The present study aims at exploring the contemporary social issues imbedded in the selected plays of Edward Albee. The issues Albee weaves in his dramatic productions, explicitly or implicitly, indicate their socio-political and religio-cultural itineraries which signify the nature of American society and also the directions it is moving in. An exploration of the contemporary issues in Albee’s plays deserve special critical attention not only because of their accuracy and urgency in terms of their relevance and contemporaneity but also because of their corresponding and engaging integrity, dramatic strategies and linguistic devices which determine the tone and texture of his plays and distinguish his prominence at the national as well interactional level. Albee is one of the very few American playwrights who are internationally recognized for their ingenious contribution to the world of drama. Albee, like Jean Paul Sartre, believes that drama holds the responsibility of acquainting modern man with himself and also with the ultimate significance of human conditions in the cosmos that betrays absurdity. His plays incessantly assert a will to come to grip with meaning in life, to surmount the indeterminate vacuity, sterility and insipidity of the quotidien.

“Tireless striving”, to borrow Tagore’s poetic expression, continually “stretches its arms…” in Albee’s play and assumes the status of a quest, a romance as is seen in Goethe. Albee combines in the different versions of absurd dramatic tradition, and stands prominent among the best of the American and international playwrights like, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and a
host of noted playwrights from different countries in the world. This study, nonetheless, centralize its focus on the fact that an absurd play essentially stands contraindicated to stark realism or realistic-naturalistic narrative or dramatic devices. Albee’s plays, despite their disjointed relationship with realism, are inextricably grounded in the social issues which ultimately define the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of human existence.

This chapter, therefore, principally traces out certain important events which took place in Edward Albee’s life right from his childhood, because these events directly or indirectly had a great impact not only on his personal life, but they also played a crucial role in shaping his perception and creative vision. His acute sense of isolation after he was adopted by millionaire parents and was brought to New York from Washington had resulted in his retreat to solitariness, to imagination and incessant reading. This ultimately had a great impact on his dramatization of human condition and on his dramatic arts at large.

In 1944, therefore, when he was sent to Choate his passion for reading was intensified and it is here that he wrote a 538 pages novel. His interest in multiple forms of literary expressions, multiple styles and creative strategies, evident in his plays, was continually sharpened with the passages of time. The impact of places, milieus and cultural vicissitude is also pinpointed here.

The complex pattern of human relationships which emerge as a conspicuous mode of cultural critique in his plays have a noticeable basis in his perceptions of personal relationships he himself had experienced at the earlier and even later phase of his life.
This chapter also systematically traces out a trajectory of American drama and its changing tradition with a focus on the tradition of absurd drama in America as well as in the other European countries. The statements made in this chapter are supported by anathematic secondary and primary source material.

Analytical survey of the predecessors, contemporary and European playwrights is also made here so that a proper perspective on the study is created. Critical discussions on Albee’s contemporary playwrights, their thematic and generic concerns facilitate this chapter to pinpoint the distinguishing features of an Albee play and its ingenious engagement with the contemporary social issues, its inextricable link with the absurd tradition of drama notwithstanding.

The significance of the American drama especially in modern and postmodern era is obvious in the various themes which are reflecting the problems of American society at present. Themes are varied including, *inter alia*, the horrors of the wars, the great depression, political hypocrisies and personal issues. Moreover, it reflects the struggle to preserve personal values, family issues such as family fragmentation, social and moral issues which are ideally relevant even in the present society we are living in.¹

The American drama also portrays the dehumanization of modern society, the individual resisting social values, social injustice and its interrelated effects on the individual, family, and society. The important question is as to how Edward Albee reflects the contemporary social issues and how the American society is affected by those issues at present?

It is imperative to note that by the end of the 19th century, America had taken its place among the powers of the world. The
American drama during the twentieth century has had a different function within the American context than within that of European theatre. Meanwhile, the rise of science and industry, as well as changes in way of thinking and feeling shaped and brought to the fore many modifications in the lives of the American citizenry.

The twentieth century American drama had placed emphasis on individual characters, functioning within social issues and rhythms of life that are peculiar to America. All through the history of the American drama, plays have continued to be expressive of life in America because they focus on the individuals and society. A new development in the dramatic art, therefore, is apparent in the plays of some well-known American playwrights. Modern and contemporary dramatists focus on the individuality of its characters and the realistic portrayal of characters in quest for moral order. Susan Harris Smith points out that,

"The modern playwright becomes more important than the Historians [since] ... no other war of our history was the private word more important than the public pronouncement."

