The first play written by Edward Albee (born 1928) was not staged in America. *The Zoo Story* (1959) was premiered first at Berlin, and it was only after its resounding success there that Albee could stage it in the original, at home. All this finds echoes in the staging history of *Waiting for Godot* (1955), the first ‘absurd’ play. While Martin Esslin includes the plays of Albee in his school of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, the dramatist himself has never claimed any such allegiance with Beckett. Indeed, his constant experimentation with form and his increasing preoccupation with language becomes a substitute for experience; his plays often tend to leave out all action, becoming conversation pieces only

Albee’s drama is gripped by a stasis, where it sometimes devours the entire action of the plays. They reveal his concern as a dramatist operating in a world where the characters do not illuminate the text, nor is there any story to tell; sometimes even no point to make, in his constant obsession with the very dissolution of his medium.

The existentialist philosophy that so deeply influenced absurd literature in the 1940s onwards also plays a definite role in the shaping of Albee’s plays (1959 onwards), undeniably so, despite the numerous other kinds of interpretations applied to them. Very often, overviews of his plays have tried to link the disparate elements in his work, labelling him absurdist / realist /
‘avante gardeist’ and so on. Whatever be the case or the classification, the noticeable tendency in Albee’s plays has always been toward a static posture or attitude, a numbness of being that devours much else in his drama. This is a quality that almost all critics of Albee recognize at some point or the other. It is this stasis pervading Edward Albee’s work that we seek to focus on in our reading of his plays.

Stasis

"... Plus, ca change, plus c’est la même chose". Over and again, we find the reiteration of this statement in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. Vladimir and Estragon are ‘stuck’ in their situation and time and space have ceased to have any specific referential quality, except that inertia, stasis and the void loom large everywhere paradoxically along with flux and ephemerality and the situation of man. Beckett’s play is exactly this – a play about a situation – not one that dramatizes any action. And stasis also becomes an ontological problem of the discourse of the play along with being a theoretical device. The feeling of deadness, senselessness, of numb, half-conscious lives coming to the western world as it did in the aftermath of the two great wars was thus described by Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus or Le Mythe de Sisyphe (1942):

At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him but see his incomprehensible
dumb-show: you wonder why he is alive. The discomfort in the face of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this 'nausea', as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd.

This was one level of absurdity. The other is the image of man—stripped of context, confronting the basic situation of his existence, forever lonely and isolated from everyone and everything: precariously perched in the universe, forever concerned with his own sense of being. "It is the theatre of situation as against a theatre of events in sequence and therefore it uses a language based on patterns of concrete images rather than argument and discursive speech."

G.B. Shaw (1856-1950) was writing, also, in the early twentieth century a kind of 'action-less' drama, completely dominated by words, not action. But his is the completely reverse kind of attitude to life and drama. His plays become mouthpieces to his ideologies that are then staged with the kind of cocksure confidence that finds absolutely no parallel in the 'action-lessness' of absurd drama. Shaw's drama uses a language which still upholds the possibility of true communication, and in that sense is hardly static at all. With the advent of the theatre of the absurd, the manner becomes that of the music hall or the circus. Language is made subordinate to stage machinery: sometimes reduced to meaningless patter, sometimes made to drown in its own over used clichés and sometimes completely disintegrating.

At this point it would be beneficial to look back at the various intellectual ideas that simmered from the middle of the nineteenth century.
Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) started the search for the new existential self to which Nietzsche's argument gave distinctive shape. His *Zarathustra* proclaimed the death of God in 1883, leading the world into a disjointed, purposeless existence without its single most integrating principle. Kierkegaard had found truth to be subjective: and the self is responsible for itself, and for no one else. It is trapped between finitude and infinitude – the twin Kierkegaardian polarities – its existence is tragic, and the solace – Christianity. Yet paradoxically here, God seems to have entered into time.

When Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) came upon the scene and proclaimed the death of God, he also propounded that life was an unbound vitality – without purpose or goal, truth or falsehood. He denounced the comfortable bourgeois attitude and justified existence only as an aesthetic phenomenon: pronouncing Christianity to be the single most repressive factor in western life. ‘Christian love’ was to be replaced by ‘genuine love’ which is possible only for the unrepressed – those who recognize the phenomenal and fictional character of the world. The locus of responsibility is now shifted to the self: to be human was to have the power, the will, the resolution and the courage.

