CHAPTER VI

THE LOST FRAGMENTED SOULS: ESCAPE FROM SELF

The post-World War II drama reveals the total disintegration of the human personality, the image of the spiritually homeless self. The new sense of historical crisis and the new socio-economic and political forces unleashed in Europe and America such physical, moral, spiritual and psychological strains as devitalized his sensibility. No wonder, the post-War hero is a lost, fragmented soul, hollow self-seeking, lonely, desperate and absurd. Of course, Kierkegaard in The Sickness Unto Death, had foreshadowed the traumatic loss of the self; but it was in the age of Freud and Einstein that the potential divinity of the self got lost.

In the existentialist thought, the process of alienation of self has been carried to fantastic lengths. In Jean-Paul Sartre's Being And Nothingness the concept of the self is not only abstract but also beset with contradictions. The subject is divorced from himself; in the very centre of his consciousness rises the consciousness of that which he is not. The unique characteristic of selfhood, according to Sartre, is that "man is always separated from what he is by all the breadth of the
being which he is not."¹ The existentialist hero thus is a lost personality, and so, despite his desire for commitment, he is handicapped by a radical inability to act.

With the loss of self in the modern and contemporary literature, the protagonist is a schizoid personality, a victim of alienation. Thus what marks his "character" are such modernistic existentialist anxieties and lack of meaning and hope as Camus analyzed in The Myth of Sisyphus.² No wonder, in the existentialist works of Strindberg, Pirandello, Dostoevsky, Proust, Joyce, Beckett and Ionesco, the naturalistic conception of character as governed by the influence of heredity and environment is totally lost. Since the traditional Greek heroes were committed to a noble cause, their quest for identity inevitably led them to the age-old questions of meaning, salvation, redemption, and survival in a spiritual sense. On the contrary, the quest of the modern anti-hero is a parody of the struggle to find value and fulfillment in a world without God. Faced with a universe "suddenly divested of illusions and lights," the anti-hero must decide either to live or to die. Finding the universe meaningless, he suffers an extreme tension which will never permit him to rest, just as the tormented Sisyphus can never pause in his task. His absurdity urges him to demand truth in a universe that says truths are impossible. His alienated state creates anxiety and restlessness, the despersonalization of self through neurosis ultimately results in his total deflation.
The Greek tragic hero also suffers "loneliness" as he is endowed with "special dynamics," as a marked man from the start. His career is a long history of struggle and his fight with the gods eventually leads him to disaster. But his fall is fortunate and it evokes glory and splendour. He is "isolated", for his personality is "a combination of self-destructiveness and intimacy with the gods." His self is higher and aristocratic; his choice is of a great standard and leads to his involvement with the supernatural forces. The anti-hero becomes the victim of psychological pressures like depression, anxiety, restlessness. His alienation makes him morbid and neurotic. All that we get is an incessant struggle to escape from self in vain.

Being alienated, this anti-hero begins to question himself as well as the universe around him; everything becomes absurd and problematical, even the phenomenon of consciousness. Having lost his identity, he is swept along by the tide of events. This "absurd" hero bears the knowledge of his own insignificance in the cosmic scheme of things. He cannot say confidently: "I am myself". Instead, he says, like the Old Man in The Chairs, "I am not myself. I am another. I am the one in the other." Even the plays of Bertolt Brecht emphasize the lack of identity in modern mass-man, though he ascribes its cause to growing capitalist society. "The universe as we have of it from Aristotle to Einstein was a system controlled by laws that produced a cosmos instead of a chaos - that is, the universe was highly structured; but entropy is a drift toward an unstructured state of equilibrium that is total."
The absurd anti-hero cannot form a consistent image of himself. Things simply happen to him; and there is no certainty or continuity in his behaviour. The plays of Ionesco reveal the futility of human action. Identity of character is an illusion. Personality in classical or neo-classical sense does not exist. The protagonist of The Chairs is a clash of opposites, a mystery to himself, unable to communicate with others. The absurd hero is portrayed as isolated and caught in a solitude from which he cannot escape.

Edward Albee is a typical playwright of the contemporary American culture. Theoretically, his plays are an extension of the European Theatre of the Absurd; yet, at the same time, the scepticism of Camus and Ionesco and Beckett about the world is lost in Albee's definition of the Absurd. Unlike the European Absurdists, Albee tried to perceive ontologically what the absurdity should be:

The Theatre of the Absurd is an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense - which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed.

Following Ionesco, Beckett and Genet, Albee highlights the absurdity of human existence, despair involved in the process of living, and the constant threat to the failure of humanness in man by the failure of sex, love and communication.
For Albee, however, these are not the attendant problems of a metaphysical or religious void as they are to Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco, but the result of a sick culture. No wonder, in his plays, he indicts severely the success myth, the image of American manhood, and the institution of marriage.

Edward Albee dramatized this absurdist-cum-neurotic predicament in a universe where normalcy and stability are impossible. An Albee protagonist is predominantly a sick neurotic self that seems to have lost its reality. Dwelling in a universe that seems to him both alien and hostile, the neurotic hero retreats within only to discover that he does not know himself; but the curse is that he must at all costs strive to know. Being abnormal creatures, Albee's anti-heroes are victims of instincts and therefore too weak to endure existence. Failure to accept the need to confront reality not only deprives them of dignity but also leaves them adrift in incomprehension, in flight from the world as it really is. The salvation of human contact is aborted by their refusal to abandon illusion. All that remains is a frustrating parody of human contact in which love begets hatred, humour begets anger and nausea.