Almost immediately after the beginning of the 20th century, realism became the main mode of American drama. Besides, the little theaters off Broadway succeeded with realistic plays; about 1916; Broadway adopted it, as well. In the year 1917, two small theater groups in New York (especially Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players) started to produce new American plays. They supplied a congenial home for new American playwrights like Eugene O’Neill, whose first plays were produced by the Provincetown Players in MA. These small play groups produced any play, in different styles, that commercial theater would not touch. These groups
were the beginning of modern American dramatic theater later on best represented by Eugene O’Neill.

Even after almost 100 years after the 1920 production of his full-length play, Beyond the Horizon, he is still regarded as the most important playwright the United States of America has produced. He introduced into American drama the techniques of realism. His plays indicate also remotest and even darkest corners of the characters he delineates in his plays. Expressionism is another distinguishing characteristic of his plays.

Before O’Neill, American drama tended to be mild and sentimental, rarely questioning the life and attitudes it depicted, and, almost never challenging the accepted traditions of the time. It consisted mostly of shows and spectacles staged by special effects that dazzled audiences. Melodramas and farces were also written for famous actors, much as TV shows today are written to display the personalities and talents of popular performers at present.

It is important to note that Eugene O’Neill’s intense psychological plays were a radical departure from the romantic convention of theater as amusement. He was among the first American to comprise speeches in common language or dialect and to focus on characters on the borders of society, where they struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations, but ultimately slide into disappointment and despair at the long end. In one of his speeches Eugene observed that:

*Obsessed by a fairy tale, we spend our lives searching for a magic door and a lost kingdom of peace... Happiness hates the timid! So does science! ... If a person is to get the meaning of life he must learn to like the facts about himself -- ugly as they may seem to his sentimental vanity --*
Moreover, Eugene O'Neill tried to convey the dehumanizing aspects of twentieth century, and technological aspect such as minimal cannery telegraphic dialogue, talking machine and characters portrayed as types rather than individuals. Eugene O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape*, 1922, depicts a rejected ship laborer who feels he belongs nowhere until he confronts an ape in a zoo. He sets the caged animal free (ape) only to be destroyed by it.

In *The Hairy Ape* Eugene O'Neill's protagonist, The Hairy Ape himself is Yank, a fireman in an ocean liner. Yank's journey in *The Hairy Ape* is right from the moment, he was found till he was finally lost is dramatized with all its socio- psychological complexities. At the beginning of the play he makes this statement about his place in the world, the world below deck. He points out that:

\[
I'm \ at \ de \ bottom \ .... \ I'm \ de \ end; \ I'm \ de \ star; \ ... \ I'm \ steam \ and \ oil \ for \ de \ engines; \ ... \ I'm \ smoke \ and \ express \ trains \ and \ streamers \ and \ factory \ whistles; \ I'm \ de \ ting \ in \ gold \ dat \ makes \ it \ money; \ and \ I'm \ what \ makes \ iron \ into \ steel.\]

The plays of O’Neill were focused on many odd jobs he held before becoming a playwright. He looked deeply into all his characters, producing searing portraits of desire and frustration, delusion and failure. With his experimental flair, his enormous output and his high aspirations for the theater, Eugene O’Neill dominated American drama in his generation. His plays were widely produced abroad, and in 1936; he was the only American playwright to have won the Nobel Prize in Literature.
Eugene O'Neill developed characters and settings that reflected the increasingly distinctive aspirations of the American people all through his long career, which stretches from 1916 to 1955. Usually, the settings in O'Neill's plays exteriorize his characters' psychological natures. The action of his plays most often involves a journey of self-discovery in which character and setting function complementarily. These highly controlled characteristics of O'Neill's plays convey the impression that he is an experimental dramatist. A clear example of how O'Neill interpreted the individual character through the use of experimental techniques is to be seen in *The Hairy Ape*, 1921. The plays show the development of the character Yank, a stoker on a ship.

