tiny Alice*, Albee can only suggest feelings and motives that resist exposure, be they the duplicities of the three agents or the layers of passion which motivate Julian. But silence is also a form of manipulation that allows the dramatist to conceal from view the private experiences that have inspired his work. In an interview Albee acknowledged: ". . . And whatever the experimental nature of the structure of the piece, it is probably firmly established in the rhythms of my life before I begin to write it down, before I discover what they are. But along the way I am very aware of what I'm doing" (Roudané "An Interview" 30). The admission of his awareness also suggests the possibility of a knowing concealment, so that, in trying to make the silence speak, one hears in it notes of conflict with homosexuality that gets masked by religous conflict, and these notes of sexual conflict can be traced from Jerry to Julian and to Albee's own life.

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CHAPTER THREE

A Delicate Balance

Albee's third full-length play, *A Delicate Balance*, was produced at the Martin Beck Theater, New York, in September 1966. Although the performance got short shrift from theater reviewers, closing after a modest run of only 132 performances, a revival, produced by the Lincoln Theater Company, opened in April 1996, and had quiet a successful run, closing on September 29. The first production, directed by Alan Scheinder, earned Albee his first Pulitzer Prize. While theater reviewers praised the direction and acting, they voiced their objections to the play itself. Writing for the *New York Times*, Walter Kerr faulted the play for its lack of coherent action in which "nothing follows necessarily from what has gone before." Kerr also criticized the language which he considered as "only fabricated, measured sounds" without any "referents," and he viewed the content as "speculative rather than theatrical, an essay and an exercise when it might have been an experience" (qtd. in Kolin and Davis 52-54). Kerr's review, which indicates his preference for realistic theater, sums up the response of most critics who saw the first production. In the last thirty years, however, the theatrical winds have changed. The growth of avant-garde theater has gradually resulted in the audience's acceptance of experimental forms, and this change is reflected in the current reviews of the revival directed by Gerald Gutierrez. Vincent Canby observes: "*A Delicate Balance* is now revealed to be almost as ferocious and funny--and far more human--than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" (*New York Times* 11). Linda Winer refers to the renewed interest in Albee: "Unlike Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, he alone is suddenly having a second act in the theater. The most heartening revival in

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town is not just a show but a living playwright." The review closes on the note that *A Delicate Balance* "may actually be more prescient, in retrospect, than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" (*Newsday* 2). *A Delicate Balance* has always been overshadowed by *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but after this revival, it is likely that the play will be revaluated for its dramatic and theatrical merits, eventually finding a permanent place in the roster of major American drama.

A play begins with a concrete, physical space. From Artaud's *The Theater and the Double* we know that this physical theater is also a very metaphysical theater, which intimates experiences outside the familiar boundaries of life. Albee patterns *A Delicate Balance* around Artaud's conception of the theater, setting the action within a physical context and then unexpectedly disrupting it with a mysterious "terror." As the play progresses, its physical and metaphysical aspects become inseparable, taking the play further away from realism than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* On a physical level, the characters use ritual and the artifice of language[13] to conceal their failure to forge a loving relationship, and their concealment of the failure has resulted in the slow disfigurement of their inner life. On a metaphysical level, they confront a silent "terror" that unexpectedly enters the threshold of their house. The "terror" is self-knowledge. Seeing the failures of one's marital relationship, going beyond empty gestures of friendship, facing the void that is carefully disguised in every day life, and knowing oneself in order to affirm life is a terrifying

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13 As with all other plays by Albee, the critical emphasis is on language. Two articles which are indirectly useful for comparing the function of language with silence are von Szeliski's "Albee: A Rare Balance," which examines "the style and content of the play's meanings, and Fumerton's "Verbal Prisons: The Language of Albee's *A Delicate Balance*," which analyzes the "potentialities and limitations of language."

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experience. The characters in *A Delicate Balance* avoid the experience with their interpretation of the "terror" as a plague.

As Albee has often expressed his indebtedness to Artaud, I surmise that in portraying Agnes's response to the "terror" as plague, he is inspired by the striking image of the plague that appears in *The Theater and Its Double*. Artaud creates an analogy between the theater's effect on the audience and the plague's on the human body, and by extension, on the state. Both a destructive and a redemptive force, the plague works mysteriously on "a latent disorder," bringing it to the surface and allowing it to reveal itself in large movements. After it exhausts itself, the process of reconstruction begins, and "nothing remains except death or an extreme purification." By destroying the falsities that people erect in life, the theater similarly compels them to look at their inner selves ("The Theater and the Plague" 15-32). Like the plague that is vividly drawn by Artaud, the "terror" which invades Agnes's household has the hidden potential of altering the characters' overwhelming feeling of emptiness and isolation in their relationships. But when the "terror" is amidst them, the characters seek to "isolate," "quarantine," "ostracize," and "immunize" themselves from its effect instead of responding to it positively (82). Only Tobias's conflict to understand the "terror," or the "plague," creates an epiphany, but he fails to grasp the moment. Denying the dark, cleansing force of the "terror," the dramatic characters stand inertly poised over a void.

The conflict in the play lies in seeing truths completely and in balancing oneself between truths and illusions. In opting for the "delicate balance," without trusting themselves to participate fully in life, the characters create a void. While ritualized language and gesture are the means to surround oneself with the illusion of harmony and contentment,

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silence contradicts language, suggesting an alternative image of an inner life in which there is a lack of contentment. Employing a technique in which signs contradict each other, Albee establishes the theme of emptiness.

A contrast between external and internal realities emerge in the setting itself, a luxurious living-room in which all the stage-activity takes place. As the play progresses, however, this set comes to reflect the empty lives of the characters, and at the end, "it seems as spooky and barren as a Beckett landscape" (Canby *New York Times* 11). In the opening moments of the first act, the play creates a visual and aural effect of intimacy as the middle-aged couple, Tobias and Agnes, share a drink and converse in "soft" tones. This effect is deceptive. Albee's technique of subverting a realistic scenario lies in introducing silence unobtrusively amidst Agnes's desultory talks of madness, anisette, and her sister Julia.

In the play, pause as silence evokes the tension in the drama. The pause, like a Pinteresque pause, is filled. We enter into the heart of the play by exploring how the play fills in the pause, what it is filled in with and how the subjects which give rise to the pause are never discussed outright. Once the spectators hear the pause in the theater, they can interpret the meaning of the pause only through hints made elsewhere in the play. Albee's technique here resembles August Strindberg's use of pauses. In the preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg discusses his experiment with dialogue that "wanders, gathering in the opening scenes material which is later picked up, worked over, repeated, expounded and developed like the theme in a musical composition" (68). Similarly in *A Delicate Balance*, oblique references to an adulterous relationship between Claire and Tobias keep recurring in *A Delicate Balance*, and the pause accumulates meaning to

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suggest a permanent break in the sexual relationship between Agnes and Tobias.

There are two crucial pauses that are connected to Agnes's speech, and they appear in the opening and final acts. The first pause occurs as Agnes toasts her husband: "I'm as young as the day I married you--though I am certain I don't look it--because you're a very good husband . . . most of the time. But I was talking about Claire, or was beginning to" (9). Is Agnes making an implied suggestion that Tobias may not always have been a "good husband?" Is there an accusatory note in her voice? Is there a past hidden in the space between the spoken words and her hesitation? Agnes arouses curiosity by leaving the pause unexplained and directing her anger towards Claire's alcoholism. With her repeated mention of Claire, however, the audience senses a tension between the couple, but before emotions can erupt, they are carefully restrained. The meaning of the pause is not allowed to come in the open as the couple divert themselves with trivial semantic games :

> Tobias. Succinct, but one of the rules of an aphorism . . .
>
> Agnes. An epigram, I thought.
>
> Tobias. (*Small smile.*) An epigram is usually satiric, and you . . . (10)

In analyzing the language game, John von Szeliski comments: "Such moments are suggestive of their lifelong moving away from personal contact and action. Even in crises, formal conversational rules apply" (127). While the precise use of language allows the characters to avoid a direct conflict, Agnes's pause makes it apparent that there are emotions that are being kept out of the marital relationship. As the opening act ends, these unspoken feelings of the characters compromise the initial mood of intimacy.

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Later, Claire illuminates the significance of Agnes's pause with her overt accusation of Tobias and the friends he keeps: "What do you really have in common with your best friend . . . (Tobias *crosses up to the platform.*) 'cept the coincidence of having cheated on your wives in the same summer with the same woman . . . girl . . . woman? What except that? And hardly a distinction. I believe she was upended that whole July" (16). Although Claire does not make a mystery about Tobias's affair, her failure to identify the "girl" arouses curiosity in the audience that is increased when Tobias blocks her name from his memory or chooses deliberately not to utter it:

> Claire. (*Crosses on knees, kisses* Tobias *on forehead.*) All right. (*Down again.* R. *of coffee table.*) What was her name?
>
> Tobias. (*A little sad.*) I don't remember.
>
> Claire. (*Shrugs.*) No matter; she's gone. (*Brighter.*) Would you give Harry the shirt off your back, as they say?
>
> (17)

Proceeding through indirection, Claire and Tobias imply an adulterous relationship between the two of them. Albee suggests the unspeakable by erasing traces of the relationship from Tobias's memory and obliterating the physical presence of the woman from Claire's language: "No matter; she's gone." While Claire projects herself on the stage as a character who utters truth and is willing to strip away pretences, at this moment she produces a conspiratorial silence. Knowing she is the woman "upended the whole July," she refers to herself in the third person, thereby sustaining the mystery around the woman's identity. The content of Tobias's and Claire's indirect dialogue, however, serves to partially fill in Agnes's pause.

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All the characters conspire to keep the past hidden from Agnes. Recalling the time when Tobias sexually withdrew from her, Agnes attempts to discover through direct enquiry what may have happened during their separation: "I think . . . I think I thought Tobias was unfaithful to me then. Was he, Harry?" (58). It's the same question that she puts to Claire: "Did my husband . . . cheat on me?" The stage-directions indicate that Harry responds to Agnes in an "*unsubtle*" tone: "Come on Agnes! Of course not! No!," and Claire "*looks at her steadily*" as she answers: "Ya got me, Sis" (58). Following the playwright's stage-directions, John Carter and Elaine Stritch, who played the role of Harry and Claire, tonally undermined the spoken responses. Although Agnes insists on an answer, she engenders silence when she meets with linguistic resistance, as in this instance with Harry and Claire, when she voluntarily closes the subject: "And that will have to do." By overlooking the characters' evasions in her desire to preserve the decorum in her life, Agnes acquiesces in the silence of estrangement.

At the end of act 2, sc. 2, Albee delineates an ambiguous dramatic situation between Tobias and Claire that leads the audience to suspect that the embers of the relationship have not been extinguished--at least, not for Claire. The scene begins with an accumulation of unnatural events. Harry usurps Tobias's place at the bar, Julia threatens the guests with a gun, and Edna speaks to Julia in Agnes's voice. Against a background of disorder, Claire suggests further disruption with an implied sexual invitation to Tobias. During the dialogue, the characters convey silences in their unrelated responses, and at the close, Claire's tone expresses her awareness of the affair's end. As given in the stage-directions, Claire switches off the light, the dim lights signifying her hope that the affair in the past might be rekindled: "Are you going to stay up, Tobias? Sort of nightwatch, guarding?