Miguel de Unamuno (1864 –1936) who declared that man by the very fact of being man, of possessing consciousness is a diseased animal, had realized that man's only existence is in consciousness which is a fleeting phenomenon: the tension thus caused is life. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) was inspired by Nietzsche to the vision that life can be lived on the other side of death by taking death unto oneself to accept all that there is. His was a preoccupation with death and finitude of human existence.
Between 1914 and 1923, around about the two world wars, the ideas of writers and thinkers like Herman Hesse, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers and Martin Buber were taking shape. Decidedly influenced by the wars, they seem to be heading inexorably towards existentialist modes of thinking in combination with a deep interest in psychology. In Hesse’s (1877-1962) creative works, the polarity is between social convention and the libido, and he draws considerable inspiration from Nietzsche’s two worlds (the Apollonian and the Dionysian). Marcel (1889-1973) established as the starting point of his philosophy, not his mind but his body. This laid the basis for the notion of the ‘body subject’ of Sartre and later, Merleau-Ponty. His philosophy focuses on intensely lived experiences such as joy, pain, hope and fidelity. Buber (1878-1965) too, moves between the objective and the subjective, between the manipulative and participative consciousness. Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), a psychiatrist turned philosopher began his work with a comparison of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. What he refers to as “boundary situations” (such as death, guilt, suffering etc.) are impermeable through “existenz” and reason. Nevertheless, man seeks infinity and transcendence: this is his polarity – between finitude and infinitude. Interestingly enough, although all of these thinkers draw inspiration from the irreconcilable polarities in Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, they all point towards a possible reconciliation: ‘Grace’ or ‘God’ are expressed in terms of ‘presence’, and a possibility of hope after the holocaust of the wars.

With the next group of existentialist writers and thinkers, we have Franz Kafka (1883-1924), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976); Jean-Paul Sartre
(1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) – for all of whom alienation, isolation and ‘nothingness’ remained an irrevocable part of existence. While Kafka in his novel remained preoccupied with the self – its relation to itself and to the world – Heidegger’s subject is *Da-sein*: the individual but essential human being. He does not seek to describe the experienced world but to outline the ontology of that world in order to uncover the nature of being itself. He turns human existence into a ‘system’ (as also does Sartre). *Da-sein* or *being there* establishes that to be human is to be so in the world which is given and arbitrary; a human being has to ‘create’ himself through the voice of his own conscience (awakened by dread), authenticating himself essentially in opposition to others.\(^\text{12}\)

For Jean-Paul Sartre, all things are material objects, while consciousness is a flow which exists because objects take on a structure or meaning through it. Without consciousness (or hole-in-Being) there are only things, and no world. It is the *For itself* that breaks the plenitude of the *In-Itself* or Being. Therefore we have the alienation of the consciousness which builds on a ground other than itself. Hence there may be no ultimate meaning; only absurdity. The body which houses the consciousness must then remain forever in our control, or we become alienated from ourselves. Love is unattainable: only conflict generates strength. The fundamental project of every human being is to be completely free which again, is an impossibility.\(^\text{13}\)

Albert Camus also illustrated the separation of the human beings from his universe / another human being / himself. The meanings in the world are
created by the human beings – the world itself is absurd – purposeless and goal-less.\textsuperscript{14}

While all the above mentioned thinkers considered the world in the sense of polarities that problematize selfhood, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) takes us away from the historical mood that gave rise to such formations, even while retaining its general insights. At the very outset, he rejects the tendency to polarize the self and the world. Neither is the world static (as in Behaviourism and Empiricism), nor do human beings create the world \textit{de novo} (as in Introspectionism and Intellectualism). The truth is midway - the world is both already constituted and about to be constituted; human beings do not create \textit{de novo}, only reorganize or reconstitute the earlier order. Self and world are always integrated and always being integrated. The world with Merleau-Ponty is a very inclusive concept – not absurd but brimming with meaning – joy, fidelity, suffering, betrayal; but none with any special status. We are condemned to “meaning”. We are immersed in things and must find our way\textsuperscript{15}. With Merleau-Ponty, existentialism becomes more matter of fact; routinized and mundane rather than tragic.