Albee's protagonists are indeed maschere nude—stripped semblances of what is commonly called "character". The seemingly integrated self of the neurotic collapses in slow stages through an intense oscillation between what is and what appears to be, between acknowledged purpose and hidden intentions, between reality and illusion. Actions of such protagonists appear
fragmented because, thanks to shifting points of motivation, their contradictory statements alone compromise the spiral of events. The predominant interest of Albee's major plays, therefore, is the dissolution of the protagonist's personality. All that this protagonist can be sure of is that he is alienated, bound to the wheel of time, and headed for the destiny of death.

Thus, each of Albee's protagonist is characterized by an inner division, by a fragmentation so complete that it has reduced him to a lost self. Embodying rebellious puritanic values and caught in the destructive life process, Albee's protagonists are fragments of debris, thrown up by "time", the destroyer. They are not men of action like the traditional heroes, but "un-beings" given to meaningless reflection. Albee's neurotic strikes as an absence, a self stripped of ontological truth. He cannot say "I" with any measure of spontaneous conviction. Albee himself observed, "I try to let the unconscious do as much work as possible, since I find that's the more efficient part of my mind."6

The protagonists of The Zoo Story (1960) and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962) are such neurotic victims of loneliness, depression, anger, violence, illusions, anxiety and other psychic pressures. Dramatizing the "dilemmas of the borderline personality,"7 in the tradition of Beckett, Ionesco and Genet, Jerry is a case of neurosis fit for treatment in a mental hospital. "The borderline is a person who has severe difficulties maintaining a stable and gratifying relationship."8 Caught in a paradoxical
situation, he longs for human contact, seeks it everywhere and then does all he can to ward it off when it comes. His fear is that in close relationship his needs will be so great that they will incorporate the other person—a process in which he will lose his own identity. Jerry's problems are of a neurotic kind: a victim of internal and external forces, he lives in a void which leads him nowhere. Hence a sense of emptiness, isolation, meaninglessness, anxiety, depression, restlessness and despair.

Two decades of criticism have proved that The Zoo Story is a study in man's loneliness in general and the modern American man's quest for identity in particular. Jerry is the lost animal of the Zoo world—sensitive and belligerent. He is full of hatred, "self-pity and self-imposed isolation." In the words of C.U.E. Bigsby, "Albee's thesis is that there is a need to make contact, to emerge from these self-imposed cages of convention and false values so that one individual consciousness may impinge on another." His need to make contact is an inner compulsion, a psychological urge, an inevitable necessity of the neurotic. But "when he succeeds in approaching an animal or a person, it is always through a barrier of mistrust and in a tension of disgust, fear and despair." Jerry's predicament is not metaphysical, religious or transcendental as in the case of the protagonists of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco; rather he is a victim of a sick culture. Thus Jerry underlines the absurdity of human existence consequent upon the failure of love, sex and
communication. Indeed, he "is a harrowing portrait of a young man alienated from the human race," as Brooks Atkinson observed. In his first interchange with Peter, Jerry exhibits an intense neurotic hunger for a relationship. He is an outsider, "an obnoxious stranger" who accosts Peter when the latter is reading a book on a bench on a sunny Sunday afternoon in summer, in a secluded corner of the Central Park. He seems at first to be "just another of those talkative cranks with which the city abounds." Like a sick patient, urged by his emotional restlessness, Jerry ambles up to Peter and announces:

I've been to the Zoo . . . I said, I've been to the Zoo. MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO! His declaration confounds and baffles Peter who goes on asking again and again the mystery about the zoo, but Jerry holds him in suspense not deliberately but out of his neurotic instability. He even forgets: "The Zoo? Oh, yes; the Zoo. I was there before I came here" (Zoo, p.23). The myth about the Zoo is exploded only when he narrates his harrowing experience of "The Lady And The Dog" for his neurotic volcano is exhausted in the long narrative. "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" (Zoo, p.49). Jerry's insistent tone, his broken language, repetitions, pauses, incoherence in conversation - all these are the testimony of neurotic abnormality of the protagonist. His efforts to strike up a conversation are awkward and ridiculous in the extreme; he
fidgets around Peter's bench and asks startlingly direct questions: "You're married! . . . How many children you got? . . . Any pets?" (Zoo, pp.16-17). The entire encounter of Jerry with Peter symbolizes the ironical parody of the quest of the traditional hero. The quest of the Greek hero is for a social and moral order, but the anti-hero here seeks it for the release of his psychic pressures.

Jerry shows no reluctance whatsoever about recalling his own private life. He is not married but apparently has had plenty of one night sex experience with women and once he found solace and comfort in homosexual perversion: "I met at least twice a day with the park superintendent's son . . . a Greek boy; whose birthday was the same as mine, except he was a year older. I think I was sure very much in love . . . may be just with sex" (Zoo, p.30). He gives an account of his neighbours - "The Puerto Rican family that entertains a lot; the woman who cries determinedly all day; the homosexual who plucks his eyebrow, which he does with Buddhist concentration" (Zoo, p.26). Like neurotics, Jerry seems strongly affected by the fact that he has never seen and will never get to know a person who lives in a room within a foot of his own. "And in the other front room, there's somebody living there, I don't know who it is" (Zoo, p.26). This obviously reveals Jerry's neurotic loneliness as he emerges an antithesis of Peter. "Nothing protects him, and consequently, he feels the full agony of knowing the world as it really is like Beckett's two tramps or Adamov's cripples or any number of other characters.
from the current French avant-garde theatre. Abandoned by his mother, neglected by his father and orphaned at twelve, Jerry has been completely on his own from the day of his high school graduation. Indeed, he seems to be drifting in a hostile void governed by the forces of the "Savage God." To quote George Wellwarth: "Albee sees society . . . as a part of Chinese wall protecting these within from the barbarian hordes outside. Occasionally, though, one of the inhabitants of the artificial enclosure inadvertently strays too near the line and is overcome by an intruder like Jerry." 16

