THE GAMES OF EDWARD ALBEE

BY

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ABSTRACT

Edward Albee's concern with the illusions people use to escape the external facts of their lives has prompted the emphasis on games in his plays. His use of such games, as well as the word "game" itself, presupposes an interest in game-playing concepts which has become increasingly obvious over the past ten years. Such concepts emphasize both the necessity of illusions in constructing and dealing with life and the necessity for awareness of such illusions if they are to be creatively managed. Albee extends these ideas in his plays both through the characters' game-playing and the structure of the plays themselves. By drawing attention to the dramatic illusion, Albee utilizes the play as a game and illustrates the significance that an awareness of illusion can achieve.

At the same time, he extends the characters' game-playing into the dramatic structure, demonstrating his tacit understanding of the relationship between form and content in a work of art.

Chapter One outlines the game-playing concepts that are the backbone of Albee's plays and discusses the ways by which Albee extends these concepts into the play-form itself. Basic to the audience's awareness of the dramatic illusion is its intermittent alienation from it. Such alienation is facilitated by Albee's deliberate confusion of theatrical conventions which prevents the audience from relegating his plays to any definite dramatic tradition.
Chapter Two examines four of Albee's one-act plays: The Sandbox, The American Dream, The Death of Bessie Smith, and The Zoo Story. In The Sandbox and The American Dream, the characters' game-playing receives its most exaggerated treatment: correspondingly, these plays represent Albee's most obvious use of the play as a game. In The Death of Bessie Smith, the manipulation of the theatrical experience is not as important as the development of the Nurse as the first of Albee's neurotic females. The Nurse's inability to use games to escape successfully from her frustration with life provides the play with its dramatic centre and makes an important point about game-playing: awareness of games and illusion must at times be overcome if games are to provide real management of life. This theme is further developed in The Zoo Story in which Jerry's attack on Peter's illusions about life serve to illustrate his own inability to communicate.

In Chapter Three, the games George and Martha play with themselves and their guests in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? are analyzed as a means of comprehending more fully Albee's prerequisites for individual and social survival. The criticism of the "American Scene" that Albee begins in The Sandbox and The American Dream is here more fully developed, the family continuing as his basic metaphor for contemporary American society. The play represents Albee's most complex use of the play as a game, the set and dialogue providing a naturalistic foil for the "interruptive" techniques borrowed from other dramatic traditions.

Finally, Chapter Four deals with A Delicate Balance, Albee's most recent
full-length play, excluding his adaptations. Although game-playing is not as marked in this play as in the earlier ones, it still is central to the characters' illusions about family and friendship and to the play's overall structure. Moreover, the "balance" that Agnes maintains between awareness of her illusions and abandonment to them suggests a resolution to the problems surrounding game-playing that Albee probes in his earlier work. Such a resolution demands an awareness of illusion and a management of games so that they may best serve the game-player.
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CHAPTER ONE
THE PLAY AS GAME

"Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the Gods...."

-- Plato

Near the end of Act Two of Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice*, Julian asks Miss Alice "Surely, Miss Alice, you haven't been playing games with...so monumental a matter?" He is referring to the transaction between Miss Alice and the Roman Catholic church in which she has agreed to donate to the church one hundred million each year for the next twenty years. Julian's role in the transaction is changing from emissary to sacrifice, although this fact is not necessarily understood by him at the time. Miss Alice replies to his question with a statement which serves as an excellent prologue to Albee's plays in general. She says:

...Games? Oh, no, my little Julian, there are no games played here; this is for keeps, and in dead earnest. There are cruelties, for the insulation breeds a strange kind of voyeurism; and there is impatience, too, over the need to accomplish what should not be explained; and, at the end of it, a madness of sorts...but a triumph... (p.120)

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1Edward Albee, *Tiny Alice* (New York: Pocket Books Inc., 1961), p.120. All subsequent references are to the same edition.
Julian's reference to games and Miss Alice's denial of them is only one example of the many direct references to games and game-playing in Albee's plays. Towards the close of *A Delicate Balance*, Tobias says to Agnes "You, who make all the decisions, really rule the game...." She replies, "That is an illusion you have."² George and Martha, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, are so involved with game-playing that Albee titles the first act of their play "Fun and Games." Indeed, the games of George and Martha even have names: in answer to his own question "Well, what'll we play now? We gotta play a game," George says "I've got it! I'll tell you what game we'll play. We're done with Humiliate the Hosty...this round, anyway...we're done with that...and we don't want to play Hump the Hostess, yet...not yet...So I know what we'll play...We'll play a round of Get the Guests. How about that? How about a little game of Get the Guests?"³

Because he gives such a pronounced emphasis to games in his plays, it perhaps seems curious that Albee's Miss Alice should deny their existence. What is noteworthy is the way in which Miss Alice denies games. She says, "This is for keeps, and in dead earnest." The games played by Albee's characters cease to be mere exercises of fun and the


opposite of serious endeavor. Rather, they become personal contests and vendettas that usually have serious and broad implications as well as meaningful and dramatic results. As Miss Alice says, "There are cruelties," suggesting that in many instances "cruelty" and "game" are related, even synonomous, terms. The cruelties are "dead earnest" for, often as not, they are used to pry open the individual's defenses in order to reach the facts of his existence. Exposing these facts, the games usually become painful to the characters involved, exorcising the illusions they have developed to support their existences. At the same time, the games can be entertaining, particularly for those only peripherally concerned: Nick and Honey in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? enjoy George and Martha's cruel games until they are forced to play them too. When this occurs, the guests cease to be mere "voyeurs" to the cruelties and become active participants in the games. The pain involved with this participation results basically from the characters' confrontation with their own illusions. Agnes' answer to Tobias -- "That is an illusion you have" (p. 141) -- could easily be applied to Martha about her son or to Julian about his relationship to God. In all cases such a confrontation produces a "madness of sorts" in which the illusion is exorcised. This exorcism Albee feels is ultimately positive for it allows the individual to understand the realities of his own situation. With such understanding, the individual can hopefully establish a workable relationship with reality -- the "triumph" which Albee feels is essential for the preservation of sanity and society.
Albee's concern with the games people play as well as his repeated use of the words "game" and "illusion" presupposes an understanding of game-playing concepts that has become increasingly prevalent over the past ten years. Indeed, Albee's plays can be termed creative or "working" examples of the game-theory that has been popularized in books such as Roger Cailllois' *Man, Play and Games* and Eric Berne's *Games People Play*. Basic to game-theory is the fact that "most people...in their family and business relationships, are constantly playing games with each other." These games may be consciously or unconsciously played, depending upon the awareness of the players. Basic to the games is the "emotional payoff" for which the players vie, a "stroke" in Berne terminology that supports one player's ego often at the expense of another's. The rules that govern these social games are often quite complex and open to change at the players' whim. Discussing games and their rules, R.D. Laing writes in *The Politics of Experience*:

...people have a repertoire of games based on particular sets of learned interactions. Others may play games that mesh sufficiently to allow a variety of more or less stereotyped dramas to be enacted. The games have rules, some public, some secret. Some people play games that break the rules of games others play. Some play

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5 Berne, loc.cit.
undeclared games, so rendering their moves ambiguous or downright unintelligible, except to the expert in such secret and unusual games. 6

Generally, social games are marked by the ulterior aims that lie behind the players' moves. Berne writes "superficially...a game looks like a set of operations, but after the payoff it becomes apparent that these 'operations' were really maneuvers, not honest requests but moves in the game."7 Thus, the social game is often more serious than the word "game" implies, fun or even enjoyment being minimal as the players move to defend and support their egos.

The relationship between illusion and game can also be understood by considering the ulterior aims of the players. Basically, social games are games of make-believe; the "payoff" for which the players vie is often radically different from the "payoff" they pretend to seek. In some cases the game-player may not be aware of his real motives nor of the game in which he is unconsciously involved; for him the game and the "payoff" go unrecognized as he suffers the illusion of living real life: the game becomes a substitute for "the real living of real intimacy."8 Such individuals, personified by

7Berne, p.48.
8Berne, p.18.
Peter in *The Zoo Story*, are in danger of being dominated by their illusions and are vulnerable to those who are aware of games and the necessary progression of moves. On the other hand, individuals aware of the games and illusions prevalent in American society are in danger of suffering an acute alienation that inhibits their ability to communicate and love; this, of course, is Jerry's predicament in *The Zoo Story*. Ultimately, a compromise is necessary: games and illusions are usually necessary for survival but an understanding of them as well as the reality which prompts them is prerequisite to their development. As Berne says: "...in order to get away from the ennui of pastimes without exposing themselves to the dangers of intimacy, most people compromise for games." Such a compromise allows the aware individual to accept the relative truth that illusions can achieve, and to recognize games as a meaningful form of social interaction.

Albee's concern with the games people play naturally has its effect upon the structure of his plays. His purpose in writing is to liberate contemporary American man from those illusions which he feels are harmful to American society. Integral to this liberation is an awareness of the games people play to support their illusions. In a preface to *The American Dream*, Albee writes:

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9 Berne, p. 171.
The play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen. 10

Using his plays to mirror society, Albee makes his characters representatives of the current American Scene, dominated by illusions which collectively constitute the "fiction" of prosperity and progress that he feels is so destructive to American development. As each of his plays progresses, the games his characters play to support their illusions unfold before the theatre audience. As the games become increasingly more serious, developing, for example, from "fun" to "exorcism" in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the characters are forced to face their illusions and to accept the significance (or insignificance) of their games. What is unique in this process is that Albee lets his characters play games in order to destroy games, makes them use illusion to confront reality. The emphasis upon fiction in Albee's plays is marked by the words "story," "dream," and "Virginia Woolf" in three of their titles, as well as by the many stories or fictions which his characters relate. Such an emphasis suggests the overall importance that Albee gives to illusion in his attack on the

10 Edward Albee, The American Dream and The Zoo Story (New York: Signet Books, no date), p.54. All subsequent references are to the same edition.
American Scene. Illusion can be used to undermine illusion, game used to destroy game.

This fact becomes important in considering the dramatic effect of Albee's plays. Generally, Albee utilizes the play form itself as a game, different from social games in its obviously structured or "scripted" nature but similar in its reliance upon illusion. It perhaps seems paradoxical that Albee should create an illusion in order to attack the illusions which he feels are hindering American society. The paradox is resolved when one remembers that all artists confront their audience with an illusion of reality that shatters some of the audience's real illusions. In the case of dramatic illusion, the audience is often asked to suspend its disbelief for the course of production in order to learn and be entertained. In the case of Albee's plays, however, the dramatic illusion is not meant to be totally involving nor is it intended to be accepted as "real." As Thomas B. Markus states in an essay on *Tiny Alice*: "Rather than supposing we will suspend our disbelief, Albee banks on our willing retention of disbelief."¹¹ The illusion that the actors create on the stage is never developed to the degree that the audience involves itself completely and thus loses sight of the basic irony of its position in the theatre: the situation on the stage is only make-believe, a game of

pretense that the actors play with the audience. This fact is deliberately emphasized in the structure of Albee's plays by a number of techniques that can best be summarized as a mixing of theatrical conventions. Such a mixing develops a play whose effect is basically "presentational." As Markus notes, Albee's plays never attempt to create an illusion that will involve us in the actions of the characters, for he always knows that we are looking at a fiction, a performance, an artifice. 13

Although Albee has not used the word in relation to his plays, it is not difficult to imagine him calling them games. He seems to be approaching this idea when, in an interview with *Theatre Arts* magazine, he states:

It seems to me that so long as you don't let the audience call the shots in any play, then you're all right. Because an audience is very, very quick. If you listen to the first five minutes of the play, and watch the audience and listen to it, you just tell by the way they're sitting, or the quality of their silence or response, what level they are taking the play on -- how much of a commitment they're willing to make. The audience loves to call the shots.... 14

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12 Markus, p. 227.
13 Ibid.
Because Albee's purpose is to prevent the audience from "calling the shots," is, in fact, to undermine the rules by which it lives and views its existence, he is acutely conscious of the effect on his audience of the illusion or artifice he is creating. His mixing of theatrical conventions which, on the most obvious level, prevents the audience from relegating his plays to any one tradition such as Naturalism or Expressionism, is often termed confusing, self-conscious or even inept by the critics. The error here lies in the critics' failure to realize the purpose behind Albee's plays and to accept the confusing of theatrical conventions as a purposeful technique of the playwright which deliberately calls attention to the dramatic illusion.

Martha, in the third act of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, says of George that he "keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules" (p.191). This is exactly what Albee requires of his audience as well. As the dramatist, he plays Martha's part; the audience, like George, is expected to learn the rules of the author's games as quickly as he changes them. Albee alone "calls the shots" and the audience must work to establish and reestablish the rules of his dramatic game as he continually modifies them.

For this reason Albee deliberately avoids identification of protagonists as hero and villain; characters cease to be "good" or "bad" as

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they present a complex of motives and traits which alternately appeal to and repel the audience. Discussing this characteristic of Albee's plays, Gerald Nelson writes:

> Albee realizes that dramatic excitement on the stage lies in the relationship of a play to a game, conflict comes from knowing that there has to be a loser, and much of the audience's thrill comes from trying to pick (emotionally, not intellectually) the winner. 16

Even after the conclusion of most of Albee's plays the "winner" and "loser" can be debated. In *The Zoo Story* Jerry's "win" over Peter — his shattering of Peter's illusions about himself and his place in society — is only accomplished by his death. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George's "win" over Martha — his "killing" of their "son" — has perhaps ruined their marriage. In *A Delicate Balance*, Agnes' "win" over Tobias — her forcing his final decision regarding their friends — perhaps leaves them friendless, and prey to the "plague" which attacked Edna and Harry. Confused by its inability to delineate clearly "winner" and "loser," the audience is forced to examine the situation of the play in regard to its own values. The characters' motives become as complex as the ironies inherent in their game, suggesting the moral confusion which Albee feels is characteristic of Twentieth Century life. Similarly, the confusion of sexual roles in

most of Albee's plays reflects the emasculation and "Momism" that Albee finds predominant in America; it necessitates the audience's examination of the place of men and women within American society. Any expectation of a battle between the sexes in the traditional sense is frustrated in an Albee play: men fight, if at all, not to regain their masculinity but to destroy that of women. The roles of men and women within the family unit are questioned as illusions involving family solidarity and communications are debased. Such illusions, fostered for so many years by the "family" play on the American stage, become undermined by the theatre experience which frustrates the audience's expectations and draws attention to itself: the family of American society is as illusory as the family of the American stage.

The deliberate confusion of theatrical conventions in Albee's plays which constitutes his use of the play as game will be specifically discussed in relation to his individual plays in the following chapters of this thesis. By way of introduction, it is sufficient to say that the central effect of the play-as-game technique is the creation of aesthetic distance between the audience and the stage illusion. This effect is, of course, similar to the alienation or "A-effect" which is associated with the "Epic" theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Writing about this effect, Brecht says, "the object...is to allow the spectator to criticize
constructively from a social point of view." Although Albee is
definitely not writing Epic theatre, his concern in emphasizing the
experience of stage drama matches Brecht's and, consequently, he
draws on some of the same techniques as Brecht. Albee has said: "I
think the theatre is also an arena of engagement, of argument, of
participation, of putting the audience more into itself rather than
taking it out of itself." For Albee, "putting the audience into
itself" demands that the audience consider the stage illusion in
relation to the current American Scene. Such consideration in turn
demands a distance from the theatrical illusion that will allow
intellectual consideration of the characters and events as well as
empathy with them. Certainly some belief in the stage illusion is
necessary; if only that it may be undermined; for this reason, Albee's
full-length plays are given naturalistic sets and basically naturalistic
dialogue. Yet, at the same time, in order to undermine the stage
illusion and thus extend his theme of the necessity of illusion-awareness,
Albee incorporates into his plays techniques from other traditions such
as the music-hall and Epic theatre. The resulting "confusion" teaches
as well as entertains, the two-fold purpose which Albee has acknowledged
as his own. In an interview published in The American Theatre

17 Bertolt Brecht, "Street Scene," in The Theory of the Modern Stage,
18 "An Interview with Edward Albee," in The American Theatre Today,
19 "I've always thought that it was one of the responsibilities of play­
wrights to show people how they are and what their time is like in the
hope that perhaps they'll change it." Edward Albee, "John Gielgud and
Today, Albee summarizes his position towards the effect of his plays. He says:

You can teach at the same time as you are engaging. I think perhaps the entire theory of alienation is a little misunderstood by the majority of the people who use the term. Of course, it is not an attempt to alienate the audience but merely an attempt to keep the audience at a sufficient distance so that two things are happening simultaneously, that the audience is being objective about the experience it is having.  

This, succinctly, is the reason for Albee's use of the play as a game.

The idea of the play as a game is not particularly new nor is the idea that both the play and the game mirror the society of which they are products. Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media*, writes:

Games are dramatic models of our psychological lives providing release of particular tensions. They are collective and popular art forms with strict conventions.  

He makes the relationship between games and plays more specific when he asks: "...does not Aristotle's idea of drama as a mimetic reenactment and relief from our besetting pressures apply perfectly to all kinds of games?"

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and dance and fun?"\(^{22}\) Johan Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens*, includes both plays and games in the broader category which he simply calls "play." His definition of "play" applies to both games and plays as they are thought of today. He writes:

> ...play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life." \(^{23}\)

He also suggests that such play need not necessarily be simply "fun." He says:

> ...genuine and spontaneous play can also be profoundly serious. The player can abandon himself body and soul to the game, and the consciousness of its being "merely" a game can be thrust into the background. \(^{24}\)

Although the games played by Albee's characters are private within the context of his plays, within the larger context of the theatre they are collective experiences for both the audience and the actors. Moreover, because the theatre experience is basically pretense, it can be termed a substitution for "the real living of real intimacy";\(^{25}\) so can the games

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\(^{24}\)Ibid.

\(^{25}\)Berne, p. 18.
it contains. For this collective experience to be both entertaining and instructive for the audience, a compromise between "consciousness" of the experience and abandon to it must be achieved. Such a compromise mirrors the compromise that Albee feels it necessary to make between illusion and reality in real life: consciousness of games must at times be abandoned if life is to remain bearable. The confusion of illusion and reality in life as well as the relative truth that illusions can achieve are two of Albee's major themes. That his manipulation of the theatre experience should extend these themes shows his tacit understanding of the relationship between form and content in a work of art. In an Albee play, form and content are fused so that the games played within the play are magnified by the play itself. The use of the play as a game achieves contemporary relevance in so far as "game" has new meaning in American society today. Lionel Abel has written: "A play is essentially a game but a game played with something sacred."

What Albee appears to see as most sacred is man's truthful acceptance of reality. He is reported to have said after a performance of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* "that in the long run it was best for people to try to live with the truth." Such a truth does not deny the place of illusions and games within society. Rather, it demands an awareness of illusion and


a management of games so that they may best serve the gamer.
It also acknowledges the possibility that reality is as much of
an illusion as illusion, and that life is as much of a game as
a stage-play.
CHAPTER TWO
GAMES IN ONE ACT

"The possible seriousness of games and play, and the possibly serious results, are well known to anthropologists.... the grimmest of all, of course, is 'War'." — Eric Berne

Edward Albee's utilization of the play as a game characterizes all his dramas though to varying degrees and with various modifications. Always, however, it has as its purpose the exorcising of those illusions which Albee feels are stifling contemporary American society. The Sandbox, though a minor play, is a good entrance into a discussion of these illusions for, besides illustrating some of the dramatic techniques Albee uses more subtly in later plays, it also contains some of his major themes. Although it is Albee's third play, written in 1959, The Sandbox deals with the family unit (Albee's metaphor for contemporary American society) in a more definite and obvious way than his two earlier plays, The Zoo Story (1958) and The Death of Bessie Smith (1959). In addition, it sets up the sexual polarity that dominates all of Albee's plays up to A Delicate Balance, a polarity in which "Mommy" has assumed "Daddy's" role as leader of the family. The dramatic effect of the play as a game is also the most pronounced in this play, emphasizing the game-playing of the characters so as to assert the vacuity and sterility of their lives.
Albee's use of the play as a game becomes immediately obvious in *The Sandbox*, the play's set making no attempt to disguise the stage upon which it occurs. Only three simple chairs, a music stand and a sandbox with a toy pail and shovel are used to create the illusion of a beach. The audience, continually reminded that it is watching "merely" a play by the avoidance of a realistic set, is also reminded of the illusion by the characters themselves. Mommy defines the locale upon entering, saying "Well, here we are; this is the beach."¹ She then elaborates the setting for both the audience and her fellow characters, motioning to the sand and "the water beyond" (p.9). More importantly, she proceeds to develop the play much as a director would, shouting for the Musician to enter and even giving him his cues. Early in the play she says to the Musician, "You can begin now" (p.10); later she says, "You...uh...you go ahead and do whatever it is you do" (p.13). When an "off-stage rumble" (p.16) occurs and Daddy asks "what was that," Mommy replies "It was an off-stage rumble..." (p.17), reminding the audience of the technicians involved with the illusion as well as the actors. Similarly, Grandma refers to the mechanics of the play and thus emphasizes it as illusion. Just before the "rumble" she "shouts to someone off-stage" (p.16) "Shouldn't it be getting dark now, dear?" Immediately

the lights dim and "night comes on" (p.16). Later she yells, "Don't put the lights up yet...I'm not ready; I'm not quite ready" (p.18). The effect of these techniques is the distancing of the audience from the play which Albee feels is necessary for the communication of his ideas. The emphasis upon the stage illusion develops the play as a game which reflects the games the characters play. Just as the play is pretense, so are the emotions the characters affect. One illusion undermines another; game destroys game.

This fact is more clearly understood when one considers the "game" in which the characters are involved. Mommy and Daddy have come to bury Grandma in a sandbox at the beach. The fact that Grandma is not yet dead bothers no one when she is dumped (p.11) into the sandbox and left to die. Ostensibly, Mommy grieves over Grandma's death — "...the time has come for poor Grandma...and I can't bear it!" (p.17); but as Grandma says to her mockingly, "you'll get over it" (p.17). Just as little children play games in a sandbox, Albee's characters play games "at the beach," pretending to feel what they really do not. The death and burial with which they are involved is really an insincere game marked by the "empty affection," "pre-senility," and "vacuity" which Albee detests. That the ritual is no more than this is emphasized by the characters' acknowledgment of the theatre game itself. Irony builds upon irony, reaching its climax when Grandma "plays dead" (p.18). (Albee

2Edward Albee, "Note," The Sandbox, p.8.)
follows this stage direction with an exclamation mark. Mommy stands
over Grandma's body, shaking her head; her speech couples her spurious
sorrow over Grandma's death with her role as "director" of the play,
completing it with a reference to the beach illusion that nobody has
really accepted:

Lovely! It's...it's hard to be sad... she looks...so happy. (With pride and
conviction) It pays to do things well. (To the Musician) All right, you can
stop now, if you want to. I mean, stay around for a swim, or something; it's
all right with us. (She sighs heavily) Well Daddy...off we go. (pp.18-19)

Grandma's death has meant little or nothing to Mommy, as has her life.
Her funeral has been merely a game played with artificial emotions.