The history of the evolution of existentialist thought has an obvious bearing upon all literature that emanated from Europe of the times even from all of the western world. This is especially so where drama / theatre theory and practice is concerned. From the early twentieth century onwards, we find ripples of avant garde activity that was soon to be labeled the literature (and theatre) of the Absurd. The works of Dostoevsky, André Malraux, (who said in 1925, that at the centre of European man, dominating the great moments of
his life, there lies an essential absurdity\textsuperscript{16} and Ernest Hemingway, culminating with those of Sartre and Camus paved the way for the drama that was to come. Meanwhile, Dadaism, Surrealism and a host of other movements also have some striking affinities with Absurd literature, often problematizing its identity. All find special problems in dramatizing the self, the world, being and temporality, flux, nothingness, change and stasis, amidst the great existentialist debate on the very nature and ontological bearings of the same.

Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) coined the term \textit{drame statique} for his work – an attempt to dramatize existential powerlessness – humanity’s dependence on an obscure fate. Death itself dominates his stage. Action is replaced by situation (as later, Sartre was to formulate in his theory of drama) and the possibility for all human action, nullified. The character speaks only to verify his situation. \textit{L'intruse} (1890), \textit{Les’ovengles} (1890) and \textit{Interier} (1894) are all treated in this manner. All have detailed stage directions and an insufficient basis for a dialogic form\textsuperscript{17}. Edward Albee has, in more than one place spoken of Maeterlinck, and \textit{All Over} (1971) is almost directly sourced from \textit{L’Intruse} as we shall trace in detail. The static drama of Maeterlinck has characters who are not causal agents of action, rather they are \textit{objects} of the action. Silences, stasis and numbness predominates as his representation of the human situation is staged.

Sartre himself being a dramatist, happened to see drama as a portrayal of the process of commitment: in the theatre, man sees himself “... not as others see him, but as he is”\textsuperscript{18}. A combination of objective distance and situations that are presented, and their relevance to the audience and gesture –
these are the most important features of drama. However, because Sartre was concerned with discursive language for his drama of choice and belief, he distanced himself from the extremes of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) regarding theatrical language in his Theatre of Cruelty. In the 1940s, Sartre developed the idea of the ‘theatre of situations’ in lieu of the ‘theatre of character’. Here, “... a man who is free within the circle of his own situations, who chooses, whether he wishes or not, for everyone else when he chooses for himself …”, this would be a result of man’s free will in the face of the “world’s absurdity”19.

Camus is again, close to Sartre in the theory of drama, existentialist theatre, despite his protestation to the contrary and he fully developed the ‘world’s absurdity’ concept in Le Myth de Sisyphé (1942). Marxism, however, drove a wedge between their beliefs and a war of pamphlets and articles followed. The theatrical works of each has also supported their opposition. The movement that their philosophy was to generate in terms of concrete stage technique was the Theatre of the Absurd and Waiting for Godot (1956) by Samuel Beckett was the torch bearer of the new avant garde that included people like Eugene Ionesco (b.1912) and Arthur Adamov (1908-71). When one seeks the sources of existence or tries to grapple with ‘understanding’ it as a whole, incomprehensibility appears. Ionesco offered an alternative term – théâtre de derision. Antonin Artaud though distinctly different, served as a lasting influence20, following whom Adamov pleaded for a theatre where gestures, attitudes, and the true life of the body free themselves from language and psychological conventions to search for the ultimate significance21.
Ionesco's diary, entry dated 10 April 1951 calls for abstract theatre, pure drama—"anti-thematic, anti-ideological, anti-social, realist, anti-philosophical, anti-boulevard-psychology, anti-bourgeois ..." This would be "theatre from within" unhindered by "social crust and discursive thought".

