CHAPTER II

STASIS IN THE PLAYS – I

The First Decade : 1958 - 1968

Albee has often been variously labelled – social critic / poet of loss and change / realist – apart from the general tendency to bracket him with the absurdists: a dramatist much influenced by this most important of theatre movements in France. However, most attempts at strait-jacketing the playwright under one category must necessarily fail, even as he constantly sheds his old skin and grows a new one. Certain modes of being, certain attitudes and stage techniques, however, show a certain amount of congruency even as Albee moves from one play to the other. It would be useful to look at a few varied critical opinion of Albee's plays. C.W.E. Bigsby\(^1\) refuses to label him as most others, and recognizes the static quality in Albee's theatre, where everything is only a "reflex response"\(^2\). Belgian critic Gilbert Debusscher incisively traces the links between Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Tennessee Williams, and places him thus on the world dramatic scene\(^3\). Anne Paolucci concerns herself primarily with Albee’s strong point – language – and draws parallels between him and Dante\(^4\). Ruby Cohn deals with Albee’s concern with illusion/reality, distinguishing him from the European absurdists who represent the stark realities of the human condition\(^5\). Albee is fitted into the social-rebel model of the 1960s by Michael Rutenberg\(^6\) – a somewhat limiting stance – but useful in placing Albee within his own milieu. Anita Maria Stenz
deals with Albee's handling of human relationships and the wastage of human potential becomes his preoccupation: he becomes a stern moralist as this critic sees it. Richard E. Amacher shows the links that Albee's plays have with Greek tragedy and provides a good deal of biographical detail as well.

In terms of the school that Esslin christened as the Theatre of the Absurd, we have a great deal of controversy on Albee's status vis-à-vis dramatists such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter. Esslin himself includes Albee in his list. "...Edward Albee comes into the category of the theatre of the Absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism." Esslin traces absurdist techniques in most of Albee's plays from *The Zoo Story* (1959) down to *A Delicate Balance* (1966) While one group of critics argues for Albee's absurdism, another vociferously opposes the idea, and this has by now become a long standing critical debate. Robert Brustein points out his wholesale borrowing from a host of writers, and admits no contribution from Albee at all. Glenn M. Looney denounced the 'fad' of absurd theatre but praised Albee for being the "least" absurd and Faubion Bowers, on the other hand was greatly appreciative of the movement and praised Albee's work precisely for partaking of the same, and moving beyond realism. W.L. Turner notoriously condemned Albee as having a bad case of "absurditis". Robert H. Deutsch also places Albee with the Ionesco-Beckett-Pinter tradition even though his distortions of reality are only slight. Robert Mayberry also searches for and finds the same dissonances and discord in Albee that one expects in the absurd play, though not in the same degree as Beckett. Brian Way traces, however, the pull towards opposite directions in
Albee — social criticism via absurdist technique — which does not really generate the power of the other absurd dramatist\textsuperscript{15}. Debusscher and Bigsby (referred to earlier) too had tried to see the various strands in Albee as an integrated \textit{oeuvre}, and proved to be successful to some extent. Albee himself provides no great help to anyone seeking to straitjacket him into one or the other side — “I’ve been influenced by everybody for God’s sake. Everything I’ve seen, either accepting or rejecting it.”\textsuperscript{16}

However, as has been earlier pointed out, this study aims to show the marked stasis in Albee’s plays throughout his experimentation with form and technique in the entire gamut of his corpus, from \textit{The Zoo Story} onwards (only the original Albee plays are looked at, leaving aside his many adaptations) This has its obvious implications in that there is the suggestion of the ontological relationship of stasis with absurd / existentialist literature, in terms of technique, attitudes and thematic predilection, especially in case of his earlier plays.

\textbf{The Zoo Story (1959)}

The first Albee play, \textit{The Zoo Story} was the work that made America look with seriousness at this perpetrator of a new consciousness: a new mode of looking at the world. Obviously, the continental success of the play made its mark; Esslin famously included Albee in the absurdist canon for his use of recognizably absurdist techniques (especially in \textit{The American Dream}) because he hits out at the very root of American smugness. The absurd effect,
however, says Esslin is marred by its melodramatic ending, with Jerry's death. The first review that Albee ever received, went thus —

This tightly wound Grand Guignol, shudder-causing drama of super intelligent style, longing for death in bluejeans, Gotterdammerung from the gutter. But highly gifted, and in the dialectic of absolute evil, often possessing a shivering luster.

Very often, it is the sociological aspect of the play that has taken primacy its interpretation. Jerry the artist, versus Peter, the bourgeois, with the latter getting some insight through the former. Alienation, discord, frustrations of modern American reality is revealed under the fiction of 'the American Dream', constructed as an escape route. Class barriers, inevitable economic separation, social stratification and the need to 'make contact' beyond these have been suggested as the impulse behind the play. In symbolic terms, the problems of interpretation are 'solved' through the underlying 'Christian' concerns; with Jerry as Christ, sacrificing himself for the sake of mankind / Peter; (who interestingly enough, does deny him three times) under overtly naturalistic techniques of the play. The niggling doubt that remains as to whether Peter has been really saved, stays. Is the play then about the inevitability of isolation of the human condition, about a totally alienated universe? In terms of ritual, Jerry's altercation with Peter moves him to some kind of change through his brush with death but not, perhaps to any vivification of life affirmation as in society, but to a kind of freedom from inherited social patterns. He 'creates' his own essence — a kind of
existentialist Christ. But then again, no true affinity is to be found anywhere, with anything. Man is estranged not only from the external society, but also from himself. His objective recognition of the world negates his subjective vision and becomes meaningless: “Tell me, Peter, is this bench, this iron and this wood, is this your honour? Is this the thing in the world you’d fight for? Can you think of anything more absurd?”

Man’s caged animality is emphasized as the “zoo” becomes the dominant metaphor of the play. Jerry explains,

“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 every one 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.”

Brian Way is right when he suggests, “The entire human condition, for Jerry, is a zoo of people (and animals) forever separated by bars and cages which keep Peter, and his family, and those like them isolated in their ‘own little zoos’.” Communication; indeed, any kind whatsoever, of positive ‘progress’ or even movement in the play seems impossible despite the melodramatic ending. Peter becomes aware of the visceral, destructive, ‘other’ side of life, through Jerry’s action, and even ‘kills’ him. But again, all of this is problematized. Peter kills him, because he holds the knife, but Jerry’s death is actually suicide, as he himself impales his body upon the knife. So really, what
is the message that Peter is to receive? For Jerry, the I/thou relationship becomes a useful meaningful murderer/victim relationship. As Debusscher says, his last speech is "a humble thanks of a wounded animal put out of his misery at last." A physical ending, to which Peter's "Oh, my God!" repeatedly, the same phrase, louder, bolder and progressively more meaningless as the event sinks in, gives way to not any life-affirming ending, but merely an obscure albeit shocking one. And there are no answers, merely the same inertia that grips the entire play, the same stasis that freezes all the action, while throwing up endless questions.