At the start, Yank is satisfied with the feeling of elemental power. His job of feeling coal into the ship's furnace gives him. One day, Yank is observed by a wealthy young woman whose father owns the ship on which he works. She finds Yank to be sweaty and uncouth and calls him a "filthy beast." The remainder of the play involves Yank's search for new identity, since his earlier self-pride has been shattered by the painful understanding that other people view him as no more than a "Hairy Ape" in his life. It is for this reason Eugene observes in the *Great God Brown and Other Plays* that:

> Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of the earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid to love, I who love love.\(^{12}\)

In *The Hairy Ape*, there are realistic and nonrealistic scenes. The nonrealistic scenes are used by O'Neill to show the process by which Yank gropes for new sense of identity. One of them involves Yank's confrontation with wealthy members of society in New York City. All
of Yank's brute power is unable to disturb these people. He charges like a bull into one of the wealthy gentleman, but the man is unhurt and seemingly ignorant of Yank's existence, no one notices Yank. In this scene. So far as wealthy people are concerned, he does not exist. This stylized scene symbolizes Yank's inability to "belong" anywhere in civilization. It is in this regard that Eugene also observes in Beyond the Horizons that:

> Suppose I was to tell you that it's just beauty that's calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown, the mystery and spell which lures me, the need of freedom of great wide spaces, the joy of wandering on and on ... in quest of the secret which is hidden over there ... beyond the horizon.\(^\text{13}\)

The other plays by Eugene O'Neill written in the 1920' also show the influences of European experimental dramatic techniques on their forms. His plays, despite the similarities with the European drama, noticeably show the marks of his dramatic ingenuity, his masterful handling of the genre.

The other two significant figures in American drama during the post-World War II years were Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. They remain the dominant figures of the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century. Miller and Williams represent the two principal movements in modern American drama: realism and realism combined with an endeavor at something more imaginative.

From the beginning, American playwrights have tried to break away from the strict realism of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov and to blend it with a more poetic form of expression. Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is one of the best examples of this style of writing.
Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams are other great playwrights whose biting criticism of societal problems defined their genius. Arthur Miller was born in Harlem, New York in 1915 and attended the University of Michigan before moving back east to produce plays for the stage. His first critical and popular success was *Death of a Salesman*, which opened on Broadway in 1949. His very colorful public life was painted in part by his rocky marriage to Marilyn Monroe, and his unwavering refusal to cooperate with the House of Un-American Activities Committee.

For Arthur Miller, things started out a bit rocky. His 1940 play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, garnered precisely the antithesis of its title, closing after just four performances and a stack of woeful reviews. Six years later, however, *All My Sons* achieved success on Broadway, and earned him his first Tony Award (best author). Working in the small studio that he built in Roxbury, Connecticut, Miller wrote the first act of *Death of Salesman* in less than a day. It opened on February 10, 1949 at the Morocco Theatre, and was adored by nearly everyone. *Salesman* won him the triple crown of theatrical artistry: the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and a Tony.

In his final years, Miller's work continued to grapple with the weightiest of societal and personal matters. Miller also wrote the plays *A Memory of Two Mondays* and the short *A View from the Bridge*, which were both staged in 1955. His other works include *After the Fall* (1964), a thinly veiled account of his marriage to Monroe, *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (1977), and *The American Clock* (1980). His most recent works include the plays *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991), *The Last Yankee* (1993), and *Broken Glass* (1993), which won
the Olivier Award for Best Play. The play that won most accolades is *The Price* (1968), a piece about family dynamics.

*Death of a Salesman* is Miller’s best work and the most successful in fusing the realistic and the imaginative; in all his other plays, however, Miller is the master of realism. He is a true disciple of Henrik Ibsen, not only in his realistic technique, but in his concern about the impact of society on his characters’ lives throughout the work.\(^{14}\)

The course of action and the development of characters in Miller’s play depends not only on the characters’ psychological makeup but also on the social, philosophical, and economic atmosphere of their times. Miller’s most notable character, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, is a self-deluded man, but he is also a product of the American dream of success and a victim of the American business machine, which disposes of him when he had outlived his usefulness in the society.\(^{15}\) Miller tells Loman that:

> Why am I trying to become what I don’t want to be... when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am... I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been... the jungle is dark but full of diamonds, Willy... the only thing you've got in this world is what you can sell... will you let me go for Christ's sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens?\(^{16}\)

It should, however, be noted that Miller’s play the *Death of a Salesman* is not merely a drama of domestic clashes between a father and his sons, a drama of conflict between capitalism and communism, between self and soul, between psyche and conscience, between a salesman and a manufacturer, but of a conflict between man's values
and his environment. The playwright was trying in the play to set forth what happens when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of a grip. On the contrary, John S. Shockley observes:

"Death of a salesman still resonates powerfully in American life and culture and that in a fascinating and chilling way life has imitated drama. [Moreover], Miller is a writer of high moral seriousness, whether he is dealing with personal versus social responsibility or with witch hunts past and present. He writes a plain, muscular prose that under the force of emotion often becomes eloquent."