The theatre of the Absurd endeavours to put on stage metaphors for states of mind, and their patterns—*not* to tell a story. Nothing "happens" in the plays because all that was to happen has already happened. Here too comes in Sartre's ideas about the drama of situation rather than that of action, and echoes of Maurice Maeterlinck's static theatre. Inertia, cliché, repetition, inanity on the one hand and flux, ungraspability and utter meaninglessness on the other form the patterns in the plays. Silences are an inherent part of the dramatic method: the reverse is also true. At various points we find so much talk, an incessant deluge of language drowning everything else on stage, driving the characters *et al.* mad—*a la* Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot*. The same play also has various points where the act of waiting brings in a painful sense of nothingness, of inertia, of complete stasis—the action (or non-action) dragging in the void, the characters trying to search for words to fill up the silences. In Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1982) George and Martha fill up the air with sound in order not to confront their basic emptiness. All Albee plays are touched by this kind of inertia of stasis, of non-happening. The conversation carries on, the characters move about, sometimes they remain seated in one place throughout the play, sometimes there are no characters at all, and sometimes they even cease to be human, laying open the entire world to question.
Most of Albee’s plays have been categorized by critics as conversation pieces, with rarely more than four characters on the stage. He would substitute language for action – language games occur throughout, inconclusively. There is no event, no revelation, only static situation: quite in tone with the absurdist tendencies. It is not for nothing that Esslin bracketed Albee thus – “… Edward Albee … comes into the category of the theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism”24. The Zoo Story (1959) is marred by its melodramatic dénouement, but his later plays, beginning with The American Dream (1961) completely displaces the all-American optimism and bourgeois attitudes with its masterly use clichés as Esslin points out. Even Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is absurd in the sense that it employs “Genet-like ritualistic element”25 along with the “dream child”26 of The American Dream being repeated. Esslin does not really take up the later plays of Albee, ending with a note on A Delicate Balance (1966), a more realistic play, still, however, redolent with nameless fears and mysteries. It is equally important to note that in his later plays, Albee in fact moves slowly but surely to an unresolvable stasis, his dramatic technique getting closer to that of Beckett and his minimalism with plays like Tiny Alice (1965) Box and Quotations from Mao Tse Tung (1968), The Sand Box (1960), All Over (1971), Seascape (1975), and Listening (1977). The conflict, the action and the resolution are irrelevant in this drama – they work on their own methodology that would owe a great deal to the mindset of Europe after the wars, which seeped in late to America.
America still lived positively, untouched by the holocaust elsewhere in
the world, still a place where all dreamt of going, to find their fortunes. It was
only after the loss in the Vietnam War that the chink in the armour revealed
itself for the hollow protection that it gave. That is why the Broadway theatre
continues to cater to the all-American bourgeois, the consumerist, comfortable
society. The Off-Broadway and then the Off-Off-Broadway theatre came only
much later. Albee himself points out certain factors in *Fam and Yam* (1962) –
the avant garde in America has not remained avant garde for long, it has
come into the mainstream. However, a few resistant authors and playwrights
have chosen to continually experiment: Albee seems to have one foot in each
camp, especially after having been recognized as a ‘success’ with *Who's
Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The Broadway audience however, did not proceed
to lap up all of Albee's work in the same manner, and the plays were soon
shifted to Off and Off-Off Broadway. Albee has still not finished with his
constant experimentation with form and presentation, even if the undercurrent
of stasis runs constantly through every one of them. After *The Man Who Had
Three Arms* (1982), Albee’s output has been sketchy and the production
reviews not quite at par with his earlier success stories. *Three Tall Women*
(1994) is his latest play which also opened to mixed reviews and critical
comments. The last play along with the several adaptations by Albee have not
been made use of in this study. Neither have I dealt with his various other
writings, such as poems and short stories as these would be beyond the scope
of my subject.
It would also be proper to mention that I do not take into account the works of other important contemporary American dramatists such as Arthur Miller (1951-), Sam Shepard (1943-), Arthur Kopit (1915-) and David Mamet (1947-). While each of them are serious and committed playwrights and each has his own distinctive idiom, they do not seem to fit into the European absurdist / existentialist / avant-gardist mode in the manner that Edward Albee does. While there have been valuable assessments made by various critics, that would situate Albee in the larger American context, my focus is somewhat different in that I seek to place him against the European perspectives for the purpose of my thesis.