That Grandma has been treated little better than a dog during her
life with Mommy is acknowledged earlier in the play when Grandma says:
"...and they moved me into a big town house with them...fixed a nice
place for me under the stove...gave me an army blanket...and my own dish
...my very own dish!" (p.16) This fact, though not unimportant in
itself, becomes more important in relation to the family as a whole.
Just as Mommy's relationship with Grandma differs radically from the
parent-daughter relationship usually presented in traditional "family
plays;" Mommy's relationship with Daddy differs radically as well.
Mommy's obvious direction of the other characters does more than alienate
the audience; it accentuates her role as leader and organizer in the
family unit. When Mommy and Daddy carry on Grandma early in the play, Daddy asks, "Where do we put her?" (p. 11) Mommy answers "Wherever I say, of course" and immediately establishes her domination over Daddy. Such female-male domination occurs in all Albee's plays, although George in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? manages to overcome and assume control of Martha. American women, Albee suggests, have usurped man's role in the family unit. Any suggestion to the contrary, like any suggestion of parental respect, is mere illusion. The family as it is traditionally presented, now exists, if at all, as a minority unit.

This idea Albee again presents in The American Dream, a longer play which has the same major characters. Although the two plays are thematically similar, there is a significant stylistic difference between them. Whereas The Sandbox is presented as obvious illusion, The American Dream is presented more realistically, using some of the techniques associated with Naturalistic theatre. However, Albee still uses the play as a game in order to emphasize game-playing in general and to undermine illusions particular to the American Scene.

In The American Dream Albee's use of the play as a game is developed by the fusing of theatrical conventions that characterizes his later full-length plays. Along with a realistic set and initially realistic dialogue, Albee combines techniques which have become associated
with Theatre of the Absurd, a term coined by Martin Esslin\(^3\) to describe theatre in which an open abandonment of rational thought and dialogue is used to present man's arbitrary or meaningless position in a universe devoid of moral order. Basic to these techniques is a magnification of character traits and actions which has long been associated with satire. In *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream* this magnification is mainly seen in the over- and under-reactions of the characters to the situations in which they are involved. Such reactions, "absurd" in that their "unnaturalness" emphasizes the irrational nature of existence and the lack of communication between people, prevent the characters from becoming more than exaggerations or caricatures for the audience. Indeed, one critic has gone so far as to call the characters "abstractions inhabiting an unreal world."\(^4\) As such, the characters never demand a suspension of the audience's disbelief; rather, they emphasize the fact that the play is different from ordinary life, a game that exaggerates life so as to comment upon it. Although such exaggeration is basic to the theatre, it is usually employed to construct a realistic illusion of life and consequently is limited to what is conventionally accepted as "natural;" when the exaggeration passes this point, it is considered unreal and is usually termed

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"fantastic" or "grotesque?" This is not to say that such exaggerated illusion cannot have real impact. Often, as in the case of much good satire, the illusion achieves its effect because of its grotesque quality, emphasizing through exaggeration and distortion the follies and vices which usually are its focus.

Such is the case in both The Sandbox and The American Dream in which illusions about American family life and progress are attacked.

In The American Dream, the exaggerated nature of the play is not as obvious as it is in The Sandbox. The set is an ordinary middle-class American living-room. Mommy and Daddy sit in armchairs, involved in a discussion seemingly about the landlord. As the play progresses, however, and the dialogue becomes more irrational, it becomes obvious that the characters are the same exaggerations as those in The Sandbox. Mommy is the emotionally sterile, nagging wife, the ruthless matriarch who has usurped Daddy's position as leader of the family unit and relegated him to the position of an impotent "yes-man." Daddy no longer disputes Mommy's power or even asserts his masculinity, i.e., "bumps" his "uglies,"\(^5\) indeed, whether he is even employed is uncertain. He spends most of his time acting as Mommy's "straight man" in the games they play, dreaming wistfully of becoming a senator or winning a Fulbright Scholarship. Grandma also emerges as the same

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\(^5\)Edward Albee, The American Dream and The Zoo Story (New York: Signet Books, no date), p.67. All subsequent references are to the same edition.
character she was in *The Sandbox*, a remnant of the pioneer stock that founded America and must now suffer the cruelties of its offspring. In *The American Dream*, however, Grandma, like the other characters, is developed in much more detail than in *The Sandbox*, becoming more than an "abstraction" or symbol of the dreams and traditions that Mommy and Daddy are burying. As Lee Baxandall says of Grandma; she is "the sole humane, generous creature in the Albee menage. She tries to relate to others in a forthright and meaningful fashion, but at her age she no longer commands the requisite weight."^6

Although Grandma does not successfully relate to Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream*, she definitely communicates with the audience. Indeed, her direct delivery to the audience near the end of the play constitutes Albee's major use of this play as a game. The development of the play from its realistic opening to its unrealistic conclusion is climaxed by Grandma's exit from the set and her appearance "stage right, near the footlights" (p.122). Her lines to the audience from this position deliberately undermine the stage illusion and emphasize its pretense. As in all Albee's plays, this technique again extends his theme of the necessity of illusion-awareness. Mommy and Daddy, still within the stage illusion at this point, are accepting the Young Man

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as their son, trusting completely in his attractive appearance and failing to recognize the emotional sterility that it conceals. Grandma, seeing the Young Man realistically, is safe from his control, a fact which is emphasized by her physical separation from the stage.

Although Grandma's exit from the set and her direct speech to the audience are the most obvious techniques Albee uses to remind the audience that The American Dream is "merely" a play, the over- and under-reactions of the characters also have the same effect. Reactions to the fate of Mommy and Daddy's first adopted son, for example, are completely unnatural and help to distance the audience from the characters. Similarly, the death itself was unnatural: the "bumble of joy" (p.97), Grandma discloses, was slowly killed, being first blinded, then dismembered, and finally made mute. As far as the characters are concerned, however, the killing of the son has no significance except, perhaps to Grandma. Mrs. Barker, the depersonalized "professional woman" (p.77) from the Bye Bye Adoption Service, responds to the facts of the death with only a "my, my, my" (p.101), an under-reaction typical of many in the play. Similarly, her entrance is marked by both over- and under-reactions. When Mommy asks, "Would you like a cigarette, and a drink, and would you like to cross your legs?", Mrs. Barker replies, "You forget yourself, Mommy: I'm a professional woman. But I will cross my legs" (p.97). Within a few speeches, this exaggeration of everyday amenities has become
"Won't you take off your dress?" (p. 79) answered by "I don't mind if I do." (p. 79). The laughter which usually follows such lines suggests the degree to which the audience recognizes the play as a game. The murder of the son is, after all, grotesque, just as Mrs. Barker's actions and reactions are shocking. Laughter in such instances, one would hope, is enlightened or, at least, hollow. As Eugene Ionesco says:

"Humour makes us conscious, with a free lucidity, of the tragic or desultory condition of man...humour is the only possibility we possess of detaching ourselves."  

Detached from the characters, the audience hopefully recognizes the insincerity and hypocrisy that mark daily rituals. Such rituals Berne defines as "stereotyped series of simple complementary transactions programmed by external social forces."  

Similar to games in their pretense of sincerity, rituals like Mommy's "welcome" to Mrs. Barker are undermined in The American Dream so as to expose their true lack of true feeling. Although such rituals are sometimes necessary as prologues to further communication, too often they are accepted as communication itself, substitutes for "the real living of real intimacy."  

As such, they are more a hindrance than a help to meaningful communication and must be undermined so as to be controlled.

7Quoted in Esslin, p. 187.
9Berne, p. 18.
The killing of the son in *The American Dream*, although only discussed by the characters, is the play’s pivotal point — the action which supplies the play with symbolic significance. This is most fully appreciated after the entry of the Young Man into the domestic scene, the same Young Man that delivered Grandma’s "kiss of death" in *The Sandbox*. In *The American Dream*, the Young Man again works as an "Angel of Death"\(^\text{10}\) but this time he comes to deliver his kiss to Mommy and Daddy instead of to Grandma. That the Young Man also represents the current manifestation of the American Dream is clearly established. Grandma says to him shortly after his arrival, "Boy, you know what you are, don’t you? You’re the American Dream, that’s what you are" (p.108). That the Young Man represents both the American Dream and the Angel of Death in the play gains further significance through the revelation that his long-lost identical twin was the son that Mommy and Daddy killed. The suggestion is that Mommy and Daddy killed the "real" American Dream only to accept its facsimile later, a substitute which has suffered an emotional death comparable to his brother’s physical one. Grandma hints at this when she tells the Young Man "You look familiar" (p.113) and then later, after he has explained his past, says "I was mistaken...before. I don’t know you from somewhere, but I knew...once...someone very much like you...or, very much as perhaps

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\(^{10}\) Albee’s stage directions regarding the Young Man in *The Sandbox* state: "his calisthenics, employing the arms only, should suggest the beating and fluttering of wings. The Young Man is, after all, the Angel of Death." *The Sandbox*, p.9.
you were" (p.115). The important phrase here is "as you were."
The Young Man, like the American dream he represents, has changed.
No longer does his appearance — "Clean-cut, midwest farm boy type,
almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way" (p.107)
—represent the honest, courageous and compassionate approach to life
that it is held to in the American dream. The dream, personified by
the original son in the play, has been destroyed: only its facsimile
remains. As the Young Man says: "...from time to time, in the years
that have passed, I have suffered losses...that I can't explain. A
fall from grace...a departure of innocence...loss...loss" (p.114).
The result is that he no longer has the capacity to feel, to love or to
communicate. As he says, "I have been drained, torn asunder...disemboweled.
I have, now, only my person...my body, my face. I use what I have...I
let people love me..." (p.115).

The significance of the Young Man's position lies in the fact
that people do love him, do "draw pleasure from [his] groin...from [his]
presence" (p.115). His summation of his position — "I accept the syntax
around me, for while I know I cannot relate...I know I must be related
to" (p.115) — explains both the usefulness and danger that fiction and
dreams can serve. The Young Man, representative of a dream of America
which is, at best, an ambitious goal and, at worst, a self-destructive
illusion, fulfills others' needs at the same time as he strengthens his
hold over them. As long as he is accepted as an illusion — a dream —
he can be useful; but once he is taken for "real," he becomes
dangerous, an Angel of Death. As he himself says: "Be careful; be
very careful. What I have told you may not be true" (p.115). It
is precisely because he is accepted as real by Mommy and Daddy that
the Young Man functions as the Angel of Death in The American Dream.
Besides being emotionally sterile, he is pragmatic to the point of
ruthlessness. He says to Grandma at one point, "I'll do almost anything
for money" (p.109); later, he says of himself: "I have been unable
to see anything, anything, with pity, with affection...with anything
but...cool disinterest" (pp.114-115). In accepting merely the
appearance of this Young Man, Mommy and Daddy become prey to his whims
and desires. Such vulnerability is both fitting and ironical in that
Mommy and Daddy killed the Young Man's twin in the first place; in so
doing, they perhaps caused his emotional death.11 Their vulnerability,
however, is also tragic, for it suggests that the end of American society
is imminent. The "substitution of artificial for real values"12 that is
represented by Mommy and Daddy's acceptance of the Young Man can only
end in destruction. The celebratory toast that the characters drink at
the end of The American Dream is, perhaps, their last, even a libation
to their new-found son.

11The possibility of a "sympathetic transference" between the twins
is suggested by the Young Man's description of their relationship
(p.114) as well as by the facts he gives about his own "losses": he
mentions his eyes, his groin and hands -- the three areas that Mommy
and Daddy mutililated in their first son.

12Albee, preface to The American Dream, pp.53-54.
Such an interpretation of the play again suggests the importance of games in Albee's dramatic world. The substitution of artificial for real values can be viewed as a game of pretense, and one that has grown out of hand. It is similar to the game that Martha plays in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* — the substitution of an "artificial" son for a real one. Both games ultimately gain control of the characters to such a degree that the characters are destroyed by them; both games can be overcome only by having the characters confront their illusions and become aware of their games. To a degree, Mommy already appears aware of her games. Her acknowledgment of the play form in *The Sandbox* perhaps suggests her awareness of the game she plays regarding Grandma: that is, her pretense of sorrow and loss. Similarly, in *The American Dream*, Mommy at times shows perception of her own game-playing. For example, the following speech demonstrates her self-acknowledged participation in the game of "one-upmanship":

MOMMY: Nonsense. Old people have nothing to say; and if old people did have something to say, nobody would listen to them. (To Grandma) You see? I can pull that stuff just as easy as you can. (p.85)

Here, however, it can be argued that Mommy is really blind to Grandma's intelligence, a fact which the play as a whole supports. Mommy's attitude towards Grandma, as towards all the other characters in the play,
is superficial, relying heavily upon self-deluding games and empty ritual. Her frequent adoption of a parental stance in relation to Daddy is a good example of this. Grandma, on the other hand, openly acknowledging the play-illusion in both *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*, is truly aware of game-playing and thus is able to manage and control games to her own salvation. The conclusion of the play develops from her playing a game with Mrs. Barker in which she convinces the professional woman that the Young Man will fill Mommy's adoption request. Prior to this game, Grandma says to the Young Man, "You'll...you'll have to play it by ear, my dear...unless I get a chance to talk to you again. I've got to go into my act, now" (p.116). In this case, Grandma involves the Young Man in her game-playing and suggests his awareness of games as well. That the Young Man is interested in a movie career is no coincidence; he realizes the power he can wield as a dream' or fantasy figure and assumes his part readily in the game with Mrs. Barker. Moreover, he is the only character in the play who is aware of Grandma after her exit from the living-room. He places, for example, five glasses on the wine tray and "catches Grandma's eye" (p.126) just before the toast. Because he is aware of games and of the importance of illusion in everyday life, the Young Man will succeed in his masquerade as son and dream. Like Grandma, he gains mastery over his games through his awareness of them; more importantly, he gains mastery over the other less-aware game-players as well. Games become, for him, the means by
which he can control his destiny, rather than ends in themselves, reality-substitutes which control the players.

This attitude towards games is again evident in The Death of Bessie Smith, the play Albee wrote just prior to The Sandbox. Here, however, the attitude is expressed in different dramatic terms. The dramatic effect of the play has been variously called "realistic," "impressionistic," "absurd," and "cinematic." The last term is most apt for the play progresses by the juxtaposition of short scenes which, in total, attempt to depict the various actions and reactions surrounding the death of the famous American blues singer who was refused admittance to a Memphis, Tennessee, "white" hospital following a car accident. Albee's use of the play as a game is developed by the cinematic "cutting" between scenes which emphasizes the artificial nature of the play rather than disguises it. His stage directions for the play -- the most detailed of all his plays -- suggest his concern with the play's overall visual effect. The central area of the stage is reserved for the admissions room of the hospital; surrounding this area on both sides and to the back is a raised platform on which the scenes peripheral to the main action occur. There should be, Albee suggests, only "the most minimal suggestion of sets." The play is to appear "very open, for the whole back wall of the stage is full of sky, which will vary from scene

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to scene." (p.25) The use of this "sky" is very important in the development of distance between the audience and the play for the rise and fall of light upon the sky is never meant to seem real. The sky often extends the emotional tone of the play and even has symbolic significance. For example, following Jack's monologue in Scene Three, "the sunset is predominant" (p.39) even after the lights fade, suggesting that the "evening" of Bessie's life is at hand. Besides the music which accompanies the sunset at this point, Jack's voice is heard from the wings; sound effects are used to suggest the exit of a car and then "the sunset dims again." (p.39). The total effect of the scene is distancing. The obviously artificial sunset combined with the sound effects issuing from the wings of the empty stage emphasize the stage illusion. When the music fades and the lights come up on the admissions room of the hospital (Scene Four), the visual shift matches an emotional one; the fading sunset changes to the harsh glare of the hospital; Jack's happy exuberance changes to the Orderly's cynical hypocrisy. Albee again uses the stage like Ionesco who has written that "...just as words are continued by gesture, action, mime... the material elements of the stage can in turn further intensify these." Here the material elements simultaneously further both the mood of the scene and an awareness of the play as a game.

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14Monologues such as this abound in Albee's plays and have a distancing effect similar to the monologues and soliloquies in "Epic" theatre. For example, Jerry's story about the dog in The Zoo Story, George's account of his two "novels" in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and Tobias' tale about the cat in A Delicate Balance are all untypical of realistic speech in their lexical cohesion.

15Quoted in Esslin, p. 132.
The distancing effect of the many lighting changes in *The Death of Bessie Smith* is intensified by the "spotted" placement of the scenes on the periphery of the stage: the audience must continually shift visual focus just as it must shift intellectual and emotional ones. It is also significant that as the play progresses, its scenes become longer, finally moving from the bordering platform to the central playing-area; the distancing effect of the "cutting" technique is thereby slowly minimized as the audience is allowed successively longer periods of involvement. Any final suspension of disbelief, however, is undermined by the play's conclusion in which the Nurse "freezes" into tableau following a slap on the face by the Intern. Albee's stage directions following this action read: "*The room fades into silhouette again....The great sunset blazes; music up.*" (p.80) The audience is again reminded that the play is artifact. At the same time, the lighting design sets the action in a broader perspective which extends the play thematically. The final "great sunset" suggests the irony of involvement with things transitory: Bessie Smith's life, like the play itself, is but a moment in the continuum of time, a tiny scene played against infinite sky. Albee suggests with the play that an awareness of life's transitory nature must be achieved if life's miseries are to be withstood. At the same time, he also suggests that the ennui which can result from such an awareness can best be met with games.
Although the cinematic techniques Albee uses in *The Death of Bessie Smith* do distance the audience from the stage illusion, the play is more important for its thematic relationship to Albee's work than its stylistic one. Its significance is mainly developed by the Nurse in the play who has been called "the first of Albee's neurotic women." \(^\text{16}\) Lee Baxandall, in his essay "The Theatre of Edward Albee," traces the development of Albee's men and women through his plays, noting how they remain consistently similar. \(^\text{17}\) Essentially, he feels they are the Mommy and Daddy of *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream* played to varying degrees and with various modifications. The Nurse in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, being Albee's first major female character, is, Baxandall writes, "the meanest of the Mommies." Beleagured by her inactive, selfish and bigoted father, the Nurse vents her frustrations against men in general by vituperatively striking out against those men closest to her, the negro Orderly in the hospital where she is employed and the Intern whom she periodically dates. In so doing, she probes cruelly into the Orderly's attempts to achieve racial equality and into the Intern's capabilities as a lover.

Although the Nurse is similar to Mommy in her vituperative and emasculating attacks on men, she is dissimilar in her attitude towards games. At the same time that she attacks men, the Nurse exposes her own frustrations and despair. At one point near the end of the play she yells:


"I am tired...I am tired of the truth...and I am tired of lying about the truth...I am tired of my skin...I WANT OUT!" (p.71).

The Nurse's outburst verbalizes her inability to play games that successfully ease her awareness of her own reality. Unlike Mommy who is unaware of the illusions she accepts and the games she plays, the Nurse is painfully aware of both her illusions and the realities that the illusions disguise. Moreover, she is also aware of the games other people play to support their illusions. Early in the play she attacks her father by saying, "...you going to pretend you're something more than you really are, which is nothing but -- a hanger-on... a flunky..." (p.32). Similarly, she attacks the Orderly by confronting him with the reality of his position. She says to him "maliciously" (p.47) in Scene Four:

Tell me, boy...is it true that you haveUncle Tom'd yourself right out of the bosom of your family...right out of your circle of acquaintances? Is it true, young man, that you are now an inhabitant of no-man's-land, on the one side shunned and disowned by your brethern, and on the other an object of contempt and derision to your betters? Is that your problem, son? (p.47.)

Earlier in the scene, she says to the Orderly: "...that is the way things are. Those are the facts. You had better acquaint yourself with some realities" (p.41). Such an awareness of games and illusions does not help the Nurse to live a more communicative and content life,
however; rather it brings about the frustration she is unable to escape. The implication is that some illusions are necessary if life is to be preserved, just as some games are required to escape the ennui of pastimes that Berne discusses. Consciousness of games must also be overcome if they are to provide real support. The Nurse's attitude of superiority to both Orderly and Intern is a game she plays to bolster an ego wounded by her father, but it is a game of which she is always aware. Based on illusions of white supremacy and family tradition, this game is played in vain for, as the Nurse says to the Intern, "I am fully aware of what is true and what is not true" (p.57). Although one could argue that this, in itself, is an illusion, one would then have difficulty explaining the Nurse's "I WANT OUT!" speech. The truth is that she is "realistic... practical..." (p.57) and is frustrated as a result. Having achieved an awareness of the "facts," she is unable to go beyond this by using illusion to manage them. When she plays games, she does so consciously. Unable to forget that she is "lying about the truth" (p.71), she thus prevents these lies from achieving a truth of their own.

The Nurse's inability to play games that relieve her situation successfully can well be seen in her relationship with the Intern. This relationship is heavily marked by games and rituals, a fact evident even

\[18\] Berne, p.171.
in Albee's stage directions. In Scene Six, for example, the main scene between the Nurse and the Intern, Albee describes the Nurse as "mimicking" (p.52), "coquettish" (p.51), exhibiting "mock despair" (p.52), being "mock formal" (p.58) and "mimicking" (p.63). The Intern, himself, refers to the ritualized nature of many of his encounters with the Nurse. Aware of her frustrations and hostilities, he nevertheless plays along with her games, realizing all the while that they are more destructive than constructive. Generally, these games develop a love-hate relationship which is similar to that of George and Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Often beginning quite harmlessly, the games usually escalate into full-fledged verbal war, unleashing the violence inherent in the relationship. This can be seen when the Nurse "turns coy" (p.60) and says to the Intern "I may let you drive me home tonight...in your beat-up Chewy" (p.60). The Intern's reply outlines the frustrating sexual games the Nurse plays in the car, ending with "I am looking forward to this ritual...as I always do" (p.61). The game escalates from there:

NURSE (Pleased): Why, thank you.

INTERN: I look forward to this ritual because of how it sets me apart from other men...

NURSE: Aw...

INTERN: ...because I am probably the only white man under thirty in two counties- who has not had the pleasure of...
NURSE: LIAR! You no-account mother-grabbing son of a nigger! (p.61)

It is significant that the Nurse screams "LIAR!" to end the game. The accusation can be taken two ways. On the one hand, the line suggests the Nurse's inability to face the truth about herself. On the other hand, and more in keeping with her character, it suggests her inability to lie within the game. Relatedly, it suggests her inability to see the truth that the lie can have.

Although the Intern's statement may be a lie, it allows him to communicate with the Nurse in a direct manner; it therefore gains a validity or truthfulness which is possible for all illusions to achieve. The problem here is that the "truth" hurts.

The conclusion of *The Death of Bessie Smith* further develops the Nurse as the central character in the play; ironically, Bessie Smith never appears. She, like the Mayor, however, is present in that she is responsible for the action of the play. The Mayor's presence in the hospital indicates the sickness of the community he heads and symbolically suggests reasons for Bessie's journey to the North. These reasons, of course, become all too obvious following her accident. The Nurse's wrath, actually meant for the Intern, is directed at Jack. The sense of superiority which she so desperately needs becomes the vicious prejudice that prevents Bessie's entry into the hospital. As the Nurse says to Jack:
Now you listen to me, and you get this straight...nigger...this is a semi-private white hospital. (p.72)

When the Intern then exits, despite her pleas, to examine Bessie in the car, the Nurse's wrath reaches "hysteria" (p.80). It remains for the Orderly to make the final comment in the play. His speech shows the degree to which he has been affected by the scene and the extent to which he has forsaken his dreams of racial equality and accepted the "realities" of his subservient position that the Nurse has been so eager to impress upon him. He says:

I never heard of such a thing...bringing a dead woman here like that...I don't know what people can be thinking of sometimes.... (p.80)

He does not seem to even remember that "the woman" is a Negro, much less Bessie Smith. The Nurse at this point is "frozen, with her hand to her face" (p.80) where the Intern has hit her. Her frustration and anger are thereby caught on the edge of madness, graphically held for a final moment of visual impact.