At the very outset, the play seems to be a take-off from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, with two characters on a park bench and very little else on the stage. But these characters are not friends, nor even acquaintances, like Didi and Gogo. Jerry picks up a conversation, forcing it down an unwilling Peter’s throat, stunning him, shocking him, startling him into paying attention. He proceeds to unravel all of Peter’s life in all its predictable comforts and complacencies. As Peter squirms with shame and anguish for his being what he is, the epitome of a successful yuppie, and a ‘straightforward’ family life with wife, children, cats and parakeets, one begins to wonder exactly what he is so flustered about at Jerry’s jeering. Interspersing his guessing game about Peter with his own realities, Jerry insidiously manages to force upon Peter, the grotesque picture of the other, the denied half of existence, and completely manages to subvert the cozy picture of Peter’s life. Having managed to do this through holding Peter’s attention by again and again alluding to ‘what happened at the zoo, Jerry reveals towards the end that, nothing, in fact,
happened there. The ‘Zoo Story’ is after all, only a red herring: a dominant metaphor ending in a damp squib – if Jerry’s murder/suicide may be referred to as really nothing very shocking. If seen in performance, the postural differences between the two characters would make a marked impact: Peter remains static, seated until almost physically shoved off the park bench by Jerry who suddenly decides to sit down after having remained on his feet almost for three-fourths of the play, restively pacing, fidgeting or standing. The only time when one almost discerns Peter’s break from his stasis is when he is completely dispossessed of his situation and Jerry assumes power and dominion. To which Jerry gleefully squeals, “Very well, Peter, we’ll battle for the bench ....” and tosses him a knife upon which he will ultimately impale himself. As for Peter, throughout the play, it is he who is being acted upon, never raising an inch without provocation and then again sinking back into his static world. As the dog story ends, he is ruffled, but not really. Then he is physically poked and tickled into a forced resistance of stasis, but again sinks back: he is actually angry with his loss of the bench, but almost stops his own reaction; Jerry kills himself through Peter – who is shaken out of his stupor if Jerry is to be believed – “You’ve lost your bench, but you’ve defended your honor. And Peter, I’ll tell you something now: you’ve not really a vegetable; its all right, you’re an animal....” It is almost a kind of benediction, very Christ-like: no wonder the hermeneutic tendency to Christian symbolism. But even as Peter gasps “Oh My God!” over and over again, we fathom something. To the very last, he has remained in his stasis, inert, unable to move of his own volition. It has been Jerry’s show all along – Jerry’s suicide
is attributed to Peter’s deed – murder – and the final benign judgement too is passed by him. He is offender, defendant, judge, jury; actor, director and audience all rolled into one. In the phenomenological sense of the term Peter remains outside the play for the most part until summoned from time to time and then literally “grabs his book, and retreats.”

Thus, in Albee’s first play itself we trace the patterns of stasis and its ontological representation in terms of stage production: its phenomenality on the stage. The pattern we find, repeats itself in most other plays of Albee where situations are dramatised which do not really alter but remain unchanged and inert. A whole gamut of questions are asked, but none are answered finally. However, from the point of view of pedagogy, the play would remain an exercise in hermeneutics of the text, and the teacher and her students would trace the various interpretations of the play and try to formulate newer ones to suit their own situations. The phenomenological stasis-on-stage would not even begin to materialize for the student-reader; the ‘holes’ in the text to be filled by performance would remain empty.

The Death of Bessie Smith (1960)

After having practically declared himself to be avante-garde with his first play, Albee’s next work immediately had critics bracketing him into the social-realist mode. The Death of Bessie Smith, written a year after The Zoo Story is ostensibly about racism, discriminations, snobbery and the like: socially relevant issues. But perhaps the play is not so easily categorized. It partakes of realism, social satire, naturalism, and other critical stratifications,
none of which we find suffices alone. Critics such as Michael Rutenburg, F. Hirsch and Luke Grande praise the play for its stand against bigotry and racism, but those such as Paolucci show how the death of the black blues singer itself peripheral, and that the play’s structure is highly fluid and ambiguous — “thematically irrelevant” — as Paul Witherington points out.

Absurdists have also managed to trace absurd elements in the naturalistic setting of the play. C.W.E. Bigsby analyses the play as not one about racism in particular, but on the decadent societal patterns in general, which, he says, animates all his work. Indeed Albee is quoted thus — “I am not concerned with politics.... But I have a sense of urgency... A dislike of waste ... stagnation.” However, critics like Gilbert Debusscher trace racism, implicit incest, the gender question and illusion versus reality as the chief thematic concerns of the play, to be repeated often in the later Albee. For The Death of Bessie Smith is ultimately concerned with despair. Its cinematographic cutting, schematic characterization, the suggested setting, the symbolic lights all contribute, he points out, to its closeness to German expressionistic theatre, and the influence of Strindberg. This play too, was premièred in Berlin.

Bessie Smith, the Negro blues singer died in a car crash in 1937, unattended by medical help, being turned away from Mercy Hospital, a whites-only institution. Nowhere in the play does the audience get to visualize the characterization of Bessie, and the melodramatic circumstances of her death. She functions, much as the Zoo does, at the level of an emblematic insignia to the unconscious of the audience, by her very absence. On the face of it, the play involves sometimes vigorous, sometimes languid conversation.
between the nurse, the intern, the orderly and at the beginning, the racist father of the nurse. The same kind of goading, provocative patterns of talk are discernible in this play too as in *The Zoo Story*. Here also, the death of Bessie seemingly provides a cathartic effect on the audience – but not quite. That is why many critics find it hard to stomach any prescribed ‘moral’ of the story. Issues are, undoubtedly raised, satire comes as a matter of course – part of the very strategy of raising the issues – all of which are then problematized and complicated, the strands woven and left unraveled. Incomplete patterns come and go like in a montage of a film, leaving no complete or single dramatic effect upon the consciousness of the reader / audience. One of the strategems that Albee applies to achieve this kind of befuddlement and unresolvability is to introduce into the dramatization of the play, insidiously, inertia: stasis. The play is after all, talk, argument, and more talk leading nowhere. Seen in the satiric mode, the play does castigate a society that practices racial segregation. One hospital turns Bessie away, so does the nurse at the other – the intern however decides to help – only to discover, to his consternation, that Bessie is already dead. And Jack, her attendant knows it. Thus we find here the subversion of the ‘racism’ theme. Sinking into a highly problematic morass, symbolic of the zombie-like actions of the orderly who bleaches his black face to achieve a deception of white. At the end of the play, he makes this absurd comment. “I never heard of such a thing ... bringing a dead woman here like that .... I do not know what people can be thinking of sometimes...”

His statement brings to mind the nurse’s summing up of his character - “You just jump to it and say what you think people want to hear ... you be both sides of
the coin". Black skin bleached white and the rest of it. The striking ambivalence of the play is in keeping with Albee’s static drama – a deliberate tool as well as theme.