Reading Stasis in Stasis: The Problem of Interpretation

The problem that arises next is a phenomenological – hermeneutic one – of tracing the dramatic stasis in the play texts of Edward Albee because of the absolute lack of the visual spectacle / absence of live theatre and the dramatized stasis of the staged plays. This leads to – our reading stasis in Albee’s texts themselves – virtually a stasis-in-stasis as it were.

Albee’s experimentation with form continues till today and the major part of his work came somewhere between modernism and post modernism. Given this fact, the methodology adopted for my study tends to draw from various structuralist and post-structuralist trends and interpretative methods, chiefly phenomenology and hermeneutic theory. Semiotics and reception theory have emerged as important methods for drama study in the recent times, and my approach makes use of some of its important tools. The
practitioners of deconstruction and its concurrent movements have chosen to chiefly work in the area of fiction and drama has been mostly avoided - a situation that is fast changing. Study tools from this area too, have been drawn. The dichotomy between theatre and drama – the text and performance, the importance of the visual and the absence of it – these are some of the chief issues that are looked into. Speaking from our own – the Indian student's cultural context and distance, our stance inevitably seems to adopt the postures of the recent cultural discourse and post-colonial attitudes, given our own past history. The hermeneutic problems arise because of the gulf between different conventions, faiths, beliefs and cultures that are involved in the context of the drama or other literary genres and the lack of visual knowledge on our part. While it may be true that the same tensions must occur in poetry / novel and other sub genres too, our focus is drama because of some of its special features.

American drama is not even considered to be literature, “is very rarely readable”, the stuff of theatre – “stage mechanisms which seem oddly wan and listless on the printed page”. This was a scathing comment made by one of America’s leading drama critics, Robert Brustein, and it goes to show that drama interpretation is nearly always a dichotomized one: with either the page, or the stage dominating the critical evaluation or understanding and nearly all approaches tend to be biased one way or the other.

Edward Albee has himself remained an articulate artist always receptive to the criticism of his work; about his medium, his stage direction, his motivations, and about the interpretation of his plays. In fact, he has even
been accused of having read a particular review / study of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and appropriating it as his own!28 This is only one example of how completely intertextual the entire gamut of writing and hermeneutic verbalizations are.

When we refer to drama, we refer to genre-specific, performance-intensive interpretations. A play is first written, then produced, then published and last of all, read. (There may however, be exceptions to this) It may not be read, only *seen* by a few. It is read in the process of production (the actor’s reading). The performance itself becomes a ‘reading’ of the play. The published playscript then assumes all the associated readings and sub-texts thus generated. Una Chaudhuri, in an essay on the reader / spectator points out that the whole process is ‘relay-like’ – addressed to the audience through the performer and then on to the reader. Furthermore, while it would be perhaps acceptable to say that the reader “performs” the novel as Umberto Eco is quoted as having said30, is it also possible to say that the reader performs the play?

Looking to theatre semiotics for some solutions, not many critics agree. The moment a chair is put on the stage, it becomes significant – *The Chair*. When Marcel Duchamp put a urinal onto a pedestal and exhibited it at an art gallery, he was making use of the magical quality of the stage31. As a play is staged, a multitude of such signs are unleashed for the audience to react to; requiring considerable agility on their part. The performance is for ever in flight, and in the work of performing a play, there is perhaps “a struggle between the wealth of signs and the perceptive capacities of the spectator”,
says a leading theorist of theatre semiotics. Albee himself says, "I like the sense of immediacy, of the present. I'm not a very good poet, and my prose is tortured. You can get nice tensions going on the stage". In an even more devastatingly simple experiment with the mono-act, Dario Fo succeeds in creating an icon out of the absent 'other' character — but the playscript to be read of the very same performance would still have two performers / signifiers while materially both would essentially remain absent.