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I've done it" (67). Still in a state of confusion from the evening's events and only half-listening to her, Tobias expresses his feelings indirectly through his repetitions: "Good night, Claire." The first time Claire chooses not to hear the unspoken rejection, and only in the end does she hint in her tone her nostalgia by repeating his words: "Good night, Tobias." In pointing out that Claire's question leaves "unstated her desire to stay up with Toby," Kane does not no see the hidden sexual message (169). On the other hand, Gilbert Porter reads a sexual motive in Claire's speech and a sign of failed sexuality in Tobias's response: "Tobias is left to decline Claire's implied invitation to join her in bed, the symbolic phallic pistol hanging unused by his side--the picture of a man unmanned" (176). Despite Porter's argument, the audience who overhears a "private" conversation senses only detachment on Tobias's part and not his sexual impotency. During the recent revival, George Grizzard, who played Tobias, conveyed to the audience the character's indifference by standing in the hallway while Stritch spoke to him from the living-room.

Agnes's second notated pause follows after she speaks to Tobias of their son's death. Speaking in a "remorseless" tone, she reminds him of his sexual withdrawal. She suffered because his unwillingness to have sex meant they could not have another child. Behind the accusatory words also lie Agnes's unresolved pain and anger at Tobias's decision to permanently end their sexual lives:

> When Teddy died? (*Pause. Crosses* U. R. *of sofa.*) We could
> have had another son; we could have tried. But
> no . . . those months--or was it a year--? (75)

The pause here does not depend on other dialogic interactions in the play to have its meaning filled because Agnes's own words provide the

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content. She speaks directly about her feelings at the turn her marital relationship had taken: "Such . . . silent . . . sad . . . disgusted . . . love" (75). Although located at two different points in the play, the two pauses take the action of the drama to the past, to the beginning of Tobias and Agnes's estrangement.

Analyzing the nature of Tobias's silence, Szelski writes: "For most of his life until now, Tobias . . . has met the really personal questions with silence. His way out is detachment; after all, what can one do, what can one affirm?" (126). While the text suggests that Tobias never recovers from the death of his infant son, which may account for his withdrawal, his cynicism is more deeply rooted than that of George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George's withdrawal is a shield against his own sexual inadequacy, whereas Tobias's suggests a moral irresponsibility that surfaces when he tells Agnes that he has nothing to say to Julia in her crisis. Though an absence of will or desire creates a gap in communication, Tobias considers language inadequate to repair the broken communication between himself and his daughter:

> If I saw some point to it, I might--if I saw some reason, chance. If I thought I might . . . break through to her, and say, "Julia. . . ," but then what would I say? "Julia . . ." Then, nothing. (24)

When Agnes suggests that his silence comes from not having loved anyone, he quietly corrects her, "No, there can be silence, even having" (24). The feelings he claims are, however, not expressed in his interaction with either his family or his friends. When Julia tries to convey to Tobias her conflicting feelings about him, he pays her no attention. The stage-directions

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show that he continues to mix her a drink, "unconcerned" and "hardly listening" (38-39).

Probably to explain that his silence does not come from an absence of feelings, Tobias tells the story about a cat. In telling his story, however, he indirectly expresses an inability to love freely and unconditionally. As Tobias remembers the past, the female cat he had once--before he met Agnes--would stay in the same room with him until one day he became conscious of her absence. With its feline instinct, the cat sensed Tobias's emotional failure, and it stopped liking him. It was not enough for Tobias to like the cat himself, but he also had to have the cat respond to him. And when his demand for a display of affection went unmet, he killed her out of misplaced egoism and vindictiveness. According to Carol Sykes, Tobias tries to suggest that the breakdown in relationship was the fault of the cat, but the concealed truth in the story is that neither he nor the cat had ever liked each other (451).

Tobias's cat story, of course, reminds us of Jerry's dog story in *The Zoo Story*. The two stories are alike in the sense that the characters' epiphanies revolve around mute animals and what is read or projected onto them. In both instances, the characters who feel they are repulsed try to kill the animals. Recounting the past, Tobias describes how he had shut the cat in a room and forced it to sit on his lap:

> One night--I was *fixed* on it now-- < . . . >[14] I had my hands around her shoulder, and I shook her . . . and she bit me; hard; and she hissed at me. And so I hit her. With my open hand, I hit her smack, right across the head. I . . . I *hated* her! (26)

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14 To distinguish from Albee's ellipses, I use <. . .> to signal words I leave out from the text.

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In the revival of *A Delicate Balance*, Grizzard accompanied the words "I hit her" with a single, quick hand movement that Albee does not script in the stage-directions, but with his physical movement he communicated to the audience the hidden violence in the character. An unexpected violence attracts attention in the theater even when it is off-stage or reported. According to Gerry McCarthy, the violence expressed in the cat story contradicts the "mildness" which Tobias projects in his voice and manners and in his relationship to other dramatic characters (93). Using repressed violence as a technique, Albee undercuts Tobias's statement of his ability to love.

The cat story is framed within the structure of the relationship between the dramatic characters. Drawing a parallel between Tobias's story and the action in the play, Sykes comments: "And Tobias and Agnes, as was once true of Tobias and the cat stay together now primarily because they have stayed together for so long in the past" (452). While the story reflects on the play's structure, it also serves to hide Tobias's feelings about his marriage. The story is inverted in real life, for in the story, the cat tolerated him, and in his marriage, it is Tobias who continues his relationship with Agnes although he feels nothing for her. As he closes his story, he identifies the female cat with Agnes, indirectly voicing feelings that he conceals in his personal transactions:

> She and I had lived together and been, well, you know, friends, and . . . there was no *reason*. And I hated her for that. I hated her, well, I suppose because I was being accused of something, of . . . failing. But I hadn't been cruel, by design; if I'd been neglectful, well, my life was . . . I resented it. I resented having a . . . being judged. Being *betrayed*. (26)

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The four ellipses in Tobias's speech are quasi-revelatory. In the first ellipse, Tobias suggests that the cat had no reason to spurn him; in the second, he reads the cat's rejection as a judgment on his failure to love; in the third, he leaves out the insight he has of himself, which is his inability to respond to the claims others make on him; and finally, he voices his resentment at having a constant pressure put on him to respond emotionally. Avoiding any mention of his own betrayal, he presents himself as the betrayed.

When the story ends, the two listeners, Agnes and Claire, sanction the cat's killing, but Tobias leaves the narrative open with an unanswered question:

> Agnes. (*After a pause.*) Well, what else could you have done? There was nothing to be done; there was no . . . meeting between you.
>
> Tobias. I might have tried longer. I might have gone on, as long as cats live, the same way. I might have worn a hair shirt, locked myself in the house with her, done penance. For something. For what. God knows.
>
> Claire. You probably did the right thing. Distasteful alternatives; the less . . . ugly choice.
>
> Tobias. Was it? (*A silence from them* ALL).
>
> (26)

According to E. G. Bierhaus, Tobias implies that " 'the less ugly choice' might have been his own death." Basing his interpretation on the comments characters make throughout the play that link the idea of love and death, he clarifies the significance of Tobias's question: "The *implication* is that if one does not love someone, the generous 'reflex' is to sacrifice

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oneself. That is what he should have done with the cat; this is what he tried to do with Harry and Edna." In conclusion, he suggests that while Tobias is unable to sacrifice himself, his failure makes him human (205). While agreeing with Bierhaus's interpretation of the unspoken silence, I view Tobias's role in the play differently. By taking a simple approach to life and reducing complexities to black and white, Tobias has invited his vacuity.

With Harry and Edna's entrance into Tobias and Agnes's house, Albee introduces the "terror," or the plague that disrupts the rituals of life. All the characters feel the plague's dark power, which threatens to destroy the illusions that conceal the exhausting nothingness of their lives. It is an energy, which when experienced, can fill the void. The plague's uncontained energy also moves from the stage to the auditorium, creating in the spectators an awareness of their latent passions with which they can alter their inhibited lives.

During an ordinary evening routine, when Harry was studying French and Edna was working on her needle point, they were suddenly overwhelmed by the "terror," the onset of the plague that has forced them to flee their house for shelter in their friend's. When Harry begins to describe his experience of that evening, he finds words inadequate to capture his feelings, and he can only approximate them in the image of a boy who is terrified of the dark. In her turn, Edna also cannot define the moments of terror:

> Harry. It was like being lost; very young again, with the dark, and lost. There was no . . . thing . . . to be . . . frightened of, but . . .
>
> Edna. (*Tears; quiet hysteria.*) WE WERE FRIGHTENED . . . AND THERE WAS NOTHING. (31)

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Albee does not define the "terror," for the meaning is outside the grasp of logic and language. In the silent "terror" that drives Harry and Edna from their homes, we read the characters' fear of the nothingness that they have bred. We also read in the nebulous presence, our unexpressed dread of the emptiness we are nurturing in our own selves and in our relationships. Though the meaning of the "terror" is not illuminated in the play, its effect is immediately discernible in the confusion and loneliness that the characters experience. As in other plays, where silence falls because of the inability of characters to listen, in *A Delicate Balance* also, the "terror" stops the characters from listening and responding to each other:

> Agnes. (*Reaches doorway; turns to* Tobias; *a question that has no answer.*) Tobias?
>
> Harry. (*Rises, begins to follow* Edna *rather automaton-like.*) Edna?
>
> Tobias. (*Confused.*) Harry? (32)

At the end of act 1, Albee applies the techniques of obscurity and incompleteness that he had used in *Tiny Alice* to evoke a surreal situation. Claire is given the curtain line:

> Claire. (*A small, sad chuckle.*) I was wondering when it would begin . . . when it would start.
>
> Tobias. (*Hearing her only after a moment.*) Start? (*Louder.*) START? (*Pause.*) WHAT?!
>
> Claire. (*Raises her glass to him.*) Don't you know yet? (*Small chuckle.*) You will. (32)

There is no object referent to clarify what "it" means. Claire purposefully withholds information, and she adds to the fear that sets in with Harry and Edna's entrance. While in *Tiny Alice*, all the three conspirators

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share an unspoken knowledge of their plan, in *A Delicate Balance,* Claire alone senses a mystery in the guests' sudden arrival. Or, perhaps, all the characters possess an intuitive knowledge of the events that will unfold, but they choose to distance themselves from their inner selves. Tobias is surprised at Claire's enigmatic statement, and the pause scripted between his words hints at surprise changing to apprehension. Playing the role of a chorus, Claire hints in her indirect utterance a mood of foreboding before the climatic momemt in the play when Tobias must decide whether to allow the mysterious process to complete itself .