The visual impact of the Death of Bessie Smith is stronger than any of Albee's other plays. The cinematic form of the play matches the action which is basically narrative. The period of time covered in the play is longer than in any of his others just as the number of different settings is greater. Elizabeth Phillips, writing about the play in relation
to the Theatre of the Absurd, states that the play demonstrates a "plotlessness" which satisfies the dictum that "action in a play must exhibit a pattern of situations which become intensified, grow more and more dense, then get tangled, either to be disentangled again or end in unbearable inextricability."\(^{19}\) Certainly as the play progresses, tensions mount and the problems surrounding the Nurse, seemingly unrelated to Bessie, become entangled. Such entanglement, however, involving many characters from disparate situations, is more typical of plot than "plotlessness."\(^{19}\) Trying to fit *The Death of Bessie Smith* into the tradition of The Theatre of the Absurd, as Miss Phillips does, is as difficult as trying to place it in the tradition of Naturalistic theatre. The play is marked by its divergence from any traditional form, a divergence which is deliberately used to confuse the audience and "put it into itself."\(^{20}\) In an interview with *Atlantic Monthly*, Albee said:

> The basic crisis the theatre's in now is that the audience primarily wants a reaffirmation of its values, wants to see the status quo, wants to be entertained rather than disturbed, wants to be comforted and really doesn't want any kind of adventure in the theatre....\(^{20}\)

As in all his plays, Albee attempts to make *The Death of Bessie Smith* a theatrical adventure for the audience which will force it to question

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its own values. The play is used as a game in which the audience
is prevented from “calling the shots” by having its expectations
continually frustrated. Not only does Bessie Smith never appear
in the play; a “winner” never emerges either. The Nurse who is so
aware of her illusions is unable to use them to escape reality. Yet the
Intern and the Orderly — her two “opponents” in the play — are unable
to withstand her attacks. The conclusion of the play reminds the
audience that the play is itself “unreal” and suggests that Bessie’s
life and death have little more significance than a play. Life is a
temporary condition in which people are arbitrarily thrown together for
better or for worse.

The significance that such arbitrary encounters can achieve receives
much fuller treatment in Albee’s first play, The Zoo Story, written in
1958. Whereas the emphasis in The Death of Bessie Smith is visual, the
emphasis in The Zoo Story, is verbal. This is fitting as the play’s
central concern is the difficulty of communication in a world which is
so temporary it is meaningless. Just as the Nurse in The Death of Bessie
Smith is called the first of Albee’s neurotic women, Jerry in The Zoo
Story could be called the first of his neurotic males. Indeed, The Zoo
Story has received enthusiastic critical acclaim as well as popular
success probably because Jerry, much like Jimmy Porter in John Osborne’s
Look Back in Anger, seems somehow symbolic of his generation and the
problems it faces. A comparison of the two plays from the point of view
of their importance as dramatic "trend-setters" is also valid. American critics were happy to anticipate a "new wave" of American theatre following the New York production of The Zoo Story in 1960, just as British critics anticipated the advent of a new theatre of social protest following the London premiere of Look Back in Anger. Unfortunately, in the case of America, the new movement never materialized and Albee, along with Jack Gelber, Arthur Kopit and Meagan Terry, was left to produce plays that are noteworthy for their merging of divergent conventions and their lack of adherence to any "school" of playwrights or playwriting. Although The Zoo Story has been well-received, the general confusion surrounding its relationship to dramatic traditions is probably the result of over-zealous reviewers trying quickly to categorize it so as to establish Albee as a new "dramatic genius" in such-and-such a mode. The Zoo Story, like The Death of Bessie Smith, demonstrates a blending of techniques that belies classification. It gains both its originality and effectiveness because of this.

The Zoo Story is also similar to The Death of Bessie Smith in that Jerry suffers from the same malaise as the Nurse. Both characters see the realities of themselves and others too clearly; both are incapable of playing the games that will relieve their frustrations and allow them to live full and communicative lives. This is not to say that the two characters do not play games. The Nurse, as already demonstrated, plays
social and sexual games with the Intern and attempts to believe the illusion of her superiority to both him and the Orderly. Similarly, Jerry plays games with Peter, as well as with his landlady and her dog. For both Jerry and the Nurse, however, such games are not enough for their own salvation. The Death of Bessie Smith ends with the Nurse's hysteria; The Zoo Story ends with Jerry's death. Acutely aware of the illusions that govern and control others, the Nurse and Jerry are unable to find an illusion that each can adopt as his own -- a master-illusion or life-game each can play "to the hilt." The conclusion of the two plays definitely suggests that such a game is necessary for sanity and survival. In his book entitled The Master Game, Dr. Robert S. De Ropp quotes Dr. Thomas Szasz as saying that "what people really need and demand from life is not wealth, comfort or esteem, but games worth playing." He continues by saying:

He who cannot find a game worth playing is apt to fall prey to accidie...a paralysis of the will, a failure of the appetite...total disenchantment. 22

Such disenchantment is graphically presented in the figure of Jerry in The Zoo Story. Aware of the necessity of games, he is nevertheless

22 Ibid.
unable to find one that will support his life. His final desperate
game with Peter — an enactment of "what happened at the zoo" — is
an illusion which he makes into a reality. The reality is, of course,
his death.

The need for a Master Game, to use DeRopp's term, does not in any
way negate the need for an awareness of games and a liberation of the
self from controlling illusions. Such an awareness is prerequisite to
any meaningful existence. For this reason, The Zoo Story resembles all
of Albee's other plays: what is crucial is the exorcism of illusions
that will allow an individual to progress towards a happier life. In
The Zoo Story, Peter represents those individuals who are unknowingly
captured in a web of illusions and games. Having Peter represent values
accepted and perpetrated by the Middle Class in America -- the same
values represented by Mommy and Daddy in The American Dream -- Albee
suggests that the American Middle Class is dominated by illusions about
communication and unity which are dangerously removed from the realities
of isolation and despair. Using Jerry to represent these realities,
Albee places him in conflict with Peter. The result is that Peter is
forced to emerge from the shelter of his possessions (symbolized by the
park bench for which he fights Jerry) to face the human condition that
Jerry represents. In so doing, Peter forsakes his Middle Class complacency
and exposes the violence, hostility and fear which have been submerged
beneath his superficial relationships and attitudes for so long. In
other words, he is forced to become aware of the games he plays.

Albee is very definite in his development of Peter and Jerry as representatives of two different approaches to life. Peter is an executive in a "small publishing house," who lives with his wife, two daughters and two parakeets in an apartment on Seventy-Fourth Street in New York. Jerry is a "permanent transient" (p.37) who describes his home as "the sickening rooming-houses on the West Side of New York City, which is the greatest city in the world. Amen" (p.37). Peter, who describes himself as "normally...uh...reticent" (p.19) and who says "I don't express myself too well sometimes" (p.20), prefers superficial dialogue — marked by clichés like "every man wants a son" (p.16) — to attempts at more penetrating conversation. Such clichés are "safe" in that they do not touch upon Peter's privacy and therefore hold no danger of exposing his vulnerabilities. Jerry, on the other hand, prefers to communicate on a more personal level. As he says: "...every once in a while I like to talk to somebody, really talk; like to get to know somebody, know all about him" (p.17). For this reason, Jerry begins questioning Peter as soon as he meets him. His questions are personal and frank, probing beneath the clichés that Peter is wont to deliver. When Peter attempts to answer Jerry's questions in an insincere manner, Jerry either ignores or ridicules him. For example,

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when Jerry asks Peter "who are your favorite writers?" (p. 21), Peter answers "Well, I like a great many writers; I have a considerable...catholicity of taste, if I may say so. These two men are fine, each in his way. Baudelaire, of course...uh...is by far the finer of the two, but Marquand has a place...in our...uh...national..." (p. 21). Jerry interrupts Peter's speech with "Skip it" and Peter says "I...sorry." Peter's remark shows an acknowledgement of the meaningless insincerity which has marked his speech. Jerry's attitude towards communication has forced Peter into an awareness of the illusion of communication he maintains. Similarly, when Jerry says "I walked all the way up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square" (p. 21), Peter is eager to establish that Jerry lives in "the Village." Jerry realizes this and says "what were you trying to do? Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit?" (p. 22) His aggressive appraisal of Peter's motives forces Peter to confront a reality he prefers to ignore: people cannot be pigeonholed because life is not ordered; "sense" is not inherent in things. Jerry's description of his rooming-house (p. 22) not only places him far from "the Village" but depicts his lonely and bizarre existence as well. Significantly, Peter is "embarrassed" (p. 22) as a result.

Peter is continually embarrassed and discomforted by Jerry In The Zoo Story. His discomfort results from the confusion he feels as a result of Jerry's truthful description of his life and his attempts to
communicate. Such a life is alien to Peter who has escaped the loneliness Jerry describes by accepting the illusions of harmony and happiness that his game-playing supports. After Jerry describes his landlady, Peter says, "It's so...unthinkable. I find it hard to believe that people such as that really are" (p.28). Jerry replies, "It's for reading about, isn't it?" (p.28); later he says, "And fact is better left to fiction" (p.29). This last line is a pithy summation of Jerry's position in the play as well as an ironical comment on Peter's attitude towards reality. The line reiterates Jerry's earlier speech about pornographic playing cards in which he says

...when you're a kid you use the cards as a substitute for a real experience, and when you're older you use real experience as a substitute for the fantasy. (p.27)

For Jerry, "the facts" can often only be communicated through fiction. Such fiction, when it enables one to communicate, gains a validity that elevates it to truth. Thus illusions which are supported by games of pretense can gain a relative truth or validity through their beneficial results.

This idea forms the basis of Jerry's relationship with his landlady. Describing her sexual advances towards him, Jerry delivers the following speech:

But I have found a way to keep her off. When she talks to me, when she presses herself to my body and mumbles about
her room and how I should come there, 
I merely say: but, Love; wasn't yesterday
enough for you, and the day before? Then
she puzzles, she makes slits of her tiny
eyes, she sways a little, and then, Peter
...and it is at this moment that I think
I might be doing some good in that tor-
mented house...a simple-minded smile begins
to form on her unthinkable face, and she
giggles and groans as she thinks about
yesterday and day before; as she believes
and relives what never happened. (p.28)

This speech clearly presents Jerry's awareness of the benefits games
and illusions can have. The game he plays with his landlady fosters
the illusion of their sexual contact: believing the illusion, the land-
lady forgets Jerry and leaves him "safe." Although Jerry is able to
play this game with his landlady, however, he is unable to find a game
which allows him to live. The game he plays with Peter about the zoo --
based upon the illusion that something really happened there -- is the
last game he plays in his attempt to relate meaningfully to another
individual. Basically, the game reflects the philosophical premise
Jerry has abstracted from other such attempts at communication, notably
from his attempt to befriend his landlady's dog. As he says:

I have learned that neither kindness
nor cruelty by themselves, independent
of each other, creates any effect beyond
themselves; and I have learned that the
two combined, together, at the same time,
are the teaching emotion. (pp.35-36)

Here the phrase "teaching emotion" is important, for it pin-points
Jerry's function in the play. In a sense he becomes a martyr, for his
death teaches, if not to Peter then certainly to the audience, the sterility and shallowness of Peter's life and values. As Baxandall states,

...Peter can no longer deny complicity...
He has been robbed of certitude about his way of life. An audience, should it include Peters, vicariously might be as shaken, as dispossessed. 24

Jerry becomes a modern-day Jeremiah who denounces the false gods of his day and attempts to teach the pillar of society ("Peter" is Greek for rock) the error of his ways. 25 To what degree Peter is affected is debatable but his final "Oh, my God," "repeated many times, very rapidly" (p.47) is a far cry from his initial "wary, but interested" "Oh?" (p.14).

Besides working to undermine the games Peter plays and to exorcise the illusions he has about life, Jerry serves another purpose in The Zoo Story. In his desperation and death, Jerry demonstrates the need for game-playing once one's reality has been acknowledged. Peter, though smugly complacent and unaware before his encounter with Jerry, is relatively happy in his apartment arrangement. It is Jerry, the aware and "liberated" individual, who is alienated and unhappy. The irony here is crucial to the play as well as to Albee's attitude towards game and

24p. 89

25Baxandall, p.86
illusion. The exorcism of Peter's illusions, the undermining of his games, leaves him in the same position that Jerry was at the beginning of the play. "Dispossessed" (p.49), he has become an "animal" (p.49); as such, he is an aware participant in the zoo which Jerry compares to life. Now, like Jerry, he must search for a Master Game which can allow him to lead a more meaningful life. That such a search is more positive than Peter's past existence is implicit in the play. That such a search will end happily is debatable.

The discomfort that Jerry causes Peter in *The Zoo Story* is crucial to Peter's awakening to the illusions he harbors about life. Such discomfort is also the play's chief dramatic effect, resulting from the audience's inability to pick the "winner" and "loser" of the piece. As in all his plays, Albee attempts to "call the shots" in order to force the audience into a theatrical adventure which will necessitate a re-evaluation of its own standards. His merging of techniques conventional to both Naturalistic theatre and Theatre of the Absurd constitutes his use of the play as a game which has as its aim and effect the audience's simultaneous involvement in and detachment from the play. Discussing the effect of *The Zoo Story*, Gerald Nelson echoes Albee's comment about audience alienation which was quoted in Chapter One of this work (p.13).

Nelson writes:

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26 The metaphor is developed late in the play. Jerry says: "I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But, if it's a zoo, that's the way it is." (pp.39-41).
A viewer likes the safety of being once removed and yet, at the same time, wants to feel himself imaginatively a part of the action -- simultaneously both involved and safe. 27

Such simultaneous feelings are related to the involvement and objectivity that Albee desires of the audience. Both are achieved by the merging of theatrical conventions and by a shifting of the audience's associations between Peter and Jerry.

Concerning this last point, Nelson points out that the audience will most probably relate to Peter at the outset of the play, he being presented as the respectable family man who is accosted by a bohemian. Tom Driver criticizes Peter's passive acceptance of Jerry as absurd, maintaining that no "sane, average-type person would be a passive spectator in the presence of behavior obviously headed toward destructive violence."

Besides being a naive appraisal of human nature, Driver's contention misses a crucial point about the play: Peter remains on the park bench for precisely the same reason the audience comes to the theatre: that is, because he is entertained by story-telling, particularly when the story-teller is very obviously his opposite. Like Nick and Honey in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Peter desires a vicarious experiencing of life which offers no personal threat. Like the audience, he wants to remain simultaneously involved and safe, a position which he initially


feels is possible with Jerry. As the play progresses, however, Peter is forced to realize that involvement with Jerry is far from safe; Jerry will not allow him to remain merely a spectator like the audience — he must actively defend himself. The audience, of course, comes to realize this as well. Rather than continue to side with Peter, however, the audience will probably relate to Jerry instead, both because, as Nelson points out, he is more interesting than Peter and because he successfully exposes Peter's superficialities. This shift in allegiances becomes important when Jerry dies at the end of the play: respectable Peter has become a murderer while bohemian Jerry has become a martyr to the cause of truth. The confusion the audience feels about the characters forces it to examine them in relation to its own values. The fact that neither Jerry nor Peter can be categorized as villain or hero reflects the moral confusion which Albee feels is characteristic of Twentieth Century life. The fact that neither character "wins" or "loses" in the play frustrates the audience's desire for a presentation of a "right" and "wrong" attitude towards life. Like the American Dream, The Zoo Story illustrates the fact that appearances are often deceptive; any initial expectations about the characters are definitely frustrated.

The frustration of expectations is crucial to the objectivity Albee desires of the audience. He alone decides the rules of his dramatic games; the audience must work to establish and reestablish these rules
as quickly as he changes them. The set of *The Zoo Story* which is simply two park benches and some "foliage, trees, sky" (p.11) offers little clue to the dramatic effect Albee desires; such an effect is almost totally dependent upon language. Although the language of *The Zoo Story* for the most part progresses naturalistically, it at times is exaggerated to the degree that it has a distancing effect upon the audience. As Markus says, "the language that the two characters engage in is... only realistic to the ears of those who are supercilious enough to think they could be so witty."29 The sarcasm of many of Jerry's remarks, the rapid banter between Jerry and Peter, Jerry's unnaturally long monologues -- all work to remind the audience that it is watching an illusion of life by intermittently interrupting the naturalistic flow of the play. This is not to say that the audience remains continually aware of the play. Rather, it has the simultaneous involvement and objectivity that Albee feels is so important. That such simultaneous response should be conditioned only by language, as opposed to the visual effects of *The Death of Bessie Smith* or the use of physical movement in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, makes the play important in Albee's repertoire.

The importance that language has in the play is immediately established by the characters' concern with words. When Jerry says "I've been walking north" (p.12), Peter replies, "I...well, no, not

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due north; but, we call it north. It's northerly" (p.13).
Within a few lines he supplies Jerry with the word "prosthesis" (itself related to speech) and Jerry asks "Do you mind if we talk?" (p.15) Shortly after this, following an acknowledgement of the cliches which mark communication — "But that's the way the cookie crumbles?" (p.16) -- Jerry delivers the speech in which he acknowledges his desire to "really talk" (p.17). What follows, however, is less like a conversation than a monologue in which Jerry interrupts his "story-telling" with short personal questions to Peter. Peter, himself, says to Jerry: "...you don't really carry on a conversation; you just ask questions" (p.19). This is important for it again suggests the desperation of Jerry's predicament. Attempting to break out of his isolation, he uses words to create his identity, to paint a picture of his existence which will communicate his despair. For this reason, his words become monologues which are unnaturally long. At the end of Jerry's monologue about his landlady's dog, Peter says, "I...I don't understand that...I don't think I...Why did you tell me this?" (p.36) His response is maddening to Jerry because it is exactly the opposite of what he desires. Jerry's use of words, rather than helping to overcome his isolation, has added to it. As Arthur Oberg writes in a penetrating article on Albee's language and imagination, "unable to 'relate'...Albee's protagonists look to language to forge whatever identity and relationships their lives have lacked."30 "Dialogue, never adequate, attempts to

30"Edward Albee; His Language and Imagination," Prairie Schooner (Spring, 1966), p.143.
surround what it would control, seeking victory in its copia and in an intensity which is related to this abundance. 31

Jerry's abundance of words, besides ironically adding to his isolation, is mainly responsible for the play's inclusion in discussions of Absurd Theatre. In a sense, the abundance is an exaggeration or magnification of human folly similar to the over- and under-reactions of the characters in The American Dream and The Sandbox. Brian Way, in an article called "Albee and the Absurd," compares Jerry's monologues to Lucky's speech in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot: both, he says, are examples of "pseudo-crisis," a convention he attributes to Theatre of the Absurd. Mr. Way writes that:

pseudo-crisis occurs when a...complex of tensions is brought to a head without resolving anything, without contributing to any development or progression, serving in fact to demonstrate that nothing as meaningful as progression or development can occur, emphasizing that complexity and tension are permanent and unresolvable elements of a world on confusion. 32

That nothing is resolved by Jerry's speech can be seen by Peter's reaction to it; that it progresses nowhere can be realized by Jerry's continued attempts to communicate. The monologue is but another example of Jerry's desperation, another example of his attempt to use words to overcome his isolation. Its lack of success suggests the ultimate inadequacy


of words, as do the final moments in the play. Peter and Jerry finally communicate, not through language, but through sheer physical contact.

Although physical contact brings about the conclusion of The Zoo Story, Jerry still comments upon the action and thereby provides the play with a verbal resolution. Such a resolution Brian Way notes is traditional to Naturalistic theatre and not to the Theatre of the Absurd. He writes about the play: "the action and the dialogue are dislocated, arbitrary and absurd...up to the moment of Jerry's death, and then all the traditional assumptions of Naturalism flood back into the play." This, he feels, has a detrimental effect for, as he says, "the slightest hint that events in an absurd play are amenable to everyday explanation is completely destructive of their dramatic effectiveness." Again, the problem with his criticism lies in his attempt to relegate The Zoo Story to the Absurd tradition. The "evasion of the absurd" which he finds unfortunate in the play has a deliberately planned effect: it forces the audience back into itself so that it can appreciate the play as a whole. The "absurdity" of Jerry's speech ceases to be important as the speech becomes real in its emotional impact. At the same time, the intensity of the death-scene is prevented from being totally involving by the

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31 Way, p. 204.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
exaggerated speeches which have preceded it. Each balances the other so that both an emotional and intellectual response to the play can occur. The merging of divergent theatrical conventions, in this play as in all of Albee's plays, allows the audience to recognize the play as a game and thereby to appreciate more fully the necessity for and the benefits of an awareness of illusion.
"In stage-play, pleasure lies in imitation, originally of external and tangible existence. By the same metaphoric road, this imitation can reach the entire breadth and depth of human emotion. The theatre and the rite meet again in such imitation..."

Benjamin Hunnigher

The theme and purpose of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is still the liberation of the self from its controlling illusions which, Albee feels, is essential to the preservation of sanity and society. The individual's establishing a workable relationship with reality depends upon his knowing what his particular reality is. Too often games are used to escape a confrontation with reality and are played without an understanding of the game and without control of the illusions the game sets up. Such is the case in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in which many of the games the characters play have ceased to serve the players and have come to dominate them instead. Such games prevent the characters from establishing communicative and fruitful relationships with others and, more importantly, inhibit their grasp of reality. Such games must be acknowledged and managed if the individual is to regain a sense of identity and reestablish control of his destiny.
Albee's technique in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is again to use games to undermine other games. This technique can be seen in both the development of the characters' relationships with one another and in the structure of the play as a whole. Although the characters often use games to escape a confrontation with reality, these games sometimes "backfire" to compel such a confrontation, particularly when they are directed by the expert game-player, George. Because George is usually aware of the games he plays, his control over them is much stronger than that of the other characters over their games. Thus, he is often able to manipulate the characters' self-protective games so that they become self-destructive ones, shattering the illusions (or false self) they have helped to perpetrate and forcing them to look truthfully at themselves and their relationships. Ironically, these games then become constructive, for in shattering the characters' illusions they provide an awareness of reality that will hopefully form the basis of more stable and productive relationships. This "backfiring" of the games becomes obvious to both characters and audience as the play progresses. "No more games,"1 Martha pleads as she begins to feel the destructive effect the games can have. Later in the play, Nick gasps "I think I understand this" (p.236), recognizing George's and Martha's most private game -- the pretense that they have

a twenty-year old child — and the significance of the "son's" death.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, as in Albee's one-act plays, the audience is never allowed to involve itself fully with the stage illusion. The typical drawing-room drama initially suggested by the realistic living-room set and the opening dialogue of George and Martha is soon undermined as the exaggerated game-playing of the characters extends itself into the form of the play. Again Albee works to blend the techniques of Naturalistic and Absurd theatre so that a degree of aesthetic distance is developed between audience and stage. The effect, similar to that of *The Zoo Story*, is the simultaneous response that allows the audience to be both involved and objective about the experience it is having. The death of the "son" that exorcises the illusions that control Martha, Nick and Honey, climaxes a play that hopefully exorcises many of the audience's illusions about contemporary American life. George's and Martha's mythical son represents The American Dream which Albee feels has become illusory and harmful, the dream that fosters the illusions of family unity, individual integrity and social honesty by ignoring the realities of family discord, individual improbity and social hypocrisy. The play anatomizes this dream, again focusing on the family unit but placing it now within a university locale. George and Martha thus become representative of the American intelligentsia as well as Mommy and Daddy of the family unit.
The sexual polarity is still between the domineering woman and the emasculated man, with the sterility, vacuity, artificiality and violence that marks their relationship being predominant concerns. The games the characters play become more subtle and more complex, befitting their academic situation, but they still reflect the same level of animalism and the same desperate need for understanding and communication and the same fear of rejection and pain that underly the games of all Albee's plays.