As far as the stage setting is concerned, we find a striking, blazing sun in the background at most times, and a clear, flat, blue sky, completely blank at others. Read, the impact of the setting is hardly perceptible. It is only in terms of the concrete stage that the impact of the visual may be envisaged, and the contributions it makes, definitely go to the ‘felt life’ of the play. The student reader will of course be unable to see the bleached white – black face of the orderly making its own semiotic inscription on the performed text of the play. But as far as Bessie herself is concerned, she remains an imagined artifact, to be visualized as one wishes, by both the reader and the spectator.

The play ends with the orderly’s comment, just after the nurse’s hysterical “keening” (Albee’s notation) and the intern’s slapping her to switch her out of this state. Keening, we know is the public moaning/wailing at the death or loss of a loved one. But the nurse’s hysterical wailing then is highly inappropriate coming as it does, absurdly, at the death of Bessie Smith: only we are told that it is a curious kind of laughter. Indeed again, one is starved for some kind of stage interpretation to bring us out of this hermeneutic dilemma – laughter or tears/keening. The slap ends the confusion, and the world, the stage and the text becomes inert again, as static as it remains throughout, despite the few attempts at a release –
I am sick of everything in this hot, stupid, fly-ridden world. I am sick of the disparity between things as they are, and as they should be! ... 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!.

But the breakdown over, she resumes her usual dogmatic posture. The Intern too remains inside his dilemma, despite his attempts to transcend his fate. The Orderly of course, makes no effort at all to do so, except semiotically, through his bleached face. Nobody can ultimately extricate themselves from the hellish situation into which they are sucked endlessly.

The Sand Box (1960)

_The Sandbox_ was the first Albee play to be premièred in America (on 15 April 1960). Albee was initially commissioned to write a short dramatic piece for the festival to be held in Spoleto, Italy, when he was about to complete _The American Dream_. Albee has admitted to extracting several of the characters from the other play and "put them in a situation different than, but related to their predicament in the longer play". In one of the most lucid readings of the little fourteen minute play, C.W.E. Bigsby who has consistently denied Albee's 'absurd-ness', at first labels the play an 'expressionistic satire' and then goes on, later, to name it as the one play that comes the closest to the European absurdists. Albee satirises, along with society, his own medium through the play "whereby theatrical devices had been allowed to harden into conventional (devices)" – a distinctly
Pirandellian concern versus naturalistic theatre. Gerry McCarthy points out that Albee mixes his absurdist Mommy and Daddy and the young man with a bright eyed, naturalistic Grandma. Another interesting aspect that becomes more obvious than ever when one looks at the stage setting and the placement of characters, is the placing of a musician and his place in the play: McCarthy shows how Albee, like Strindberg preferred chamber theatre – intimate, concentrated and to be watched with great attention and closeness.

Meanwhile, it is greatly interesting to see how Albee utilizes the stage for his play. Mommy and Daddy sit on two chairs, facing the audience. A Sandbox (where children play, signifying the sands of the beach) is upstage centre – where Grandma is dumped by Mommy and Daddy. Stage left is another chair, to be occupied by the musician. This, then, is more a performance space rather than a locale or a setting of a scene. To be performed within this space is the “passing-away-of-Grandma” game. The scene is a deliberate burlesque: artificial, self conscious metadrama that lays bare its own becoming, or coming into being. The performers share with the audience exchanges such as – “It was an off stage rumble... and you know what that means... It means the time has come for poor Grandma...” says Mommy pseudo-tearfully. The musician takes his cue and plays on until told matter-of-factly by Mommy – “It’s all right, you can stop playing now ….” Grandma, the only character who ‘lives’ in the play until made to die, plays her own subversive game to hijack Mommy’s carefully planned out scenario, acts deaf, shovelling sand all over herself and lying still Mommy and Daddy make their prepared little mechanical speeches and leave. But Grandma’s subversion of
the little gameplaying is also to be subverted: she actually begins to die. The listener to whom she relates the story of her life (*a la The Zoo Story?*) identifies himself clumsily as the Angel of Death or, the actor designated such a role. Throughout the rest of the time he has been busily going through his exercises, pleasantly greeting all and sundry. The last exchange between them nearly crosses over (indeed, one of the reasons why the play is often designated naturalistic) to the maudlin, soppy kind of expressiveness. But not quite, as Grandma dies, the musician keeps on playing and the young man goes back to his exercises.

All this, we in the classroom, will merely read. Yet, the entire play, we notice, is completely enthralled as it were, to mechanisms of the stage, even as it makes its own simultaneous comments upon it. *The Sandbox* is a play that compulsively uses stage mechanisms at the same time as it tries to objectify it. Bigsby is right in citing the closeness to Pirandello: “When a musician is hired to play during Grandma’s death-scene and when the light grows dim – after Grandma has prompted the electrician – what we are witnessing are the formal clichés of death as evidenced in the cinema and naturalistic theatre.”

Hence again, *The Sandbox* makes all the points it wants to make through performance itself, here the greatest sign Albee seems to be using is the very *stage* itself, and all its conventions of characterization, stage lighting, music and the rest of its paraphernalia and devices: all stuck in stasis, the action is non action, the characters – non-characters, the props and the stage itself are suspect. The play apparently reveals the clichés of the theatre itself – it also revels in them and there is no effort to get out of the inertia. Even as,
paradoxically, the young man does his callisthenics, he remains the most inert character – the Angel of Death – to play his designated role in the manner of a keyed up robot, going through his programmed movements: but completely without life – static. This is the play that is after all drawn from *The American Dream*, and in analyzing that play we shall deal with the same issues on a broader canvas of both time and space.

**The American Dream (1961)**

*The American Dream* opened on Off-Broadway at the York Playhouse. Albee himself said that “it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy keen.”48 So, self expressedly, the play is a satire. Or, as C.W.E. Bigsby puts it, an expressionistic satire –

In *The Zoo Story* Peter had been forced to acknowledge the hollowness of his marriage and the emptiness of his personal life... with *The American Dream*, however, he concentrates more closely on the alternative to an authentic existence.... 49

The centre of the play – the subject satirized – is the American family. (It may of course be pointed out that Peter, no where in the text of the play, verbally ‘acknowledges’ any such thing in *The Zoo Story*). The absurdists of course, claim the play as one that

clearly takes up the style and subject matter of the Theatre of the Absurd and translates it into a genuine American idiom... *The American Dream* shows an American family –
Mommy, Daddy, Grandma – in search of a replacement for the adopted child that went wrong and died ... the oily glibness and sentimentality of the American cliché ...