After the sudden entrance of the "terror" in the first act, the consequent scenes are constructed to allow the unnamed metaphysical force to act upon the characters. The characters construe the nameless terror as a disease that will attack and destroy them, but the necrotic process of their lives had already begun before Harry and Edna's entrance. When Claire asks when "it" will all start, she is implying that a process is about to begin that will make outwardly visible their diseased state. Albee introduces the motifs of repetition and waiting to invoke suspense. The "terror" leaves the house and reenters later, and in the intermittent time, Claire informs the other dramatic characters that they are in a "room" waiting for a "biopsee":

> Claire. (*Half-smile.*) We're waiting, aren't we?
>
> Tobias. Hm?
>
> Claire. (*Crosses to sofa.*) Waiting. The room; the doctor's office; beautiful curtains; absorption in *Field and Stream,* waiting for the Bi-op-see. (*Looks from one to the other.*) No? Don't know what I mean? (51)

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At a subtextual level, all the characters are aware of a hidden cancer. Claire's question, "No? Don't know what I mean?," is rhetorical, for Tobias, Agnes, and Julia know fully what Claire is implying, but they intend to keep their disease hidden. And hence Claire's statement: "We don't want to talk about it" (51). Later, Agnes also refers to a disease imagery to clarify the disorientation and fear caused by their friends' presence. "It is not Edna and Harry who have come to us--our friends--it is a disease," she tells her family (82). As she regards the guests from behind the screen of her own unspoken fear, they change their physical appearance to symbolize a "plague" (82). Perceiving the plague only as fatal, Agnes fails to respond to its underlying transforming effect.

Agnes's fear stems from not knowing what Harry and Edna want. In structuring *A Delicate Balance* around motives of characters that are undisclosed, Albee is following the pattern of games in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* where the hosts know the rules but their guests do not and that of conspiracy in *Tiny Alice* where the three collaborators possess information that they withhold from Julian. Harry and Edna enter a room with intent. The stated intention is to find refuge with friends, but their unstated intention is more intriguing. Confronted on his second appearance with Agnes's question about his and Edna's "want," Harry acts confused and avoids a direct answer, moving towards the bar to create a physical gap between himself and his interrogator. As the dialogue between them progresses, an interior mood of uneasiness turns rapidly to hostility:

> Agnes. (*Eyes narrow.*) What do you *really . . . want*?
>
> Claire. You gonna tell her, Harry?
>
> Harry. (*Steps to bar.*) I, *I* don't know what you mean Claire. Scotch, was it, Agnes?

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Agnes. I *said.*

Harry. (*Less than pleasant.*) Yes, but I don't re*member.* (*Crosses to bar.*)

Edna. (*Her eyes narrowing, too.*) Don't talk to Harry like that. (59)

The answer Agnes seeks is diverted when Edna aggressively interrupts the dialogue and Claire begins to play the accordion to offset the tension with music. Other than to be told by Claire that the outsiders are seeking "warmth" in a house bereft of it, the audience has no clue of their covert motive.

As the second act concludes, Tobias is thrust into the center of conflict when Agnes and Edna turn to him in "parallel moments," compelling him to decide between the claims of family and friendship (McCarthy 91):

Agnes. <. . .> Tobias? (*She exits with* Julia. *Silence.*)

Edna. (*Something of a demand here.*) We *haven't* come to the wrong place, *have* we? (66)

To Agnes's plea, Tobias responds with his characteristic silence and to Edna's demand with an insincere answer that is implied in a scripted pause that precedes his words, "No; of course you haven't." Though Tobias tries to verbally assure Edna that she has no reason to doubt his hospitality, he is not altogether comfortable in the presence of the mysterious terror, and he finds it increasingly difficult to hide behind his indifference.

In the final act, Agnes poses a direct question to Tobias, "What did you decide?" She repeats her question four times, and each time he tries to avoid an answer. Continuing with his train of thoughts "about what the house is like in the middle of the night, the state of disarray in the room, the quality of help," Tobias attempts to circumvent Agnes (Kane 169). Hearing

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Agnes's insistent questioning, he tries to manoeuvre her instead into making a decision, "What are we going to do?" Adopting his evasive strategy, she reiterates, "What did you decide?" Finally, seeing he is in checkmate, Tobias pauses and then responds, "Nothing" (70). Although Tobias delays making a decision, he has undergone a crisis the previous night when he had sat in silence in the living-room while the rest of the house was quiet.

In this instance, silence is revelatory, as Tobias sees himself as the subject and object of his own thoughts, the actor and spectator in his own theater. Referring to their house, he tells Agnes, the "inn is full," and he stands outside the action to view a spectacle, "to look at it all, reconstruct, with such . . . detachment, see yourself, you, Julia . . . Look at it all . . . play it out again, watch" (70). Tobias watches a play unfolding, and viewing the action from the position of the spectator, he has a clear picture and can "see everybody moving through his own jungle . . . an insight into all the reasons, all the needs." Accompanying his understanding is the hope of rising from his inertness, but the hope is tinged with fear that the understanding gained in silence will be lost in everyday linguistic transaction. Comparing this moment to T. S. Eliot's The Family Reunion, Bigsby observes: "For both writers, experience easily devolves into theater and the factitious nature of theater is potentially a denial of the very reality which it urges" (*Modern American Drama* 141). An artificial theater to which Bigsby refers to can also be an enduring experience, and Artaud makes us aware of this in his essay "The Theater and the Plague." Artaud discovers the theater's vitality in inspiring the audience with images they had not conceived earlier and transforming their experience of reality permanently through these images. In the conclusion, he states:

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> the action of theater, like that of plague, is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world; it shakes off the asphyxiating inertia of matter which invades even the clearest testimony of the senses; and in revealing to collectivities of men their dark power, their hidden force, it invites them to take, in the face of destiny, a superior and heroic attitude they would never have assumed without it. (31-32)

Watching his family enact their lives in the living-room where the play's action pivots, Tobias recognizes their language as a mask, a social pretence beneath which are evasions, the self-generated nothingnesses of their existence. Albee indicates a turning point in the action as the spectacle Tobias envisions disturbs his silence.

Instead of a silence that normally suggests concealment, withholding, and repression, Albee depicts in *A Delicate Balance* a silence that can be liberating. A meditative silence, rare in Albee's writings, has created in Tobias a desire to break free from his imprisonment, the "empty" life structured around ineffectual conditional patterns. The first sign of change comes when Tobias remonstrates with Agnes who refuses to have Harry and Edna stay in her house:

> When we talk to each other . . . what have we meant? Anything? When we touch, when we promise, and say . . . yes, or please . . . with our*selves*? . . . have we meant, yes, but only if . . . if there's any condition, Agnes! Then it's . . . all been empty. (83)

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Later, when Harry speaks of his and Edna's tragic choice, Tobias hears with horror his own silence echoing back to him. Harry summarizes his and Tobias's past:

> Edna and I . . . there's . . . so much. . . over the dam, so many . . . disappointments, evasions, I guess, lies maybe . . . so much we remember we wanted, *once* . . . so little that we've . . . settled for . . . we talk, sometimes, but mostly . . . no. We don't . . . 'like.' (86)

The authentic language, removed from the evasions which mark his own, stirs Tobias's dormant self, and the effect is an unexpected eruption of dormant feelings. Those feelings are articulated in his "aria" in which he struggles to make commitments.

In its mysterious way, the plague was leading Tobias to this crisis point that comes with the speech "DO I WANT? DO I WANT YOU HERE?" (87). Harry's confession of his and Edna's marital failure acts as a catalyst. He feels the dark effect of the plague, and his *aria* is an expression of a character who is close to reaching freedom. The freedom is from both emotional and sexual withholdings, for as Artaud writes, "all true freedom is dark, and infallibly identified with sexual freedom which is also dark, although we do not precisely know why" (30). As Tobias addresses Harry, he expresses his emotions, overcomes his hesitancies, and the stammers disappear. But the transformation that Tobias is searching for is incomplete. Like other characters in Albee's experimental works, who see themselves close to emotional change but fail to create completions, Tobias is caught in contradictions that deny him the means to resolve conflict. The irresolution reaffirms the silence:

> I DON'T WANT YOU HERE!

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I DON'T LOVE YOU!

BUT BY GOD . . . YOU STAY! (87)

Harry and Edna's departure creates a dialogue similar to the one at the conclusion of Tobias's cat story when Agnes and Claire had given their moral approbation to the cat's killing. Trying to conceal their collective inertia, the family members now spare Tobias from the knowledge of his failure to meet a crisis in his life with integrity, and with their reassurances, they tell him what he wishes to hear. The confrontation with the "terror" leads to no change as the characters turn to the same comforting lies with which they had always conducted their linguistic relationship. The notated pauses and silences contradict the meaning of spoken words:

> Tobias. I tried. (*Pause.*) I was honest. (*Silence.*) Didn't I? (*Pause.*) Wasn't I?
>
> Julia. (*Pause.*) You were very honest, Father. And you tried.
>
> Tobias. Didn't I try, Claire? Wasn't I honest?
>
> Claire. (*Comfort; rue.*) Sure you were. You tried.
>
> Tobias. I'm sorry. I apologize. (92)

In her turn, Agnes also returns to language to establish the quotidian pattern. Her "time happens" speech begins on a revelatory note as she tries to understand the erosion and emptiness of her marital relationship, but then she interrupts herself with a pause, changing the subject and juxtaposing[15] a serious reflection with something familiar:

> Time. (*Pause. They look at her.*) Time happens, I suppose. (*Pause. They still look.*) To people. Everything becomes . . .

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15 For the use of "set of opposites" in *A Delicate Balance*, see Paolucci's "Albee and the Restructuring of the Modern Stage."

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> too late, finally. You know it's going on . . . up on the hill; you can see the dust, and hear the cries, and the steel . . . but you wait; and time happens. When you *do* go, sword, shield . . . finally . . . there's nothing there . . . save rust; bones; and the wind. (*Pause. She crosses and puts down cup on R. table.*) I'm sorry about the coffee, Edna. The help must hide the beans, or take them when they go to bed. (90)

When I watched the performance, Agnes's speech reminded me of Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* in which the patterns of everyday life continue while beneath it a powerful subtext hints at loss and entrapment. By resuming the ritual disrupted by an unexpected visit of friends, Agnes distances herself from the dark, delirious shadows of the night. The possibilities of change through an upheaval are avoided as she restores the balance between language and silence, logic and emotion, order and chaos--physical and metaphysical. Rather than changing, Agnes chooses to forget the past. Referring to the play's theme, therefore, Hirsch writes: "*A Delicate Balance* is about the necessary forgetting, the self-willed absent-mindedness" (50). Agnes speaks "to fill a silence," reaffirming the emptiness of a life in which the future will only be a continuation of the past:

> (*Pause. Then she leans over sofa, touches* Tobias.) Well, they're safely gone . . . and we'll all forget . . . quite soon. Come now; we can begin the day. (93)

In the recent revival, Rosemary Harris, who played the part of Agnes stood apart from the other characters, opened her arms, and apostrophized: "Come now; we can begin the day" (93). By physically isolating the characters, the performance emphasized the emotional divorce between them that was subliminally felt by the audience as they watched the play.