The basic situation of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a party, but it is a party which eventually becomes a wake. George and Martha, long-time residents of a small university society, invite Nick and Honey, newcomers to the scene, to continue at their own home a party given by Martha's father. The party continues through the night, with the constant flow of liquor and conversation quickly eating away the defenses and illusions of the foursome to expose the facts of their existence to both themselves and the audience. As the party progresses, the games George and Martha use to support their marriage become entangled with those used by Nick and Honey to support theirs. Essential to these games is the illusion that the marriage is somehow other than it is: in the case of George and Martha, the illusion is that they have a child who gives their marriage meaning; in Nick and Honey's case, the illusion is that their marriage is based on love and mutual respect. In both cases, the reality of the marriage is exposed so as to facilitate a
growth to awareness. If the characters continue to play games and create illusions, they will at least do so with full understanding of the fact. Albee does not advocate with the exorcism the dispelling of all illusion and the end of all game-playing; rather, he demonstrates the necessity for controlled game-playing, for an imaginative and creative use of illusion.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is divided into three acts which become successively shorter and more intense. Act One, "Fun and Games," sets up the situation which generates the conflicts which in turn create suspense: basic to this situation is the characters' game-playing that propels the play's action. Halfway through the act, George makes a comment to Nick which almost summarizes the action of Act One. He says "Martha and I are having...nothing. Martha and I are merely...exercising...that's all...we're merely walking what's left of our wits" (p.34). As the Act progresses, the "exercising" becomes increasingly vicious as George and Martha's feelings about each other are revealed. George has become a "bog" (p.50) in the History Department, a follower instead of a leader. His lack of ambition and aggression frustrates Martha who feels that her position as the President's daughter demands that her husband succeed both socially and financially. Martha also suggests that George is "a flop" in bed (p.189), his lack of sexual aggression and desire leaving her unsatisfied and discontent, which is why she must flirt and fornicate with other men. Gradually, however,
as the play progresses and Martha exposes more of her background and character, her accusations about George's shortcomings emerge as rationalizations of her own failures. George may have shortcomings but he, at least, admits them. Martha deliberately ignores her failure to have a child (and to fulfill herself as a woman), hiding behind the illusion that she is an "Earth Mother" (p.189), and that their childless marriage is really all George's fault. This situation is complicated by the illusory son that George and Martha have dreamed up to give their marriage some sort of support. The game involving the "son" has one definite rule: "he" must not be mentioned in public. When Martha violates this rule by discussing the "son" with Honey, she opens herself and him to attack. As Emil Roy writes: "By revealing the 'existence' of George's and her child to an outsider, and then trying to play the same game with Nick ('You be the father, I'll be the mother'), she has released George from the rules of the game." George is then free to make up a new game according to his own rules.

George's new game involving his "son" emerges in Act Two, "Walpurgisnacht," in which all the games increase in intensity and significance. The mainly verbal games of Act One now become physical and sexual acts. Martha and Nick perform a dance that imitates copulation and then retire to the bedroom to perform the act. Honey performs a

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dance of solitude and then withdraws to the bathroom to lie on the tiles and suck her thumb. George attempts to strangle Martha and then plans to murder their "son" instead. All the characters act out the fantasies they have so far only verbalized. In order to "win" over Martha and to save her tenuous grasp of reality, George creates his new game at the end of the act, deciding to kill their "son" in an automobile accident. The audience, unsure of the "son's" reality up to this point, now realizes he is definitely just a game, a monstrous illusion George and Martha have fabricated to soothe their own inadequacies. This fact is not recognized by Honey, however, who is alone with George when he concocts his new game. She, like her husband, must wait until Act Three to discover this largest game of all.

The degree to which the illusion of the son has usurped reality and gained control of Martha is realized in Act Three, "The Exorcism." Here, Martha suffers George's news of the death as the mother of a real child would. Doing so, she demonstrates the destructive effect a "backfiring" game can produce. At the same time, particularly in her quiet questioning at the end of the act, she suggests the hopelessness of a life devoid of any illusion. George reestablishes the awareness of reality that he feels Martha needs for her self-preservation. At the same time, he provides the other characters with the awareness that they need to construct a workable relationship with reality. Honey overcomes her fear of childbirth and turns to Nick as a more mature woman, forsaking her child-parent
relationship with him. Nick must face the fact that his wife knows his true reasons for marriage just as she must face the fact he knows her false ones. The couple quickly exits, leaving George and Martha to face the reality they have so desperately tried to escape: the barrenness of their marriage and the emptiness of their lives. Any new games that they play, as well as any new illusions they develop, will be used as vehicles for managing their reality, not as substitutes for it.

This brief analysis merely indicates the central importance of games and game-playing to the play's development and theme. For George and Martha, games have become their major form of intercourse, "substitutes for the real living of real intimacy." On the most superficial level are the games George and Martha play in public, the games of social discourse and action which form and support the pattern of their daily lives. In most cases, George and Martha are aware of these superficial games and are able to manage them to their advantage. Moreover, because they play these social games so regularly, they are acutely conscious of them when they are played by others, so much so that they often ridicule them as Martha does when she imitates Honey's "never mix—never worry" (p.23) and George when he parodies Nick's response to the painting (p.22). Even these games, however, can grow too large and can either gain control of the game-players or become weapons used to achieve ulterior motives. An obvious example here

is drinking, a social pastime that the couple normally uses to its advantage but which continually threatens to gain control of them and which is often used as a weapon in a type of power-play that has destructive purpose and results. For example, when Martha asks George for another drink shortly after the play begins, he says "my God, you can swill it down, can't you?" She replies, "Look, sweetheart, I can drink you under any goddamn table you want...so don't worry about me" (p.16); the power play escalates from there, bringing the couple's underlying hostilities to the surface. This movement from superficial games to games of deeper and more serious importance becomes a predominant pattern in the play and is reflected in the play's overall movement from "fun" to "exorcism." This movement is responsible for the gradually decreasing humour of the play. The initial game of mimicry that begins the play -- Martha's impersonation of Bette Davis -- eventually becomes the "total war" (p.159) that results in "murder." The irony of the play-within-a-play structure that is just suggested by Martha's impersonation of the actress ceases to be funny as Martha impersonates a mother whose imaginary son is killed by a father who plays infanticide. The effect of the traditionally comic device becomes sad, if not tragic, as the game gains control of the player and as illusion usurps reality.

The games of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? can be roughly divided into three groups: surface games, psychological games and sexual games. The surface games mainly consist of verbal witticisms -- sarcasm, puns,
euphemisms, allusions, "private jokes" (p.30), anecdotes, rhymes, songs, repeated phrases — and the dramatic games of mimicry and impersonation; they involve the social games that all four characters play and which, in many cases, exaggerate the ritualized responses and clichéd attitudes of American society that have long since ceased to have any sincerity or meaning behind them. Games of impersonation and mimicry become immediately obvious in the play. Martha's impersonation of Bette Davis gives way to her mimicking a child (p.16), a verbal game she often plays throughout the play. Within the first few moments of the play, Martha also quotes nursery rhymes — "Georgie-Porgie, put upon pie!" (p.12) — and sings the title song, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?", a word play on the name of the English novelist and the song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" She also imitates Honey's platitudes soon after her arrival (p.23) just as George imitates her giggle (p.21). George disguises his frequent attitude of condescension by putting on a parental tone with Nick (p.34). A quick glance at Albee's directions to the actors shows the degree to which impersonation of an attitude is required: "false heartiness" (p.39), "feigned incredulity" (p.39), "falsely innocent" (p.70), "feigned disdain" (p.71), "with hideously false enthusiasm" (p.66), "mock concern" (p.215), "mock awe" (p.223). Other directions Albee gives reinforce the game-playing that such language-develops: "Stretching...luxuriating...playing the game" (p.112) and "playing along" (p.113) are two examples. These dramatic games which involve role-playing and assuming a pose reach their height when the characters
openly acknowledge their role-playing by actual impersonation. Martha's "Bette Davis" is the best example but George's "messenger" (with speech reminiscent of Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*) as well as his "priest" are two others. In addition, George and Martha's vaudeville-type rendition of "I'm Nobody's Houseboy Now" (p.196) is still another type of dramatic game; so is Honey's interpretive dancing. The dance that Martha and Nick perform imitates copulation and therefore fits into this category as well.

The most obvious verbal game in the play is sarcasm, beginning early and continuing to the end. Just a glance at the first few pages of the play shows its predominence; for example, note the following jibes which George directs at Martha: "Well that was before my time..." (p.5); "What did they do...go home and get some sleep first..." (p.11); "He's a god..." (p.26). One of the most obvious and frequent uses of sarcasm in the play is George's continual reference to Martha as "Angel" and her reference to him as "Lover"; neither character deserves the epithet, Martha being far from angelic in her speech and actions and George being far removed from the typical lover. The use of euphemisms in the play also contributes to verbal game-playing. Martha's use of the words "flop" and "potential" (p.188) refers to Nick's penis and sexual performance. The euphemisms that George and Martha use for their son include "the apple of our eye," "the sprout," "you-know-what," and "the little bugger" (p.83), the latter term being an
ironic comment on the "son's" final effect of the marriage. The use of euphemisms is even openly acknowledged early in the play when George calls the toilet "the euphemism" (p.29). All these verbal games, as well as many more, combine to form much of the humor in the first part of the play as well as to keep it moving at a quick and energetic pace. Moreover, because they usually mask underlying emotions and conflicts which are in opposition to their surface meaning, they often produce irony as they expose deeper psychological and sexual games.

The psychological and sexual games played in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? are often related. Psychological games such as the power-play mentioned above — a type of "oneupmanship" — as well as games like "Humiliate the Host" (p.138) and "Get the Guests" (p.140), are usually played verbally, the game-player often using anecdotes to gain his points; for example, Martha's story of the boxing match (pp.55-57) and George's account of his "second novel" (pp.142-147) are both stories told for destructive effect. Another type of psychological game involves the parent-child relationships which the characters sometimes act out and which are again exposed by verbal games; here the characters imitate children's speech and actions, like Martha when she acts as a parent (p.15) and then as a child (p.16). Essential to these relationships is the playing of a role, about which Berne writes: "A role is something like what Jung calls persona, except that it is less opportunistic and more deeply rooted in the individual's
relationship is overtly recognized in Act Two when Martha accuses George of marrying her so that she could humiliate him and "tear him apart" (p.152). In the sexual games, and with most of the psychological ones, the game-player's control of the game is extremely tenuous. In some cases, such as Martha's involvement in the "Family" game, it is nonexistent. As George says to Martha in Act Two: "...You've moved bag and baggage into your own fantasy world now, and you've started playing variations on your own distortions..." (p.155). It is games such as these which have become harmful in their confusion of illusion and reality. It is games such as these, games in which the game-player has lost sight of his motives and check of his moves, that must be ended so that he or she can regain a grasp on reality, an awareness of illusion, and a control of future games.

This classification of games in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is helpful in examining the characters' motives in the play. Why do the characters play games at all? The answer, which should now be emerging, is for defensive and offensive reasons. On the defensive side, the characters use games to create and support illusions which help them to escape the realities of their lives; such games and illusions, when they are condously conceived and played, can be beneficial and even necessary in that they help the game-players to communicate more fully. Generally, these defensive games are surface ones, having rules accepted and known to the game-players whom they defend and unite. Often these games are repeated.
fantasies.⁴ The extent to which the role can be dominated by fantasy can be seen in Martha's "Mommy" and George's "Daddy," both being roles played in the "Family" game that involves the illusory son. In this case, Martha's belief in her role has become much greater than George's belief in his, just as her awareness of the game has become much less. For this reason, George is able to kill the "son" and terminate his role with less pain to himself. It is significant here that George finishes one role by donning another; that is, he abandons the role of "father" (as parent) only to assume the role of "father" (as priest).

Role-playing also forms the core of the child-parent relationships in the play and is often suggested by moves and actions as much as by words. Honey's thumb-sucking and foetal position on the bathroom floor, for example, reveal the role she prefers to play with Nick, as does her general attitude towards him. These roles are in turn related to and account for much of the sexual game-playing in the play. Martha the "Earth Mother" (p.189) is a sexual pose like Nick's stance as a powerful young athlete; both roles provide motivation for the sexual games of seduction and intercourse which, again, are often cloaked in verbal euphemisms and allusions. George even names such sexual games when he refers to "musical beds" (p.34) and "Hump the Hostess" (p.139). The sado-masochistic relationship of George and Martha also represents a type of role-playing that has a sexual basis. This

⁴Berne, p.45.
so regularly that they become rituals in which actions and counter-actions are expected. For example, near the beginning of the play, George says to Martha about the 'Thirties musical *Chicago*, "Well, that was probably before my time..." Martha, who is involved at the moment with her impersonation of Bette Davis, does not wish to play the game about her age that George has just begun and therefore replies "Can it! Just cut that out" (p.6). A short while later, however, George begins this game again, saying to Martha "I suppose it's pretty remarkable...considering how old you are" (p.14). Here, Martha again replies "You cut that out," but, after a pause, picks up the game, saying "You're not so young yourself." The game continues:

GEORGE: (With boyish pleasure...a chant):
I'm six years younger than you are...
I always have been and always will be.

MARTHA: (Glumly): Well...you're going bald.

GEORGE: So are you. (Pause...they both laugh) Hello, Honey. (p.15)

George's and Martha's understanding of this game and the moves it requires makes it a pleasurable game for them to play. They are in control of it and, despite its slightly competitive undertone, it binds them together in an almost tender way. George continues the game with "boyish pleasure," his-chanting of his lines indicating a known and repeated response in addition to establishing his childlike polarity with Martha. Significantly, Martha's line following this game is "C'mon over here and give
your Mommy a big sloppy kiss" (p.15). This line plays on the
tender affection that the game has generated at the same time that
it reinforces the child-parent relationship. The game, being under­
stood and controlled by the game-players, binds them together and
supports their relationship.

In the dialogue following this game, however, George fails to
respond to Martha's demands and the surface defensive game that has
united the two gives way to deeper psychological games in which Martha's
sexual needs and George's inadequacies are brought into play against each
other. The pattern of surface games developing into deeper games is
thus paralleled by a pattern in which defensive moves become offensive
ones and in which the characters lose control of their emotions. When
George fails to respond to Martha's demand for a kiss (a demand which is
representative of her general sexual demands and rejections) and drops
his boyish pose, Martha becomes upset — "Why don't you want to kiss me?"
George answers in a short speech heavy with sarcasm. Within a few lines,
Martha has switched her roles to become a child ("I'm firsty") and, still
lacking the desired response, begins to play more viciously. The episode
quickly grows out of hand as the two lose control of the game and fall prey
to their underlying feelings of competition and hostility. The door-bell
rings and Martha and George speak to each other "murderously" (p.17).
Martha discloses her domineering nature and orders George to answer the
door; initially he refuses but eventually he obeys. Doing so, he adopts
the masochistic "houseboy" role which, in many ways, he continues for the rest of the act and which Martha later tries to impose upon Nick (p.193). At the same time, however, George smiles slightly and seems to have some reserve power, as well as a fear of Martha's mental stability; he says "Just don't start on the bit, that's all" (p.18), and the largest game of all is introduced. With this introduction, the movement from public surface games to private psychological ones is complete, with sexual role-playing having developed in the progression. Moving to protect their own sexual and emotional needs, the characters have lost the tenderness which momentarily united them and have unleashed the antagonisms and the game which will push them apart.

"The bit about the kid" (p.18), Martha and George's most private game, is the most ironic and dangerous game in the play; it is therefore fitting that it is the game which always ends the game-playing patterns. Being the most important game to George and Martha, "Family" is the inevitable climax of their power-plays; their "son" is the final possible weapon each can use against the other, the "goddamn club" to which George refers in Act Three (p.225). The irony inherent in this game is that it was developed as a defensive game that would unite the couple and support their marriage, not as an offensive game that could be used to break them apart. Its change in nature and purpose suggests the constant need for an awareness of games and of the reasons for their existence. Only with such an awareness can the game-players constructively use the games to
cope with reality. Game-playing in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* leads finally to a painful awareness of reality for all the characters. Like Jerry in *The Zoo Story* or the Nurse in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, the characters must now learn to cope with their lives and relationships, accepting the facts of their existence. The creation of new games and illusions as vehicles for dealing with reality is a possible course of action. What is necessary is that the characters find games worth playing: that is, constructive and creative games which defend life and communication. The search for such games is not easy, but the awareness of the reality which necessitates such games is, in itself, a meaningful step towards them.

In considering the games played between all the characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and not just between George and Martha, defensive and offensive motives again become clear. Between the couples, defensive games are those which unite one couple against the other and offensive games are those which attempt to break up the unity of the other couple. Obviously "Get the Guests" is an offensive game; so, in a more indirect way, is "Hump the Hostess." Although these games are often played for selfish reasons, they do sometimes, as in the case of "Get the Guests," have beneficial results inherent to which is the shattering of out-of-hand illusions. Generally, the pattern of movement from surface games to deeper sexual and psychological games is adhered to as one couple or character strikes against the other. For example, the social games that Nick and Honey attempt to
play upon arriving at George and Martha's, games they use to support themselves in the new situation, are undermined by George and Martha's offensive moves. George's parody of Nick's reaction to the pointing and Martha's imitation of Honey's platitudes disconcerts the guests so that they try even harder to integrate themselves with their hosts; they express a series of reactions to Martha's father and his party (pp. 25-26) which, besides sounding artificial, luckily (for them) aggravate the rift between George and Martha and return their hosts to their own games. George then attempts to win Nick to his side but, having already ridiculed him, fails. Martha, using Honey's reaction to her father to support her own ego, picks up her role as hostess — "I want to show you the house" (p. 29). She even supplies Honey with a euphemism ("wash up") in the face of George's derision. Thus the games of offence that George and Martha have aimed at Nick and Honey reverse themselves to divide George and Martha. Martha exits with Honey, saying to George, "you burn me up" (p. 29), leaving him alone with Nick whom he has already alienated.

The surface games of condescension and derision that George has aimed at Nick and Honey he continues to play when alone with Nick. He asks Nick "What made you decide to be a teacher" (p. 31)? Nick replies "Oh... well, the same things that...uh...motivated you, I imagine." George counters with "What were they?" and undermines Nick's empty answer. When Nick tries to act condescendingly in return, George stops such action with
"Don't you condescend to me!" (p.32) He continues to toy with Nick until the young man rebels, saying:

All right...what do you want me to say? Do you want me to say it's funny, so you can contradict me and say it's sad? or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say no, it's funny. You can play that damn little game anyway you want to, you know! (p.33).

This speech is important for, besides being the first overt recognition of game-playing in the play, it clearly establishes Nick as a person aware of surface games. When in Act Three he says of George and Martha "Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what" (p.200), he shows the degree to which the games have changed since Act One and to which illusion has become confused with reality. At this point in Act Three, the games have reached their deepest, most probing level, a fact which George recognizes when he says to Nick, "Truth or illusion. Who knows the difference, eh, toots? Eh?" (p.201) The question is ironic for George has already ably demonstrated that he knows the difference, having used the story of his illusory second novel -- a story which relates the illusions surrounding Nick and Honey's wedding -- as a means of playing "Get the Guests" and exposing the truth about their marriage. Nick's ability to play surface games is no match for George's ability to play games on all levels and still to retain his grasp of reality. As George says, "I'm running this show" (p.229); he is in command of Nick and Honey
from the moment they arrive and, although it is not immediately
evident, he is equally in control of Martha, the "original game-girl"
(p.207). George is able to manipulate illusion so as to expose reality
and is able to play games so that they serve his ends. He is the only
character in the play who wins major successes over all the other
characters.

The games played between the four characters in Who's Afraid of
Virginia Woolf? become more important in Act Two in which the conflicts
established in Act One find physical expression and release. The games
are climaxed here by "Hump the Hostess" and "Get the Guests." George's
part in the game-playing becomes more and more predominant as "Humiliate
the Host" is aimed at him, "Get the Guests" is invented by him and "Hump
the Hostess" is aimed at his rehumiliation. "Bringing up Baby" in Act
Three is the final game which George initiates and it constitutes his
final "win!". In all these games George is the only character who is able
to retain a realistic perspective and who, in some cases, acknowledges his
motives and aims. In Act Two, for example, after listening to Nick's account
of his marriage to Honey, George says

You realize, of course, that I've been
drawing you out on this stuff, not be-
cause I'm interested in your terrible
lifehood, but only because you repre-
sent a direct and pertinent threat to
my lifehood, and I want to get the goods
on you. (p. 111)
Later he says "I mean...I've warned you...you stand warned" (p.111). Thus, George lays the ground-rules for the game of "Get the Guests" that eventually ensues. He invites defensive action, so to speak, in his attack on the guests; such action makes the game more meaningful, as well as possible, for it invariably exposes new weaknesses that can be exploited in combat. For the same reason, George prods Martha to anger before he begins the final game of "Bringing up Baby." As he says, "An equal battle, baby; that's all" (p.209). In the case of the earlier game, Nick offers little resistance beyond a pleading "Please...please don't (p.145) and "Why?" (p.146) Honey, who is dominated by the illusion that her husband married her for love and not because of her hysterical pregnancy and wealth, ironically pushes George to relate the plot of his "second novel." Completely unaware of the game, she is completely vulnerable. As she comes to realize that the woman of the story is really herself, she is forced to recall her past and to face the fact that Nick has divulged the facts of their marriage to near-strangers. Her illusions, past and present, are thus exposed to public and her reality-confrontation provoked. It is significant that she quickly exits the room in a state of panic; the foetal position she assumes on the bathroom floor suggests her final attempt to withdraw from reality and to escape back to the security and protection of the womb. Nick, realizing the extent to which George will carry his offensive games and the degree to which he is master of them, says simply "You shouldn't have done that...you shouldn't have done that at all" (p.148). The game has had a destructive effect, probing beneath the
exterior of Nick and Honey's marriage to expose Honey's fears and illusions along with Nick's opportunism. George answers Nick's statement with a curt "I hate hypocrisy."