As he proceeds with his conversation with Peter, Jerry is in the grip of a crisis. The purposelessness of his life has begun to manifest itself in his appearance. He is dressed not poorly but carelessly. His body "has begun to go fat." As Albee adds, "His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness" (Zoo, p.11). The entire action of the play consists of conversation which culminates in an outburst of violence. Of course, Jerry does most of the talking; here is a case of "prowling" restlessly around the stage to get release from the neurotic obsession. In the words of Anne Paolucci, "Jerry's persistent questioning of Peter and his tireless verbal energy are unmistakable signs of an hysterical state" (emphasis added). Sometimes, it becomes difficult to find any relevance in what Jerry says or relates, for he is full of contradictions, irony and paradoxes. In his encounter, he is demanding and insistent that others must give
him direction. He makes an appeal as a confused person, but
soon the conversation enters into a hostile relationship.

Charles R. Lyons, comparing Brecht's *Im Dickicht Der
Stadete* and Albee's *The Zoo Story*, discovered that both Jerry
and Shlink recognize at the beginning of their respective
encounters that the conflict is necessary for it is the only way
to get release from the psychologically oppressed mind. Shlink's
boxing match and Jerry's "course", thus, are ironic parodies of
the quest of the neurotic hero. Jerry says: "I took down to the
village so I could walk all the way up Fifth Avenue to the Zoo.
It's one of those things a person has to do; sometimes a person
has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a
short distance correctly" (Zoo, p.25). His mental paralysis is
further revealed in his story of "Jerry And the Dog" which is a
rehearsal of an anguished cry for contact with something external
to his own consciousness. He descends to the world of animals
in despair in his sordid quest for identity. The ugly black
dog, who guards the entrance of his squalid rooming house,
selects Jerry, from the other roomers, as the object of his
animosity. As both Jerry and the dog become suspicious of the
appearance of friendship, it becomes distorted in both their
minds and gets associated with attempted destruction. After
telling Peter the story, Jerry adds sadly:

... the dog and I have attained a compromise;
more of a bargain, really. We neither love
nor hurt because we do not try to reach each
other. And, was trying to feed the dog an act
of love? And, perhaps, was the dog's attempt to
bite me not an act of love? If we can so misunderstand, well then, why have we invented
the word love in the first place? (Zoo, p.44). 

Jerry decides to deal with the dog in his own neurotic manner: "I decided: First, I'll kill the dog with kindness, and if that doesn't work... I'll just kill him" (Zoo, p.37). Since the entire fabric of Jerry's harrowing experiences reveals his tortured existence, the audience find themselves, along with Peter, drawn into a "nightmare." In fact, contrary to the Greek hero's quest for salvation and redemption, Jerry's desperate quest is for deliverance from his miserable condition. By the time he meets Peter, he has thought long and deep about the way people are kept apart by barriers inside themselves as well as outside - barriers as tangible as the bars of the cages that separate the animals in the Zoo and the people from the animals. Left with no alternative, he must make contact: "It's just... it's just that... it's just that if you can't deal with people, you have to make a start somewhere. WITH ANIMALS!" (Zoo, p.42). 

Like Hamm in Endgame, Jerry has his morbid "course," which brings him to the realization of human isolation. His illusions about life are broken when he embraces death at the end of the play: "I came unto you... and you have comforted me. Dear Peter" (Zoo, p.61). In Jerry's final death, his acute neurological tension is released in a "homosexual contact," the only alternative left with him. His last words express not the jubilation of a victor but the humble thanks of a sick and wounded animal. His fall is the most unheroic fall of a modern
man afflicted with fears, doubts, anxiety, isolation and neurotic despair. It is not like the "fortunate fall" of the great Greek heroes. The fall of Agamemnon, Orestes or Oedipus inspires spiritual confidence; Jerry's fall effects not the catharsis of pity and fear but the pathetic release of neurological anxiety. The protagonist emerges not as a spiritually redeemed hero but as an emasculated personality - an object of "repulsive landlady's sweaty lust." Jerry's suicide itself is symbolical of his defeated personality, being an escape into another unworldly illusion. Instead of an heroic acceptance of reality as in the case of Othello, Macbeth or Hamlet, here we have an acceptance of another hell, "a hell of no feeling and no humanity."  

Jerry's fall is anti-heroic as it epitomizes the fall of American civilization, the decline of moral values, and the emasculation of human soul in the technological and industrial West. Fascinated by the "neurotic fall" of Jerry, Sharon D. Spencer finds at work the influence of "Sick Comics" of comedians like Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, Mike Nicholas and Elaine May, and adds: "And like the 'Sicks,' Mr. Albee is ferociously determined to expose the deceased guts of the 'Great Society,' he is like a sadistic surgeon, coldly, but nevertheless furiously, slicing up the cancer-ridden patient." Jerry dies under the spell of masochistic ecstasy, but the consummation he imagines he has reached is an illusion, his attempt to force a connection through hatred, a failure, and his private vision of love, a destructive lie. His self-murder symbolizes a release of his
abnormalities. His fall is not at all tragic for he has only learnt the ultimate absurdity of hate as a means of communication. Jerry is a victim of the cruelty of the cities like New York where people live lonely, frigid lives in tiny rooms and become morbid neurotics. Jerry is like O'Neill's Yank - a desperately isolated outcast, a victim of nervous disorder who struggles in vain for acknowledgement. Both visit the Zoo to contemplate their isolation and reach the conclusion that men are animals, and that beneath the illusion of civilization - when they use words and knives instead of fangs and claws - they still have the tendency of killing. In the words of Ruby Cohn:

> Because life is lonely and death inevitable, Jerry seeks to master them in a single deed of ambiguous suicide murder; he stages his own death, and by that staging, he punctures Peter's illusion of civilization, converting Peter into his apostle who will carry the message of man's caged animality - the Zoo story.21

Albee seems to imply that, faced with a mysterious cosmic order, man finds it difficult to be a hero. Having been reduced by Darwin to the product of natural selection, by Marx to the victim of economic determinism, and by Freud to the slave of unconscious forces, man has no height from which to "fall". As this modern unheroic hero inhabits a world where justice and reality rarely operate, protagonists reverse all conventional heroic formulae and thus battle with inner selves or with society instead of with dragons. The sordid predicament of Jerry is that he remains rootless till the end, and instead of achieving heroic dimensions, he commits suicide. This scapegoat figure immolates
himself not in the spirit of offering sacrifice to celebrate
the immanence of human soul, but in order to arouse a human
vegetable to animal consciousness.

There is a sense in which the play can be read as an allegory
on a divided self — one part alienated and incapacitated by an
excess of insight, the other adjusted and socially efficient
through an excess of blindness. One is aware, the other unaware;
one is eloquently articulate, the other speaks either brokenly
or in platitudes and cliches. Jerry’s being the fall of a split
personality, a neurotic patient, it is to be pitied and regretted
and not to be emulated or envied in any heroic manner. Thus,
The Zoo Story dramatizes not heroism, but depersonalization of
self through neurosis, the loss of self — in short, the deflation
of the hero. To quote Amita Maria Stenz:

For Albee Jerry represents a wasted life. The
question which the author is stridently asking in
this play is in fact whether the one man is any
less depersonalized than the other. For the
author the polarization of Jerry and Peter
represents man’s alienation from himself.22

Like The Zoo Story, Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?
dramatizes the impotency, sterility, alienation and anxiety of
the neurotic protagonists — abnormal people who failed in love
and marital relationships. Groping in the abyss of darkness,
they are sticking to their neurotic phantasies and illusions which
are their only hope to live in the waste-land of contemporary
America. Othello, Macbeth, Hamlet also have illusions for which
they grapple with the external forces, but theirs are heroic
battles. They die for a cause and their illusions lead them to enlightenment or redemption. The modern anti-hero's predicament is that his vain and desperate struggle for neurotic illusions leads him to spiritual abyss, chaos and mental disorder. While the tragic illusions inspire Macbeth with courage, nobility, magnanimity, leadership, invincibility and dynamism, the neurotic illusions inspire the anti-hero with jealousy, pride, hatred, hostility, frustration, defeat and despair.

The protagonists of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? are the victims of neurotic illusions. When the play opened at the Billy Rose Theatre, New York, on October 13, 1962, under the Richard Barn and Clinton Wilder management, Richard Schechner, the editor of the Tulane Drama Review, greeted it as "a persistent escape into morbid fantasy." Like W. U. Maxwell, he found it "a filthy play" and declared that its "morbidity and sexual perversity" are there only to titillate an impotent and homosexual theatre audience. Richard Schechner's revulsion was shared by other eminent critics and reviewers. Charles Thomas Samuels for example, observed: "But what seems more damaging is the author's confusion of the social problem of discrimination with a portrait of neurotic womanhood and Strindbergian sexual conflict." Despite the scathing criticism, the play won wide acclaim because it indicted the entire American civilization which suffers from emotional and spiritual sterility. Visualizing an unfamiliar, purposeless world, a universe without any explanation or recognizable reference and one in which man is a stranger,
Albee dramatizes the harrowing existence of a neurotic and frustrated professor of history in a small American college, who leads a lonely and desperate life, struggling in comic and grotesque manner to live through illusions and phantasies. His bitter, childless and boisterous wife, Martha, is another psychopathological case who seeks to get release from her neurotic tensions through verbal violence and cruelty to avenge on her husband for giving her a "luckless life." It is a work in which the playwright successfully touches the heart of American culture, which manufactures fantasies and neurotic illusions as well as motor-cars and Hollywood films. The world of George and Martha is nocturnal, hermetic and demoniac - a world haunted by death and horrors. The four anti-heroes play nothing but games - "war-games" and "nerve games." One could say with Walter Kerr, "Hell lived there but all the devils were great jokers" 25 mocking at the desperate isolation of human existence. Albee aims his sharpest thrusts at self-delusion, materialism, opportunism and cannibalism built into the institution of marriage. Indeed, George and Martha attacking each other in a college town called New Carthage resemble the fighting armies of Carthage destroyed by the Romans before the Christian era. Rightly has the action of the play been described as a "long night's journey into daze." 26

Both George and Martha suffer from mental and emotional crises. Alienated, desperate, frustrated and sterile, they are victims of anxiety and restlessness. Their emotional pressure,
their outbursts of hysteria reveal their neurotic personalities. They are too weak to live in their illusive microcosm, and instead of reaffirming it for ever, they quickly break it. Their life is empty and their unassuagable loneliness, thrashing in vain to break out of their self-imprisonment, reveals their sense of despair. Albee is not interested in painting them in heroic colours; nor is he interested in giving through them a vision of life. Indeed, as Charles Thomas Samuels has observed, "... he is interested in neither characters nor ideas. He is interested in shocking revelations, maudlin confessions, and liberal doses of self-pity."27