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In his recent analysis of Albee's plays in "Edward Albee: Journey to Apocalypse," Bigsby observes that in Albee's plays characters are brought "to the brink of change," but a reversal is never complete, even though "redemption and apocalypse" are both attainable. Bigsby explains: "[Albee] seems to find it difficult to imagine the social reality to which he wishes to restore his characters. Indeed redemption and apocalypse seem to be possibilities with almost equal potential. In some degree, perhaps, that is the source of their power. It is what works against his capacity for sentimentality" (*Modern American Drama* 132). The fact that there is no perceptible change in the lives of the dramatic characters in *A Delicate Balance* or any other play is not because of any failure in Albee's artistic vision. In the modern context in which Albee is situated, he does not have access to the structure of a tragedy nor to those of a comedy. The playwright can only only depict through his dramatic characters the absurd condition of life in which completions are difficult and repetitious cycles are the norm.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Box, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, *All Over* and *Listening*

In *Box*, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, *All Over*, and *Listening*, Albee explores the idea of a theater in which external action is minimal and characters speak in monologues, telling stories about themselves although there is no one who is listening. *Box* consists of a single monody, and *Quotations* juxtaposes three monologues in which a counterpointing technique gives to the play its form. *All Over* is composed mainly of extended monologues, and while *Listening* has a sparse dialogue, we cannot verify whether the characters are listening to one another. In all these four plays, the absence of communication or its minimal existence evokes silence and with it an accompanying feeling of emptiness in the characters' lives.

The plays also reveal Albee's considerable interest in creating a dramatic structure that will correspond to a musical structure.[16] In the Introduction to *Box* and *Quotations*, the playwright remarks on the use of music in these two plays and the changes in the form that relate to them: "several experiments having to do--in the main--with the application of musical form to dramatic structure, and the use of *Box* as a parentthesis around Mao is part of that experiment." Referring to *Box, Quotations,* and two other short plays, *Counting the Ways* and *Listening*, Zoltán Szilassy writes that these plays are analogous to "fugue" (96). Analyzing the form in

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16 For Albee's comments on the similarities between musical structure and his plays, see the following interviews: Diehl 24; Flanagen 54; Richards, "Albee after the Plunge" 181; Sullivan 189.

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Box and *Quotations*, Bob Mayberry refers to Albee's model as that of a "partita." In the plays, "themes are stated in the initial section (*Box*), developed and interwoven in the body of the composition (*Quotations*), and restated in the coda (reprise) (40).

To understand the function of silences in the plays that are analogous to those in music, I refer to John Cage's definition of silence in "Experimental Music:"

> . . . *in this music nothing* takes place but *sounds*: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment. This openness exists in the fields of modern sculpture and architecture. (7-8)

In *Box*, we hear in the silence the sound of the ocean that evokes fear in the speaker, and in the other three plays, the dramatic characters' echoing feelings of loneliness. In *Box*, notated silences also function to separate three different experiences articulated by the Voice, and in *Quotations* and *All Over*, they set off the monologues of different characters. Through silence the plays evoke: "The mystery of the ear. The mystery of the receptive."[17] The themes sounded in the plays relate to the characters ability to hear each other and our ability to be certain about what we are hearing, and this process of listening and responding is especially true of *Listening*. Because characters do not hear or respond to one another, the communion that silences in music creates does not occur in Albee's dramatic structures.

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[17] I borrow the phrase from Richards, "John Cage" 39.

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Box and *Quotations* were performed as linked pieces in Buffalo, New York in 1968. *Box* is an experiment in abstraction in the theater: in the first five-seconds' silence, the audience's attention is focused on a beautifully crafted cube whose "*sides are open*," which lets the audience see "*the other sides clearly*." A light remains steady on the cube to foreground its presence. On the stage, there is no other stage-prop.

"Box. (*Five second silence.*) Box. (*Three second silence.*) Nicely done. Well put . . . (*Pause.*) . . . together. Box," announces a voice over the auditory system of the theater as the play begins (7). Silence scripted in between the words sharpens the sound of "Box," with both sight and sound contributing to the "feeling of a cube" and emphasizing it as the subject.

In a radical departure from the essence of theater, Albee replaces the actor with a stage-prop and a voice, entrusting them with the semiotics of the play. In the stage-directions he writes that the voice belongs to a mid-western farm woman, defining the quality of her voice as "*not young, but not ancient, either: fiftyish. Neither a sharp crone's voice, but not refined*" (7). The description gives a touch of earthiness to the lyrical cadences of Voice's recital which "*should seem to be coming from nearby the spectator--from the back or the sides of the theater*" (7). Because of the physical closeness established between the oral recital and the audience, the latter's thoughts and feelings cue in with those of Voice, transforming the recital into an interior monologue.[18] The empty cube creates curiosity in the audience, as does the unidentified Voice whose lyrical fragments are underlined by sadness. By eliciting curiosity about the box and cueing us emotionally to the Voice, the play draws us into the performance. As the audience listens

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[18] In an interview, Albee agreed with Rutenberg, who noted that "the first piece, *Box*, happens not on the stage, but in the spectator's head" (247).

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to Voice in the theater, their visual attention is also on the cube, and the meaning of the fragmentary themes emerges from the interaction of visual and aural images.

In the monologue, there are three movements corresponding to Voice's reflection on art, life, and nature that are signified by the cube, milk, and a seascape. The first two movements relate to art and life, the third to an interior world in which nature is evoked. Musing on the handcrafted cube that has survived the decline in art, Voice notes: "Many arts: all craft now . . . going down further" (7), and through association, it remembers the past, the milk spilling on the ground ,the waste of something that is vital and life-giving (8). In the final movement, the transition from art and life to nature signifies a movement from an external to an internal landscape that is evoked by the soundscape, the sound of ocean at night. The audience does not know whether this represents the imagination, memory, or the unconscious, but like other absences in Albee's plays, the unseen ocean is significant because of its effect on Voice:

> What used to frighten me? Bell buoys and sea gulls; the *sound* of them, at night, in a fog, when I was very young. (*A little laugh.*) Before I had ever seen them, before I had heard them. (*Some wonder.*) (9)

The memory of the ocean generates successive images, culminating in the image of birds and Monarch butterflies travelling over the ocean: "going straight . . . in a direction. Order!" (9). The Voice implies a comparison between the perfect formation in nature and the structure of the six-sided cube, the perfection suggesting its ability to survive amidst the decline in all other arts. Missing from art, in general, are order, direction, movement, and beauty, qualities communicated in the flight of the birds.

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The implied conflict, which gives to *Box* its dramatic status despite its lyrical form, is between nature and art. Art is declining while nature is a dynamic, moving force.

As the ocean's sound becomes audible towards the end of the monody, an inexplicable and dramatic reversal takes place in nature, for it loses its creative, dynamic, and "inspirational" quality (Hopkins 144). Interrupting its reminiscenes, Voice cries out to the listeners, pointing out to the birds in the sky: "Look; more of them; a black net . . . skimming. (*Pause.*) And just one . . . moving beneath . . . in the opposite way. (*Three second silence. Very sad.*)" (10). Although Albee does not directly state the entrapment of the birds, the ellipses in the image of "a black net . . . skimming" suggest that the multitude of birds have fallen into the net. The single pause is significant, for against its background, the flying bird is silhouetted. Art, life, nature all suffer the same stasis: only the lone bird, which flies in an opposite direction, creates an image of nature that has still survived despite having lost much of its dynamism. As Voice observes the scene, she evokes sadness in the awareness of herself, and, perhaps, that of the audience locked in convention and yearning for freedom in theater and in life. Albee notates a silence that marks the end of the monody: the sound of ocean recedes as the light in the theater dims.

McCarthy writes: "*Box* is in its very conception a theatrical manifesto, actively recording Albee's concern with and for the medium of theatre" (43). If *Box* is the "medium of theatre," the cubic frame on the stage is the boxy stage, and the bird is the artist, then Albee allows one bird to survive, giving hope to the artist and to experimental theater even though the overall impression of the play is stasis and stillness.

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With their silences, the Long-Winded Lady in *Quotations* and the the Wife in *All Over*, evoke the same feelings of entrapment that Voice experiences. While each of the women characters, who are central to the action in the plays, desires freedom from memory, they invite their own paralysis through their denials and repressions. In these experimental plays the characters have only "generic, functional names." When Albee was asked to explain his method, he referred to *Quotations* to explain that since none of the characters in the play address or communicate with each other, they do not need names" (Roudané, "Albee on Albee" 198). The concealments of individual characters and their failure to create communication are themes that are interlinked in the experimental plays.

Chairman Mao delivers a political text, and the Old Woman recites a ballad, but Long-Winded Lady's monologue consists entirely of personal memories. Albee's stage-directions provide careful details for speech rhythms and the manner of delivery. Long-Winded Lady does not speak to the audience, and only on occasion does she turn to the Minister for sympathy. In her monologue she is absorbed with a past event of falling from a ship deck when the rails suddenly vanished and with her dream of "falling straight up" (18). Though the fall has a meaning for her, her mind represses the particular meaning, avoiding any conflict with disturbing emotions: "And the only desperate conflict is between what we long to remember and what we need to forget" (24).

The Long-Winded Lady implies silence with her circuitous, fragmented, and repetitive speech. The false starts and the abrupt leaps from one thought to another distinguish her speech from those of Albee's other dramatic characters. All her memories and stories digress from the incident of her fall and return to it, making it the central dramatic episode. In

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her opening lines, she tries to imagine the sound that accompanied the fall: "So long ago! So much since. But there it was: Splash!" (12). Later, the sound is recaptured with a manic precision: "Plut! Yes" (13). An element of mystery surrounds her fall. Is her fall a suicide or is it an accident? For the character herself, what the sound conveys is more interesting than the resolution of the inner conflicts of her life that caused the fall. Although she struggles to discover in her repetitions and stories the hidden meaning of her fall, she avoids any recognition of its larger implication, focusing instead on sounds, the lexical meaning of words, and phrases. Turning to langauge, she distances herself from understanding the nature of her experience or the content of her dream. She approaches the subject of the fall, captures the sound, but retreats from articulating the momemts surrounding it, opting instead for an indeterminate silence: "And *I* was so *busy* . . . I didn't pay attention, or, if I did . . . that part of it doesn't re . . . recall itself. Retain is the, is what I started" (12). The syntactical shift here is significant. Instead of stating, "I do not recall, " the Long-Winded Lady omits the "I" from her statement. She distances herself from the fall and indirectly absolves herself of any responsibility.