George's statement to Nick brings up a question which is central to the whole play: what are George's motives for playing "Get the Guests" and "Bringing up Baby," the two most important games in the play? Obviously George's loathing of hypocrisy is not the only reason he plays "Get the Guests"; he is, in part, retaliating for their playing "Humiliate the Host." Although the results of "Get the Guests" are ultimately positive, in that the dispelling of illusions prepares the way for a more productive and honest marriage between Nick and Honey, this positive result is probably not George's intent. His game of offence is more probably played to defend his own pride which has suffered a crushing blow at the hands of Martha, Nick and Honey at the end of Act One. In warning Nick that he is a "direct and pertinent threat," George demonstrates his fear as well as his control of the younger man, an archetypal "comic" situation. When this warning is ignored, George is freed to attack without responsibility for the results. Furthermore, when George's attempts to "communicate" (p.116) with Nick are repelled, George is given additional motivation for attacking the young man: like Jerry in The Zoo Story, George perhaps realizes that the only way to reach Nick (Peter) is to hurt him. Later, when Nick and Martha begin their game of seduction (pp.130-134) and Martha resumes the humiliating story-telling by which she engaged the guests at the end of Act One, George is given further
motivation for a destructive game of retaliation. The fact that
Martha relates her story about George's novel while she is dancing with
Nick necessarily involves the young man in the ridiculing game; he, in
turn, plays the game with zest, mocking George with lines like "He will
not be made mock of, for Christ's sake" (p.136). Honey, who is "beside
herself with glee" (p.136), also participates in the ridicule, completely
losing herself to the game; when George finally attempts to strangle
Martha, she yells wildly "Violence! Violence!" (p.137) Although Martha
is the basic cause of George's humiliation, it is perhaps natural that
he should now strike out against Nick and Honey who are her willing
accomplices and who have given him sufficient ammunition to support the
game of "Get the Guests." This ammunition is mainly composed of the
illusions which Nick has indirectly and directly revealed to him. Besides
the illusion of pregnancy that Honey used to trick Nick into marriage, her
illusion about Nick's love and respect for her has been revealed and provides
excellent area for attack. In addition, Nick's illusions about himself
expose vulnerabilities that George can use to hurt him. The fact that
Nick ignores George's warning shows Nick's feelings of invulnerability and
control which are sadly amiss; he is neither the strong and potent athlete
nor the emotionally detached scientist that he would have himself and
others believe. This becomes clear as he watches George strip away Honey's
illusions and when he later fails to rise to Martha's sexual demands. In
effect, George "communicates" with Nick by exaggerating the illusions upon
which Nick's marriage and life are based into the "allegory" (p.142) of his illusory second novel which, ironically, points out the reality of Nick's marriage. Thus illusion is used to destroy illusion just as game is used to undermine game. The games that Nick and Honey have played to support their marriage "backfire" to become an exorcism in which they must confront reality. In demonstrating the hypocrisy of Nick and Honey's marriage, George revenges himself and asserts his power over the group.

In considering "Bringing up Baby," a game similar to "Get the Guests" in that it uses illusion to destroy illusion, game to undermine game, one realizes that George's motives become more complex. Following "Get the Guests," the game of "Hump the Hostess" takes place, and Nick and Martha retire to the bed, leaving George and Honey to their mutual isolation in the living-room. Earlier in Act Two, George has replied to Martha's question "You give up?" by saying "No...no. It's just I've got to figure out some new way to fight you, Martha. Guerilla tactics, maybe...internal subversion...I don't know. Something." (p.125). These "guerilla tactics" perhaps apply to "Get the Guests" which has had the effect of damaging Martha's "forces" -- i.e., Nick and Honey -- from within; they could also apply, however, to "Bringing up Baby," Martha's illusion about her son being an internal game that she plays with herself as much as with anyone else. In both cases, George's motive appears to be revenge for the humiliation he has suffered at Martha's hands, first through "Humiliate the Host" and then through "Hump the Hostess"; to
retaliate, he must hurt Martha, must strike beneath her surface—defensive games to reach the marrow inside the bone (p.213). As George says to Martha near the end of Act Two: "I've got to find some way to really get at you" (p.156). Although this motive is the most obvious one for George's actions, another one appears near the end of Act Two which is more relevant to game-playing in the play. George says to Martha, "Actually, I'm rather worried about you. About your mind" (p.156). This comment, following the speech in which he claims Martha has moved "bag and baggage" into her own "fantasy world" (p.155), suggests his awareness of Martha's tenuous grasp of reality and his fear for her sanity. Having already proven himself to be an arch game-player whose control of games matches his awareness of illusion, George realizes Martha's lack of control in the "Family" game and the dangerous confusion of illusion and reality that has prompted her to mention their "son" in public. The game must be stopped before it becomes more real to Martha and thus more dangerous; because the game has already become so real, it can only be terminated by another game -- the pretence that the son has been killed. When this game is played in Act Three, the reality of the illusion to Martha raises the game to a profoundly serious and psychological level. The "son" has in fact become the demon in possession of Martha who must be exorcised for her own good. In killing the "son," George thus saves Martha at the same time as he revenges himself. This double effect parallels the ultimate effects of "Get the Guests"; the
destruction of illusion for Martha, Nick and Honey prepares the way for a more workable relationship with reality.

Although the ending of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is ambiguous in that it lacks definite statements which can be used to predict George and Martha's future, the parallels between "Get the Guests" and "Bringing up Baby" suggest that Martha, like Honey, is now better able to cope with her marriage in that she now sees her marriage as it really is. Through the dispelling of illusion, Nick and Honey have moved closer together: Honey says "I want a child" (p.222). Ironically, this line follows Martha's recitation of "Our son" (p.216), a series of speeches in which Martha describes the birth and childhood of her "son" in a romantic and idealistic way. This series is climaxed by a speech which illustrates Martha's illusions about herself and her position in her marriage as well as her dangerous subservience to the son-illusion. She says:

And as he grew...and as he grew...oh! so wise!...he walked evenly between us...(She spreads her hands)...a hand out to each of us for what we could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love...and these hands, still, to hold us off a bit, for mutual protection, to protect us all from George's...weakness...and my...necessary greater strength...to protect himself...and us. (p.222)

Ironically, the illusory picture that Martha paints about the family relationship is the one which induces Honey to forget her fear of childbirth
and to express her maternal desire. The irony is accentuated by George's line "There's a real mother talking" (p. 222). Yet, in effect, this line is true, for Martha has come to feel for her illusions as a mother would for her real child; just prior to this line, George's saying "All truth being relative" acknowledges the truth of Martha's feelings for the "son" and demonstrates the real proportions that "son" has assumed in Martha's mind. Because the "son" has become a truth, he must die: any truth so relative to private context, so unable to withstand public exposure, must be destroyed once it has been revealed, otherwise it will destroy the believer.

That Martha believes in the "son," she herself states when she says near the end of the play:

> I FORGET! Sometimes...sometimes when it's night, when it's late, and... everybody else is...talking...I forget and I...want to mention him... (p. 237)

Here, of course, Martha is also referring to the rule that the "son" must not be publicly mentioned; but that she can forget this rule means that she can and does forget that she is merely playing a game. When Martha later asks "You had to?" in reference to the "murder," George replies "It was... time" (p. 240). He follows with "It will be better." Hopefully, George and Martha will be able to unite in a more positive way, like Honey and Nick. Before exiting, the latter couple speak to each other hesitantly, Nick
saying "I'd like to..." (p.238), probably referring to Honey's earlier line "I want a child." George's destructive game has had the constructive effect of uniting the couple without the aid of illusions; hopefully the game he has won over Martha will have the same outcome. Martha asks George "Just...us?" and he replies "Yes" (p.241); he then asks "Are you all right?" and Martha says "Yes. No." The lines suggest that George and Martha will attempt to live without illusions, at least without illusions as large and demanding as a son; because of this, Martha is frightened. The title song that George finally sings now upsets Martha, the word play on Virginia Woolf and the big bad wolf representing Martha's fear of and vulnerability to her barren and lonely reality. She has been forced to remember both the proportion and cause of her illusion and to face the facts of her existence: her life looms before her like a hungry wolf. What will she do now? George has already given the most positive answer:

You just rearrange your alliances...
You just pick up the pieces where you can...you just look around and make the best of things...you scramble back up on your feet. (p.149)

To what degree Martha will need and use further games and illusions to support her existence is debatable; but that she will remember her reality is not.
The conclusion of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in which Martha acknowledges her fear of "Virginia Woolf" provides an effective end to game-playing in that it indicates both the cause and effect of games: in the play, games lead the characters both away from and back to reality. For Martha, "Virginia Woolf" suggests the reality of her life and for this reason she is afraid: the "wolf," stripped of illusion has the capacity to devour her. Obviously Martha has been dependent upon illusion and games because she needs the two to live. She is the type of individual about whom Berne writes:

> These people's psychic stability is so precarious, and their positions so tenuously maintained, that to deprive them of their games may plunge them into irreversible despair and even psychosis. Such people will fight very hard against any antithetical moves. 5

He goes on to say that in some marriages the destruction of games and illusions may benefit one spouse while it leads to deterioration of the other. This is perhaps the case with George and Martha, George being more able to live without games and illusions than his wife. This is not to say, however, that Martha will not be able to control her games once she accepts the reality that prompts them. Her line near the beginning of Act Three, although spoken lightly, makes serious comment on her game-playing. Nick says "You're all crazy: nuts" (p.187) and Martha replies:

5Berne, p.61.
For Martha, the reality of her existence — her meaningless life and barren marriage — is more unreal than the "truth" of such illusions as her son. Such truths are her refuge from the "nothing" that George mentions in Act One — "Martha and I are having...nothing. Martha and I are merely...exercising..." (p.33). The nothing of her existence is what Martha cannot accept, the reality which is unreal in its emptiness and isolation. If her games were used as vehicles to manage this reality rather than as substitutes for it, the games could become beneficial. As Berne writes:

> ...games are integral and dynamic components of the unconscious life-play, or script, of each individual; they serve to fill in the time while he waits for the final fulfillment, simultaneously advancing the action. 6

If Martha could accept this fact and use her games as conscious time-fillers, her position would be stabilized. Her line to George in Act Three, "Truth and illusion, George, you don't know the difference" (p.202), applies more to herself and makes an ironic comment on George's function in the play. His reply, "No; but we must carry on as though we did"

6Berne, 62.
relates to his later line "All truth being relative" (p.222). George realizes and accepts the unreality of reality and the truth implicit in the creative use of illusion; he is thus able to "carry on" by managing his games and controlling his illusions. Following her exorcism, Martha, hopefully, will be able to do the same.

The use of "Virginia Woolf" in the pun that becomes symbolic of Martha's fear of reality suggests a point which leads into a discussion of the play's structure and Albee's techniques: this is, the relation of "story" and "fiction" to game-playing. A major criticism of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is the improbability of Nick and Honey's remaining at George and Martha's, an improbability which Driver compares to Peter's remaining with Jerry in The Zoo Story. Driver asks: "Why doesn't Nick...take his young wife and go home when he sees George and Martha want only to fight the whole night through?" The answer involves the spectator-player relationship that George and Martha immediately establish with Nick and Honey. The latter couple remains for the same reason that Peter remains with Jerry and that the audience remains in the theatre: that is, to watch someone else play games. As Nick says to George shortly after arriving: "...you two...you and your wife...seem to be having some sort of a..." (p.33); here, "battle" would be an appropriate noun for Nick to have used. Moreover, it is a battle which involves

suspense. Earlier, George has said to Martha in front of Nick and Honey, "Just don't shoot your mouth off...about...you-know-what" (p.29); the effect of this on Nick and Honey is the same as the effect of his earlier line -- "Just don't start in of the bit" (p.18) -- on the audience or Jerry's line to Peter -- "You'll read about it in the papers tomorrow, if you don't see it on your TV tonight" (The Zoo Story, p.15); that is, the couple's interest and curiosity is aroused, like their desire for vicarious experience which is openly acknowledged when Honey yells "Violence! Violence!" (p.13) as she watches George attempt to strangle Martha. George and Martha set up two major components of drama -- i.e., suspense and conflict -- by their elaborate game-playing and thereby involve their guests just as they do the audience. Their games of mimicry and impersonation add to the drama of the situation at the same time that they propel the action. Nick and Honey become integral to their games as does an audience to a play, a fact which is emphasized in the "exorcism" where Nick and Honey become the necessary spectators in the ritual and Nick even participates in the process. Albee's stage directions in this scene state: "Nick rises, grabs hold of Martha, pins her arm behind her back" (p.232). As Martha screams, Nick "holds on," becoming a physical symbol of the son-demon in possession of Martha. When the "son" is exorcised, George says to Nick "Let her go" (p.233) and he does so, his role in the ritual completed. Nick and Honey, like the audience have been led from being mere spectators of simple surface games to being participants in the serious ritual of exorcism.
The position of Nick and Honey as spectators of George and Martha's games is developed in the play by the use of the anecdotes, stories, songs and jokes that constitute the surface games: all provide the guests with the substitutes for reality that they seek. Ironically, the illusions that these games usually set up often contain a truth from which the characters are trying to escape. Such is the case with both George's first and second "novels"; the story-line of each novel contains a truth which is used to hurt one of the characters. Martha, in outlining George's first novel, acknowledges this fact when she describes George's confrontation with her father. At that time, George apparently said "No, Sir, this isn't a novel at all...this is the truth...this really happened...to ME!" (p.137) This line gains significance when George relates the story of his "second novel" and exposes the truth about Nick and Honey's marriage. In this second case, the line could be changed to "This isn't a novel at all...this is the truth...this really happened...to NICK and HONEY!" In both cases, the "fiction" of the story form has its basis in fact, and the illusions it sets up and describes become real as they are used as vehicles of communication. Similarly, the "lies" of both George and Martha's "Baby" narrative in Act Three are real or truthful in their effect. Martha continually yells "Lies! Lies!" (pp.225-226) while George describes their "son's" reactions to Martha's attentions; in reality, Martha is correct for George's statements are illusory; but in the context of the situation -- in the "reality" of the illusion -- the lies are truths
in their relevance to the marriage and their effect upon Martha's mother-role. The lies become truths as they are used to frighten and hurt another character.\(^8\) For the audience, the irony here is threefold. First of all, the lies are lies in that they are part of the dramatic illusion; yet they are truths in so far as this illusion is accepted. Secondly, the lies are lies in that they refer to the son-illusion; yet they are truths in so far as this illusion has relative truth. Thirdly, the lies may be lies that George is creating within the "Family" game; or they may be truths that he perceives about Martha's character. In all cases, the lies serve to involve the audience in the game-playing just as Nick and Honey are involved, confusing truth and illusion to the degree that illusion can be used to destroy itself, as game is used to destroy game.

The parallelism between Nick and Honey and the audience gains added significance when it is realized that Nick and Honey's roles as spectators are representative of their general attitude towards life: they do not take part, rather watch the games and actions of other and use them as substitutes for "the real living of real intimacy."\(^9\) As Nick says early in the play, "...I don't like to...become involved...in other people's affairs" (p.34). Later, with reference to this statement, George says, "I know you like to...preserve your scientific detachment in the

\(^8\)The thematic similarity of this scene and the one between the Nurse and the Intern in The Death of Bessie Smith (discussed on pages 39 and 40 of this work) is noteworthy in that it suggests the consistency of Albee's belief in the truth that illusion can achieve.

\(^9\)Berne, p.18.
face of -- for lack of a better word -- life..." (p.100). To what degree Albee considers the audience to be similar to Nick and Honey can only be surmised; because of the parallelism developed in the play, however, it is logical to assume that Albee feels that the audience suffers from the same desire for vicarious experience as Nick and Honey, the desire nourished by the stories and anecdotes in the play, indeed, by the play itself. This perhaps results from similar fears and vulnerabilities. Honey's admission in Act Two -- "I'm afraid! I don't want to be hurt...PLEASE!" (p.176) -- is a direct cause of her lack of real involvement with Nick. She preserves her detachment from a reality that might be painful by adopting a child-role which is the direct counterpart of Martha's mother-role. Her fears of changing this role and thus becoming vulnerable are similar to the audience's fears which Albee implies when he says:

the audience wants to see the status quo, wants to be entertained rather than disturbed, wants to be comforted....

Ironically, the dramatic illusion of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* points out truths about American life which the audience is possibly trying to escape: the meaninglessness that prompts games and illusions as well as the hypocrisy, artificiality and violence that marks so many of these games. The play works to dispel the audience's illusions just as

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the games within the play work to dispel the characters' illusions. The content of the play is thus extended by its form.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee extends the game-playing of the characters into the form of the play by using various techniques which, as in his one-act plays, constitute his use of the play as a game. Central to these techniques is the audience's desire to "pick a winner" in the play, an idea which was discussed in relation to *The Zoo Story* in Chapter Two. Unable to either pick a winner or to delineate hero or villain in a play, the audience is prevented from "calling the shots" and is therefore disturbed. Moreover, the confusion the audience encounters can only be overcome by its consideration of the characters and their problems in relation to its own values. Albee purposely develops such a confusion in order to put the audience into itself, to force it into "a kind of adventure in the theatre."\(^{11}\) Too often the theatre-games of drawing-room dramas like *Life with Father* (an adaptation of the novel by Clarence Day) are used to escape this reality rather than to understand and cope with it; as such, these games foster illusions which are similar in purpose to the illusions the characters use in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They are used as escape-routes from reality. It is games such as these which develop and support the "peachy-keen" illusions of American life that Albee feels are so dangerous to productive and worthwhile development, ignoring as they do the

\(^{11}\) Albee, *Atlantic*, p.65.
violence, discord, hypocrisy and decay that he sees as basic American realities. By undermining such theatre games and forcing the audience to undergo a theatre adventure which leaves it uneasy, disturbed and questioning, Albee hopes to teach as well as to entertain, to provide the awareness of reality that is a necessary prelude to constructive change and growth.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the audience is prevented from "picking a winner" just as it is in *The Zoo Story*. Although George finally "wins" over Martha, his victory is an ugly one; in effect, he is a "murderer," murdering his "son" just as he "murdered" his own parents. If the audience is to accept the shattering of the son-illusion as constructive and thereby to choose George as the hero of the play, it must also accept the necessity of reality-confrontation and the danger of uncontrolled game-playing. This is a lot to expect of an audience that "wants to see the status quo" maintained. More likely the audience will accept the revenge motive for George's actions and feel pessimistic about Martha's final position in the play. Indeed, some may feel at the conclusion of the play that George is the villain, having destroyed Martha's illusions for his own selfish motives and having pushed her over the edge of sanity to the point that she has become frightened, inarticulate and withdrawn.

This possible reaction is prepared for throughout the play by George and Martha's continual bickering in which Martha's statements often appear
to be as clear-headed as George's. This is particularly noticeable in Act Two in the scene in which the couple declares "total war" (p.159). Here, Martha's speeches provide sympathetic motives for many of her actions; they also demonstrate her feelings about her marriage. For example, she says:

"You know what's happened, George? You want to know what's really happened? (Snaps her fingers) It's snapped, finally. Not me...it. The whole arrangement. You can go along...forever, and everything's...manageable. You make all sorts of excuses to yourself...you know...this is life...the hell with it...maybe tomorrow he'll be dead...maybe tomorrow you'll be dead...all sorts of excuses. But then, one day, one night, something happens...and SNAP! It breaks. And you just don't give a damn anymore. I've tried with you, baby...really, I've tried." (p.157)

The effect of this speech is to put Martha in a sympathetic position and to suggest that her view of her marriage is not as befuddled as it later appears. This effect is emphasized in Act Three in which Martha admits to Nick "there is only one man in my life who has ever...made me happy" (p.189) -- "George: my husband" (p.190). When Nick disbelieves this, she asks "You always deal in appearances?" (p.190) This line illustrates Martha's consideration of the relationship between illusion and reality by demonstrating her recognition of the fact that reality is often illusory; contrary to appearances, George has been able to satisfy Martha. This line, as well as
Martha's line about game-playing in her following speech (p.191), can be used to support the argument that George's "murder" "wasn't needed" (p.237). On the other hand, George's speech during the "total war" scene, particularly the one about Martha's "fantasy world" (p.155), gives support to George's actions and makes him more than a selfish villain. In reply to Martha's "snap" speech, George verbalizes his stand and gives another perspective on Martha's argument. He says:

Once a month, Martha! I've gotten used to it...once a month and we get misunderstood Martha, the good-hearted girl underneath the barnacles, the little Miss that the touch of kindness'd bring to bloom again. And I've believed it more times than I want to remember, because I don't want to think I'm that much of a sucker. (pp.157-158)

The effect of both George and Martha's speeches is to confuse the audience to the same degree that Nick and Honey are confused and involved. Nick's later line "I don't know when you people are lying, or what" (p.200) is probably echoed by the audience. Such a confusion is constructive for it demands that the audience consider George's and Martha's situation at more than a superficial level. The audience cannot immediately believe what George and Martha say and must consider more than the mere "reality" of their words. In necessitating such consideration, Albee demonstrates one of the major themes of the play: namely, that reality and illusion are both present and intertwined in life. Moreover, because the whole play is itself an
illusion, Albee implies that man has only illusion with which to reconstruct his sense of reality.

The confusion surrounding George's and Martha's motives in the play, a confusion which prevents the audience from "calling the shots," is furthered when one considers George's emasculation and Martha's aggressive sexuality. It can be argued, as Gerald Nelson does, that George and Martha become two halves of the same person. Nelson writes:

> What Albee does..., while making George and Martha different physically, is to make them homosexual psychologically. The tension of psychological opposition is gone in George and Martha, they are the same man in different bodies. 12

Nelson argues that Martha takes over Jerry's position from The Zoo Story, battling George as Jerry battles Peter. Although this argument is wrong and should, if used at all, be reversed, Nelson's point about the homosexual psychology of George and Martha is valid; moreover, his statement that his psychology has an alienating effect on the audience supports the idea that Albee uses the play as a game. The audience, as Nelson points out, sees George and Martha and wants a fight between a man and a woman as tradition has led it to expect one, i.e., a battle between the sexes. In the play, however, the couple is not competitive as man versus woman (in the manner of Katherine versus Petruchio) or even as man versus man (Anthony versus

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12"Edward Albee and his well-made plays," Tri-Quarterly, no.5 (Spring, 1967), p,186.
Brutus) but as man versus himself. George and Martha "use the same weapons against each other and there is no question of George regaining his manhood, but only of his destroying Martha's."³⁰ Although George does finally assert his control over Martha, he spends much of his time playing the subservient role typical of the "hen-pecked" husband. The audience's expectations are thereby frustrated; Albee affects the distance that will allow the audience to become intellectually involved with George and Martha's situation. He demands that his audience consider the characters from various vantage-points and work with a range of emotions running from the comic to the tragic; the effect is to simulate the complexity and confusion that often predominates human relationships, a complexity and confusion that is usually marked by elaborate game-playing.

Albee's use of the play as a game is also seen in his mixing of theatrical techniques which attempts simultaneously to involve and distance the audience. Just as the audience is prevented from "picking a winner" by having both George and Martha appeal to its sympathies, the audience is prevented from placing the play within a definite dramatic tradition by Albee's deliberate fusion of the techniques of Naturalistic and Absurd theatre. The combination undermines the realism of the stage illusion and prevents the audience from the suspension of disbelief that might inhibit its intellectual understanding of the play. Moreover, the fusion is a

direct formal extension of one of the play's major themes, i.e., the necessity for an awareness of illusion. This is not to say that Albee does not desire intermittent emotional involvement with the characters and with the illusion of reality which both he and they construct; such involvement is necessary if only that it may be undermined. The confusion of illusion and reality in life and the "relative truth" of many illusions are themes that the play carefully develops. By alternately becoming involved and distanced from the stage illusion, the audience is forced to appreciate these themes in relation to itself, experiencing the "reality" that illusions can achieve. Furthermore, the desire for a vicarious experiencing of life which the audience shares with Nick and Honey is exposed as the audience is reminded that the "life" it experiences in the theatre is only an illusion, a form of substitute for life outside the theatre. The play can thus be seen as a game which is a larger version of the games it contains. The audience, then, is as much a "player" as any of the characters.