Albee’s promising and brilliant first example of an American contribution to the Theatre of the Absurd.50

In another, later work on American drama, Bigsby points out the use of character in Albee as a product of language. “The language of Mommy and Daddy in The American Dream like the functional claims of their names, denied in action, is evacuated of meaning, conventionalized to the point at which it becomes self-annihilating”51. Bigsby here, almost echoes Esslin. Ionesco’s The Bald Prima Donna (1956) is often seen to be one of the major influences on the play. The American Dream – the beautiful young man – turns out to be impotent, a castrato incapable of performing

The myth of the American Dream, to begin with, is, in the words of Arthur Miller, “... the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out – the screen of the perfectability of man .... We think that if we could only touch it and live by it, there’s a natural order in favour of us ...”52 Reading then, the play as absurdist satire, M.C. Roudane shows how Albee establishes the absurdist texture of the play through the inane but intense argument about the cream/wheat/beige coloured hat, the non-individualized, “vanishing” character53, the social and spiritual entropy, the deadness of the entire situation. Indeed, Mommy and Daddy react exactly in the same manner with Mrs Barker as they did twenty years ago showing the
stasis of their world, the lack of growth or even any kind of movement. Sexually too, the playwright makes emblematic use of inertia, impotence, stasis and inability to act, both in Mommy’s references to Daddy’s ‘uglies’ and the adopted son’s ‘you-know-what’. In typically grotesque fashion, we are told how Daddy now only has ‘tubes’, instead of tracts, and how the child was dismembered part by part by the couple, as he was unable to give ‘satisfaction’. The information is dropped by none other than Grandma, initiating the Young Man and the audience into the static world enshrouded by the myth of the American Dream: herself still “outside the ring”, and candid –

My sacks are empty, the fluid of my eyeballs is all caked on the inside edges, my spine is made of sugar-candy. I breathe ice; but you don’t hear me complain. Nobody hears old people complain because people think that’s all old people do. And that’s because old people are gnarled and sagged and twisted into the shape of a complaint.54

‘The American Dream’ himself is ‘almost insultingly’ good-looking, typically American. But empty inside, unable to ‘feel’ at all, passionless, emotionless piece of sculpture – “I have been drained, torn asunder .... disemboweled .... I am incomplete ... I can feel nothing”55. He is the “existential question made flesh”56. As for Mommy, overtly Albee’s own catharsis of the mother image, she is the Mommy we found in The Sandbox — badgering, nagging, complaining, manipulative, domineering and calling all the shots. She self-admittedly married Daddy for his money, adopted the
dream child from the Bye-Bye Adoption Service and Mrs Barker, twenty years ago – but the child could not ‘satisfy’ and hence was dismembered – each part she could not control, she cut off; until the baby turned the tables on her – it died. The grotesque, used in this avante garde manner in drama is again a very distinct characteristic of absurd theatre. In Ionesco’s Amédeé (1954) for example, we have the corpse bursting at the seams of the house as it were; here of course we only have talk.

Perhaps the most static, inert person in the whole play is not the child/young man but Daddy. He is constantly being acted upon, never taking any kind of initiative, ossified into nothingness. He willfully submits to the diktat of Nada: non experience as a way of living. He lives, because he has to, and refuses to stir himself out of his self-imposed stasis. This is a corrosive influence, a kind of a ‘negative epiphany’, the absurdist manner of looking at life; “the prototypically modern revelation: negative epiphany” as Susan Sontag puts it.

Mrs Barker, we find, is variously introduced in the play, and variously displayed as well, on the stage. She is the club president who Mommy seems to have an ego problem with; she is also (or was, twenty years ago) the agent of the adoption service. Time and space are perversely made obtuse and obscured – Mommy and Daddy are again to adopt a son – the twin of the one they ‘killed’ years ago: this time they are sure of satisfaction, and again, Mrs Barker / the club president is to broker the deal. At her arrival, she is asked to make herself comfortable, even to take off her dress if she wished (which she promptly does) much to the befuddlement of the audience as Daddy himself
points out. All these gimmicks are after all, tendencies very much in keeping with the avante gardeists. Only she bears a name in the play. The rest are all nameless characters: functional types, ossified clichés populating the stage. As M.C. Roudane puts it,

The characters become mere extensions of the play’s set design, they are objects, types living in a sterile apartment filled with gaudy furniture.... the ultimate force of the play lies not so much in its social as in its existentialist presentation of the enervated individual.\(^{58}\)

There are no solutions offered, no salvations or epiphany: they remain as they are – stage conscious, as always, with Grandma’s comment that it was time to end the play to end it in comedy – not tragedy. It can be best described as “a personal, private yowl”\(^{59}\) that we all share at a certain level of anguish.

**Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962)**

This play, for most Americans (and others) has come to be synonymous with the name of Edward Albee. His first foray into Broadway, in October, 1962 was an instant success, running for two years, and receiving the Tony Award for best play of the season as well the New York Drama Critics Award. The Pulitzer Prize was denied to him (“a filthy play”)\(^{60}\) leading to the resignation of two members of the drama committee in protest. Here was Albee, now truly turning into a FAM from being a YAM,\(^{61}\) while also maintaining a popularity in the European avante garde. (In Prague, his
translated play was rechristened *Who's Afraid of Franz Kafka?*) Off-Broadway doyen Albee was quite embarrassed about his Broadway success.

The Strindbergian sex-drama, the battle of the sexes thrust and various other visible motifs of the play are undeniable, in this first full length, three act play with four characters—a play that generated a veritable avalanche of critical interpretations. The usual polarization of critics who on the one hand see the absurdist elements in the play and on the other, those who do not, occurred.

Elizabeth Philips argued for the clubbing of the play with *The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The American Dream* in the absurdist canons closer to the Europeans while critics like Wendell V. Harris find it the ‘most cheering and morally hopeful of Albee’s plays.’ And though it is ‘devil-spawned’ for Elemer Hankiss, it has a positive effect, rising above mere naturalism as a protest “against the senselessness and impurity of life.” Another major motif traced by the critics is the illusion-reality/fantasy/truth theme, some in terms of allegory and symbolism, and some in realistic terms: with the stripping of illusions. C.W.E. Bigsby finds the play generally optimistic in its ending because of the confrontation made possible with reality, in his early assessment of the play which he terms as a “modern secular morality play,” though not precisely an allegory. He points out that Albee has never been a realistic playwright and shows the affinity with Beckett’s idea of the moment when “the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being,” precisely the moment that George and Martha have to face. The resorting to illusion—now called fiction and game playing and
elements of Metatheatre are all found in a subsequent reading by Bigsby, an interesting shift in focus.\(^{67}\) Martin Esslin of course relates the dream child of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to that of *The American Dream*, and points out the “Genet like ritualistic elements in its structure as a sequence of three rites ....”\(^{68}\) [i. Fun and Games, ii. *Walpurgisnacht*, and iii. Exorcism] Other critics tend to veer away from symbolism or allegory toward realism. Daniel MacDonald calls it a “story of real people and their illusions”\(^ {69}\) despite the problematic word “real”. For Diana Trilling, the play is clearly terrible – “life is nothing, and we must face our emptiness without fear.”\(^{70}\) Failure of course is one of the chief elements concerning the playwright – and it leads to sterility: another important motif of the play, as critics like Michael Rutenburg have pointed out.\(^ {71}\)