In recounting a dream, the Long-Winded Lady is alerted to the chaos and absence of direction in her life. Even though the audience recognizes a meaning indirectly revealed through the dream, the character herself is more puzzled with the phenomenon of "falling up" than its import. She recounts the dream to the Minister: "Once, though! Once, I dreamt of falling straight up . . . or out, all in reverse, like the projector running backwards, what they used to do, for fun, in the shorts. (*Some wonder.*) Falling . . . *up*!" (18). The dream is surreal. It is a reversal of time and gravity. Employing a language of repetition, in the form of memories or a dream, Albee arrests the

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movement of the dramatic character and also the forward-moving drive of the play. The fall from the ship-deck appears not to have been an isolated experience but a recurring one, at least in the Long-Winded Lady's imagination, for she is constantly haunted by the idea of falling: "My husband used to say, don't leave her next to anything precipitous, there's bound to be a do; something will drop, or fall, her purse, *herself* " (19). Through involuntary repetitions, the dramatic character sees herself subject to endless falls, but the symbolic meaning of the fall or her own responsibility in preventing it evades her or is deliberately not confronted.

At the close of the play, the rescuers who pull her out of the water pose questions that the Long-Winded Lady had circumvented in her recital. The interrogation proceeds through hesitant questionings as to whether she slipped or was pushed, and whether this had happened before. Mayberry refers to the significance of the exchange:

> This passage is the climatic moment in her narrative because it promises to answer the central mystery of her monologue, why she fell. It is the question she has been trying to answer throughout the play so she can resolve the dissonance of her experience. (46-47)

The mystery surrounding the immediate moments before the fall or those preceding it is not fully dispelled with the Long-Winded Lady's response to the rescuers. She recalls one of them asking her, "I don't know how to put it . . . do you think . . . do you think you may have done it on purpose? <. . .> Tried to kill yourself." After a "*sad little half-laugh*," she answers, "Good heavens, no; I have nothing to die for" (55). While attempting to imply her contentment with life, the Long-Winded Lady betrays

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in her strange twist of a colloquial expression the empty life she lives. The play depicts her failure to resolve the conflicting desires of remembering and forgetting.

All Over continues with the theme of "falling" or dying treated in the earlier two plays, *Box* and *Quotations,* tracing in a circular form the estrangement from love, the "winding down," "silences," and "goings off" (14), that have left the Wife without a capacity to feel. Waiting with other family members for her husband to die, the Wife remembers the emotions connected to their thirty years of separation that she had blocked. As she confronts death, she expresses a wish to be free from accumulated anger and pain:

> I know I want to feel something, I'm waiting to, and I have no idea what I'm storing up. You make a lot of adjustments over the years, if only to avoid being eaten away. Anger, resentment, loss, self-pity *and* self-loathing loneliness. You can't live with all that in the consciousness very long, so, you put it under, *or* it gets well, and you're never sure which. (61)

As in all of Albee's other plays, her withholding results in split identity, self-doubts, and an emptiness in the self, and although she now desires a stirring of life, she finds herself caught in an emotional stasis. The Wife and the other dramatic characters do not have any name or identity apart from their relationship to the dying character. Lying on a canopied bed at the rear of the stage, a screen, physically and metaphorically, separating him from the others, the dying man conveys an aura of mystery as little information is given about him other than that he is a powerful public figure.

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Although all the characters constantly refer to the unseen man, he is not the central character in the play. The Wife and the others are the main characters whose inability to find meaning and a future for themselves constitutes the play's action.

A picture of a broken marriage emerges in the Wife's stories of the past that continues to haunt her.[19] Perhaps, her conflict with her marriage is nowhere more poignantly expressed than in the her opening narrative of the husband's eyes that "went out." At the hospital, the dying man signals his separation from the Wife with an eye movement as he rejects her proffered help for the Mistress's. The tone is objective as the Wife recounts the event:

> Do you want to go home?
> No reply at all, the eyes burning at me.
>
> Shall I arrange something?
> Eyes still on me, no movement.
>
> Do you want her to arrange it?
> Still the eyes , still no movement.
>
> Has it been arranged? Has she arranged it already?
> The eyes lightened; I could swear there was a smile in them.

(9-10) Though the Wife is strangely detached in the beginning, her feelings intrude upon the narrative as she recalls the liaison between her husband and the Mistress, but those feelings are quickly blocked: "I no longer feel possessive, have not for . . . and the eyes went out--stayed open, went out, as they had . . . oh . . . so often; so far back." The denial that is broken off in mid-sentence implies the Wife's interior obsession with an absent husband. Subverting the meaning of what she says, her silence implies what she feels.

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19 Of the thirty-one extended monologues in the play, fifteen have a narrative quality, functioning in a manner similar to Albee's most accomplished narratives in which gaps signify hidden ambiguities and tensions in the narrators (Jones 90, 91).

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Later, in the second act, her words show an acceptance of reality as she announces: "I have loved only . . . once." The stage-direction indicates that these words are spoken "*slowly; something of a self-revelation.*"

The eye is a recurring motif in the narratives and dialogue that conveys the failures in relationship. The "faint shift from total engagement" detected in the dying man's eyes creates a similar awareness in the Best Friend of his voluntary withdrawal or disengagement from others, which begins with an adulterous relationship with the Wife, a "secret time" in his life that is kept concealed from his dying friend by an unspoken social tact. The Mistress tells him: "*He* never knew it. *I* did. I didn't tell him" (11). While the betrayed man is protected by silence, the Best Friend's wife loses her sanity. In *A Delicate Balance*, when Agnes has to confront her past, Tobias's adultery and his sexual rejection of her, she similarly fears the onset of insanity. Here in *All Over*, as the Best Friend projects his wife as mad, he attempts to avoid his own moral culpability. The emotional exhaustion of waiting prompts a disclosure of the past, his wife's madness:

> Each thing, each . . . incident--uprooting all the roses, her hand so torn, so . . . killing the doves and finches . . . setting fire to her hair. . . all . . . all those times, those things I knew were pathetic and wanton. I watched myself withdraw, step back and close down some portion of . . . (12)

Speaking of the past, however, the Best Friend fails to declare his role in his wife's destructive acts, his linguistic hesitations signifying a resistance towards full confession. The Mistress's comment links up the gap that the Best Friend leaves between his act of betrayal and his deliberate act of avoidance:

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> the tiniest betrayal . . . moves you back into yourself a little, the knowledge all your sharing has been . . . willfull, and that nothing has been inevitable . . . or even necessary. (12)

The Best Friend belongs to the long train of male characters in Albee, Peter in *The Zoo Story*, George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and Tobias in *A Delicate Balance*, whose avoidances of relationships make them either emotionally or sexually impotent.

While the remembrance of the past elicits disturbing emotions in the Best Friend, the past is a retreat for the losses the Wife suffers in the present. Memory, which is a means to repossess the past and the love of an absent husband, takes the form of a refrain--"I am thinking of the little girl I was when he came to me. I am thinking of. . . . " There was a past when she and her husband had responded to each other with "talk and presence," and she tries to reach out for those moments that have since eluded her. The past offers no clue, no hint of any conflict to explain love's end. Somewhere in the chasm between the past and the present, the mystery of the marital break up lies hidden. The audience knows only the beginning and the end, the story of young love and the end of marriage that is encapsulated in the Wife's description addressed to the Mistress:

> (*Sighs heavily.*) And two years after that we were married; and thirty years later . . . he met you. Quick history. Ah, well. (*A quickening.*) Perhaps if I had been . . . (*Realizes.*) No; I don't suppose so.
>
> (*A silence.*) (63)

The omissions are telling. The first implies accusation or pain at the break-up of the marital relationship, and it contradicts the words spoken

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earlier to the Daughter about the Mistress: "She *loves* us. And we love *her.*" The second implies low self-esteem that has come with the Wife's realization of the Mistress's power and the knowledge that she cannot be what the Mistress is. Albee reverts to his practice in his earlier plays to frame an emotional text with physical silence.

Two other memories provide brief impressions of the past. They tell of innocence that was lost and hint at an inexplicable duality in the absent character, his manner of loving and wounding the Wife at the same time. As none of these memories are allowed to surface fully, they create the incompletions in *All Over.* Urged by the Mistress, the Wife describes a country-house and a beautiful, untamed garden outside Paris where she and her husband had spent time, but in the midst of her recital, she closes memory's shutters: "I don't think I want to talk about it any more" (58). Her second memory relates to her relationship with the dying man that removes some of his enigma; the Wife admits, "and he could please me and hurt me in ways so subtle and complex I was always more amazed at *how* it had happened than I was by *what.*" Beginning to give an illustration, she abruptly stops herself:

> I remember once: we were in London. . . . No; I don't want to talk about that, either. Something *must* be stirring; it's the second time I've balked.
>
> (61-62)

Although Robbie Odom Moses argues that "in Wife's unconsciousness are the sparks of the Something that must be stirring" (75), the linguistic suppression shows the Wife reaffirming the stasis. Moses only considers part of what the Wife has to say of her present, and he does not consider her use of the expression, "I've balked," which conjures up an

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image of a horse balking in front of a fence. The image cancels the affirmative note that is denoted by "stirring." Like *All Over*, where the Long-Winded Lady recounts a dream, here also the Wife remembers a strange dream. In analyzing the dream, Moses suggests that it indirectly hints at the interior or subtextual self in the Wife. The Wife is in a dry goods store and on the shelves she sees canned goods and bottles, "her hermetically sealed psychic existence" (75). "From the unconscious comes the revelation that hers has been a death-in-life existence" (76). The revelation does not necessarily suggest a reversal in the character's situation, for in recounting her dream, the Wife gives no hint as to what insight she has of herself and whether she can effect changes or flux in her life by an act of will. On the contrary, having practised widowhood for many years, the Wife visualizes no change (61).

At the close of *All Over* Albee gives to the Wife three extended monologues that have the precision of music in their use of pauses and are also arresting in the contrast drawn between the outpouring of spontaneous feelings and careful verbal articulations. Roudané writes that in these solos, "the Wife addresses both the incompleteness and complexity of her life and marriage" (127), and Jones analyzes them as "arias" in their "climatic revelation or manifestation of the self" (91). Read together, these solos do not show the character's recognition of anything beyond grief. As the Doctor signals the impending death of the absent character, the Mistress asks the Wife to be a "rock" (61). The rock strikes the Wife as a sign of inanimation and stasis in her life (Roudané 127-128), and she dismisses the archetypal symbol as "profitless" stoicism (64). Then in a tone that is "*strong*" but underlined with a sense of "*loss*," she rejects in her first solo *all* her family members, continuing to embrace the past in her assertion of her love for her

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dying husband. After her first solo, the stage-direction indicates "*nobody moves from their position*" (64). Against the backdrop of stillness, the play enacts the individual's final confrontation with the self. The second solo, delivered in a "*toneless*" voice and "broken with long pauses," reveals the disjunctions in the self in the implied conflict between "selfless love" and love that is self-centered. The unresolved conflict has induced emptiness:

> Selfless love? *I* don't think so: we love to *be* loved, and when it's taken away . . . then why *not* rage . . . or pule? (*Pause.*) All we've *done* is think about ourselves. Ultimately. (65)

While the Wife's pause is followed by her recognition of the individual's failure within a familial context, the knowledge does not provide any resolution for the future, or give peace and hope. In the final monologue, a "*controlled weeping*," a sign of the suppression of thirty-years changes as buried grief breaks forth, but the tone remains consistently "*empty, flat*":

> (*It explodes from her, finally, all that has been pent up for thirty years. It is loud, broken by sobs and gulps of air, it is self-pitying and self-loathing; pain, and relief*) Because . . . I'm . . . unhappy. (*Pause.*) Because . . . I'm . . . unhappy. (*Pause.*) BECAUSE . . . I'M . . . UNHAPPY! (*A silence, as she regains control. The she says it once more, almost conversational, but empty, flat.*) Because I'm unhappy. (65)

An analysis of words, silences, and tone reveal that an exploration of the past and an examination of the self has lead to revelations without a

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promise of change in the Wife, so that the stasis with which the play began remains at the end, unaltered. As Bigsby puts it: "But where once Albee would have permitted an epiphany, moved the action to a moment in which revelation and transformation were logically related, now no such moment occurs--at least not within the context of the play itself. Something is indeed all over" (*Modrn American Drama*145).