George's unheroic lack of self-awareness, helplessness and failure are revealed through Martha's derogatory epithets which symbolize her inner disillusionment and despair. She calls George "cluck," "dumbbell", "pig", "blank," "cipher", and "zero". George is a total "flop" in life and he can't do anything right: "You didn't do anything, you never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk."28 George is too weak to confront the stark reality of life; he emerges as a modern anti-hero lacking the "guts" to grapple with the external forces that agonize him. To escape from the sordid predicament, he has conceived a world of fantasy to nurture such illusions of life as serve the function of antidote to mental depression, nausea, despair and metaphysical loneliness. For example, he has cemented his marriage with the fiction of their "son". He knows that he is impotent and his wife sterile, but the fiction of having fathered a son sustains his life. George describes his fictional son as
"our own little all-American something or other." They are committed to reaffirm the illusive microcosm, the only way left to live in a psychological vacuum. According to Robert Brustein,

Albee seems less interested in the real history of his characters than in the way they conceal and protect their reality; the conflict is also a kind of game, with strict rules, and what they reveal about each other may not be true. This comedy of concealment reminds me of Pirandello, and even more of Jean Genet. For George and Martha ... shift their identities like reptiles shedding skins.29

George's "comedy of concealment" alludes to the love-hate relationship of the protagonist with his wife; articulated in a lyricism of witty malice. The characters' verbal duet, which both reveals and conceals identity, establishes the ambiguity between truth and illusion. Truth is a verifiable fact which threatens the protagonist as he is weak and fragile; illusion is a false image, the product of his abnormal mental disorder. Illusions correspond to the chaotic tensions of the protagonists who assume false roles to out-wit one another. The audience witness the stage filled with wounds springing from love-hate relationship, glancing blows, destructions of confidence, revulsions, intimidations, bitter exaltations and hopeless embraces. The comic and grotesque roles mingled with levity and seriousness are the testimony of the neurotic states of the protagonists. George's accusations relate Martha to animals: she is "braying", "chewing ice cubes like a cocker spaniel, and howling like a sub-human monster."

The emotional instability and the aggressive attitude of
Martha are an index to the personal emptiness of her life. Continued frustration in private and public life has been leading her to seek refuge in violent emotional outbursts: she feels unrooted and helpless like George, and her vain efforts to control the mess of her own life are no better than subservience to impulses. Her prejudices against George and her guests are a mask to assure the world and herself that she is still in control of her life. With nothing to do that interests her and nothing to live for, she spends nights drowned in gin and days in sleeping off her drunkenness. The residue of her wasted talents and unused energies are released in the abusive and filthy verbal attacks on her husband who has withdrawn into his own world of history, teaching, writing and drinking to sustain the hollowness of existence:

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.

(woolf? p.155).

The First Act, "Fun And Games", initiates the conflict between George and Martha in which they employ as weapons those fantasies which were to have acted as an asylum. Brilliant in their repartee, as they repeatedly enact scenes indulging in savage games, George emerges as the more devastatingly inventive, while Martha turns out as the more swinishly effective. She achieves barbarism that aesthetic George must deftly avoid. He plays the game of withering insult, using his intellect and imagination as destructive weapons. Martha's ferocious combat
is a mere escape, a neurological valve for emotions firmly rooted in her morbid mentality. She seems to be "suffering from a long-standing psychological repression of an unsolved problem that the alcoholic intoxication and the consequent events of the play in the third act eventually flush out of deep hiding in the labyrinth of her subconsciousness."³⁰

While the guests, Honey and Nick, are silent spectators, the neurotic hosts create a night of carnage and chaos, indulging in convulsive giggles, guffaws and smirks, and all the burlesqueries of the mock-heroic tradition. The turning point in Act I occurs when Honey tells George that Martha has told her of their son who will be twenty-one on the next day. George feels threatened by reality as he restlessly asks Honey twice, "She told you about him?" Martha slowly tortures George, heaping indignities on him. She tells the guests that George is an unsuccessful academic, a frustrated writer, and an impotent husband. As if that were not enough, she makes sexual advances to Nick in front of Honey and George, until George "shoots" Martha — an instance of the volcanic eruption of emotional tension into neurotic frivolity. But what bursts out is a Chinese parasol, an apt symbol of George's impotency. But this relief is transitory and serves as a prelude to a new emotional build-up. Feeling threatened with intellectual emasculation by Nick if the younger man's scientific theories would prevail, George shouts, "I will fight you, young man . . . one hand on my scrotum, to be sure . . . but with my free hand I will battle you to the death" (Woolf?, p.68).
Nou George and Martha are seen enjoying sadistic pleasure in venomous, cannibalistic attacks as they feed on each other’s weaknesses. In conceiving his sadistic and hysterical protagonists, Albee obviously seems to follow Artaud who declared that contemporary culture was not suitable for traditional heroism: "But whoever said Theatre was made to define character, to resolve conflicts of a human, emotional order of a present day, psychological nature. . .?" Indeed, betraying a taste for crime, sexuality, savageness and perversion, George and Martha recall the protagonists of the Theatre of Cruelty. The tragedy with this neurotic couple is that they prefer to indulge in private savage games and public hostility rather than face their shared loneliness. When they look inward, all they find is self-contempt instead of spiritual solace or enlightenment. The world of fantasy helps them escape from their recurring sense of personal inadequacy. Thus Martha’s fictional son is the child of her will, the symbol of potency and virility, while George’s novel is the symbol of his intellectual procreation. Through these creations that exist only in their minds, they seek escape from their guilt and disillusionment. This is a fragile arrangement, of course. Thus in Act II, when Martha summarizes George’s novel about a boy who accidentally killed both his parents, George threatens to kill her and he grabs her by the throat. Obviously, George struggles in vain to reaffirm his illusive microcosm. Athletic Nick, who resembles the American Dream both in physique and lack of emotion, tears George from Martha, and she accuses her husband