Dan Ducker and David Pryce-Jones try to show the comic strains as the dominant ones in the play\(^ {72}\), black or a little horrifying in nature – to use Henry Hewes’ phrase – “a neo-naturalistic horror comedy”\(^ {73}\) or “sick” comedy as Sharon Spencer puts it\(^ {74}\). These approaches attach themselves to the existentialist basis of Albee’s work, and often, parallels with works like Sartre’s *No Exit* (1946) are traced as in Eugene H. Falk’s interpretation where the characters are unable to transcend their situations, or create any essence beyond their existence.\(^ {75}\) The choice only causes anguish and a kind of liberty. Another existentialist writer who is often drawn upon by Albee is Miguel de Unamuno, as Diane Carr\(^ {76}\) shows, where the necessity of illustrations are undermined. Albee’s wide reading is undeniable, and hence one must grant all kinds of influences that have been integrated into *Who’s Afraid of Virginia*
Woolf. Emil Roy says that the play combines naturalism, existentialism and the theatre of the absurd, but ends up embracing "the values that he so bitterly castigates"\textsuperscript{77}. He descends from flashes of brilliance to mediocrity, inverted romanticism and pseudo-significance.

The influence of Ibsen’s \textit{Hedda Gabler} (1890) and some other plays, Strindberg’s \textit{The Dance of Death} (1901) have even led to allegations (by critics such as Martin Gottfried and Robert Brustein) of plagiarism\textsuperscript{78}. Other possible influences are Brecht, Shakespeare’s \textit{The Taming of the Shrew} (1593-94), Shaw’s \textit{Heartbreak House} (1920), Pinter’s \textit{The Lover} (1963) and so on. Eric Berne’s \textit{Games People Play} (1964) led to various interpretations of the play to fit it into the ambit of that psychological theory, such as those by Joy Flasch and Louis Paul\textsuperscript{79}. In another psychoanalytic view of the play, \textit{Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?} is proposed to have been written for two male couples, a play about homosexuals\textsuperscript{80}. Thus, seeing and sifting though a wide variety of critical stances on the play, it is still difficult to come to a straightforward, singular view of the play.

George and Martha, on returning home from a Saturday night drinks party, apparently punch drunk and bent on continuing the party at home, are to receive Nick and Honey, another academic and his wife to spend the rest of the evening. There is continuous bickering between George and Martha, an argument that starts from nowhere in particular, nor leads anywhere. The coming of the other couple merely complicates the fabric of the play through the projection of ‘other’ kinds of people. But this ‘otherness’ itself subverts its own origins, when Nick and Honey reveal their reasons for marrying, and
later, the child phobia that Honey has. Throughout, the characters and the audience keep veering back to the consideration of the most important character / non character in the play: the child who is an illusion / fantasy / dream or what you will. Hence the very absence of their omnipresent child becomes emblematic – the sign of the existence of the play – perhaps very much in the same manner that Godot does, in Beckett’s play. The play then is dramatically rooted in stasis, with no hope for progress, affirmation or negation. In fact the two sets of characters, the non action, the repetitions, the killing of time through various modes of game-playing and rituals, the abusing, the name calling and the immanent ‘absence’ in play are almost parallel to Beckett’s play. Like Godot, the dream child never comes. However, it is made to die: perhaps the reason for such varied interpretations of the play, and where the affinity with Godot ends. Is the death a pointer that George and Martha have finally decided to end their illusion? Perhaps it is incumbent only because Martha cannot keep her part of the bargain – fiction comes apart as George must get his own back, even as the duel continues. Whatever be the case, the couple are to find themselves further entrenched in the stasis, unable to actually make a move, while deluding themselves that they can.

Many of G.B. Shaw’s plays have a similar dialogue intensive structure. The entire play format could be sustained just by Shaw’s conversation pieces. But all his conversations would also have formidable ‘answers’ attached to them, not the pointlessness, the inertia and the fundamental stasis that consumes Albee’s conversation pieces. By the same distinction, Shaw’s plays
could perhaps be understood perfectly well in reading them, without the spectacle. Edward Albee’s drama, however, would demand the visual. A look at the stage directions of both playwrights show us how different Shaw’s meticulously detailed directions are from the evocative, suggestive and even impressionistic stage directions of Albee. Albee’s dialogues themselves are open to all kinds of problems.

To sustain interest in such a conversation piece through three acts, the writer certainly needed some amount of technical mastery over the craft of dialogue-writing and over the phenomenon of theoretical performance itself. Obviously Albee’s method is the use of language – it is also his weapon. A weapon that George uses to substitute experience with: the son is a literary construct who helps to combat his and Martha’s sterility, their stagnancy, their stasis. As C.W.E. Bigsby realizes in a later work, “He and Martha fill the air with sound because without it they would have to confront one another without protection; they play their characters because performance has replaced being”81. When words cease, the fantasy dies and monosyllables again render the grip that stasis has over Albee’s work. Like Daddy in The American Dream, George’s strategy seems to be withdrawal, death-in-life, anaesthetic routine as he admits –

I’m numbed enough …. And I don’t mean by liquor, though may be that’s been part of the process – a gradual, over the years going to sleep of the brain cells – I’m numbed enough, now, to be able to take you when we’re alone. I don’t listen to you … or when I do listen to you, I sift everything, I bring everything down to
reflex response, so I don’t really hear you, which is the only way
to manage it.82

The various acts of story-telling in the play again point to the
metafictional acts that almost always try to lay bare language. The Bergin
story which has a boy killing his own father and spending the next thirty years
without uttering a sound is, according to Martha, George’s autobiography; first
related by George, and then interpreted by Martha. In the same way, the secret
fantasy, or fiction about their son is a joint conception but revealed by Martha,
abruptly ending it, as George decides that he has to die. The other stories in
the play – Nick and Honey’s fiction about their child and the real phobia
behind it, George and Martha’s past are all devices that go toward a
construction of a non-existent movement, in life – to avoid or defer the
nothingness that would otherwise devour them.

“The Exorcism” the title of the third act, has often led most critics to
assume the cathartic dimension of the play, the cleansing, purgative effect of
myth-breaking, of George and Martha coming together, closer than they have
even been before. But these are always indefinite, tentative, a deferral of the
issues – because no consequences are reached even at the end. George,
Martha, Nick and Honey remain just the same, formulating and reformulating
modes of survival sometimes absurdly, sometimes with lucidity, but always
pointlessly, inconsequentially, through the series of ritualized game-playing.
Nothing in the play bears any mark of progress or movement – even sex
remains unachievable for Martha and Nick.
Tiny Alice (1965)

The sheer abstraction of *Tiny Alice* has led to a volume of critical explication / interpretation that even exceeded that of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Many of the first reviewers of the play, put up in December, 1964, were as confounded as most of the members of the audience. Albee, despite his Broadway success, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* remained still, faithful to the precepts of Off-Broadway – and unrepentantly so. Perhaps his own succinct summary of the plot may meaningfully contribute.