The stasis that links *Listening* to the others, *Box* and *Quotations* and *All Over*, is again a consequence of the denial or rejection of a personal relationship in the past, while the unsolved mystery surrounding the catatonic girl's suicide connects the play to the ending in *All Over*. In *Listening*, three unnamed characters meet in a garden: the Man and the Woman, both in their fifties, and the Girl, a younger woman of twenty-five. The garden setting is similar to the countryside garden in *All Over*, evoking a past and its attendant mystery. Observing the scene, the Man is struck by familiar feelings of having seen the garden before, and as looks at the fountain at the center of the garden, he imagines there were lovers who had sat on the fountain's edge: "Very much as imagined . . . I would imagine. Would they come . . . *did* they come here, sit on the edge, trail a hand in, exchange empires? I fancy" (37). Critical to the play is the Man's recognition of the location and his feeling about the echoing footfalls of other lovers in the garden, for that would tell him if he were among those who also had a rendezvous here in this garden. But his indistinct recollection creates a mystery around the setting and leaves relationships unaffirmed. At some indefinite point in the past, however, he had been given a promise--"*Be* here! *I'll* show you something!"--and he has come to the garden to keep his end of the promise (37). So far as the Man is involved in solving the mystery

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of his own past, he is a participant in the action, but he is also an onlooker who has come to see "something." Albee uses a prospective strategy he had earlier used in *The Zoo Story*--announcing a spectacle and then inducing curiosity by withholding information.

David Wade, who heard the first radio production of *Listening*, identifies the characters in the play as husband, wife, and child who are engaged in a hostile familial relationship (10). From scattered hints in the play, the Woman gives the audience the impression that she is a psychiatrist and the Girl her patient, and that the Man is a former cook at the mental hospital. Any relationship assumed by the audience is arbitrary because there in none that is definitely stated in the text. The characters have perceptions of themselves that are not shared by another character. Nor do they share similar perceptions of each other. These contradictory impressions leave the audience without any clear insight into who the characters are, and they remain strange even at the close of the play. The past is also unknown. The Man regards himself as the Woman's lover, but consistent with the structure of mystification in the play, the Woman repeatedly denies that there was any relationship. Like the Man, the Girl indicates in her repetitions a desire to know and to find out the origin of her experience, but in the end she cannot articulate her feelings. Starting a sentence and leaving it incomplete, she suggests "a previous experience that cannot be confirmed" (Bigsby *Modern American Drama* 322). The suicide at the end of the play leaves her inner conflicts untold.

Obsessed with proving an intimacy and consequently verifying his own past, the Man confronts the Woman with her "prides" and "losses" and all the "things" she may have confided in him (60). She responds with her characteristic indirections:

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The Woman. (*After a pause.*) Who *are* you?

The Man. You saw me *cry* remember? You *made* me cry, remember that?

The Woman. (*As if denying everything.*) You're a *cook*.

(60)

The Woman's counterquestions "Who *are* you?" and her irrelevant statement "You're a *cook*" alert the audience to an unspoken meaning. A pause scripted between the Man's question and the Woman's query becomes significant, for she thereby betrays her prior involvement. In order to aid the actress to convey to the audience a hesitation and its implied meaning, Albee italicizes all the words that need emphasis, providing, for example, stage-directions for the Woman's concluding statement: "As if denying everything." The difference that tone and color of voice can make, especially in the radio, becomes evident from a comment made by Irene Worth, who acted in the Woman's role for the radio production:

> When I'm on stage, I can distort a line here and there, because I have the stage movement to give it colour. But before the microphone, anything even slightly off true becomes totally false. (Rich 22)

While meanings are implied by intonations and pauses, McCarthy's analysis of the Man's spoken words leads him to conclude that a relationship was consummated: "The pain he experienced may be the evidence that there was a relationship, a reality that was shared" (134). At this moment, silence and speech, the implied and articulated meanings, complement each other.

Listening is an obscure play. The text suggests a relationship only to undercut it in the next dramatic situation. Memory of the past, on which the

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Man relies, is not an adequate index in determining whether there was a sexual relationship. Earlier in the play the Woman had mocked the Man's assertion that he had knowledge of who she was by remembering a physical moment together. By questioning the very grounds on which one lays claim to intimacy with another, the Woman introduces an element of uncertainty in the relationship:

> The Woman. (*Mimicking.*) You don't . . . *know* me.
>
> The Man. I *thought* so.
>
> The Woman. (*Hoots.*) By what right? Holding a hand, or not? Holding whatever . . . or not? What did you hold? What did you *not* hold? hunh?
>
> The Man. (*Weary.*) Never mind; leave off.
>
> (45)

Even when the Man appears to remember a fountain that was full and his own presence in the garden with the Woman, he is caught in self-doubts that undermine his earlier asssertion to the Woman about his awareness of her inner life:

> The Man. (*As the Woman hmmmmmmms and chuckles--closemouthed--throughout.*) Did you? (*Pause.*) Did you know? (*Pause.*) Did you come here with someone else, and did you know? (*Pause.*) *Was* it full? (Pause.) Was it *full*? (*Pause.*) Did you come here with someone else? (*Pause.*) Did you know? (*Pause.*) *Did* you? (*Pause.*) (50)

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The ruminations return the Man to the starting point, but they fail to lift the mystery surrounding the past.

The mystery in the present centers around the conflict between the Girl who describes herself as "full of guile" and the Woman who insists she would "know" (42). At this point, there is no hint in the text as to what the Girl is disguising. Only at the end of the play does the audience make a connection between the Girl's disguise and a piece of glass that might be lying hidden at the bottom of the fountain. In the following quotation the Woman's reference to a "glass" is either made to express her concern for the Girl or to insinuate the means by which she can commit suicide. Speaking in a languid tone, the Woman masks her intention towards the Girl who addresses her with a note of challenge in her voice:

> The Girl. *Do* you pay attention? *Do* you hear?
>
> *Are* you ready for a lot?
>
> The Woman. (*Puzzles; recalls.*) Oh! I see.
>
> Well . . . I'd *know.*
>
> The Girl. What! If I were . . . to do what?
>
> The Woman. (*Languidly.*) Oh . . . say there was a glass in
>
> there, in the fountain there--sharp glass. (*Pause; interest*)
>
> *Is* there? (41)

Although the Girl will cut her wrists with something sharp, she describes all debris that has collected over the years in the fountain's basin, leaves and stones, but "no sharp glass" (42). In retrospect the audience knows that the Girl had broken the sincerity condition of a dialogue, for at

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least on four occasions she had responded in the negative to the Woman's enquiries. There are hints, however, that the action is stealthily edging towards a catastrophe; the Girl's pause, her deflection, and also her impatience are signs of dissimulation on her part:

> The Woman. You're *sure* there's none *there*
>
> . . . in the fountain.
>
> The Girl. (*Looks back into the fountain*)
>
> No. The skeleton of a mouse; half a blue egg;
>
> a feather.
>
> The Woman (*Pressing a little*) And no glass.
>
> The Girl. No. (*Pause.*) Who built it?
>
> The Woman. (*Suspicious; starts to rise.*)
>
> What?
>
> The Girl. (*Impatient. Moves C. to fountain.*)
>
> Egg! Feather! Mouse! All this!
>
> The Woman. (*Shrugs. Rising.*) Well, I don't
>
> know. (43)

There is no explanation as to why the Girl cuts her wrists at the end. Looking back on his own work, Albee tries to give the auditors an "insight" into the final, violent act: "She wanted to. But she probably wanted permission to die for a very long time. I'm sure she is suicidal. I'm sure she has tried a number of other ways" (Roudané, "An Interview with Edward Albee" 33). The silence of the schizophrenic Girl who may have acted out of a variety of reasons--anger, feelings of rejection or resentment at not being heard, or a need for attention--eludes any logical or necessary

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interpretation. Her death evokes a feeling of loss generated in many of Albee's plays.

The suicide is a sequel to the narrative recounted by the woman. Because the event in the narrative parallels the suicide on the stage, it raises disturbing questions about the Woman's role in the Girl's death. The Woman's narrative relates to her personal encounter with a girl in a park on a Spring day. When the unknown girl in the story had stood beside her, the Woman had recognized the wide look and had also detected a strangeness in the "detached voice" when she asked her: "Do you want me to *show* you something?" (70). Imitating the girl in the narrative who drew her bloodied hands from her pocket and displayed them to the Woman, the Girl in the fountain holds up her slashed wrists. While the ending shocks the Man and the auditors who share his feelings, the Woman betrays no surprise at the horrible repetition of events. On the verge of dying, the Girl accuses the Woman for the final time of not listening:

> The Girl. (*Fainter.*) You said you could hear
>
> my pupils widen.
>
> The Woman. (*Pause.*) Well . . . I can.
>
> The Girl. (*Pause.*) Then . . . you don't *listen.*
>
> The Woman. (*Long pause.*) *I* listen.
>
> The Voice. (*Long pause.*) End. (71-72)

After a deliberate pause, the Woman responds: "*I* listen." These two words jar us as we do not know if our listening was faulty, and along with the Girl, if we had misread the meaning of the Woman's interrogations, regarding them as expressions of concern for the Girl, not as manipulation.

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The Woman's cryptic remark has elicited various interpretations. As Wade describes the Woman's role in the suicide, " . . . in the savage ending she knowingly, explicitly allows it to proceed" (10). Thomas P. Adler sees a "lago-like rationalism" in the Woman who plays with the Girl's fear of blood to engineer an ending that displays no moral sense (112). Responding to the ending differently from either of the two critics, McCarthy points out how an individual performance might affect our interpretation of the ending: "the effect of the performance is to suggest that the Woman cares, but accepts the suicide" (140). Bigsby sums up the view of most auditors towards a difficult and complex play: "Any meaning is projected" ("Edward Albee" 323). Assuming the role of the artist as critic, Albee makes the following observation:

> One of the things that the Woman is trying to do here in the course of the play is to suggest and gently urge the girl toward suicide which she finally makes; to suggest it to her. But she is also making a larger comment there, which is there is absolutely no point in taking up space unless one is going to be completely alive while one is alive. As in most things, it's double. (Roudané, "An Interview with Edward Albee" 33)

Despite Albee's comments, the auditor's confused feelings at the Woman's brief words do not quite disappear. Her silence may represent an understanding that prompts her not to intercede between the Girl's desire and her self-destructuve actionl, however, tragic may be the consequence. Or it may conceal a hidden design to push the Girl towards suicide. In the end, the play fulfils the promise made to the Man and the audience: "*Be here! I'll* show you something" (37).