Because a degree of belief in the stage illusion is required in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the play is placed within a one-room set that is in the Naturalistic tradition. Also, for this reason, the characters are developed as "real" people and not as caricatures as they are in The American Dream. As Emil Roy writes:

14 This idea receives physical representation in Tiny Alice in which the room constructed by the stage set is identical to a room in the model house sitting in the set.
The drinking, vomiting and sexual obsession; the allusions to disease, insanity, and animalism; and the highly colloquial, profane, and specific language all place Albee in the naturalistic mainstream of Williams and O'Neill. 15

Another interesting fact about Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is its observance of the Aristotelian unities of Time, Place and Action. The action in the play takes place within one room and is restricted to, approximately, a four-hour period beginning, as George notes, "after two o'clock in the morning" (p.10) and continuing through to dawn. Albee even introduces a Messenger (the cable-boy, Crazy Billy, whom George pretends has made a call) and has the murder of the "son" -- i.e., his "accident" -- occur off-stage in the best Greek tradition. In addition, Albee uses many scenes which are conventional to the Naturalistic tradition; for example, George's eavesdropping scene (p.165); the paired couple's betrayal of each other (Martha betrays George to Nick, Nick betrays Honey to George). Furthermore, the play-within-a-play technique that is developed by the characters' game-playing is a convention long traditional to comedy. Related to this, the playing of roles in the play is a type of masquerade -- i.e., a donning of social masks -- that is also traditional to comedy. This convention, however, like all the others that give the play its "realistic" appearance, is used for a different purpose and to a different effect than it is in its traditional context.16 It is used to undermine itself and the

16 See page 68.
type of "family" play with which it is associated. The "realistic" techniques of the play are used only to involve the audience with the dramatic illusion to the degree that the audience can be jarred out of it. The "jarring," produced by the introduction of "interruptive" devices conventional to Absurd and Epic Theatres, has the effect of upsetting the audience by forcing it to notice the dramatic illusion. Albee changes the rules of the dramatic game in order to draw attention to it. The technique is fitting, for besides drawing attention to the relationship between illusion and reality, it necessitates the audience's involvement with the issues the play presents.

Basically, the interruptive devices of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? result from the exaggerated game-playing of the characters. George's entrance with the toy shotgun that contains a parasol is an attention-eliciting game; but until George pulls the trigger, no one, least of all the audience, realizes this. Honey's reaction to the incident is typical of the feelings, if not the actions, of many in the audience. She "screams...rises"; after the parasol "blossoms," she "screams again, and mostly from relief and confusion" (p.57). Her confusion here is a logical reaction to George's illogical action. George and Martha are having a bitter argument in which Martha is humiliating George beyond endurance. George's entrance with a

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17The term is borrowed from Eric Bentley who, discussing Epic Theatre, writes: "the playwright...brings back choric commentary by introducing narrators, songs, soliloquies and other "interruptive" devices." See The Playwright As Thinker (New York: World Publishing Co., 1955), p.217.
gun, though melodramatic, is not anticipated as a joke. Then, when it becomes obvious that it is only "in fun," it becomes unfunny again as it is recognized as symptomatic of underlying hostilities. This "confusion" also accompanies the interruptive devices in the play. For example, George's entrance with the snap-dragons in Act Three, an entrance which Albee describes as "almost manic," is confusing in its "unrealistic" suddenness. The banging chimes which precede George's entrance strike the jarring interruptive note which the sequence develops. The bizarre quality of the incident in which George first speaks with the "hideously cracked falsetto" (p.195) of a flower-peddler, then with the embarrassed hesitancy of an adolescent, is complicated by George's deliberate reference to Nick as his son (whom he has already decided is dead), by Martha's reference to Nick as the houseboy, and by George and Martha's rendition of "I'm nobody's houseboy now" (p.195). The effect of the incident which takes place in a matter of minutes is more "absurd" than "realistic," illustrating the exaggerated degree to which George and Martha play their games. It undermines the stage illusion by interrupting the pace and flow of "realistic" action and dialogue that has involved the audience; the audience is suddenly forced to re-examine the situation and to re-establish the nature of the stage illusion.

The snap-dragon incident is continued by other techniques that are characteristic of Absurd Theatre; that is, by the illogical juxtaposition
of dialogue and action and an incongruous attention to irrelevant detail. The interruptive and confusing nature of the incident is maintained as George and Martha become absorbed in a dialogue about the moon: George insists there is a moon out and Martha insists there is not. Although the dialogue has significance in that it relates to the question of illusion and reality — George says "You must not call everything a lie, Martha" (p.199) and suggests the "truth" of the accident he is planning to relate -- it is completely illogical at the moment and is funny because of this. In its effect, it resembles much of the dialogue in the first act of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Just as the inhabitants of the small town in the latter play become unduly concerned with the horn or horns on the rhinoceros' heads, George and Martha become unduly concerned about a detail which they could just as soon determine as debate. The incongruity of the situation, as well as the illogical development of the ideas, continues the confusion of the interruptive device and momentarily changes the "realistic" situation into an "absurd" one. The incident reaches its climax when "George swoops down, picks up the bunch of snapdragons, shakes them like a feather duster in Nick's face" (p.201) and then proceeds to throw the flowers "spear-like," (p.203) about the room. The snap-dragons thus become physical symbols of the spear-like power that the word "snap" has assumed since Martha's use of it in Act Two (p.157). Following this, the absurdity of the situation subsides, having been pushed to its extreme (i.e., action extending dialogue). The audience is quickly redrawn into the stage illusion, but
this illusion has now become more exaggerated and emotional as a result of the Absurd technique. The characters have become more hysterical, "manic," to use Albee's term. Martha has become frightened by George's appearance and anticipatory of what is to follow; she says "I don't like what's going to happen" (p.206). The interruptive nature of the snap-dragon scene has prepared the audience for both the intellectual and emotional impact of this game. The scene has had the double effect of first undermining the stage illusion and temporarily alienating the audience and then intensifying the action and elevating the "reality" of the illusion to a more hysterical pitch.\(^1\)

Although a discussion of Absurd techniques in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is necessary for an understanding of the way in which the play "works" such a discussion is not meant to refute the reality that the play constructs for the audience. On the contrary, a discussion of Albee's fusion of techniques attempts to explain the amazing impact that the play achieves, an impact that has intellectual depth as well as emotional intensity. Albee's fusion of techniques is responsible for this impact, heightening the realism of the dramatic illusion by the use of techniques that strive to express "the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought."\(^2\) Albee is not writing for the Theatre of the Absurd in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The intensifying of the action again suggests the similarity of Albee's dramatic aesthetic to that of Ionesco who has written: "I try to bring about a progression by a kind of progressive condensation of states of mind, of a feeling, a situation, an anxiety...The text is merely a prop, a pretext for this intensification." Quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), p.131.

\(^1\)Esslin, p.XX.
Woolf, but he is using techniques associated with it, as well as techniques associated with Epic Theatre, to increase the effect of his play. And, as Emil Roy writes,

That Albee should fuse the conventions...in a uniquely original way is in itself a traditional accomplishment. This merger of divergent conventions into an original, coherent work of art seems to be a peculiar distinction of American drama at its best. 20

The merger of divergent conventions in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is most noticeable in Act Three. Here the use of church ritual within the middle-class American living-room prompts Elizabeth Phillips to write:

"Absurdity reaches its lowest depth...redeemed from intolerable blasphemy only by the validity of its psychological purpose." 21 Miss Phillips is wrong in saying that absurdity reaches its "lowest depth" in this scene; on the contrary, it reaches its highest level, elevating the play to the degree that it becomes a rite, alienating the audience by the use of a ritual out of its accepted context (making it thus an obvious and macabre game) and, at the same time, involving the audience by appealing to it in a non-rational and non-discursive way. Ritual, particularly as it is practiced in the Roman Catholic church, appeals to the participant's desire for non-intellectual involvement; the participant surrenders as much to the sound of the ritual

20"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? And the Tradition," p.27.
chant and to the recognized movements of the Priest as to the meaning of the words or the symbolic significance of the action. The use of ritualistic effects such as chants which involve repetition and rhyme as well as movement and action which is stylized to the point of dance has become a major technique of such Absurd plays as Anne Jellicoe's *The Sport of My Mad Mother*. To a less obvious degree, many of the exchanges in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* have a ritualistic effect that results from their rhyming nature and their frequent repetition. For example, note the following exchange between Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*:

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ESTRAGON: Let's go.
VLADIMIR: We can't.
ESTRAGON: Why not?
VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot. 22
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That ritual should be used in the "exorcism" scene of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is particularly effective for it involves the audience with Martha's problem at the same time that it distances the audience from the same problem. Moreover, it is fitting that ritual, a technique of Absurd Theatre, should be used to exorcise the son-illusion which is the basic absurdity of the play, an absurdity based on "the assumption that George and Martha could have concealed their secret for over twenty years." 23

23 Roy, pp.32-33.
Within the stage illusion, such an absurdity, which is no more odd that Oedipus' famous complex or Lear's world-weariiness, ceases to be important when the dialogue and action become real in their impact. When, however, as in this scene, a device is used which is obviously not real to the situation, the effect is to emphasize the illusions upon which the play is based and to heighten the grotesque absurdity that such illusions constitute. George is not a priest: his quoting the Dies Irae while Martha frantically asserts the actuality of their "son's" forces the audience to realize that Martha is not a mother and to grasp the painful irony that many of her lines consequently have. Just as game destroys game and illusion shatters illusion, absurdity indicates absurdity. This becomes most obvious when Martha demands to see the telegram that brought the news of her "son's" death. She says, "Show me the telegram!" and George replies "I ate it" (p. 234). The absurdity of his line accentuates the absurdity of the situation and alienates the audience to the degree that it can appreciate the multiple ironies that are occurring. George did not eat the telegram because there was no telegram; the irony is that Martha knows this but cannot acknowledge it without admitting that there was no "son" either. Nick, who is still unaware of the "family" game, says to George, "Do you think that's the way to treat her at a time like this? Making an ugly goddamn joke like that?" (p. 234). His calling George's line a "joke" and implying its incongruity attests to the interruptive effect that the line has. To a degree, the line provides "comic relief" for Martha's "exorcism;" such relief, however, comic
because of its absurdity, has an alienating effect on the audience. Such alienation allows the audience to observe the final scene between George and Martha more clearly than it might have if it had been completely involved with the couple's situation.

The use of ritual in Act Three is not an isolated occurrence in the play. As has already been noted, many of the surface games are played so often that they become rituals. In addition, the use of repetition and rhyme in the play often provides ritualistic effects. For example, the "familiar dance" (p.131) that Nick and Martha perform in Act Two gains its ritualistic effect from the repetition of phrases and the use of rhyme as much as from its recognizable physical moves. As Martha and Nick "undulate congruently" (p.131), the following dialogue occurs:

MARTHA: I like the way you move.
NICK: I like the way you move, too.
GEORGE: (To Honey) They like the way they move.

The phrases establish a rhyme that beats in time to the music and adds verbal accompaniment to the dance. As Albee states in his directions: "Perhaps Martha's statements are more or less in time to the music" (p.132). Similarly, the statements made by the other characters are short and frequently have the same syllabic length. For example:

GEORGE: I warn you...don't encourage her.
MARTHA: He warns you...don't encourage me.
NICK: I hear him...tell me more. (P.133)
As the "very old ritual" (p.131) reaches its climax, Martha's speech becomes "consciously" (p.133) rhymed, producing a chant effect that is involving for both the characters and the audience. But although the audience becomes involved with the ritual because of its rhythmic sound and movement, it also becomes aware of this very sound and movement because of its specialized nature, its departure from the language and action that forms the rest of the play. Martha's speaking in rhymed couplets matches the physical "rhyme" she is initiating with Nick. As such, it is representative of the connections and, more deeply, the communication that she seeks. Because she is, in a sense, already connecting with Nick, her speech becomes as completed as it does in the play; moreover, it becomes complete in a stylized way. Her rhyming lines are in direct contrast to the unfinished speeches, broken lines and hesitant deliveries that mark much of the dialogue in the play. When Martha is least "connective" at the end of the play, when she is stripped of illusions and faced with her isolate reality, her speech is its most inarticulate and fragmentary; besides her scanty "yes" and "no," she speaks brokenly, saying, for example, "I'm...not...sure" (p.241). Her rhyme in time to the music, although involving because of its repetition and rhythm, is, at the same time, distancing. It again makes the audience aware of the dramatic illusion by interrupting the established flow of dialogue and action.
Although there are other Absurd techniques in the play, few have the interruptive quality of those already discussed. They do, however, have a cumulative effect that helps to undermine the play's ostensibly Naturalistic appearance and to emphasize its divergence from the typical "family" drama. The title song of ridicule, repeated at various points throughout the play, is representative of the double meaning that underlies the play's many verbal games. George and Martha's repartee (as on pages 14 and 15), the use of songs such as "Just a gigolo" (p.195) and "I'm Nobody's houseboy now" (p.196), and the visual "gimmicks" of the shotgun and snapdragons are all techniques borrowed from the music-hall and associated with Theatre of the Absurd. In addition, the monologues in the play, such as George's story about the boy who ordered "bergin" (p.95), and Martha's soliloquy at the beginning of Act Three, are as untypical of drawing-room dramas in their form as they are in their content. For example, Martha's soliloquy contains a "dialogue" in which she impersonates George speaking with her. It also contains the baby-talk which typifies her child-role. Again, these forms develop out of the characters' elaborate game-playing and are extensions of the roles they assume. These, in turn, emphasize the irony of the whole theatre situation, piling impersonation upon impersonation. In relation to this, it is significant that both Acts One and Three begin with Martha's impersonation of someone else. Act Two begins with George's deliberate confusion of Martha and Honey. All three cases demand that audience quickly work to establish the type of
illusion with which it is dealing; the audience is not led gently and
clearly into each act but is pulled in, so to speak, in each case by a
different type of game. In such a way, games become a major component
of the play's structure.

Again it must be emphasized that Albee's use of the play as a game
is an attempt to undermine the stage illusion by intermittently
alienating the audience. The audience thus becomes aware not only of the
characters' susceptibility to illusions and game-playing but of its own
susceptibility to illusion and game-playing as represented by the theatre
experience. Such an awareness extends the illusion-reality themes of the
play and necessitates the audience's re-examination of its ideas about
contemporary American life. The "family picture" that has been presented
on the stage attacks the conventional ideas of the American family that are
based on harmony, honesty and love. The need for communication and under­
standing, and the fear of pain and rejection that underlie many of the games
people play have been suggested by the defensive and offensive games of the
characters. Moreover, the hypocrisy and artificiality that mark many of
these games as well as the violence and sexuality that they often disclose
are exaggerated so as to receive emphasis. Furthermore, the reality of man's
existence has been implied as a barren and meaningless condition that in some
cases necessitates a degree of game-playing and a manipulation of the
illusions which games often develop. Always, however, an awareness of such
games and illusions is prerequisite to their control.
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? also suggests that the awareness of games and illusions which is necessary for an individual's sanity is also necessary for the survival of American society. Throughout the play, frequent references to American and Western society establish a parallel between this society and George and Martha. Indeed, it is no accident that George bears the Christian name of the "father" of American society, George Washington, and that Martha has the same name as his wife. By using these names for his bickering couple, Albee demonstrates the degree to which the American family has changed since the time of George Washington. Concerning the marriage of George and Martha Washington, the Encyclopaedia Britannica states: "Though it does not seem to have been a romantic love match, the marriage united two harmonious temperaments and proved happy. Martha was a good housewife, an amiable companion, and a dignified hostess."24 The latter sentence, when considered in relation to Albee's Martha, demonstrates the dramatic difference between the two women. On the other hand, the "loveless" marriage between George and Martha Washington can perhaps be seen as similar to Albee's couple's marriage; then again, Albee's George and Martha, because of their moments of tenderness, George's concern for Martha's sanity, and Martha's admission that George is the only man who has ever made her happy (p.189), can be said to demonstrate a type of love which the Washingtons did not have. Definitely, in their childlessness, the two

couples are similar. Although Martha Washington had children by an
earlier marriage,\textsuperscript{25} she did not conceive with George. What this suggests
about the man who "never told a lie" is significant when one notes that
he adopted Martha's children "and even signed his letters to the boy as
'your papa'".\textsuperscript{26} Again, the relative truth of illusion is suggested, a
fact that even Encyclopaedia Britannica acknowledges when it states
"Himself childless, he thus had a real family."\textsuperscript{27}

That Albee's George and Martha are meant to be considered as modern-
day family archetypes in the way that George and Martha Washington have been
considered American archetypes is subtly suggested in the play. For example,
George's speech in Act Two about Martha's fantasy world (p.155) contains
the following line:

\begin{quote}
But you've taken a new task, Martha,
over the past couple of centuries --
or however long it's been since I've
lived in this house with you -- that
makes it just too much....
\end{quote}

Martha and George's "two hundred year old marriage" takes them right back
to the period in which George and Martha Washington were America's "First
Family" (1759-1799). George, who states "I am preoccupied with history"
(p.50), often delivers speeches which are concerned with American society;
for example, he says in Act Two, "We drink a great deal in this country, and

\textsuperscript{25}Note that both Martha's were married twice.

\textsuperscript{26}Encyclopaedia Britannica, p.239.

\textsuperscript{27}Encyclopaedia Britannica, p.239.
I suspect we'll be drinking a great deal more, too...if we survive (p.106). Such speeches tend to establish George as "society's protector" and to give him a paternal role reminiscent of George Washington's. This becomes most obvious when he delivers a speech in retaliation to Nick's defiant "UP YOURS!!" (p.117) in Act Two. Here, George's words show his paternal attitude towards Western Society as well as his sense of its imminent collapse. He says:

You take the trouble to construct...to...to build a society, based on the principles of...of principle...you endeavour to make communicable sense out of natural order, morality out of the unnatural disorder of man's mind...you make government and art and realize that they are, must be, both the same...you bring things to the saddest of all points...to the point where there is something to lose...then all at once, through all the music, through all the sensible sounds comes the Dies Irae. And what is it? What does the trumpet sound? Up yours. (p.117)

This speech also establishes the parallelism between George and Martha's situation and the situation of American society. The "saddest of all points," "the point where there is something to lose," is also the point at which George and Martha's marriage has arrived. The Dies Irae that George feels Nick sounds for American society, is later openly applied to George and Martha's predicament. The threat that Nick poses to Western civilization in his role as a biologist experimenting with test-tube babies is verbalized in Act One when George says "There will be a certain...loss of liberty, I
imagine, as a result of this experiment...but diversity will no longer be the goal. Cultures and races will eventually vanish...the ants will take over the world" (p.67). This threat is directly linked to George and Martha when Nick copulates with Martha in Act Two, the act becoming the physical enactment of the "up yours" threat. It is no coincidence that at this point Albee has George read from a book that speaks of Western civilization. George reads aloud:

And the west, encumbered by crippling alliances, and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events, must...eventually...
fall. (p.174)

Nick's copulation with Martha who is, in a sense, the mother of America, is the type of "crippling alliance" that will bring about the destruction of both the family unit and western civilization. Later, when George actually intones the Dies Irae in the exorcism ritual, the relationship between the couple and American society is made complete. Nick who has sounded the Dies Irae for Western society now "holds on" (p.232) to Martha like the "son" that George is trying to expel; the implication is that Nick is representative of the demon or devil that will be the cause of America's "fall" if he is not first exorcised. His name obviously makes this implication clear: he is young "old Nick." The illusions which govern Nick's life as well as the illusions he represents to society (i.e., "clean-cut," upstanding, moral youth) must be understood and managed or else the "Honey" of American life will be drained or turned sour.
The relationship of George and Martha's names to their forebears concerns the games of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in that it relates to the characters' role-playing. George's concern with history and his paternal attitude towards Western civilization can be regarded as expressive of the "older man" and "professor" roles he sometimes plays in the play. Similarly, Martha's line "I am the Earth Mother and you're all flops" (p.189) clearly establishes her role-playing that supports her "Mother of America" name. This is not to suggest that the pair are consciously playing father and mother of America roles. But they are playing father and mother in the "Family" game that has an illusory son who is very similar to the "all-American" young man that has been so admired in America and who is represented by Nick in this play and by the American Dream in the play of that name. Nick, himself, consciously plays this role, admitting with false modesty that he received his Masters degree when he was nineteen and that he played quarterback but "was much more...adept...at boxing...really" (p.52). In his physical characteristics, Nick is similar to the Young Man of both *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*; more importantly, his coldly calculated opportunism represents the same threat to America as does the direct and ruthless pragmatism of the Young Men in the earlier plays. As Nick says to George in Act Two,

...what I thought I'd do is...I'd sort of insinuate myself generally, play around for a while, find all the weak spots, shore 'em up, but with my own name on 'em...become sort of a fact, and then turn into a...a what...? (p.112)
George supplies Nick with the word "inevitability." Although Nick is here talking about his academic career, such a career is in the Biology Department which studies, among other things, the development of man and is responsible for changes in this development. That Nick with his opportunism, detachment and hypocrisy should eventually be in control of such a Department, George considers an open threat to civilization; as he says in Act One, "You're the one! You're the one's going to make all that trouble..." (p. 37). The irony here is that Nick is typical of the American Dream: good-looking, intelligent, physically fit and ambitious, Nick appears to be the type of young man that one should readily welcome into the heart and home. As the play points out, however, Nick's appearance, like George's, is quite different from his reality. The audience, in coming to understand this, is forced to realize that "that's not our own little Sonny-Jim. Our own little all-American something-or-other" (p. 196), to use George's words. Nick's appearance is as illusory as George and Martha's son; moreover, a belief in such an appearance is just as dangerous. Only when such illusions are understood can they be beneficial to life on either the individual or national level.
POSTSCRIPT

The only play not included for discussion in this thesis with the exception of Albee's adaptations from other sources, and works subsequent to *A Delicate Balance*, is *Tiny Alice*, written after *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1965. Although Albee is still concerned with the individual's use and control of games and illusions in *Tiny Alice*, his examination of the subject focuses on man's religious experience and the influence and control of religious belief. As such, the play moves outside the boundaries of the family unit which is the dramatic centre of Albee's other plays. Because this thesis concentrates on the family unit as Albee's metaphor for American society, *Tiny Alice* has been excluded from discussion.
"Objects which in themselves we view with pain we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity."

—Aristotle

*A Delicate Balance* (1966) is Edward Albee's most recent full-length play with the exception of his adaptation of Giles Cooper's play *Everything in the Garden*. It is also his most Naturalistic play: the illusion of reality that the set and actors establish on the stage is seldom undermined — "interruptive" devices are seldom used. The fusion of theatrical conventions in the play is less obvious than in Albee's earlier plays, corresponding to a less pronounced emphasis on games. The focus of the play is still upon the American family unit which, again, is representative of a segment of American society in general. The middle-class living-room of Mommy and Daddy in *The American Dream* has changed into the upper-middle-class one of Tobias and Agnes; George and Martha's university milieu has altered to suburbia. The family has grown to include a daughter, Julia, and a sister-in-law, Claire; the "family circle" has widened to include friends, Harry and Edna. Still, however, Albee's theme and purpose in the play is the liberation of the self from its controlling illusions. With the enlarging of the family unit, the focus of these illusions broadens to consider the nature of family and friendship as well as the rights of
individuals in relation to others. A new concern with "territory," both psychological and physical, has become predominant. With this is linked an examination of filial love and a questioning of its use as an escape from the "nothing" which Albee regards as a basic reality of life. The love, "comfort" and "succor" (p.99) of the family and home are the means by which Tobias, Julia, Harry and Edna attempt to escape this reality. That filial attachments and friendships are illusions which the characters do not understand, and, therefore, misuse, is a major theme of the play. Necessary to a preservation of both the self and the family (and society as a whole) is an awareness of the reality which necessitates social structures and patterns. Although such an awareness may be painful, it provides the basis for more honest and workable relationships.