The trouble with an illusion is that it works for a time, and soon brings complications which want redress. George knows that he cannot afford to live in the illusive microcosm. No wonder, the third Act is concerned with the ritualistic "exorcism" of all illusions. When Martha pleads with George not to go through with his plan, the moment is highly explosive. George's concerted efforts to destroy the fiction of the son reveal the true anti-heroism of the protagonist. The fantasy child will be destroyed and with it the unpublished book about which he has been so resentful. Since "man can put with only so much without, he descends a rung or two with old evolutionary ladder," he begins a process of descent. When man can't abide the present, as it is, George observes, there are just two options open: people can either "turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they set about to . . alter the future. And when you want to change something . . . You BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!" (Woolf?, p.178). Until now, George has brooded over the past, but from now on, he will "alter the future" - a desperate attempt to reconcile with the existential agony of life. Despite Martha's vehement insistence that "I WILL NOT LET YOU DECIDE THESE THINGS!", he breaks the illusive microcosm exorcising the child:
GEORGE: Martha... Our son is dead... He was... killed... late in the afternoon... on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a... .

MARTHA: You... CAN'T... DO... THAT!

GEORGE:... large tree.

The two chief excuses for their unhappiness, the two weapons they have used against each other in their intellectual as well as neurotic battles, are eliminated in one dramatic action. George's decision, however, is not merely "theatrically punitive" as Ruby Cohn suggests, nor is it a response to "demonic spite," as Anne Paolucci implies. It is an emotional outburst of the protagonist who is too weak to endure the existential agony of life. While a traditional hero reaffirmed the illusory microcosm at the end, George, being anti-heroic, breaks it. Of course, as his bitter tears at the end reveal, he is conscious of his loss: in punishing Martha, George is also punishing himself. Martha still sees the child as savior, a medium of reconciliation and redemption in a hostile universe:

And as he grew... and as he grew... oh! so wise... he walked evenly between us... a hand out to each of us for what we could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love...

But George sees the baby not as Dionysus or Christ reborn to inaugurate a new age or to save people, but as a demon to be exorcised, the product of Walpurgisnacht Orgy.
Thus, George and Martha emerge as helpless neurotics, victims of their hysterical cravings. There is absolutely no tragic grandeur in George's act of exorcism; it is an emotional outburst of the neurological tensions that gripped the soul of the protagonist. Agamemnon, Orestes, Electra also have illusions which urge them to seek confrontation with the gods and thus a niche in the hall of heroic fame. No wonder, their illusions lead them to tragic sublimation or redemption. But George's predicament is that his vain and desperate struggle to maintain the illusory microcosm leads him to spiritual sterility, chaos and mental paralysis. While the tragic illusions inspired Oedipus and Agamemnon with nobility and spirit of invincibility, George's neurotic illusions deflate his personality, make him arrogant, haughty, bestial and pervert. Othello emerges as a strong man with tragic limitations, but George is a "flop," a "zero," with neurotic illusions of greatness. Oedipus falls at the end, but not without reaping certain spiritual glory; there is nothing heroic in George. Instead, his heroism simply lies in accepting the sordid reality of his total emasculation - intellectual, moral and spiritual.

Jack Gelber, Jack Richardson and Arthur Kopit are other playwrights who compromise the American counterpart of the French avant-garde theatre. Their vision of life is absurd and they concentrate on the portrayal of neurotics and abnormal protagonists who stick to the "world of phantasy" to shun their psychic tensions. Alienated and depressed, they quest for an unnatural stimulant which might yield "guts" to live.
Jack Richardson has been inspired by Euripides' Orestes who is by no means an Aristotelian tragic hero. He is not a virtuous figure but a transgressor lacking in mercy, sympathy and compassion. His brutal murder of Clytemnestra terrifies the gods and his spirit of vengeance reveals his malicious mind. But in the hands of Jean-Paul Sartre, Orestes becomes a protagonist who defies the gods to assume full freedom in the universe. "In The Prodigal, in which Richardson, like Giraudoux and Sartre before him, turns the Oresteia into a contemporary philosophical play, Orestes attempts to escape involvement in the conflict between Agamemnon and Aegisthus," and thus the traditional hero turns anti-hero with all the symptoms of moral and spiritual fragmentation, alienation and nausea that afflict the modern anti-heroes.