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Albee's experiment with the musical form and with an interior or psychological action in the four plays was not completely successful. All the plays had short runs in the theater, and all were criticized for the absence of emotion in the action and a circling around abstract ideas. Albee's dramatic career was written off with *All Over*. *All Over* is an underrated play, which needs a new production like *A Delicate Balance* to reveal its dramatic potentialities. That a revival often gives a play a new lease of life was seen in a recent production of all of Albee's shorter plays dating from 1960 to 1993 by the Signature Theater Company. *Box* was presented together with an early play, *The Sandbox*, and a more recent work, *Finding the Sun*, and in combination with these two works, its theme seemed sharper than as a prelude piece to *Quotations*. Ultimately the value of these experimental works lies in the direction in which they have taken Albee. The period of experimentation culminated in *Three Tall Women*, which is considered his masterpiece.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Three Tall Women

Three Tall Women, which was produced at Vineyard Theater, New York, in 1994, won Albee his third Pulitzer Prize. In this play, Albee returns to the early parental drama in which the injured child resembles the playwright himself, adopted and then rejected by his parents. The bitterness of his childhood memories had given rise to *The American Dream* where Mommy and Daddy are grotesque figures who mutilate their son, and to *The Sandbox* (1959), presented from the point-of-view of an absent child who witnesses Mommy and Daddy burying Gradma in the sand. In 1983, Albee had written a short play, *Finding the Sun*, in which a teenage son's struggle to break away from a mother's grip finds reflection in *Three Tall Women.* While autobiographical themes link all these plays, what has undergone a change in the plays, is the tone. Albee writes *Three Tall Women* not in vengeance, but to understand his own mother. In the Introduction to the play, he states:

> I knew I did not want to write a revenge piece--could not honestly do so, for I felt no need for revenge. . . . No, it was not a revenge piece I was after, and I was not interested in "coming to terms" with my feelings toward her. . . . I realized that what I wanted to do was 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 intact into fiction, that I was aware I would be able to be accurate without prejudice, objective without the distortive folly of "interpretation."

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With his personal statement, Albee is breaking his commitment to silence in so far as silence signified his own repression. The break is not complete as one would expect of a writer for whom concealment is the means to present dramatic conflict. And who is completely able to break one's silence, know one's self fully? In the role of the mute son, who is one of the dramatic characters in *Three Tall Women*, Albee enters his own play. Throughout the play, the son does not speak, but allows his mother to narrate her story.

The play elicits silence around the theme of rejection as the mother, A, remembers losing her husband's and her son's love, and living with her mother's and her sister's hate. In portraying the losses of the 92 (or 91?)-year-old protagonist, Albee reintroduces the motifs of remembering and waiting that he had earlier used in the Wife's monologues in *All Over*. A waits for her son's arrival with hope and uncertainty. As she waits, she tries to grasp what has slipped or is slipping away from her, love, memory, time, and remembering becomes a means to arrest time, and thereby delay the encroaching silence of death. But remembering is also fraught with pain. Some memories in A's life are best left undisturbed, for as she tries to recall the past, she falls silent. She becomes comatose. A's silence is not a consequence of failing to remember, but of being unable to transcend the festering wounds of hatred.

In *Three Tall Women* are strong hints of emotions that were missing from many of the abstract plays during Albee's experimental period, and this "emotional balance" together with structural innovations has contributed to the play's stage success.[20] Employing the technique of his earlier plays,

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[20] David Richards quotes Glyn O'Malley, Albee's associate and friend, who observes: "Compared to the middle plays, like *Listening* and *Counting the Ways*, the

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Albee introduces realism in the opening act only to attenuate it in act 2, which contains most of the innovations. In act 1, Albee portrays A as "a very old woman," B, as a 52-year-old paid companion, and C, as a 26--year-old lawyer sent to settle A's affairs. The absence of names is not unusual in Albee's plays, for the playwright often does not give characters names when their function is more significant than their identities or when they do not address each other, and their lack of names here is symbolic of the triangular relationship of youth, maturity, and old age. When A speaks of her son, she refers to him only in the third person, which hints at the emotional distance between them. The dialogue of the three women characters revolves around the past, but unlike Albee's treatment of the past in his earlier plays, here the past does not elicit mystery. Instead, the past reveals recognizable social patterns as A's memories travel over a landscape stretching from her youth to her marriage. She slips in and out of coherency, which gives the dialogue a natural rhythm, reflecting the speech-patterns of a woman who is resisting loss of memory.

In act 2, a single innovative stroke of splitting A's identity creates the complexity in the structure of the play. B and C's roles shift as they come to represent A in middle age and youth, and as each character recounts the past, three different points of view intersect to convey to the audience a full story of A's life. Though A's story has a realistic content, the characters themselves are not realistic, but function as A's projections. As "A" lies silent on the bed, her voice A speaks from the past. The absent son who arrives in this act is the second mute character. The son's muteness creates ambiguity, as one does not know if silence is a sign of healing or whether it is a sign of an irremediable gap between the mother and son. In the theater,

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newest works are not all in his head. They're more emotionally alive."

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the son's muteness interacts with physical gestures to suggest his compassion. As the mute son sits by his mother's bedside, he communicates visually to the audience his unspoken motive to close the wound from the past. Though Albee presents two mute characters onstage, the nature of silence differs from character to character: silence refers to emotions that are unresolved in A and that are exorcized by the mute son.

"I'm ninety-one." A's announcement breaks the opening silence in the play. Though she does not aim her remark at any particular listener, she provokes B's and C's attention. The ensuing dialogue among the three characters progresses with brief answers and pauses, evoking the theme of miscommunication that is central to Albee's plays, and which reveals itself in the generational conflict between A and C:

(*Some silence*)

A

(*An announcement from nowhere; to no one in particular.*)

I'm ninety-one.

B

(*Pause.*) Is that so?

A

(*Pause.*) Yes.

C

(*Small smile.*) You're ninety-*two.*

A

(*Longer pause; none too pleasant.*) Be that as it *may.* (3)

Albee notates pauses to capture the different attitudes of B and C as they negotiate with an old, feisty, and manipulative woman. B indulges her,

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perhaps, because she fears life's "downhill" descent herself (13), and C is combative. She will wonder later whether A was scoring "some tiny victory" over time and settling a "private vengeance" from the past by lying about her age, but now she forces A to hold on more fiercely to her one year lease of life (11). So the subject of age continues to be debated eight pages after it was originally announced.

A quotes her son to support her statement. C argues back, "what if he's wrong about how old you are," and A retaliates:

> (*Pause.*) Don't be silly. How couldn't he be thirty years younger than me when I'm thirty years older than he is. He's said it over and over. (*Pause.*) Every time he comes to see me. What is today? (5)

The first pause, situated between C and A's speeches, gives the latter a chance to think of a response, and the the second pause scripted in between A's words, marks a shift from the subject of age to the son's past visit and brings A abruptly to the present. Underlying A's question "What is today?" is her unresolved feelings about the son she had rejected and who, in his turn, had left her. A's anger, confusion, loss of control, and helplessness abruptly break out in a scene that is reminiscent of the Wife's emotional outburst in *All Over*:

> *Silence; then she cries. They let her. It begins in self-pity, proceeds to crying for crying's sake, and concludes with rage and self-loathing at having to cry. It takes quite a while.* (7)

After a display of resilience when she held her ground with C, her violent crying suggests layers of hidden, raw emotions.

Albee uses repetition to suggest A's strain and anxiety as she waits for her son. In the midst of an argument, her confused thoughts return to the

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subject of her son and, later, in the middle of recounting her story from the past, she interrupts herself with her memory of the absent son who brings her flowers. The memory carries with it an indirect recrimination: "We would drink champagne and nibble candied orange rind. *He* brings me some, sometimes, when he comes, Or flowers--freesia, when they're in season. It's the least he can do. And he *knows* it!" (44). The thought whether her son loves her or has rejected her for the "boys" preoccupies A's mind, the linguistic pause conveying her uncertainty:

> He doesn't! 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)

Those memories of rejection that A would rather forget create a silence. "I can't remember; I can't remember what I can't remember," A tells B before she falls into a coma (60).

Albee's treatment of A's story is different from others that occur in his earlier plays. While both stories and memories involve the past, a story in Albee is an artifice of concealment while memory is a natural process of remembering and forgetting. Telling a story allows the narrators to escape from present reality in which loneliness, doubts, sexual and emotional inadequacies haunt them, and by reconstructing a past, they hope to discover an answer for the incompatibilities in the present. In the midst of telling, however, the narrators stop, producing gaps that are signs of voluntary silence. These gaps prevent a resolution of conflicts, or they protect a narrator from a past that would somehow destroy his or her present balance. Like the playwright, the narrator has control over the story and can cast himself or herself in the fiction or remain outside it. However, when A tells a story, she does not want to conceal the self but rather to forestall the

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future. Since the past gives her the illusion of avoiding death, she struggles to remember all the events connected to her past and is frightened when they elude her. "Such memories," writes Bigsby, "are the root of a profound irony, as youth and age are thereby forced together. They are also part of a recoil from the implications of a radically foreshortened future, a means of slowing down and if possible freezing process into a series of tableaux, of memories aesthetically reshaped" (*Modern American Drama* 22). Lapses, confusions, and gaps are signs of involuntary silence, the slippages that an old woman cannot avoid in her dialogue. Memory, however, also alters the contours of the past as it involves a certain amount of selectivity or voluntary withholding that is signified by silence.

The first example of narrational silence relates to A's memory of her husband's physical appearance, and it reveals how some details about the past or about a person become irrelevant with time. A remembers that the man she married was short, and had one glass eye that was damaged by a golf ball. C's curiosity, "Which eye? Which eye was glass?" reduces A into a state of confusion, and her broken sentences reveal her agitation:

> Which eye was . . . ? Well, I don't know . . . (*becomes weepy*) I can't remember! I don't know which eye was the glass one! (*Full weep.*) I . . . can't . . . remember. I . . . can't . . . remember. (51)

In the following example A describes her relationship to her husband that suggests a withholding of a painful memory when she sexually rejected him instead of a struggle to remember specific details from the past. A is as accomplished as any other storyteller in Albee's pageantry of narrators, moving easily from humor to eroticism, always repressing her feelings at critical junctures. She describes an evening when she is sitting naked at her

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dressing table, and her husband walks in, also naked: "We were naked a lot, early on, pretty early on. All that stopped. (*Pause.*) Where am I?" (54). A inadvertently comments on the emotional severance and breakdown of their sexual relationship, and her pause suggests her reluctance to remember that time or offer any further details that would elicit pain. The absence of information creates silence. The story continues with A's husband offering her a bracelet in expectation of a sexual favor that she feels too inhibited to perform, and it ends in a scripted silence counterpointed with the sound of A weeping. "*Long silence; finally she weeps, slowly, conclusively* " (56). The sound echoes with A's recollection of the moment when she repulsed her husband and he withdrew emotionally.