The semiotics of drama reconciles the performance and text divide in various ways. Keir Elam refers to their intertextuality, and Anne Ubersfeld refers to the written text as one which has 'holes' to be later filled by the performance text. Patrice Pavis, another semiotician, contends that mise-en-scene mediates between the text-performance dialectic and that it is "a system of association or relationships, uniting the different stage materials forged in performance" (but only because the text/performance confrontation exists). Marco de Marinis approaches the spectacle as a sort of "text", with its own signifying systems, separate from that of the written text. Hence, theatre semioticians cannot really rid themselves of the linguistic (and textual) concerns of the play: only to find a means to have the two co-exist. "When I write a play, I see and hear it on a stage....", says Edward Albee in an interview.

Still, it would seem that the one way of getting outside the hermeneutic circle, (but not quite) is performance — because of its unpredictability, the actor's body and its unreliability. And this, only till it is interpreted to have itself interpreted the text. After interpretation, the flood. An endless
proliferation of texts and “meanings” are generated, as Benjamin Bennett has pointed out. Marvin Carlson, having traversed the gamut of performance-text relationships, settles for “supplement” over “illustration, translation and fulfillment.” This because, he says, quoting Derrida, it “adds”, is a “surplus” — a plenitude to enrich another plenitude.

With these short glimpses of the phenomenological-hermeneutic implications involved in this study, as also of the intellectual mindset and its offshoots in the present time that lead to the static situation in Albee’s work, we begin the exploration of his plays. From our situation and cultural distance, how shall we begin to go about it? Our study of an eclectic American dramatist must needs be text dependent — the problem is compounded because we seek to trace stasis as a dramatic method in Albee — but our own reading will be within another static surrounding; minus the dynamics of the mise-en-scene. We shall then, function only in time (of the page), the space (of the stage) being denied, along with the phenomenological ‘body’ of the drama that makes it so unique a genre. We deal with Albee’s art as literature, not as a performing art; where words are primary, not the act. So many times removed from our subject, we crave for the gaps, the “holes” to be filled by the performance made flesh by lived experience, or erlebnis. It is against such a backdrop that we stand.

Pedagogy: Film and Television as Visual Substitutes

With the problems of the dramatic text, the performance text and the hermeneutic position let us now look at the Indian pedagogic situation. Every
year, thousands of Indian students enroll in graduate and post-graduate courses offering English literature. While only a few Indian Universities have a special Theatre/Dramatic Arts Department, all English departments include quite a few texts from Shakespeare, some Shaw and some Beckett almost mandatorily. American studies are not really available as a separate department, only as an option among many others, as a sub-category of English literature. All this leads to the unavoidable question (in the context of our postcolonial background) of the hegemonic dimensions of our situation. However, our present task is to situate ourselves in so far as the academic study of an American avante garde dramatist is concerned.

Plainly, the text dominates the class-room. All academic activity, all search for meaning, all interpretation centres around the text. But, given that drama is assuredly a definite and distinct literary type, even when taught in class, we wonder what happens to performance in pedagogy. The student studies a text that looks obviously different with stage directions and conventional dialogue, and no ostensible authorial voice (if we ignore the stage directions) nudging our consciousness with this comment or that, except through the choric devices. (Again, we may find ample authorial directive in avante garde plays like those of Beckett, Albee and others in their elaborate, painstaking comments on facial expression, pauses, and the like). This text is merely read, not seen, as performance and received as such by the audience / spectators. At the most we may have what we may call a classroom performance by the teacher who explicates the text. And at best, a classroom
'reading' of the text by a number of students/actors, may generate hints of the resonance of the real stage.

Such readings of the dramatic text will undoubtedly involve a degree of hermeneutic tension that exists between meaning as a function, and meaning, here and now, for the reader or the spectator. This, however, in the same manner as non-theatrical literature would do, not theatre as "the intense focus of paradox, the place where a significant, or indeed constitutive paradox of literature becomes an art in its own right, the art of drama." Then the problems of the stage and its paradoxes do not even make an appearance in our pedagogical context.