Arthur Kopit's method of playwriting consists chiefly of conceiving fantastic characters and placing them in fantastic situations. His Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You In The Closet And I'm Feelin' So Sad (1960) dramatizes the famous American theme - "the emasculation of the male." The protagonist, Madam Rosepettle, is a dominating iron-maiden, cruel and ogreish, eccentric, she is travelling around Latin America to seek relief from her dismal past. Sick and depressed, she slyly derives sadistic pleasure in walking along the beach at night, kicking sand into lovers' faces and wrecking their nerves. Being a schizoid personality, she is not able to experience herself together with others; instead, she revels in isolation. Life with Mrs. Rosepettle includes Venus-flytraps, a silver piranha
which is fed Siamese cats; Albert's or Edwards' or Robinson's fantastic stamp collection, and fabulous coin collection. It also includes chairs which move without being touched, drapes which open and close without human hands, a cuckoo cloak which strikes when Mamma is displeased, and, of course, poor Dad, hung up there in the closet. Cynical to the core, Mamma holds nihilistic view of life: "life is a lie, my sweet. Not words but life itself. Life in all its ugliness. It builds green trees that tease your eyes and draw you under them." Her main interest in life is to keep her son away from life. Jonathan is never permitted out of the hotel room lest he be contaminated: "I don't let him out because he is my son. I don't let him out because his skin is as white as fresh snow and he would burn if the sun struck him" (Oh Dad, p. 494). Mamma is a feelingless, sensuous coquette. Her sexual frigidity and her nauseating vision of life have made her "a man-eating female." No wonder, Mamma wrecks the love-sentiments of Commodore Rose above treating him with cynical indifference. She smothers her son who, in a fit of neurosis, takes out the fire axe, chops up his mother's Venus-flytraps, kills her piranha fish and strangles Rosalie. Witchlike in her appearance, Mamma discovers the mess as she returns from one of her nocturnal beach rambles:

ROBINSON! I went to lie down and I stepped on your father! I lay down and I lay on some girl. Robinson there is a woman on my bed and I do believe one's stopped breathing. What is more, you've buried her under your fabulous collection of stamps, coins, and books. I ask you, Robinson. As a mother to a son I ask you. What is the meaning of this? (Oh Dad, p. 508).
In a grotesque melodrama, Kopit has projected the "castration anxiety" of a mother. Dramatized as "a pastiche of parody and nonsense," she role is marked by frustration, confusion and cruelty. Convinced that a woman can play the role of "a man-eating mother," she negates all traditional values by assuming the anti-heroic, witch-like role recalling Ionesco and Genet.

Jack Gelber's *The Connection* (1959) dramatizes the junkies' world where the addicts are seen hanging around for their "fix". It is a world without heroes as all the protagonists are "addicts", "narcotics", escapists from the alienation as well as the grim sordidness of the contemporary American life. Gripped by the existential despair and helplessness, the yankees turned junkies treating heroin as the only means for getting peace and ecstatic bliss. Drug addiction in its most unpleasant forms, as practised by mental degenerates and congenital morons, became the bane of American life and behaviour. Reflecting this degeneration, all the characters in *The Connection* are drug addicts, weary of life and society. They are lost souls looking for an unnatural stimulant which might give them "guts" to survive. The play begins as an "improvised theatre," with its producer, Jim Dunn, insisting upon the unreality of the play: "I and this entire evening on stage are merely a fiction. And don't be fooled by anything anyone tells you. Except the jazz ... what I mean to say is that we are not actually using real heroin." But as the action develops, the audience feel
involved in the loneliness and frustration of the addicts and identify their own weary and sterile existence. Richard Gileman observes:

The addicts hanging around for their fix, engaged in activity and conversation of an extreme solipsism and ineffectuality, is a serious and poetic statement of an existential situation. Behind everything lay bitterness and mockery, solitude and metaphysical anguish. We are all addicts of one kind or another, and we all have a Cowboy for whom we wait.40

The setting of the play is a dilapidated New York tenement apartment. The protagonists wander about the stage with a curious combination of listlessness and nervousness. Tired and weary, they appear to have barely enough energy to move about, and occasionally they don't seem to think that it is worth the effort. They become aware, ever so often, of the audience's presence, and look at them vacantly and listlessly. The most dominating role of these addicts is their inactivity; they don't do anything, for there is nothing left in their life to do! Their passive existence reveals the futility of life, its purposelessness and hopelessness. They seem to have been weary of the active roles and all they can do is to "wait" eternally for a "fix", like the doomed protagonists of Beckett's Waiting For Godot. Instead of performing heroic deeds, they seek euphoria - to get lost in drug ecstasy. Waiting for their dope-purveyor to arrive, as they idly debate their miserable condition, the audience come to know about their sordid past, their harrowing experience of life, their metaphysical loneliness, nausea and despair.
The world of junkies is a world of frenzy. The hipsters have no interest in life and its activities and since they see themselves neither as victims nor as heroes, but merely as absentees from the daytime universe, their relationship to society is not one of enmity, but one of truancy. Of course, the life of the junkies is neither glorified nor sentimentalized; however, their broken spirits, their lack of strength and vitality underline their moral and spiritual decadence. Leading a static life, they have neither any desire to repent nor do they wish to go back to normal life; rather, each one of them seems satisfied in his neurotic existence. The play transcends the theme of addiction by exploring the psychological state of the victims of neurotic tensions. If for George in Albee's play the illusion-mongering is an antidote to sterility of life, these junkies desperately seek dope to become oblivious of the fever and fret of their sordid life.

Leech is the central protagonist and it is in the pad of this "snarling, snickering, putatively epicene hipster," that the action takes place. He is the most dominating junky because he has acquired such an amazing capacity for drugs that he can no longer become crazy. The boil on his neck does not bother him: "Oh, this boil. Damn this boil. Dream world. Narcotics. I live comfortable. I'm not a Bowery bum" (Connection, p. 21). The junkies flock to this "king of the junky world," because they need his "hard earned connection to supply them with heroin." He is not happy with the life he is leading; rather, he is fed up with the dull talk of the junkies around him: "Cowboy, Cowboy,
you rotten junkies. Is that all you can think about is dope? Dope? Dope?" (Connection, p.27). However, his own aspirations are vicious and degrading: "I'm saving all the heroin I can so that I can put it in vitamin pills," (Connection, p.27) to infect the whole world with the heroin.