*Tiny Alice* is a fairly simple play, and not at all unclear, once you approach it on its own terms.

A lay brother, a man who would have become a priest except that he could not reconcile his idea of God with the God which men create in their own image, is sent ... to tie up loose ends of a business matter ... [he] becomes enmeshed in an environment which, at its core and shifting surface, contains elements which have confused ... him throughout his life: the relationship between sexual hysteria and religious ecstasy, the conflict between selflessness of service and the conspicuous splendour of martyrdom ... [he has finally to] accept what he had insisted he wanted .... union with the abstraction, rather than a man-made image of it.... He is left with pure abstraction [God, or Alice].

It is, you see, a perfectly straight-forward story, dealt with in terms of reality and illusion, symbol and actuality. It is the very simplicity of the play, I think, that has confused so many83.
This play is, self-admittedly, more graspable in print than in performance – an area we shall look at, duly. At another instance, Albee is reported to have told John Geilgud, “I know you want to know what the play is about, John, but I don’t know yet, so I can’t say.”

_Tiny Alice_ provoked much castigation, Philip Roth vehemently attacked Albee for disguising homosexuality – his real subject, under the guise of Christ's Passion. Martin Gottfried too, emphasized the same issue, scathing in his comment – “The play is ridiculous, a hodge-podge of philosophical and metaphysical pretensions. It is endlessly talky and lined with homosexuality.” Catherine Hughes declared “It is a bad, and a pretentious play”. Henry Hewes said of it that it “unfolds with great skill, whatever the hell it is choosing to say.” Bernard F. Dukore shows the symbolic nuances of the play as the only way to comprehend it, clouded as it is by homosexual slang.

Mary Elizabeth Campbell shows the allegorical structure of the play and its affinities with the morality play. The obscurities are due to the multiple facets of the different characters – so intriguing that they eclipse meaning. In another essay, Campbell draws a one to one parallel with _Everyman_. Paolucci also sees the allegorical elements in the play, directly related to the same quality in the earlier plays. But the play for her is more realistic than statically allegorical and its “chief impact lies in the surrealistic telescoping of real and imagined, past and present, apparent and actual, true and false.” Agnosticism is another subject that Alice Mandanis argues, is represented in the play - what Brother Julian is actually after. N.S. Pradhan shows how the
link between *Tiny Alice* and the Adamic Fall works.\(^94\) *Tiny Alice* of course, is also interpreted as a dream-play, making possible the probable interpretations of the ambiguities of the play. Thomas B. Markus does this, while also categorizing it as a tragedy evoking pity and terror\(^95\). Leighton M. Ballew has an interesting psychological reading, suggesting that the entire play takes place in Julian’s mind and functions to reveal the existential problem of absurdity in human existence.\(^96\) A number of psychological approaches to the play abound, as the critics have the tendency to always equate Albee’s personal and private life with his work and his themes. Ultimately, as Leonard Casper says, *Tiny Alice*’s message is its mystery “a tribute to finite man’s terrifying instinct for infinity.... *Tiny Alice* is a dramatization of all that must remain tantalizingly beyond the mind’s reach.”\(^97\) For Martin Esslin, *Tiny Alice*, therefore becomes an important play, “It is futile to search for the philosophical meaning of such an image. [The model inside a model, *ad infinitum*] what it communicates is a mood, a sense of mystery, the impenetrable complexity of the universe ....”\(^98\) Perhaps then, as John Stark has pointed out, its *deliberate* obscurity is the play’s chief virtue, and that the play is metadrama, a theatre-on-theatre experiment.\(^99\) Paradoxically, even as it seemingly becomes a conspicuous theatre mechanism, Albee confounded matters by saying that *Tiny Alice* could perhaps be grasped better *read* – not *seen*.

The entire gamut of the play mocks everything in general, and instead of being any metaphysical exercise about the nature of reality / religion / God / replica / model / truth, reads like a parody, bringing to mind the other
nonsense narrative of another Alice – Lewis Carroll’s – the name seems to have been a deliberate choice by Albee for the obvious resonances that it evokes. Likewise, the action of the play is again, a kind of Mad Hatter’s party, with no character actually on totally sure ground. Lay Brother Julian is the Cardinal’s emissary to Miss Alice who lives in a huge stone mansion and is a billionairess; bequeathing fantastic amounts of money to all and sundry – churches of all hue, revolutions, universities, hospitals and so on. The Lawyer who acts on her behalf is suggestedly the cardinal’s ex-lover, and Alice’s present one. The Butler is most un-butler like, at ease in posture and sympathetic. The other most important thing on stage for the most part will be a model of the house within which the scene is set – an exact copy. (And a self-declared symbol by Albee). The last is a phrenological head - meant for generating its own semiotic implications but not perhaps for any symbolic meaning. The lawyer we find, is the same cocksure, sarcastic, sardonic and almost reptilian creature as the lawyer of Charles Dicken’s Great Expectations (1861). Uncannily enough, even Dickens’s novel is about a very large legacy, like Tiny Alice : the resonances are hard to miss, and the character seems to be a direct lift. These are a few reasons for the obscurity of the play : the borrowings are quite arbitrary, and the amalgam apparently pointless. Julian goes to Alice, the old hag who transforms herself into a beautiful young woman (notice the borrowing from fairy tales again) and the discussions about the model on the set informs us that the house they are in is not the real or original house but a replica of the one built in England before. And within it is another copy – of a copy – calling forth all of Julian’s doubts and questionings
as to the stasis of God: made into a symbol of man or God, the ontological truth, per se. The questions are those that have sent Julian to a mental asylum for some years and the answers to which he has yet been unable to reconcile. When he marries Alice, Miss Alice tells him that he has only married the ideal (Alice) through the medium (Ms Alice) But there has been physicality in that marriage and Julian ends up craving for Miss Alice who has to leave, as fore-deemed. When Julian protests, he is shot dead by the lawyer. The process of dying occupies some of the most important parts of the play. The Platonic paradox too, is obviously a device that Albee uses to a parodic effect. Even as Julian dies, the uncommunicable stasis that seems to be at the heart of each work by Albee tightens its grip over the play – the signs that the audience receives are only from the empty, dead, static pherenological head, and of course, the copy of a copy – the model of the house. Then comes the protracted dying itself that is enacted on stage by Julian, whose obsession with truth, the real, and abstraction serves to show up the terrifying loneliness of man – what Sartre had tried to express – “God is the loneliness of man. If God exists, man is nothing.”102 Julian lives a kind of death-in-life situation: “(Quivering with intensity) I WISH TO SERVE AND ... BE FORGOTTEN”103 His innocence and Christian gullibility may only be termed grotesque, as Anita Maria Stenz points out, he being a fifty year old man104. Julian constantly tries to turn his God into a kind of emblem; until his search for such abstraction is turned upside down when he shouts at Alice that it is her who he has married and made love to – not the abstraction through her. Their verbal sparring reminds one of Jerry and Peter in The Zoo Story. He
rebels against the absurdity and the existential despair and isolation of nothingness even as he is about to lose his mind again, in his search for abstraction. Language is the obvious medium through which the negotiations between concrete and the abstract take place — when comprehension ends, hallucination begins (which is also, ironically, linguistic)