In the opening act, A's covert motive to steal a victory over time through story-telling becomes self-defeating. The memory of "happy times . . . the *happiest* moments" (107) naturally brings unavoidable memories of rejections and hatreds. While A verbalizes the disappointments of her marriage, counts the losses she suffered, her sentence trails off: "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. If I wasn't, then . . ." (60). The stage-directions portray a powerful image of physical silence, the open eyes, and the shudder before a stroke. Unable to withstand the impact of verbalizing memory in which painful feelings are not reconciled and not forgiven, A suffers a sudden stroke.

In the second act, the comatose "A" lies on the bed. The presence of a silent character on stage is a subversion of dramatic conventions, for drama depends on dialogue between characters. Yet modern dramatists have boldly experimented with the silent character who takes on a wide range of functions. In *Three Tall Women,* Albee continues with his

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innovative use of a mute character like those earlier encountered in *Tiny Alice* and *All Over.* While Alice is both silent and invisible in *Tiny Alice*, she conveys the strong impression of controlling the action from behind the stage like the director in a theater. She remains invisible but breaks her silence with her entrance in the closing moments of the action. But because she is unseen, the spectators regard her as a projection of Julian's imagination. In *All Over,* the dying character is emotionally remote whereas in *Three Tall Women*, the comatose "A" evokes our sympathy as we have seen and heard her in interaction with the other dramatic characters. At the Vineyard Theater, the audience sat in a ring and were at the same level as the actresses. I recall feeling disturbed in being so close to the stage. With the silent "A" occupying the same physical space on the stage with her projection A, one no longer experienced death as an abstract concept, but felt one's mortality.

In the stage-direction in act 2, Albee mentions that the figure who lies on the bed is a "*life mask*," and he invites the audience to imagine the figure as real. Only with the audience's participation and their willing suspension of disbelief can the play succeed in sustaining an emotional effect in the theater. During the expository moments in this act, the audience is not aware that they are looking at a "*life mask*" of the actress playing A. As B and C talk about A's will, A walks in herself. The moment is charged. A observes "A" lying propped on the bed, and enquires, "Any change?" B answers, "No, we're . . . just as we were; no change" (68). As B identifies herself and A with the comatose "A," the idea dawns on the audience that A, B, and C are all projections of "A". The theatrical device has implications as to how the comatose character perceives herself. As her story is told

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through her projections, she is not directly responsible for the past even though in the final analysis she is the woman who has shaped that past.

As in the first act, so also in the second act, the remembrance of the past leads the dialogue continuously back to the son. While the son was previously an absent character, he is now another mute. The son's entrance coincides with C's question, "I have children?" and A's answer, "Yes, we do. I have a son" (88-89). The stage-direction indicates: "He appears in the stage right archway, stands stock still, stares at 'A' on the bed." Usually a mute character communicates nonverbally with the speaking characters, but here the silent "stare" at the comatose A extends the way communication takes place in the theater. As the act unfolds, two levels of interaction occur simultaneously: one, between the two mute characters and the other between the speaking characters and the son. Also, two time frames reveal themselves side by side: the present, in which the son expresses his devotion to the mother, and the past, in which he was rejected by her.

When the son enters, B addresses him, and hers is the voice he "heard when he was growing up" (Lahr 104). As she speaks, the past recreates itself in a flash: " (*Seeing him; sneering.*) Well, fancy seeing you again. (*Sudden, and enraged, into his face.*) Get out of my house! (*He doesn't react*) " (89). In this harsh rejection scene, both the mother who speaks and the son who shows no sign of hearing her words convey to the audience emotions that are still unresolved.

A's tone is alternately hard and sad. Referring to the past relationship, A tells B and C, "We never . . . reminiscence," and her pause signifies the silence that separates her from her son. Yearning to break the silence, A discovers her own emotions as a hindrance to any kind of lasting reconciliation. "We let him come, but we never forgive him. (*To him.*) I bet

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you don't know *that . . . do* you!" (92). When she sits on the bed and speaks, she expresses the comatose character's premonitions about death. The son hears his comatose mother's voice through her projection A:

> (*Speaks directly to him; now he can hear her, can respond.*) I had a premonition. I know you say there's no such thing, but I *had* one. It was I died. (*His hand up.*) (105)

With his hands raised to stop A from articulating the awful words, the son conveys his compassion for his dying mother: "*He tries to touch her, to comfort her*" as she relates the event, while she recalls him holding her hand before she dies: "You held on to my hand, and my hand wasn't warm anymore, was it? My hand was cold, *wasn't* it? (*Pause.*) *Wasn't* it?" (106). The response that Albee renders in a minimalist image is evocative:

> *He looks at her once more, shudders, weeps, looks back at* "A." A *moves away from the bed.* (106)

In a theater review, John Lahr observes: "The boy's muteness is a metaphor for the inconsolable gap between parent and child. It's also another of Albee's brilliant maneuvers; the child is forever outside the narcissistic parental embrace--seen but not heard" 104). An alternative reading emerges when we read the son's muteness with his physical movement that shows a groping towards understanding. Instead of contradicting themselves, silence and gesture act together to deepen the note of compassion conveyed in the son's silence.

During the first part of the play, Albee absents himself from his own play, entering only in the second half. This strategy allows him to appear both detached from the play's action and involved in it:

> Writers have the schizophrenic ability to both participate in their lives and, at the same time, observe themselves

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> participating in their lives. Well . . . some of us have this ability, and I suspect it was this (frightening?) talent that allowed me to write *Three Tall Women* without prejudice, if you will. (Introduction)

Whatever weariness, anger, and repression Albee may have endured in the past, he suggests in this play a loosening of his emotions in his naturalistic language. As the playwright resolves his conflict, to the extent that he can, the writing proves liberating for him and the spectator who participates with him in his journey from repression to momentary openness.

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CONCLUSION

The notated pause and the notated silence, the evasive utterance and the incomplete utterance, what is implied in the incompletions and evasions, the combination of acting and the audience's interpretation of a performance--all these figure in Albee's treatment of silence. Choosing plays in which silences have a signifcant role and approaching the plays chronologically, I have attempted to show how Albee creates a structure of mystification, drawing upon the techniques of silence from his previous works and experimenting with those techniques in his current work as he searches for a form to convey his dramatic themes.

Although Albee inherited a revelatory tradition of drama, he had always preferred silence to disclosure. In an interview, he said: "One thing I don't like about the naturalistic theater in general is that it usually gives answers instead of asking questions" (Wardle 99). Through the modern strategy of silence, the playwright discovers the means to convey the mysteries in life. For him silence is not a recoil from language, as it is with absurdist playwrights. Silence is a retreat from the memory of childhood injuries, and those difficult memories that are unresolved in the playwright find their artistic expression in the plays. The context in which silence makes its presence known is within the drama of family life. Two of Albee's most moving plays, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Three Tall Women*, are about the playwright's concealment of a wound. Silence emerges around the subject of homosexuality; the contradictions in the text and the subtext in *Tiny Alice* alerts us to a silence. Although the playwright insists that this silence does not speak about homosexuality, our interpretation of the ambiguous silence in the play leads us to arrive at a conclusion which

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contradicts the playwright's statement. Like the pain in childhood, the complexities of sexual choice in adulthood are an aspect of Albee's personal concealment.

Albee's choice of silence as a dramatic strategy and his personal experiences of life are responsible for the gradual edging we observe in his plays towards the tradition of absurd drama. While he creates in his plays a familiar environment, he attenuates familiarity with his use of mystery that is evoked by silence. Like Pinter, Albee uses the strategy of silence to extend the realistic boundaries of his drama. Many of the strategies that are typical in absurdist drama recur in Albee's: the use of scripted pauses and silences to suggest concealment and to mark the end of an emotional confrontation; the use of linguistic incompletions to indicate the break in one's thought process; the use of contradictions to suggest unresolved conflict; the use of repetitions to show the absence of change in a character's life or in the dramatic situation; motifs of recalling and waiting; speechlessness. And like Beckett and Pinter, Albee uses all the physical resources of a theater to convey meanings nonverbally.

The key themes around which Albee evokes silence relate to the withholding of emotions, the void in marital relationships, and failed communication. Around these themes the playwright centers dramatic conflict, and their consistent use suggests their importance to Albee as an artist. In all the plays, withholding, withdrawal, and repression are the means of generating silence: feelings which are held back, pulled back, and kept unspoken result in a conflict within oneself or with other dramatic characters. Often there is an edge to these silences, an underlying tone of anger and bitterness that is conveyed throughout the action. Emotions that are concealed create bitterness, or they create fear at having to face life

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without myths or illusions. As many of the themes in Albee's drama overlap with those in Beckett and Pinter, we often have to listen to the tone in his plays in order to determine how they are different from those that are within the same dramatic tradition. Most of Albee's plays unfold in the living room of a family, and through the concealments that emerge in the dialogue and stories of married couples, he portrays the sterility of love in relationships. While the characters invite their own emptiness, once caught in the vortex, they cannot alter the course of their lives.

With other modern dramatists, Albee shares a concern with the process of communication that involves the discrepancy between what the speaker is saying and what the listener is hearing. Albee does not show the impossibility of communication or speak of communication as evasion. Rather, the process of communication breaks down in Albee's plays because of the inability or refusal of characters to make contact with each other. Critics constantly raise the subject of communication in interviews with Albee. The playwright's statement suggests how silence falls in his plays: "Since all of my people are terribly articulate, they could communicate if they chose to. But they don't choose to" (Wallach 132). The characters' motives for not communicating intrigue us and lead us to speculate about what is being concealed. The listener's failure to respond has tragic consequences for the speaker who calls out and hears no response. With the suicide or the death of the protagonist under strange circumstances, the plays create a physical silence in which all we hear is the note of loss.

The dramatic conventions of revelation and concealment are the watersheds between realistic drama and absurd drama. In his movement away from the former to the latter, Albee produces a dramatic openness. In trying to determine the meaning of silence scripted and suggested in the

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plays, we find, each interpretation is tenable, and no one interpretation is privileged in the action. The significance of the plays lies in their very elusiveness. As we watch the unfolding action, we discover our creative possibilities, reading the meaning of silence from our own cultural and theatrical experiences and leaving in the silences traces of ourselves.

We can understand Albee's strategies of silence by not only comparing them with those of Beckett and Pinter, but by placing them in context of O'Neill's cyclical silences and Williams's ambiguous silences. While the playwright's use of silence differs from his mentors, he has derived his early inspiration from their works. In turn, he has made it possible for a playwright like Sam Shepard to write experimental plays whose tenor of silence is close to Albee's. In fact, it was Albee who paved the way for contemporary playwrights to write experimental works that make startling use of language, silence, and music.

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