Leech's addiction is not peculiar to him; it is a manifestation of the universal urge in mankind to seek ecstasy:

I used to think that the people who walk the streets, the people who work everyday, the people who worry so much about the next dollar, the next new coat, the chlorophyll addicts, the aspirin addicts, the vitamin addicts, those people are hooked worse than me. Worse than me. Hooked.

(Connection, p.31)

As the goal of everybody in this world is to achieve happiness and self-contentment, various means are adopted - both legal and illegal, moral and immoral. Richard Kostelanetz goes to the extent of observing, "Gelber suggests that, given the chance, half the audience would surrender'square credentials' and be initiated into the narcotic life. Dope addiction becomes a possible choice, an effective way to achieve certain values; pleasure and contentment which society considers worthwhile." Of course, it is difficult to agree with Kostelanetz, for, far from helping one to "achieve" "pleasure and contentment," dope addiction makes one passive, dull, morbid, mentally sick and physically sullen. No wonder in their unheroic escape from reality, the addicts are seen as selfish, mean and piggish. There is no attempt to grapple with the sufferings of life; their
vision is lopsided and they are always haunted by death-consciousness. Solly tells the truth about heroin when he says:

Suicide is not uncommon among us. The seeking of death is at once fascinating and repellent. The overdose of heroin is where that frail line of life and death swings in a silent breeze of ecstatic summer.

Haunted by death, the neurotic hipsters indulge in lewd and licentious talks or homosexual perversions. That makes Leach's pad a dreary, baleful and shabby hell where the addicts are seen fighting "sex-battles" in frenzy. Their Chief, Leach, is "a queer without being queer. He thinks like a chick you wouldn't like with that, I certainly wouldn't. Sometimes I wish he would stop fighting it and make the homosexual scene" (Connection, p.41). A total failure in life, a man of cheap tastes and vulgar ideas, he is so lecherous that "sexually speaking he can't be with a girl for more than one night" (Connection, p.49).

The action of the play is electrified by the arrival of Cowboy, an ironic Messiah of the junkies. "If there is any hero, it is Cowboy, who gets the stuff, takes the risk involved in getting it, administers it to others, and behaves generally like the doctor which his white uniform makes us feel he is." But here is an ironic savior whose heroism is destructive, vicious, corrupting and anti-social. No wonder, talking about the existence of the junkies in general, Ernie observes: "You have invited yourself to a den of "vipers, sister Salvation. I'm sure you will find enough sins crossing your path today. So
leave me alone" (Connection, p.56).

The climax comes when Leach is caught in an ineluctable trap of dope:

I'm not high I'm not high at all. You know what I mean? I want more. Cowboy? Cowboy? You have some left. I'm not high. It's mine Cowboy. Strictly speaking, it's mine and I want some more. Everybody's high and I'm not. You didn't give me as much as you gave them.

(Connection, p.85)

A victim of his illusion, he takes an overdose. His death is neither tragic nor pathetic, for his "suicide" is not a quest of any identity; anyway, his life has been an utter waste. To quote Jaybird,

No doctors, no heroes, no martyrs, no Christs. That's a very good score, I didn't get burned. Maybe short counted, but not burned.

(Connection, p.82)

Obviously, the play has no "hero" to give. The inmates of the "junky den" are sick and decadent people whose life does not inspire us at all. What a pity that in the contemporary rotten society, only such junkies are the hopes of humanity! Their sickness and perversion symbolize the degradation of the American culture which manufactures illusions and dreams. No wonder Robert Brustein observed, "The most severe indictment of the evening is reserved for the audience, and, by extension, for society at large."44

Thus, Edward Albee, Jack Gelber, Jack Richardson and
Arthur Kopit projected neurotics and sick protagonists who are unfit for any heroism. Symbolizing the "sick culture" of contemporary America, they are neither tragic nor pathetic as their quest for illusions deprive them of heroic glory and grandeur. Alienated and depressed, they emerge as lost souls, dull, morbid, sick and decadent, indulging in lewdness or homosexual perversion. Gripped by neurotic despair, they seek escape from the stark realities of life instead of redeeming themselves through heroic struggle. No wonder, spiritually hollow and burdened with existential despair, they emerge as anti-heroes, belonging to the tradition of Ionesco, Genet, Beckett and Pinter.
Notes


6 R.S. Stewart, "John Gielgud and Edward Albee Talk About The Theatre," Atlantic, April 1965, p. 64.


8 Ibid.


11 Quoted in Confrontation And Commitment, p. 72.


14 Edward Albee, The Zoo Story (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1960), p. 12. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition and are incorporated in the text, the title having been abbreviated as Zoo.


16 Ibid.


23 "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" Tulane Drama Review, 7, No.3 (Spring 1963), 8-10.


28 Edward Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Athenaeum, 1966), p.7. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition and are incorporated in the text, the title having been abbreviated as woolf?


32 Edward Albee, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No.77 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1969), p.22.

33 From Tension to Tonic, p.59.

35 Arthur L. Kopit, "Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You In The Closet And I'm Feelin' So Sad," Best American Plays: Fifth Series, 1957-1963, ed. John Gassner (New York: Crown Publisher, 1963), p. 494. All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition and are incorporated in the text; while the title abbreviated as "Oh Dad."


37 Gerald Weses, The Jumping Off-Place, p. 77.