The key characteristics of the American drama, particularly its focus on the individually characters and its realistic portrayal-developed slowly. In the early nineteenth century, it was not character as much as setting that distinguished Native American drama from the popular European, especially British, imports. Throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century, playwrights such as James A. Herne and Clyde Fitch began to write dramas that used American settings. There were often simple people pioneers whose qualities of resilience, stamina, sense of fair play allowed them to survive in the society.

The transitional dramatist William Vaughn Moody, early in the twentieth century wrote two plays that contributed significantly to the kinds of characters his nineteenth century predecessors had begun to create for the American stage. In Moody's work, characters are grappling with the problems of individual self-determination. The dramatic climaxes of his plays are striking resolution by individual characters of the problems identity. Moody also advances the use of American settings for his plays; he placed his characters in scenic
environments that both corresponds to and explain their psychological turmoil.

The American realistic drama, which came into its own at the turn of the century, was idea-oriented, standing for the controversial social and ideological concerns of its main practitioners, and as their idea required clear exposition, the convention of revelation was a logical development. All the dramatic elements of realistic drama are structured in order to completely reveal the mystery around which drama is built and provide solutions to problems raised in the plays.

Typically, in realistic drama, the action moves towards a single climax in which meanings are illuminated. Characters disclose their motives as the action progresses, the plot traced a linear curve, and language conveys chaos and mystery within a logical structure. A clearly articulated language served the playwrights to drive their ideas in the theatre.

Prominent American playwrights, in the twentieth-century, experimented with the traditional linear development, but amidst the structural changes, the convention of revelation remained constant. But, with the writings of European dramatists in the 1950s, realistic drama and its conventions started to display signs of changes, yielding ground to the philosophy and techniques of "The Theatre of the Absurd."

Moreover, the concept of absurd theatre as man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed. A changing world view led to the appearance of absurd drama that reflected in its form and language the cataclysmic changes of modern
society. Disrupting logic and breaking language to pieces, absurd drama creates a form which expresses the contents.

Samuel Barclay Beckett is one of the most celebrated and influential dramatists of the twentieth century before the coming of Edward Albee. He was born near Dublin, Ireland, on April 13, 1906 into a Protestant, middle class home. His father was a quantity surveyor and his mother worked as a nurse.

As a youth he was more inclined to athletics than academics, not showing interest in literature until his third year at Trinity College, Dublin, as a student of modern languages. Upon receiving his B.A. in 1927, at the age of twenty, he departed for France and lectured at Ecole Normal Superieure in Paris, where he became acquainted with James Joyce. Beckett worked with Joyce as an assistant and copier during the writing of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. He respected the older writer so much that at the age of 23 he wrote an essay defending Joyce's magnum opus to the public. In 1927, one year later, he won his first literary prize for his poem entitled *Whoroscope*. The poem was about the philosopher Descartes meditating on the subject of time and about the transiency of life. Thereafter, Beckett journeyed through Ireland, France, England, and Germany and continued to write poems and stories.

Samuel Beckett's first play was *Eleutheria*. He later wrote *Waiting for Godot* in 1948 and 1949 which was not only a successful play that premiered at the Theatre de Babylone but was also widely considered Beckett's finest play. Although critics labeled the play "the strange little play in which 'nothing happens,'" it gradually became a success as reports of it spread through word of mouth.
All of Beckett's major works were written in French. He believed that French forced him to be more disciplined and to use the language more wisely. However, *Waiting for Godot* was eventually translated into the English by Beckett himself.

Samuel Beckett also became one of the first absurdist playwrights to win international fame. His works have been translated into over twenty languages. In 1969 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, one of the few times this century that almost everyone agreed the recipient deserved it. He continued to write until his death in 1989, but towards the end he remarked that each word seemed to him "an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness."

Regarded as one of the most controversial and seminal works of twentieth-century drama, *Waiting for Godot* is noted for its minimal approach to dramatic form, powerful imagery, and concise, fragmented, and repetitive dialogue. Traditional plays begin with some action or event that results in dramatic conflict, an imperative element to Aristotelian dramatic theory.