The use of games in A Delicate Balance is not as noticeable as it is in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? The word "game" is seldom used. Near the end of Act Three, however, Tobias says to Agnes, "You, who make all the decisions, really rule the game..." (p.141). She replies, "That is an illusion you have." This reply, linking game to illusion, defines the manner in which the major games of A Delicate Balance are played. Unlike the games of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? which are usually played between two or more people with the purpose and effect of either uniting or separating...

affections, the games of *A Delicate Balance* are played *au solitaire*, a character playing a game with himself, so to speak, in which an illusion or pretense is accepted without test. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Martha's participation in the "Family" game is, at times, solitary, the illusion of her son being a game she uses to escape her loneliness and frustration. Always, however, this game is used as a crutch for her marriage with George and, until it becomes a "club," is a game which unites the two people. In *A Delicate Balance*, however, games are rarely played to unite the characters, nor are they played to separate them or communicate through pain. Rather, they are played to placate individual fears and to soothe private anxieties; as such, the games are nearly all defensive, the illusions they develop working like Linus' "security blanket" to protect the individual from painful aspects of reality.

That the nature of game-playing has changed in *A Delicate Balance* becomes obvious in the first scene; surface games are at a minimum. Whereas *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* begins with Martha's impersonation of Bette Davis and George's sarcastic digs, *A Delicate Balance* begins with Agnes' quiet musing about her sanity and her sister and Tobias' "knowing" (p. 16) attention. The feelings of frustration, antagonism and inadequacy that developed and are supported by the games of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are no longer present; the compatibility of Agnes and Tobias is quickly developed as he "kisses her forehead" (p. 15) and toasts her with
His cognac. Although underlying tensions do develop, they are not dependent upon the characters' animosity towards each other, nor upon "power-plays" that soothe damaged egos. Tension, at this point, involves family in the person of Claire. Agnes' opening line "What I find most astonishing..." (p.13) is only completed after some minutes when she states "Claire"; her consideration of insanity which has occurred in the interim is later directly linked to Claire when she says, "to revert specifically from Claire to...her effect, what would you do were I to...spill the marbles?" (p.18) This is significant for it immediately establishes the concern with family that is central to the play. In addition, it suggests that family, both in the physical and conceptual sense, is somehow related to possible insanity. Moreover, in the mention of family and insanity and their relationship to one another, a preoccupation with both individual and social health becomes clear at least in the case of Agnes. Such a preoccupation, particularly in Agnes' case, results in an analytical and intellectual attitude towards relationships which restricts her playing of surface games. At the same time, it allows her to realize the necessity of some illusions for individual and societal stability. As she later says, referring to both individual sanity and family unity:

There is a balance to be maintained, after all, though the rest of you teeter, unconcerned, or uncaring, assuming you're on level ground...by divine right, I gather, though that is hardly so. And if I must be the fulcrum...(p.89)
Necessary to the balance or stability of both the individual and the family unit are certain illusions such as the one of Agnes as fulcrum. Agnes, aware of this fact, perpetuates the illusion, playing the role of "balancer" just as she plays her other roles of wife, mother, lover, homemaker, nurse, hostess, agitator and pacifier (pp. 64-65).

Unlike the others in her family, she has no regard for assumptions, only facts, although she may, as in the opening scene, meditate on possibilities. The fact of her existence is that she remains on "level" ground not "by divine right" but by careful understanding and control of her position. Inherent in this position is the assuming of roles and the perpetration of illusions but not the playing of surface games.

Agnes' avoidance of surface games results from her realization that their relief from reality is merely "temporary" (p. 20). As she says, "I am concerned with peace...not mere relief" (p. 20). Feeling thus, Agnes differs greatly from Claire who plays surface games with zest but avoids the larger illusions and role-playing that Agnes uses to maintain her family position and sanity. As Agnes says, "there are times when I think it would be so...proper, if one could take a pill -- or even inject -- just...remove...Ah, but those are temporary; even addiction is a repeated temporary...And I am not a compulsive -- like...like some...like our dear Claire, say" (p. 20). Claire's drinking to which Agnes continually refers is representative of Claire's use of surface games; although she may not be an alcoholic, Claire once was, and she still is very dependent upon alcohol. Such an
escape she appears to control, however, just as she controls her other surface games of impersonation, mimicry and verbal wit to withstand the reality of her life. This reality she has accepted as the "nothing" (p.55) from which Harry and Edna are still running. With this acceptance has come a sense of alienation from the family group and relationships in general as well as an objectivity which often gives Claire's lines the commentative value of the Chorus in a Greek play. As Agnes says:

Claire could tell us so much if she cared to, could you not, Claire. Claire who watches from the sidelines, has seen so very much, has seen us all so clearly, have you not, Claire. You were not named for nothing. (p.110)

Although Agnes may intend her words to be sarcastic, she ably summarizes Claire's function in the play just as she defines her traits as an individual. Moreover, her statement "You were not named for nothing" has an ironic twist when the double significance of "nothing" is realized. "Claire," from the Latin word meaning illustrious or bright and having the implication of clairvoyance and clarity, was named, ironically, for nothing. Her very clarity of perception allows her to see the "nothing" that underlies the relationships of her family and friends and to say, like Didi and Gogo in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, "We're waiting, aren't we?" (p.94) "Waiting. The room; the doctor's office, beautiful unconcern; intensive study of the
dreadful curtains; absorption in *Field and Stream*, waiting for the Bi-op—see (p. 95). The biopsy in *A Delicate Balance* is finally delivered when Agnes classifies "the plague" (p. 155) in Act Three. This plague is, as Claire could have said earlier, the "nothing" from which Harry and Edna are fleeing, the "terror" (p. 155) of being alone in a meaningless room or space, suddenly aware that love, "warmth" and "succor" are only illusions. Claire who has come to accept this plague through her experience as an alcoholic no longer looks for the ultimate "peace" (p. 20) that Agnes still feels is possible and tries to maintain through her "balancing act" (p. 91); consequently, she no longer plays the roles or cultivates the corresponding illusions as Agnes does. What she does do is play the surface games that fill out or complete the life-play or script of her individuality. Doing so, she infuriates Agnes who correctly accuses her of being one of those "who want to die...and take your whole lives doing it" (p. 37).

Agnes' and Claire's differing use of games is important because it clarifies Albee's concern with the significance games can have in facilitating the individual's control of his life and destiny. Claire's uses games to escape ennui in a way similar to the Nurse in *The Death of Bessie Smith* and Jerry in *The Zoo Story*: her games are all surface ones, played consciously, without the "abandonment" which could allow them to become

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2The term is borrowed from Johan Huizinga. See page 15 of this thesis.
more meaningful and fulfilling for her. Although they stem from an awareness of "nothing" which is similar to Agnes’ awareness, such games do little to assuage Claire’s "accidie"\(^3\) and frustration with life. They are, in the saddest sense, "temporary" (p.20). Agnes’ use of games, on the other hand, is much more profound. Ignoring the "mere relief" (p.20) of surface games, she pursues a Master Game by adopting the roles and stances that will give her life purpose and meaning. Although such a game may still depend on illusions, such illusions are more integral to her life-script than those with which Claire so flippantly plays. The delicate balance that Agnes attempts to maintain in her family parallels the delicate balance between illusion and reality that Albee feels each person must find and maintain for himself in life. Such a balance necessitates the compromise or balance between awareness of games and abandonment to them which will ultimately allow one to communicate more fully with others.

Agnes’ and Claire’s use of games and illusions in their lives becomes significant in relation to Tobias. Basic to Agnes’ Master Game is "maintenance," as she explains in Act Two:

> Maintenance. When we keep something in shape, we maintain its shape — whether we are proud of that shape, or not, is another matter — we keep it from falling apart. (p.88)

For Agnes, all that matters is maintenance of order for only order gives her life any purpose. To this end, her major concern is her family and her home, the maintenance of which has become synonymous with order. She says at one point, "I shall...keep this family in shape. I shall maintain it; hold it" (p.88). To do so, Agnes necessarily requires Tobias' support; he must agree to her demand for order, and help in its maintenance. This he does, at the expense, however, of his own masculine identity — a fact which both Julia and Claire consistently hold against him. Early in Act One, Claire says to both Agnes and Tobias, "If we are to live here, on Tobias' charity, then we are subject to the will of his wife" (p.38). Later, in Act Two, Julia says to Tobias, "...you sank to a cipher, and you've stayed there, I'm afraid — very nice but ineffectual, essential, but not-really-thought-of, gray...non-eminence..." (p.71). Agnes, however, does not view Tobias this way. Although Tobias himself feels that Agnes makes "all the decisions, really rule(s) the game" (p.141), she sees his attitude as illusory. As she says, speaking of women in general, "the reins we hold! It's a team of twenty horses, and we sit there, and we watch the road and check the leather...if our...man is so disposed. But there are things we do not do."... "We don't decide the route" (p.127).

The realization that he does indeed decide the route is the epiphany that Tobias achieves at the end of the play. Inherent in the realization is his acceptance of his place in the family unit and an understanding of the illusions he has unconsciously developed to relate to both family and
friends. The entrance of Harry and Edna with their "plague" forces Tobias to make a decision regarding the family: are Harry and Edna entitled to the warmth and security of their "best friends" (p. 56) home? The question has implications which Tobias is quick to grasp. As he says to Agnes,

It is our friends! What am I supposed to do? Say: "Look, you can't stay here, you two, you've got trouble. You're friends, and all, but you come in here clean." Well, I can't do that. No, Agnes, for God's sake, if...if that's all Harry and Edna mean to us, then...then what about us? When we talk to each other...what have we meant? Anything? When we touch, when we promise, and say...yes, or please...with ourselves?...have we meant, yes, but only if...if there's any condition, Agnes! Then it's...all been empty. (p. 156)

Significantly, Agnes replies to this speech by saying: "Perhaps. But blood binds us. Blood holds us togethether when we've no more...deep affection for ourselves than others" (pp. 156-157). The illusion of the family's physiological unity is one that Agnes must believe if she is to maintain order. For this reason she can reject Harry and Edna not as friends but simply as threats to her family. As she says to Tobias: "...think about the rest of us" (p. 157).
Tobias, however, is unable to accept this illusion. Rejecting Harry and Edna at the end of the play, he rejects Agnes' compromise with reality which he has accepted for so long, the compromise in which Agnes uses order to give an illusion of purpose. Doing so, he asserts himself as leader of the family unit, decides the "route," and faces the consequences of this leadership. He can no longer be termed a cipher, ineffectual and gray. At the same time, the pattern or balance upon which he has so long relied for peace and security is now thrown askew. Earlier in the act, Claire has stated: "We have our friends and guests for patterns, don't we?" (p.150) The line becomes important now as the friends and guests force the decision which exposes the illusion of friendship ties. Similarly, a question Claire has asked now becomes most relevant. Foreshadowing the play's conclusion, she asks Tobias in Act Three: "...what would happen if the patterns changed; you wouldn't know where you stood, and the world would be full of strangers; that would never do" (p.150). At the conclusion of A Delicate Balance the world is, indeed, full of strangers for Tobias. The illusion of friendship that has helped supply his life with pattern and meaning has been undermined. He is left open and exposed to the nothingness which has so terrified his friends. In addition, he is forced to question the assumptions he has made about familial ties: is there any meaning in "family" or is it as "empty" a word as "friendship"? Although Agnes looks to the new day positively, Tobias remains lost in thought; while he asks "Wasn't I honest?" (p.174), Agnes states, "And
when the day comes again...comes order with it" (p.175). Agnes has accepted Tobias' decision and will maintain the balance that the decision allows. Still believing in "blood" she will collect her family around her and "hold" the delicate balance of family unity, just as she holds on to her own sanity. Having faced an "unreal" (p.108) time of confusion and insecurity following the death of her son, Agnes has managed to establish and maintain a balance between illusion and reality in her own life by concentrating on her role as "fulcrum" (p.89). Tobias, on the other hand, must face the reality of his isolation anew. Whether he will continue to accept Agnes' solution to the problem of "nothing" is debatable. Like Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, however, he will probably again create illusions to manage his life, but he will now do so more consciously and constructively. He has said in the play "Truth will get you nowhere" (p.77); the line cryptically acknowledges the need for illusions once one's reality is understood, a fact Tobias grasps only too well at the end of the play.

The rejection of Harry and Edna and the undermining of the friendship illusion gains added significance in relation to Julia and relates the subject of friendship to family. Although Agnes is able to believe in blood ties at the end of the play, Tobias is not; yet, ironically, Tobias appears closer to Julia than does Agnes all through the play. Like Harry and Edna, Julia has also come to Tobias and Agnes for "succor," "comfort"
and "warmth" (p.95) following the breakdown of her fourth marriage; as Claire aptly puts it, she's "laying claim to the cave" (p.100). Agnes, however, does not welcome her warmly; having nursed Julia through three divorces similar to the one she is now probably entering, she treats Julia with a cool lack of concern. When Tobias says to Agnes, with "a kind of wondrous bewilderment" "Don't you think you should go to tend to her?" Agnes replies, "No. She will be down or she will not. She will stop, or she will...go on" (p.116). Agnes' attitude to Julia is consistent with her attitude to Claire: indeed, the speech just quoted is almost identical to her line about Claire near the beginning of the play -- "No. Either she will be down, or not" (p.19). Both are in keeping with the epigram which Agnes calls "our motto" -- "We do what we can" (p.19). The motto reflects Agnes' personality which she herself perceptively describes: "...I can't even raise my voice except in the most calamitous of events, and I find that both joy and sorrow work their...wonders on me more...evenly, slowly, within, than most..." (p.19). For Agnes, Julia has ceased to be "calamitous"; even her hysteria in Act Two Agnes finds only mildly concerning. Albee's stage directions at this point aptly summarize Agnes' reaction -- "kindly, but a little patronizing" (p.106), "patient" (p.106), "Calm" (p.107), "seemingly dispassionate" (p.108). Tobias, on the other hand, demonstrates a much more passionate, deeper concern for his daughter's sanity. Shortly after Julia's scene with Edna over the sideboard, he angrily questions the other characters about the reasons for Julia's behavior upstairs. When Agnes ignores his
concern and Julia's behavior, he says, "sputtering," "Well, for God's sake, Agnes...!" (p.116). Following this he falls "deep in thought" (p.118) and becomes "confused as to where he is" (p.118). Agnes' detached acceptance of Julia's behavior questions the assumptions he has held about family just as Harry and Edna's presence tests his assumptions about friendship. In both cases, Claire supplies Tobias with the clearest analysis of the situation, saying that Julia is "a visitor as much as anyone now" (p.99) and that Harry and Edna have been just passing through "all these years" (p.96). Until the conclusion of the play, however, Tobias is unable to accept these facts. The idea of family unity and communication, like friendship, is an illusion he has accepted as a "reality": it therefore has been able to gain control over him to the degree that he is vulnerable to it. Moreover, because he has ceased to understand the real situation of his family -- the isolation and despair which necessitates the illusions they have developed -- he has lost control of the family and has become a cipher for Agnes. Only by exorcising his illusions and accepting the reality of his situation can he regain the control he needs for sanity and self-respect.

Although all the characters in A Delicate Balance consciously or unconsciously employ illusions in their lives, they do not play surface games to the same extent as the characters in the other Albee plays discussed in this work. The exception is, of course, Claire: from early in the play she plays those games of mimicry, impersonation and verbal wit which are
found in all the preceding Albee plays. Doing so, she supplies the play with much of its humour. Significantly, Claire only begins her games once Agnes exits in Act One. Knowing Agnes' impatience with her, Claire, more often than not, engages Tobias in her games when they are alone. For the two of them, games become a worthwhile form of communication, constructively binding them together. When Agnes and Claire play games, however, the result is quite different for the games are used as weapons rather than aids.

Claire relies heavily upon imitation in her games. This becomes evident early in the play when she fantasizes about Tobias defending himself for murdering his family. At this point she "wrinkles her nose" and imitates Tobias' speech: "There I was, your honor, one moment in my chair, sipping at my anisette... and the next thing I knew... they were all lying about, different rooms, heads blown off, the gun still in hand..." (p.26). Later in the same scene, she imitates a little girl as she tells Tobias the story about her confession at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting (p.34); within the same story she also imitates another alcoholic. What is important here is that Claire's imitations usually occur within stories; as in The Zoo Story and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, stories become an integral part of the play's structure and demonstrate the creative use that illusions can have. In Claire's case they allow her to communicate; in addition they satisfy Tobias' and Julia's desire for vicarious experience which is similar
to that of Peter's in *The Zoo Story* and Nick's and Honey's in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* This becomes most evident when Julia and Claire meet in Act Two, Scene One. Here Claire relates an elaborate though irrelevant story about buying a bathing suit, managing to imitate a saleslady and a store manager in the process. (pp.75-77). In essence, the story is an old vaudeville "gag" that is hackneyed to say the least; in this instance, however, it allows Claire to welcome Julia by entertaining her, to establish a rapport through nonsense similar to frivolous gossip. When Tobias, who has been "mildly amused throughout" (p.77), asks "what were you doing buying a bathing suit in October, anyway," Julia says "Oh, Dad!" Her exasperation demonstrates the fact that the content of Claire's story is not as important as its form. The story is really just a game that allows the two women to greet one another after a separation. Similarly, Claire often delivers lines that sound like excerpts from a narrative in which she is the central character: for example; in the same scene she says, "'They laughed when I sat down to the accordian!'" (p.92). Earlier, in Act Two, Scene One, she dons a "Texas accent, or near it" (p.80) after calling herself an "objective observer." The fact is, Claire usually is on the "sidelines" (p.95), alienated from the family group by her sense of the absurdity of life. "Waiting for the Bi-op-see" (p.95), she can often communicate only by playing the game which the other characters, in the main, ignore. Doing so, she is both entertaining and
infuriating to the other characters. At the same time she is helpful to the audience, her ironic perspective providing many of her comments with an insight into the characters' motivation.

Although surface game-playing is not as prevalent in *A Delicate Balance* as it is in Albee's other plays, there is one game that all the characters play to a greater degree than do the characters in his earlier plays, with the exception of Tiny Alice. This game concerns language which, as in *The Zoo Story*, becomes of major importance as all the characters try to break from their isolation into communication with others. Concerning this subject, Arthur Oberg writes;

> The degree of consciousness that the characters exhibit in formulating and fixing an appropriate language...is intentionally conceived. While comment upon mental and verbal processes from within a play is neither new nor exception-al in the drama, the extent to which Albee's protagonists call attention to the use and mechanism of language merits particular regard...Language becomes a playful and deadly game....

This game is noticeable early in the play. Agnes' erudition becomes immediately evident with the elaborate clause structure of her opening lines. The mild rivalry over words that Tobias begins with his correction

of Agnes' "saying" (p.16) is continued when, "Mocking an epigram" (p.17) he says, "One does not apologize to those for whom one must?"

The game ensues as follows:

AGNES: (Winking slowly): Neat

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...

AGNES: ...and I am grimly serious, yes? (p.17)

Besides demonstrating the characters' concern with language, the exchange demonstrates their lexical control: lexical choice is varied and educated; words such as "aphorism," and "epigram" are soon followed by "paranoia," "calamitous" and "schizophrenia" (p.19). For Tobias and Agnes, the use and control of words is related to their use and control of each other; word-play works to draw them together at the same time as it allows each to vie for "the upper hand." Verbal jousts such as the one just quoted rarely end in hostility between the characters as they do in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?; on the contrary, they allow Agnes and Tobias to communicate in a playful way; their semantic concerns often allowing them to ignore other ones. This can be seen, for example, following Tobias' story about his cat. He ends the story by saying with "defiance and self-loathing," "I had her killed" (p.45). Agnes, "kindly correcting" says,
"You had her put to sleep. She was old. You had her put to sleep."

Here Agnes attempts to use the euphemism to steal Tobias away from the subject which is beginning to bother him: Agnes' use of a euphemism will hopefully reestablish the calm which existed earlier, a calm dependent upon a skirting of painful memories and questions such as Tobias' reasons for killing his cat. In this connection, Agnes' use of the language game reflects her attitude towards painful subjects in general. She says, for example, about a book "which opines that the sexes are reversing"..."It is a book to be read and disbelieved, for it disturbs our sense of well-being" (p. 65). Anything threatening to the maintenance of order must be carefully rejected. Regarding the story about Tobias' cat, however, the correction does not work, for Tobias is himself equally "correcting" (p. 46). He says "I had her killed...I had her killed." His insistence on the word signifies his refusal to avoid a painful fact and to submit to Agnes' control at this point. Although Agnes' use of the game does not have the desired effect in this instance, it does demonstrate her conscious attempt to use words to gain control. What is more important, however, is that the language game, as Agnes and Tobias play it, does not represent or lead to other deeper and more violent conflicts. It serves to unite the characters by providing them with a measure of communication.

This is not the case with all the characters in the play, however. For example, Tobias and Claire demonstrate underlying tensions by correcting each other's speech. Relating the story about her confession to Alcoholics'
Anonymous, Claire first says, "My name is Claire, and I am a alcoholic," then asks Tobias to "try it" (p.34). He says, "My name is...My name is Claire, and I am an alcoholic." Claire immediately corrects him, saying "A alcoholic" (p.34). What is important to Claire at this moment is that Tobias really listen to her words, for the story she is telling is deeply significant to her. His casual insertion of a different article suggests his only "vague" (p.34) interest and therefore bothers Claire. From then on she consistently uses the article "a" with "alcoholic," saying it again when she repeats her line to Tobias and later when she speaks to Agnes (p.35). Her conscious concern about words matches that of Agnes who often deliberates her vocabulary and sentence structure. For example, in Act Two, Scene One, Agnes says, "I dropped upstairs — well, that doesn't make very much sense, does it? — I happened upstairs, and I knocked at Harry and Edna's Julia's room, door..." (p.81). Similarly, Claire says shortly after: "Isn't ilk a lovely word?" (p.97). In Claire's case, however, the concern with words appears to result from different motives from that of Agnes'. Rather than trying to ignore the truth by surrounding herself with words, Claire seeks a verbal precision that will communicate the truth. She says near the middle of the play "We submerge our truths and have our sunsets on untroubled waters" (p.100); pushing the metaphor further, "water" becomes "words" for Agnes. The result, says Claire, is that "we better develop gills"
(p.101) if we are to communicate and survive. In this instance, Claire acts as Albee's mouthpiece, suggesting the corruption of word-power that results from the use of language as escape. C. W. E. Bigsby makes this point when he writes:

...in this society, as Albee has stressed in The American Dream, even the word "love" has become corrupted. It becomes an expression of self-pity and greed or simply a means of describing social relatedness. 

He goes on to say that "there is clearly a savage irony" in Claire's speech about love in Act One in which she shows her awareness of the debasement of the word. She says:

Oh, stop it! "Love" is not the problem. You love Agnes and Agnes loves Julia and Julia loves me and I love you. We all love each other; yes we do. We love each other. (p.46)

The speech suggests the same inadequacy of words that Albee demonstrates in The Zoo Story. If words are not carefully managed and controlled, they become as dangerous as any other unmanaged game or illusion; they can become, as Oberg points out, "substitutes for real acts." As verbal and "mental sex play" he says, "Language turns into masturbation." Berne, 


6Oberg, p.144


8Oberg, p.144.
of course, would add, a substitute for "the real living of real intimacy."