The periods of hallucination would be announced by a ringing in the ears, which produced, or was accompanied by, a loss of hearing. I would hear peoples voices from a great distance and through the roaring of ... surf. And my body would feel light, and not mine, and I would float, not glide. 105

Julian lies shot, alone and dying, 'crucified' in a universe as inscrutable as God, or death itself. The stage direction at this point of time dominates — the exaggerated sounds of heartbeat, increasing in volume; the lights moving inside the model (is this the model, or the paradigm?) Julian gets the cue, the sounds become terrifying, filling up the entire theatre, making the audience partake of the nightmarish experience of dying, and a great show of a 'presence' engulfs the stage and Julian. The status of the presence remains a matter of conjecture — God, Death, Reality, Alice or Pure Abstraction. If Albee’s intention was to somehow portray this pure abstraction that remains beyond hermeneutic reach, not to be interpreted — only a kind of direct communication between the theatre and the audience (much like the theories of Artaud), he seems to have achieved it in the resounding clamour of the ending. Richard E. Amacher points out the source of Artaud’s theories in
Balinese theatre – “Wayang” or “shadow”, a concept which was a spirit invoked by the “Dalang” a narrator to unfold all wisdom. Much of the befuddlement about the play comes from, he says, the assumption about Albee’s intentions: the play is not a philosophical tract so easily categorized, but an experimental avant garde drama to be seen against the background of surrealism, existentialism and Artaud’s theories.

Meanwhile, it would be appropriate to see how this play, for all its intense mechanisms, the sounds and the fury, the theatrical presentation of intellectual arguments through the characters and the signs and symbols placed on stage, the overt plot with its conspirators and the protagonist and its terrifying ending, remains gripped by “dramatic inertia”. Even Albee made the incredible comment that it reads better that it plays. For one, the entire exercise seems more oriented to achieving a kind of captive momentum, movement in fixity, shadows of non-opaque objects and such other paradoxes much in the manner of surrealist painting – where stasis ultimately dominates or engulfs all movements, momentum or dynamic energy. Everything in the play is problematized beyond hermeneutics – Julian’s positing of his ‘moral’ dilemma, the curiously parodic action of the play, the psychological intangibility of the play and the statue of the chief emblem of the play – the model itself. Is it the paradigm or the copy as one tends to assume? The fire begins in the model, the lights move in it toward’s Julian’s room – the cue seems to emanate from here rather than the (unseen) original. The confusion is complete when Julian too, gets confounded with the Alice that he has married.
Hence the play offers no solutions, no progress, no dynamic movement, only dramatic stasis, although variously the theatrical devices run but fail to make impact, as the inertia consumes the play. Looked at from our own pedagogical situation, we find the entire movement of the play esoteric and confounding for the students and a hermeneutic dilemma for the teacher. Minus the performance, (despite Albee's own comment) the play would again, have to be read within its own vacuum. This is not a pejorative comment on the play's obscurity, only a relooking at its own experimental status, across the boundaries of culture.

A Delicate Balance (1966)

First performed at the Martin Beck Theatre, New York City, on 12 September 1966, this play saw Albee's return to appreciative audiences and critical acclaim. A Delicate Balance was awarded the Pulitzer Prize that so many had thought Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? deserved. Again, the lack of action, too much conversation and posturing and too little substance invited the ire of some of his worst critics such as Robert Brustein who alleged plagiarism from T.S. Eliot's The Family Reunion, saying, "Characters discuss their relationships in a lapidary style as far from modern speech as the whistles of a dolphin." and that "Albee seems to be stimulated by mere artifice, and the result is emptiness, emptiness, emptiness". It has no "internal validity" and that, finally it is a "very bad play" John Simon charges that the play is "about the nothingness, the bare nothingness of it all - it is a play about nothing .... Utter pointlessness ... Albee's nothing is as dull as anything."
These views obviously ignore the possibility that the stasis, the inaction, the formal "speechifying" language and the dramatic inertia may be part of the author's design, drawing as he does from both American realism and French surrealism, following perhaps the ethic of metadrama, of a postmodernist aesthetic that would find clearer expression in his plays of the next decade.

But in 1966, in *A Delicate Balance*, Albee had to maintain a fine balance indeed, to present his world of static atmosphere, people and (in)action, and non-language. As Virginia L. Perry says,

> it is precisely because the play *does* disturb one's sense of well-being that critics have judged it so harshly, not recognizing that *A Delicate Balance* is intended to point out the fragile nature of that illusion of security by exploring the ill-defined boundaries which separate sanity from madness.\(^{111}\)

From the point of Albee's dexterity with language, there have been major interpretations of the play, considering the lack of other things. M.P. Fumerton's detailed analysis of the language shows how the characters manipulate language to rid themselves of fear and realities, but that at the end, language becomes a "protective device ... a thick layer of skin."\(^{112}\) With little direct action, the play continues through its veneer of realism to deal with its themes and individuals in an insidiously surrealistic manner making them "more than real" points out J.J. Von Szelisky.\(^{113}\) Emptiness is seen to be at the "center" of the play by M. Gilbert Porter but that is significant and basic to the
play which is about the pointlessness about the existence of its characters: how and where they began – in a loveless void, facing nothingness. To echo the essential hollowness of the play, the use of language too, is sparing and devoid of Albee’s usual “dazzling dialogue” shows Ruby Cohn. The ‘cat story’ told by Tobias in the play must necessarily remind one of the ‘dog story’ of Jerry in The Zoo Story; very frequently we have in Albee the repetition of one motif from play to play varying only in nuances. Carol Sykes interprets the parallel as really about the weakness of human relationships. A Delicate Balance is, what M.C. Roudane calls “Albee’s most blatant staging of the existentialist predicament....”

The play opens with Tobias, Agnes and Claire – husband, wife and sister / sister-in-law sitting in the living room of a ‘well appointed suburban house’ – a home where another couple, Harry and Edna (Tobias’s best friends) and Julia, the daughter of Tobias and Agnes are to arrive at. This is the locale for the entire three acts of the play, and the action (or non-action) takes place within a span of a little more than twenty-four hours. Claire is an alcoholic, constantly sparring with the elder sister with some support from Tobias. In the first few scenes we realize that Claire and Tobias have been lovers once, and that Agnes and Tobias do not share a normal sexual relationship, and sleep in separate rooms. A little later, Agnes announces that Julia is coming back, breaking off her fourth marriage – “Right on schedule, once every three years.” (as Claire quips). Tobias, goaded by Agnes, recalls a story about a pet cat who he had put to sleep after it stopped loving him. The act is an obvious reminder of Jerry’s dog story – the love / frustration / anger / fear and
sheer incoherence behind the act. After the murder, Tobias is forever haunted by the act – and the cat’s betrayal – its failure to love. At the same time we are also told that the stasis in their lives came after the death of their son Teddy who is the single most important (absent) presence in the play just like the various other sons in Albee’s previous plays. Celibacy to avoid more pain of loss is his means to counter his shock, and this becomes the important emblem of nothingness that the play tries to explore in brutally and shockingly frank language used by Agnes who is as articulate as Tobias is inert.