*Waiting for Godot* is a play that generally entails search and struggle for identity and begins with no precipitative movement, only an abstract struggle involving the passage of time. This apart, in *Waiting for Godot*, there is a constant comic antagonism created between actor and audience, as ideas and lines of narrative are picked up and abandoned without the usual dramatic sense of resolution. In the first Act for example, Estragon begins a joke that is never finished:

*Estragon: Tell it tome!*

*Vladimir: Ah, stop it!*

*Estragon: An Englishman having drunk a little more than usual goes to a brothel. The bawd asks*
him if he wants a fair one, a dark one, or a red-haired one. Go on.

Vladimir: Stop it!"\(^{19}\)

The antagonism and frustration engendered by this un-ended joke is more than a mere literary device, it is also a performance device that sets up a markedly different actor/audience relationship. Unlike, say, classical Aristotelian dramatic theory that asserts the imperative of the "incentive moment" the "rising action" and the resolution, here Beckett (as indeed he does throughout the play) creates a deliberate anti-climax that immediately calls into question the binary between reality and performance.

Martin Esslin characterized Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* as “concerned with the hope of salvation through the workings of grace.”\(^{20}\) However, it can be noted that it concerns itself not with a general salvation but with a very a personal one, with each character desperately searching for their own identity amid the alienation and ennui of the surrounding environment. Most of the play’s linguistic rhythm arises out of the characters’ attempt to assert their own identity in the face of the others:

*Vladimir: Charming evening we’re having.*

*Estragon: Unforgettable.*

*Vladimir: And it's not over.*

*Estragon: Apparently not.*

*Vladimir: Its only beginning.*

*Estragon: Its awful.*

*Vladimir: Its worse than being in the theatre."\(^{21}\)

The tooing and frothing of the dialogue here is a perfect example of this point, with neither Vladimir nor Estragon willing to surrender themselves to the other. The same can be seen in a more graphic sense with the Pozzo/Lucky relationship that is, at its heart a Hegelian
dialectic of the master and slave, with each party attempting (and failing) to break away from the other.

In the comic scene towards the end of the play that depicts Vladimir and Estragon exchanging symbolic identities in the form of their hats since Beckett’s observes on the ironies of postmodern life as:

\[
\text{Vladimir takes puts on Lucky’s hat in place of his own which he hands to Estragon. Estragon takes Vladimir’s hat. Vladimir adjusts Lucky’s hat on his head. Estragon hands Vladimir’s hat back to Vladimir who takes it and hands it back to Estragon who takes it and hands it back to Vladimir who takes it and throws it down.}^{22}
\]

The absurdity of this scene arises from the fact that each hat is the same, or at least very similar, so that it makes very little difference which hat ends up on which head. This is, I think, symbolic of the larger treatment of identity within the play; with the playwright suggesting the absurdity of the search for personal individuation. Are not identities much like hats, asks Beckett, remarkably the same?

Beckett deconstructs the very essence of the performance itself, exposing the bewildered reaction of the audience to his own drama. In a Postmodern dissolution of identity boundaries, the performer here becomes playwright, audience, character and actor as not only are the thoughts of the character exposed but so too the thoughts of the audience. This is not the only deconstruction of performance Beckett employs in the play. It can be seen, for instance, the questioning of dramatic convention; \textit{Happy Days} is, for all intents, a monologue but it features two characters, it is about the movement of time but, ironically, the main actor is static throughout and although it is primarily a play about words and not actions it is peppered with pauses
and space. All factors that point to both plays as being as much rooted in postmodernism as modernism.

Similarly, Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* is a play that is also open to many interpretations. In *Endgame*, Beckett again focused on two characters, bedraggled survivors of an apparent holocaust. The two men, Clov and Hamm, are faced with the nothingness of their existence as they attempt to validate their lives, eventually falling back on memories to justify their existence.

Beckett further developed his innovative theatrical techniques and metaphysical concerns in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days*. In *Happy Days*, the protagonist, Winnie, continues her daily rituals while being buried up to her waist in earth. She seems uncaring and almost welcomes this entombment, and by the second act of the play, she is buried up to her neck. Winnie believes that the earth stabilizes her and keeps her grounded, lest her insubstantiality should cause her to float into the sky. Beckett's preoccupation with disembodied heads and faces resurfaces in his later short plays *That Time* (1976), *A Piece of Monologue* (1979), *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), and *What Where* (1983), all of which feature heads with long white hair and an aged appearance. In *Not I* (1972), the main character is a disembodied mouth floating high above the stage. The Mouth seems to be forced into confessing her faults to a lone Auditor in a Dante-esque purgatory. Beckett used darkness, voice, repetition, and silence to heighten the feeling of damnation, hopelessness, and introspection in much of his drama.