The text is omnipotent, and the teacher assumes the mantle of actor, director, interpreter and critic all rolled into one. Her role has all the potential to become hegemonic in its own way – she exerts her will over her audience much in the same manner that an actor on stage would do – only this is further enhanced by the fact that she will also explicate, analyse, and interpret the play.

This brings us to the problem of meaning, of interpretation of the dramatic text and the problem of 'relatedness'. The immense criticism industry thrives precisely because of the need for classroom explication. The Shakespeare interpretation industry is one example that aids the teacher with various readings / approaches to the texts, the sub-texts and so on. (We all know of the proliferation of what we call 'bazaar notes' along with the bonafide, 'accepted' critical texts). The classroom can only generate an exercise in hermeneutics, very much in the style of new criticism, through
‘close reading’ of the text. With precise notes and a meticulously chronological approach to what is deemed as a comprehensive, textual approach to drama, books such as *Understanding Drama* (1945) by Cleanth Brooks are to act as helpful tools for the teacher, much in the same manner as *Understanding Fiction* (1943) and *Understanding Poetry* (1938) help in their related areas. But these rather cut and dried approaches remain pitted against what has been earlier referred to as the ‘felt life’ of drama, seen (or meant to be seen) in real sensory terms, on the stage. Criticism, or this search for understanding, becomes then, a hunting ground for all manner and form of meanings, if not a mundane discourse only aimed at passing examinations. Meanings that one is culturally distanced from, and unfamiliar with, meanings that one cannot visualize (or ‘see’ in your mind’s eye) or empathize with.

While ‘The Daffodils’ may well evoke the visual understanding of the Wordsworthian landscape in a Western / European reader, it only leaves a vague curiosity on one who has never seen the flower in its natural ambience. Neither, for instance, can one even begin to visualize the setting of the windswept terrain of *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte’s well loved novel. Drama, being basically a visual genre, poses special problems in this context. For illustration, one may look at a few of Albee’s own plays. In *Tiny Alice*, there is a device of the set within the set, the play within the play, and one set of characters that are (apparently) repeated inside the next set and so on, *ad infinitum* in typically absurd fashion. The effect distances the audience from the characters, and at the same time, makes them ‘absurdly’ uncomfortable. But a ‘reading’ of the same text will not yield similar results. *The Death of*
*Bessie Smith* (1960) is about racism in America: its language however, suggests inertia, fixity, misdirected action and stasis. The overtones, the texture, and most importantly, the *colour* of the skin would not be materially visualized and the impact would become deadened. Stasis, indeed and *within* a vacuum, to compound it. *A Delicate Balance* is often accused of pointlessness, of being *about* nothing. Clearly, here the reader is at an advantage, and may drown himself in the abundance of syntax (at the cost of theatrical ‘livedness’). Language is paramount here, hence performances of this play have often been ‘flops’.

To surmount some of our problems, to find some substitute for visibility, for the pleasure of the spectacle, one may turn to the other visual medium – film and television. A lot has been said to prove the schism that exists between theatre and film / television performance. Some universities have separate teaching departments (most have none at all) for the two media. One agrees that due to the manipulation of *mise-en-scene* by the omniscient director and editor, the film reaches the audience severely doctored. The audience-actor lived interaction is lost, and so is the immediacy of the stage. Theatrical performance on the other hand would consist of the immediately present, material before one’s eyes. The chemistry will work wonders if the actor-audience communication gets ignited. Then, there is no predictability about the play – the moment the actor stumbles, the play changes beyond correction.

Cinema and television still happen to be our means to sort out some of our problems: films and television performances are readily available. Bernard
P. Dukore points out the advantages of the situation where admittedly, the affinities seem to outweigh the distinctions, and that all major dramatists write for the medium – not exclusively for the stage. Adaptations, and televised drama of serious works are a genre on their own. Pinter, Beckett, Albee, Shepard, Mamet, Stoppard et al., have written for both media. A play like *Amédeé* (1954) by Eugene Ionesco, would technically be much easier on film. So would a lot of Shakespeare for sheer panorama and range that cinematography is capable of. *Tiny Alice*, and its echoing sets could truly become energized through a camera zooming out of one, then the next, and the next (A film script, like a playscript, can be read, though the concept has not become popular because of shot directions, angles, and a great deal more ‘bricolage’ than the other. The conditioning has to be first acquired to read film scripts or screenplays). Both scripts are, at the end, at the mercy of the producer / director (and the taste of the audience to some extent) and unless the author asserts his own copyright stringently, any amount of interpretative liberties may be taken. *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* remains till date, the most well loved Albee play. Doubtlessly successful on stage, it is however, its film version that has etched itself on the memories of the audience, with actors of the stature of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor playing George and Martha. Under Albee’s own eyes, the director edited out portions of the script and even Albee admired the end result.