Although the characters in *A Delicate Balance* are not as involved with surface games as the characters in Albee's earlier plays, it must again be stressed that they are all dependent upon some form of illusion. The psychological and sexual games exposed by the surface games in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are not as evident in the later play; they are, however, just as relevant to the play's theme and purpose which is the necessity of illusion-awareness. Such sexual and psychological games are depicted differently in this play from the way they are in Albee's earlier plays. Sexual role-playing that defines one character by opposing him or her to another is not as important in *A Delicate Balance* as solitary role-playing; the most important games in the play are the games the characters play with themselves in order to escape or manage the facts of their lives. Agnes' conception of herself as "fulcrum" (p.89) is an illusion she makes into a reality by playing the various roles that keep order in her house. She uses the illusion to manage the reality which Tobias faces at the end of the play -- i.e., the meaningless human condition in which people are arbitrarily thrown together without any real ties of family and friendship. Until the conclusion of the play, Tobias believes like Harry and Edna, in the illusion of friendship and love. All three eventually face the fact that none has any real rights as far as the other is concerned. Edna who has tried to assert her rights as Agnes' best friend and Julia's Godmother
It's sad to come to the end of it, isn't it, nearly the end; so much more of it gone by...than left, and still not know --still not have learned...the boundaries, what we may not do...not ask, for fear of looking in a mirror. We should--n't have come. (p.169)

By the end of the play, all the characters know more about themselves and, in knowing, become paradoxically more isolated and close to their families and friends. Julia must face the reality that she has become a "visitor" as much as Harry and Edna; She can no longer assume the role of a child to Agnes and Tobias but must meet them as a mature woman; similarly, she can not expect the family home to give her the womb-like security she seeks. Agnes' line to Tobias -- "Well, my darling, you are not young now, and you do not live at home" (p.145) -- could easily apply to Julia as well as to all the characters. "Where do I live?" asks Tobias; and Agnes answers, "The dark sadness" (p.135). The dark sadness in which every character is separated from the other by definite though indistinct boundaries is the final truth the play depicts. Each character mirrors the other as Edna implies. Albee even describes Edna and Harry as being "very much like Agnes and Tobias" (p.9) and Harry is referred to as "being Tobias" (p.110). "All happy families are alike!" (p.84) says Claire early in the play. The line gains significance with the play's conclusion. The play
need not be regarded as darkly as the truth might suggest, however. Agnes can look forward to the new day because she can reassert the order which she chooses to construct. Facing their situations truthfully, the characters make more meaningful communication possible. Illusions such as self-imposed order can now be used as vehicles to cope with reality rather than as substitutes for it. This idea perhaps explains Albee's dedication of the play to John Steinbeck. The Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* comes to the understanding that "Use 'ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody." The same understanding is finally achieved by the characters in *A Delicate Balance*.

The concern with the boundaries of the individual's psychological and physical territory in *A Delicate Balance* is a new one for Albee. It is a logical development of his concern with individual sanity. If friendship and familial love are only illusions, the individual does indeed have no right to impose his needs on others. Illusions, however, as Albee consistently points out, can gain relative truth by facilitating communication. Doing so, rights become possible, just as responsibilities become inevitable. Tobias suggests this conclusion at the end of the play. Almost hysterical, he shouts:

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I DON'T WANT YOU HERE!
I DON'T LOVE YOU!
BUT BY GOD...YOU STAY! (p.167)
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*Quoted in Bigsby, p.230.*
Although the rights may only be willed, they can nevertheless be "real." What is important is that having chosen to believe in the illusion, the individual accept the responsibilities of it. Such a use of illusion, as cynical and sophisticated as it may be, allows the individual to live with some form of intimacy. He must, however, maintain an awareness of the balance between illusion and reality in his life, just as he must achieve an awareness of the boundaries of his own and others' psychological space. Only by doing so can conflict and tension be minimized and a peace which is more than temporary be developed.

The concern with territory in the play receives symbolic expression in Act Two, Scene Two. Here Julia's desire for her own "room" is transferred to her manic protection of the sideboard. The relationship between her need for security and the room in her parents' house has already been established. Act Two, Scene one ends with Julia saying "I want my room back! I want my room!!" (p.86) Early in the next scene, Claire describes the room as "a special room with a night light, or the door ajar so you can look down the hall from the bed and see that Mommy's door is open" (p.99). Julia says, "But that's my room" (p.99) and Claire answers, "It's...the room. Happens you were in it." Julia's growing fear that she is only a "visitor" (p.99) in her parents' house with no more rights than Harry and Edna reaches its climax when, in the same scene, Edna calls Julia a guest and asks her to make her a drink (p.103). When Harry then enters and goes towards the sideboard to make the drink himself, Julia "rushes to
the sideboard, her back to it, spreads her arms protecting it, curiously disturbed and frightened..." (p.104). Suddenly she becomes "A little girl, crying" (p.105); her hysteria increases to the point where Agnes says "go up to my room, lie down" (p.106). This, of course, infuriates and frightens Julia even more. Becoming "A trapped woman, surrounded" (p.107), she finally screams "I WANT...WHAT IS MINE!" (p.108) and "Runs from the room." The important fact here is that the sideboard housing the liquor becomes the focus of a scene concerned with the rights of territory. Julia protects and guards the liquor as she would like to guard her own room. Agnes and Harry's casual use of the cabinet reminds Julia of their casual takeover of her room. More importantly, their takeover suggests to her that they have usurped her rights as resident visitor; she is suddenly homeless, her territory invaded. Ironically, however, her protection of the liquor suggests the illusory nature of the rights that she, Harry and Edna all attempt to assert. In effect, everyone in the play is seeking the "succor" and "warmth" (p.99) of a room at home; the fact is reflected in the characters' constant use of alcohol. The play begins with Tobias "looking into cordial bottles," "looking for" (p.13) the anisette. All the characters drink in the play in order to escape, in some measure the fact that they cannot find succor and warmth. A belief that such is possible, however, is as much an illusion as the relief liquor affords. Rights are illusion until they are accepted as such and then consciously willed.
Uulia's defending the sideboard "like a princess in the movies, hiding her lover in the closet from the king" (p.115) is ironically apt because the rights she feels she has are mere fantasies; like liquor-induced illusions of security and peace, they can only be temporary.

Albee's concentration of the illusions that individuals use to construct their lives and his reduction of attention to the surface games which they use to develop and protect these illusions naturally has its effect upon the structure of *A Delicate Balance*. The play is his most Naturalistic. The realistic living-room set establishes an illusion which is seldom undermined by the characters' speech or actions. The relative lack of surface game-playing in the play prohibits the sense of irony that the games of mimicry, impersonation and verbal wit develop in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; the play-within-a-play structure seldom makes itself obvious in *A Delicate Balance*. Similarly, there is no reference to the play itself; verbal acknowledgement of the play as game, as in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*, is non-existent. There are, however, techniques in *A Delicate Balance* which have a distancing effect on the audience and which interrupt the naturalistic flow of the play so that the audience can appreciate it intellectually as well as emotionally. The conclusion of the play is similar to the conclusion of *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in its failure to establish clearly a "winner" or "loser" in the play. Confusion surrounding Tobias' final position necessitates the audience's examination of its own beliefs about friendship and family. The villain of the play must be viewed as the "enemy within" -- the individual's misuse of game and illusion so that they have harmful rather
than helpful effects. The basic problems in the play result not from an antagonist but from the nameless terror, the "plague" (p.155), that Harry and Edna bring into Tobias' home. The plague eventually spreads to Julia and Tobias before the guests are rejected and the play concludes. Albee would probably hope that the plague also contaminates the audience; aware of the "nothing" that has prompted Harry and Edna's fear, the audience may question its own assumptions about filial affection and rights. Claire says at one point: "We are not a communal nation, dear; giving, but not sharing, outgoing, but not friendly" (p.100). In relation to this line, Bigsby suggests that the play is

Albee's acknowledgement...that there is a desperate need to reestablish human relationships on just such a firm foundation of truth. For to him if we continue to "submerge our truths" on "the grassy bottom" and prefer to "have our sunsets on untroubled waters," then the essential need for humanity is to "develop gills" (pp.100-101). The urgency of this transformation is underlined by the warning that "Everything becomes...too late, finally" (p.101).

The necessity for an awareness of the illusions Americans use to submerge truths such as individual isolation and selfish friendship is a major purpose of the play. The techniques associated with Epic Theatre and Theatre of the Absurd that Albee has used in his other plays are used in

10Bigsby, p.169.
A Delicate Balance for the same reason: to make the audience intermittently aware of the play as a game in order to demonstrate its own vulnerability to illusion. Chief among these techniques is the use of monologues and stories; the technique is consistent to all of Albee's plays and is fundamental to his manipulation of the audience. In A Delicate Balance, Claire and Tobias each delivers two stories of significant length and intensity. Claire's story about her involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous represents the first intrusion of non-naturalistic techniques into the play. The story actually begins when Claire "lies on the floor, balances glass on her forehead, puts it beside her, etc." (p.27). Her position at this moment is very important: its unnaturalness accentuates the unnaturalness of her story. Tobias circles her body and stands over her; at one point she "raises her two arms, one with the cigarette, the other the brandy glass" (p.31). Her "invitation" to Tobias to join her on the floor matches her invitation for him to listen to her story. Her speeches increase in length and emotional intensity as she becomes more involved with her story. She says, "You hate with the same green stinking sickness, you feel your bowels have turned into...yourself, and everybody... and you notice -- with a sort of detachment that amuses you, you think -- that you're more like an animal everyday..."(p.32). The sense of Claire's lines is extended by her position like an animal on the floor. "...You snarl, and grab for things..." she says, extending her words into gesture. As she becomes more and more involved with her story, however, Tobias "moves
a little away" (p. 31), becomes "wistful, triste" (p. 33), "rather vague" (p. 34). By the time she rises to "re-enact" (p. 34) her confession, Tobias is watching Claire intently but does not appear to be involved with what she is saying. He has achieved the detachment she talks about, probably because she is "embarrassed" (p. 35) at the personal nature of her story. The audience also becomes detached from Claire's story; when she finally rises from her prostrate position, she does so to "re-enact" a scene which requires her to mimic a little girl as well as herself and a fellow alcoholic. The story, although not as involved as Martha's and George's monologues in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? or Jerry's lengthy story about his landlady's dog in The Zoo Story, has a similar effect: it forces the audience to become aware of the actress playing Claire, both by her bizarre positioning and narrative and by the ironic layering of impersonation upon impersonation. The effect is important because it allows the audience to appreciate the speech more objectively.

Tobias' story about his cat (pp. 43-46) has a similar effect, though not as strong a one as Claire's Alcoholic story or her story about the bathing suit (pp. 75-77). The latter story, involving so much mimicry and impersonation, provides an actress excellent opportunity for a virtuoso performance. What is important, however, is that the story works best as a performance: it is written to allow the actress to "demonstrate" her lines in the tradition of Epic Theatre. Claire talks about herself, delivering
lines like "Hello, there, I'm in the market for a topless swimsuit!" (p.75). Bertholt Brecht, discussing the actor's techniques in Epic Theatre, makes an analogy between a person relating the facts of a car accident on a street corner to an actor relating his character in a theatre. His discussion is interesting in relation to Claire's story of her encounter with the saleslady. Brecht writes:

The street demonstrator's performance is essentially repetitive. The event has taken place; what you are now seeing is a repeat. If the scene in the theatre follows the street scene in this respect then the theatre will stop pretending not to be a theatre, just as the street-corner demonstration admits it is a demonstration (and does not pretend to be the actual event). 11

The effect of Claire's story is that the theatre situation is impressed upon the audience, a situation which is basically ironic. The audience is forced to appreciate the fact that it is involving itself with an illusion which is an imitation of reality similar to the games which people use as reality-substitutes every day.

Tobias' long speech at the end of the play also has this effect. Albee is deliberately explicit in his directions to the actor regarding this speech. He writes:

This next is an aria. It must have in its performance all the horror and exuberance of a man who has kept his emotions under control too long. Tobias will be carried to the edge of hysteria, and he will find himself laughing, sometimes, while he cries from sheer release. All in all, it is genuine and bravura at the same time, one prolonging the other. (p.164)

"Genuine and bravura"; the words define both Tobias' character in this instance and the actor's performance as well. To appreciate Tobias' predicament most fully, the audience must understand why he must feel both genuine and bravura; to comprehend this fully, the audience must be both simultaneously involved with and "objective about the experience it is having." The actor's performance must allow this simultaneous reaction just as the play must allow such a performance to be possible. The fact that Albee should call Tobias' speech an "aria" is also significant. In opera, the aria represents "lyric episodes that temporarily relieve the dramatic tension of the action." At this point in the play, dramatic tension must be "relieved" at the same time that it is heightened if the audience's simultaneous reaction is to be achieved. An "elaborate composition for solo voice" which is "of greater length" and which emphasizes "design and expression..." is particularly effective.

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14 Idem.
Another technique which Albee uses in *A Delicate Balance* to help effect the audience's intermittent alienation from the illusion is the use of Claire as a type of chorus. Like Grandma in *The American Dream* or Butler in *Tiny Alice*, Claire's objectivity about the other characters and the situations in which they are involved allows many of her lines to commentmeaningfully upon the action. Writing about the chorus in the Greek Theatre, George R. Kernodle says the chorus provided "a background of group response, enlarging and reverberating the emotions of the actors, sometimes protesting and opposing but in general serving as ideal spectators to stir and lead the reactions of the audience."\(^\text{15}\)

Brecht opines that the chorus in Greek Theatre had a basically alienating effect, which is the reason he adapted the convention to Epic Theatre. In an article entitled "Masterful Treatment of a Model," Brecht writes: "...the old play was historically so remote as to tempt nobody to identify himself with its principal figure. Here too its elements of epic form were a help, and provided something of interest to our theatre...Greek dramaturgy uses certain forms of alienation, notably interventions by the chorus."\(^\text{16}\)

Although Albee does not use a chorus in the traditional sense (he uses an individual rather than a group), he does use Claire's lines, as well as the other characters reactions to them, to help to enlarge the emotions of the characters and to "stir and lead" the audience; in addition, he uses them


to condition an aesthetic distance similar to Brecht's "A-Effect." This can be seen quite clearly in Act One when Agnes, exasperated by Claire's frequent and penetrating comments, "regards Claire for a moment, then decides she -- CLAIRE -- is not in the room with them. AGNES will ignore CLAIRE'S coming comments until otherwise indicated. TOBIAS will do this, too, but uncomfortably, embarrassedly" (p.39). Claire, of course, continues to comment upon Agnes' and Tobias' conversation, herself ignoring the game Agnes has chosen to play. When Agnes says of Julia "...she's welcome, of course" (p.39), Claire says "Right on schedule, once every three years..." (p.40). Agnes "closes her eyes for a moment to keep ignoring CLAIRE," eventually saying about Julia, "her place is properly here, as for some it is not" (p.40). Claire says "One, two, three, four, down they go;" a few lines later she says, "Damned if you do, damned if you don't" (p.41). Eventually she delivers a "mocking sing-song" which causes Agnes to turn on her. Claire then says "Ooh, I am here, after all. I exist!" (p.41)

The use of the sing-song cleverly exaggerates Claire's lines to such a degree that she must be noticed. Her use of song at this point is consistent with the music and song she uses in Act Two, Scene Two when she enters with the accordian. In addition, it is similar to the "litany" she has already delivered (p.38). Her lines in all these instances, as often as not delivered to no one in particular, comment upon the action so as to emphasize or clarify it for the audience.

\[1\] In at least one major production of the play -- that of the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco (Summer, 1968) -- Claire's "choric" lines were delivered straight to the audience, a fact which helped to draw attention to the play as a game.
Claire's function as a chorus in the play is also acknowledged by the other characters, chiefly by Agnes. In Act Two, Scene Two, she says to Claire, "Ah, how simple it is from the sidelines (p.95). In the same scene, she also says "Claire, who watches from the sidelines, has seen so very much, has seen us all so clearly..." (p.110). In Act Three, Agnes says "Claire has never missed a chance to participate in watching" (p.141). It is precisely because Claire sees so clearly that the characters often prefer to ignore her; she endangers their positions which are so dependent upon illusions. This fact becomes important when the characters are reluctant to face questions which threaten their security; in such instances, Claire's comments and questions are the only things which compel the play's development. This can be seen near the end of Act One when Harry and Edna bring their "terror" into Tobias' home. At this point, all the characters except Claire are afraid to face the reasons for the visit. Agnes asks Harry and Edna with "a strained smile"(p.49) "Have you been to the club?" The guests ignore the question and any other that will necessitate a frank answer. Claire, however, does not: she says, "The question — I'm going deaf from all the alcohol — was (Southern accent) 'Have you-all been to the club?" (p.49) Later when Edna asks "How is Julia" (p.51), Claire says "Wrong question." Eventually she asks "Why did you come?" (p.51) and then queries "What happened, Harry?" (p.52) Throughout the scene she is the only character who asks the questions which keep the play in motion As a result, the audience looks to her for guidance and clarification. Moreover,
because her questions demonstrate her objectivity both by their use of mimicry and their cryptic succinctness, the audience is led to develop a similar sense of objectivity. Albee's use of Claire therefore adds to the overall dramatic effect he is attempting to achieve.

This overall effect in which the naturalistic flow of the play is interrupted by the insertion of techniques not conventional to Naturalism often is conditioned by moments similar to some in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Claire's entrance with the accordian, for example, is similar in effect to George's entrance with the snapdragons. Both are heralded by blaring noises which suggest the interruptive nature of the scene to follow. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the door chimes clang loudly; in *A Delicate Balance,* there is a loud "burst from an accordian" (p.91). Following Claire's entrance, the interruptive nature of the scene is extended by Claire's use of mimicry and the chords she plays on her accordian to punctuate her speech. At one point these chords "drown" the conversation. A similar effect is achieved later in the same scene when Claire's blaring chord, as well as her "yodel, to an um-pah base" (p.119) occurs simultaneously to Julia's appearance with Tobias' pistol. Most important here is the fact that the audience sees Julia before the other characters do. Claire's game-playing acts as a distraction for the other characters so that Julia can make her entrance, "her hair...wild, her face tear-streaked" (p.119). The theatrical nature of the scene which is developed by the unnatural juxtaposition of Claire's comic yodeling and Julia's desperate entrance is
extended by the under-reactions of the characters to Julia's behavior. Although Edna "gasps" (p.119), little other sign of shock is registered. Agnes, neither frightened for herself nor concerned for her daughter's state-of-mind, becomes merely angry with a "soft intensity" (p.120). Edna, "becoming Agnes" (p.121), admonishes Julia mercilessly, her behavior unnatural in its sadistic severity: she calls Julia a "wilful, wicked, wretched girl..." (p.122) and calmly slaps her face. The scene ends only when Agnes, sighing, takes Julia under her arm and "leads her out" (p.123). As with the scene following George's entrance with the snapdragons in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? the exaggerated nature of the scene subsides. Although the actions of the characters in the scene can be logically explained, the overall effect of the emotional dialogue, underlined and emphasized by the use of music and violent action, is similar to the effect of the Absurd techniques in the snapdragon scene. The stage illusion has become more emotional just as the characters have become more manic. The mood of the play has been intensified so that scenes such as Tobias' final "aria" (p.164) can be accepted. At the same time the audience has been made aware of the play itself by the use of techniques which are jarringly interruptive.

Although the use of interruptive devices in A Delicate Balance is less obvious than it is in the other Albee plays discussed in this work, such a use is still evident and relevant. In his article on the play, Bigsby points out that "to several critics...the play's chief fault lay in its
mixture of styles. For one, the play moved from "realism to fantasy," while to another, perhaps more surprisingly, from "symbolism to naturalism."\textsuperscript{18} Bigsby dismisses these statements with an observation which is crucial to an appreciation and understanding of Albee's work. He writes:

\begin{quote}
...one of the most important lessons which Albee has to offer to the American Theatre is that distinctions such as these no longer make any sense. A Delicate Balance, like Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, defies such classification. \textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Albee's merging of divergent conventions extends and reveals the content of his plays at the same time as it provides a theatrical experience which is disturbingly teaching for the audience.

\textsuperscript{18}Bigsby, p.234.

\textsuperscript{19}Bigsby, p.234.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

"And I have sometimes wondered if it wouldn't make better sense to teach budding playwrights, instead of the usual Dramatic Techniques, two rules grounded in human nature: if you wish to attract the audience's attention, be violent; if you wish to hold it, be violent again."

-- Eric Bentley

Edward Albee's concern with the illusions people use to escape the reality of their lives has prompted the emphasis on games in his plays. For many people, games have ceased to be constructive and creative ways of controlling time and facilitating communication; rather they have become mere escape-routes from the facts and fears of Western society that Albee feels must be acknowledged and controlled if man is to survive. Only by understanding the reality of his life can the individual control it. Such control may develop from a conscious use of games which construct and employ illusions. The choice of using illusion to structure one's life has one inherent obligation, however: responsibility to the truth which such illusions can achieve. When this responsibility is accepted, intimacy becomes possible just as objectivity becomes difficult. A balance between illusion and reality must be achieved as must a compromise between awareness of a game and abandonmment to it.

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The development of Albee's talent that is demonstrated in his progress from *The Zoo Story* to *A Delicate Balance* suggests a resolution of his questioning of the balance between illusion and reality in life. The impasse that prompts Jerry's suicide in *The Zoo Story* -- an impasse in which an awareness of games strangles the ability to communicate -- is overcome in *A Delicate Balance*: Agnes is able to maintain order in the face of meaninglessness simply by choosing to. The desperate frustration of the Nurse in *The Death of Bessie Smith* is overcome in Agnes' case by the conscious use of games and an acceptance of the responsibilities inherent to the creation of illusions. Whether Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or Tobias in *A Delicate Balance* will be able to establish a similar balance is undetermined. But that Albee now sees a solution to the problem of "nothing" -- a solution not evident in his early plays -- is determined. George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Agnes in *A Delicate Balance* suggest that there are alternatives to suicide, and alternatives which still face and accept the truth. All truth as Albee sees it, however, is relative. Dreams, too, he would say, are facts.

The creative "slump" that some critics feel has characterized Albee's career since the production of *A Delicate Balance* is perhaps explained by the thematic resolution that the play represents. Perhaps Albee's exploration of games and illusions has come to an end. One would like to think that his examination of the realities which underly these games and illusions has just begun. The significance of the violence, discord and isolation
which his characters dramatize is only beginning to be felt and understood in Western society. A playwright who is able to present these realities in a disturbingly meaningful way is most needed. If Albee is indeed in a "slump," the pathway out perhaps can be found in his two most experimental plays, The Sandbox and The American Dream; experimentation that has as its aim the awakening of the audience to the realities of "this slipping land." Does a violent society need violent plays; or do violent plays perpetrate a violent society? Albee's future as a playwright possibly lies in exploring the tension between these questions. Certainly his career thus far acknowledges his ability to tackle the problem.
SELECTED LIST OF REFERENCES

The following list is by no means a comprehensive bibliography on Edward Albee. It is, rather, a list of books and articles pertinent to this thesis, divided into four areas: Albee publications, background material, discussions of game-playing, and articles concerning Edward Albee's plays.

Albee Publications


Background Material


**Discussions of Game-Playing**


**Articles Concerning Edward Albee's Plays**


Harris, Wendell V. "Morality, Absurdity, and Albee," Southwest Review, XLIX (Summer, 1964), 249-256.


Oberg, Arthur K. "Edward Albee: His Language and Imagination," Prairie Schooner, XL, ii (Summer 1966), 139-146.


Prideaux, T. "Cry of Loss: Dilemma Come Back!" Life, LXI, xviii (1966), 120.


Rule, Margaret W. "An Edward Albee Bibliography," Twentieth Century Literature, XIV, i (1968), 35-44.

Schechner, Richard. "Reality is Not Enough? An Interview with Alan Schneider," Tulane Drama Review, IX, iii (1965), 118-152.