When Harry and Edna come by, wild with terror – of nothingness apparently, we are convinced that Albee’s play is as far from a Broadway realistic drama as ever and in its own way, as “obscure” as Tiny Alice if obscurity also implies resonance. “We were … sitting home … just sitting home …,”¹¹⁹ says Harry, and Edna takes over –

... it was all very quiet and we were all alone … we got scared ....

It was like being lost: very young again, and with the dark, and lost. There was no … thing … to be … frightened of, but …. We could not stay there, and so we came here. You are our very best friends.¹²⁰

So they are put up in Julia’s old room – and Julia herself arrives leading to a rather interesting building up of tension and a kind of conflict in the play – the struggle for possession of the room. As the play progresses, however, it will be seen that the conflict is the same kind that had built up between Estragon and Lucky with the contentious issue of the chicken bones: the room becomes the
excuse over which to reach a crescendo, an act to merely do something provocative, to jerk someone (may be Tobias) back to life. Harry and Edna, says Richard Amacher, "become symbols, they represent the inevitable march of spiritual aridity into the most sacred oasis in the modern wasteland — the home."\textsuperscript{121}

The ossification of the family in its inertia and inaction becomes vivified by Harry and Edna’s hysteria "WE WERE FRIGHTENED ... AND THERE WAS NOTHING"\textsuperscript{122} William Barrett’s \textit{What is Existentialism?} (1964) discussing Heidegger’s angst would perhaps illustrate their behaviour, and Albee’s concerns in the play,

...anxiety, more than any other feeling, discovers to us the world: i.e., brings us face to face with a world to which we now sense ourselves to be in a precarious relation ... authentic anxiety disappears in our banal existence ... a state in which man perpetually busies himself with diversions and distractions from himself and his own existence.\textsuperscript{123}

In this sense Harry and Edna show up the flaccidity of Tobias and Agnes’s lives. Claire of course has her veneer of alcoholism to help her, even if she appears the most clear-headed and blunt-tongued of the lot. But despite her self-awareness, Claire lacks what M.C. Roudane calls the “wherewithal to change”\textsuperscript{124} Drinking has deadened her impulses and she too enters the stasis of the world around her, unable to change, unable to grow, unable to live dynamically. Julia on the other hand appropriately fulfills the French cliché —
the more things change, the more they remain the same: through four marriages, still a tantrum throwing child – obviously leading to various psycho-analytical interpretations of her character in relation to Tobias and her dead brother. Agnes is supposedly the ‘balancer’ of all these delicate relations through her insistence on maintenance – keeping her house in order outwardly – she also thus justifies stasis as a means of survival against the emptiness, the nothingness of the world they inhabit. Albee comes close to show up these darknesses through Harry and Edna – but the ontological impossibility of the representability of such a situation merely leads to fill-ups, deferrals, melodramatic hysteria from both Julia and Tobias in his aria – the climax of the play. Tobias tells them to stay while all the time confirming the undesirability of such an event. Like in most Albee plays, the ending comes accompanied with much sound and fury, aptly signifying nothing. Harry and Edna leave and things go on as before, the balance is restored for what it is worth – status quo is back in place with no shattering change. “Just let it be ....”¹²⁵ with the credo “we do what we can”¹²⁶ even as Agnes as usual, gets the last word – a parody of lyricism about the light coming after darkness.

Words, word and words – language-as-life is what Albee is struggling with in the play – trying to stage the intangible and undefinable fears, terrors, and the nothingness of being through words : dialogues. “Life, he suggests is language and nothing more”¹²⁷ as Walter Kerr says in a negative article on the play : while arguments on such a comment could lead to very eclectic ground, it is useful to see some other parts of the article –
Quiet is all that underlies Mr Albee’s Play – not the quiet of peace arrived at or of harmony established but the stillness of mute rock or uninvaded desert. The cosmos has no core. It cannot be penetrated. Breathlessness is its ultimate condition, immobility its sole activity.128

Indeed, the language is self-conscious, intentionally calling attention to itself, until the toppling of its dominance by the fears of Harry and Edna that refuse to be tied down by words, be explicated and hence ‘domesticated’ by them. It is in this sense that the play tries to look even beyond language into existence and consciousness. Does the space of the stage help? Does performance itself bring forward the undefinable? Does the play succeed as a play in performance? Obviously, depending upon the relevant performative factors and visualization, the actual ‘seeing’ of such a performance is desired before we presume to answer such questions. It is with A Delicate Balance that Albee seems ready to move into his second decade and more severe forms of the avante garde with plays such as Seascape, Box and others. Relying on stage mechanisms for getting across the various proliferations of meaning, Albee is to become more and more eclectic, moving away from the ‘Broadway’ kind of theatre, which had made much of the seemingly realistic Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Already, the core of stasis and inertia that pervades the heated arguments of the earlier play has become overtly manifest on the surface of A Delicate Balance. From fighting over the ‘death’ of a non-existent son, Albee’s characters have begun fighting with unseen enemies, terrors and
anxieties and the 'nothingness' that pervades the absurdity of the world envisaged by the existentialists devours them.

Notes

5. Ruby Cohn, Edward Albee (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969).


45. Edward Albee, *The Sandbox* in *The Zoo Story and The Sandbox: Two Short Plays* 153-54


56. Anne Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee* 34.
63. Wendell V. Harris, “Morality, Absurdity, and Albee”, *Southwest Review* 49 (Summer, 1964) 249

71. Michael Rutenburg, Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest 95.


83. E. Albee, Press Conference Transcript of Albee’s opening remarks (New York City, Monday, 22 March 1965, at the Billy Rose Theatre) 5. rpt. in the *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* and Guernsey, in *Best Plays of 1964-65* 252.


92. Anne Paolucci, *From Tension to Tonic* 65-104.


105. Albee, *Tiny Alice* 63-64.


111. Virginia I. Perry, "Disturbing Our Sense of Well Being: The Uninvited in A Delicate Balance" in Edward Albee: An Interview and Essays ed. J. Wasserman et al., 55-64.


117. M.C. Roudane, Understanding Edward Albee 99-117.


119. Ibid. 41-44.

120. Ibid.

121. Richard E. Amacher, Edward Albee 149.

122. Albee, A Delicate Balance 45-47.


124. M.C. Roudane, Understanding Edward Albee 106.

125. Albee, A Delicate Balance 60.

126. Ibid. Tobias's statement is resonant of Hamm and Clov's speech in Beckett's Endgame (1958).