The social background to *Happy Days* was described, in an effective way by Harold Clurman in an early review:
Beckett is the poet of a morally stagnant society. In this society fear, dismay and a sort of a stunned absent-mindedness prevail in the dark of our consciousness, while a flashy, noisy, bumptious, thick-headed complacency flourishes in the open.23

It is against this backdrop that the characters in the play struggle to maintain their scant identities. Even before the action begins they are made witness to the difficulties in establishing an individual existence as the characters’ names, Winnie and Willie, straightway blur their respective personal boundaries. This can also be seen to a greater extent in Waiting for Godot, as Gogo, Pozzo and Godot, combine to form a linguistic homogeneity that suggests a group rather than an individual identity.

As John Pilling suggests in his study of Samuel Beckett, the playwright twins the enormity of the search for identity in an alienating world with the minutiae of everyday living, as Winnie spends a great deal of the play’s time conducting worthless searches for toothbrushes, or lipsticks or many of the other incidental objects of existence.24 Ultimately, her search for a personal identity is proved fruitless as she becomes subsumed in that which surrounds her, perhaps a particularly twentieth century vision of the struggle of the personal psychology in the face of the modern city. Waiting for Godot, it can be noted, it concerns itself with similar themes and similar characters.

In view of the above it can be noted that Beckett’s work says as much about the identities of the audience as the characters and as much about the performative nature of the wider society as the performance of the theatre.

Martin Esslin is another important playwright, who is the foremost critic of the "Theatre of the Absurd," defines the plays written
in this tradition as moving toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself, the elements of language, as Esslin explains are:

“Still plays an important part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters.”

These changes in form and language have had an impact in the theater as it has significantly altered the role of audience. Unlike the audience in a realistic theater who interpret meanings that are scripted in the text by the playwright and conveyed in the theatre by actors, the audience viewing an absurd play fills in meanings of their own.

The aims of absurd dramatists is not to solve the mysteries and contrarieties in human condition but simply to portray them within the dramatic form, they find silence an affective technique to present life as they see it. Silence is not to be understood as the absence of sound or noise. Unspoken meanings are conveyed in gaps, sentences begun and left fragmented, and stories started and not completed that leave the motives of characters or their inner selves hidden, truths concealed or cryptically expressed. These gaps, in completions, and silent syllables beneath sentences together with pauses and silences scripted in the text open the drama into the unknown and the mysteries in life.

The actor and actress, in the theatre, have the central role of conveying verbal and nonverbal meanings, and through vocal intonations and gestures they make textual silences expressive. Gesture, which involves both movement and stillness of the actor’s body, is not separates from language. Instead, language and gesture together convey meaning in a single visual and auditory image.
Tennessee Williams, born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi was a master playwright of the twentieth century, and his plays *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* are considered among the finest of the American stage. At their best, his twenty-five full-length plays combined lyrical intensity, haunting loneliness, and hypnotic violence. He is widely considered the greatest Southern playwright and one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American drama.

Williams’ plays were a great success in the United States and abroad, and he was able to write works that were well-received by critics and popular with audiences, including *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Night of the Iguana* (1961), and many others. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won Williams his second Pulitzer Prize, and was his last truly great artistic and commercial success.

In 1940 Williams' play, *Battle of Angels*, debuted in Boston. It quickly flopped, but the hardworking Williams revised it and brought it back as *Orpheus Descending*, which later was made into the movie, *The Fugitive Kind*, starring Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani.

Although Tennessee Williams was Miller’s contemporary, his concern was not with social matters, but with personal ones. In play after play, he probed the psychological complexities of his characters, especially of his female characters: Amanda and Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and Alma in *Summer and Smoke* (1948.)

In contrast to Miller’s spare, plain language, Williams’ writing is delicate and sensuous, often colored with lush imagery and evocative rhythms. Miller’s characters are, by and large, ordinary people with whom we identify because they are caught up in the social tensions of our times. Williams’ characters are often women who are lost ladies,
drowning in their own neuroses, but somehow mirroring a part of our own complex psychological selves. In the works of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, we see the two strongest strands in American drama: pure realism and realism blended with an imaginative, poetic sensibility.