Martin Esslin, the same critic who popularized and christened the Theatre of the Absurd, and designated Albee as its American representative, makes use of semiotic theory to trace drama on both the stage and the screen.
Drama is multimedia, he says, and includes both theatre and cinema/television within its scope. Exponents of film theory insist on the total difference of this distinct art; particularly different from theatre. Strictly, this holds good. But the common ground shared by the two is undeniable. Film theorists tend to align their filiation to the epic-narrative quality – the novel rather than drama. Film does have its own distinct 'language' – of montage, of editing, travelling shots, panning, zooming in and out, close-ups, framing, etcetera. But there is also the neglect in the area of spoken dialogue, the actors and designers of sets, costumes and the rest – the dichotomy between mise-en-scene and film direction (that decides which bit or fragment of the mise-en-scene is to be filmed). Likewise, the mise-en-scene, or live theatre has refused to assimilate within film aesthetics that would seek to marginalize its potency. Esslin points out that the hegemony of the live stage in drama, the domination of stage plays, and then, particularly on the written texts of plays, in the drama departments of Universities seem to him a relic of the past, when the live theatre continued to be for centuries together, the sole mode of transmission for drama. Also, we see that film departments of colleges and universities and practical film schools tend to neglect many of the basic dramatic elements of cinema.

Seeing drama live, in the theatre, is a 'learned' experience – for the initiates who understand theatrical conventions (such as the aside, the soliloquy, the chorus, to name a few). The same can be said for film (techniques of flash-back, flash-forward, the dream sequence, and so on). The tradition of seeing live theatre – even popular theatre – peters down as the film
television audience burgeons. A child who watches a few hours of television everyday, easily grasps and consumes all these conventions. The visual delight in the medium is enough to hold his attention even when the item is esoteric. ‘Understanding’ or interpretation of the ‘meaning’ created by the multitude of the signs on the screen begins at the same level.

Hence the suggestion of filling the gaping holes in our available text of drama so as to enable us to complete our enjoyment of the text that we read, by the pleasure of the visual spectacle, the palpable image. This would fulfill at least one aspect of the performance – audience relationship, even though we know that we have tended to ignore the ‘I/eye of the camera and the person who guides it, as absences – having prioritized the actors / performance that we are able to see.

Notes


2. Esslin recognizes these qualities as he includes in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Edward Albee as the American exponent of the school. C.W.E Bigsby (*Modern American Drama: 1945-1990*, 1992) also points out the stasis that is found to engulf Albee’s plays. Various other critics to be directly referred to later have taken note of this tendency in Albee.


reference is to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausee* (1938). See *Nausea* Trans. Floyd Alexander (1938).


28. Albee had appropriated as his own the critics’ interpretation of the allegory on George and Martha Washington in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.


31. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) French artist and theorist. In 1914, he propounded that it was no longer valid to make an artistic equivalent of an object; any common object, isolated at random from its normal context. (e.g. a bottle rack, spade, urinal) and placed in an incongruous setting and furnished with an ironical title and signature, could be identified as a work of art; the only possible meaning of a work of art consists in the spectators’ consciousness of it.


43. Benjamin Bennett, *Theater as Problem: Modern Drama and Its Place in Literature, op. cit.*, 4

44. *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943) by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren and Later, *Understanding Drama* (1945) by Brooks did much to make the methods of New Criticism the chief mode of literary interpretation for the next few decades.
45. Bernard P. Dukore, "Film and Theatre: Some Revisionist Propositions"


47. Ibid. 34.