When Arthur Miller revived the term Social Drama in his preface to *A View from the Bridge*, he was tired of the weeping will ooziness of our plays of lyric neurosis. He was also wary of the tougher drama of estrangement, whether elegiac (Beckett) or swollen to grandeur by threat and malice (Genet)--making the outcast into a principle of being. What he wants in Social Drama "is the drama of thee whole man."\(^{28}\)

In the introduction to the *Collected Plays*, he said he saw something like it in the drama of Brecht. While he could not agree with his "concept of the human situation", he did feel that Brecht was working "not on the periphery of the contemporary dramatic problem, but directly upon its center which is the problem of consciousness."\(^{29}\) To achieve consciousness, however, one needs to believe in society.

William's plays *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* can be read as a critique of the postwar socialist pressures to conform to normative sexual standards, and, by proxy, the pro-family ideal.\(^ {30}\) As Paul J. Hurley suggests:

"...the ability of the individual to defend his personal values in the face of a society which demands adherence to group values, represents the heart of William's play."\(^ {31}\)

Indeed, William depiction of the childless couple Maggie and Brick Pollitt, dramatizes the emptiness and futility in striving to fulfill cultural expectation without regard for personal integrity.\(^ {32}\)
The social hierarchy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, in many ways, can be read as a representation of the south's stereotypical antebellum culture which is most often characterized by good breeding and genteel manners.³³ As Kimball King describes:

“What William succeeds in doing is to convey the magnetic appeal of southern cultural myths as he deconstructs them in play after play.”³⁴

*The Social Drama* generically is a drama in search of body politic. For Miller, a social humanitarian, it emerges out of the desire to make sense of the word "individual" in a mass society, increasingly deprived of identity by machines and machine politics and machine values.³⁵ It also comes from his rather academic preoccupation with the tragic form, where self-realization, the quest of the dramatic hero, is prefigured in the myths and mores of his people. The word "individual," which once meant "inseparable," now usually means "alienated."

What Miller is after, almost against the evidence of modern experience, is a drama in which the individual is not an "individual in his own right," but in relation to universal substance and the polity as a whole. Both tragic drama and the idea of heroism floundered when personal right, becoming a mandate, got lost in the press of the crowd and even more so when the private life of men became inconsistent with the generally approved definitions of man.³⁶

The classical trilogy of *Oedipus* shows that, after banishment and disgrace, the final resting place of the outcast is within the city limits. With *Hamlet*, however, the slaughters seem more accidental, the spectators more self-conscious, and it is a stranger who supervises the
burial and bids the soldiers shoot. For a dramatist like Beckett, there is no refuge, as there is only the career of the outcast:

“We live astride the grave; indeed, we are born to it: "Down in the hole, lingeringly, the gravedigger puts on the forceps.”

Man's quest for resolution in society is the quest of the psychotic in an armed madhouse, going from one lunatic asylum to another.

The only refuge is the closed world of the dispossessed Self, divided against it; not even the "individual in his own right," for we suffer by nature from impossible dependencies and existential drainage, like the bald patch of Tolstoy's Vronsky, who has pride in himself as a social being. The question is "why do we go on tormenting ourselves," says Vronsky, "When everything might be arranged so well?"

A play is privileged to reconstruct history for its own purposes; but here we have a play which pretends to describe in realistic terms a community instinctively bent on devotion to GOD. The American plays reflect the social issues and behaviors of society.

Hawthorne's novel retains the impermeable quality of that experience by accepting completely the terms of the divine or demonic game. The plays do show that he considered the inquisition a fraud; but though he is bound to the community as a farmer. Character in the play is certainly the more dramatic figure in being compelled to disavow what by instinct and conditioning he has come to believe. It also displays the difficult conditions of life and order to cure illness of society in general.

As pointed out above, Edward Albee’s writings present a specific world of ironic domesticity through the figure of the child
which ranges from that of the adopted infant, real or imagined baby, young man, dead child, imaginary person, to that of grown-up homosexual son who lives in the post-war era and depicts the symbolic disintegration of the American nuclear family and the state of domestic affairs in the context of the period’s excessively consumerist society.\textsuperscript{40}

According to Anne Paolucci:

\textit{Albee is a playwright who builds his characters from his own character, that is, he constructs “from the inside out” and remolds the figure of the child who is alienated in and from the domestic, private world of American nuclear families.}\textsuperscript{41}

Moreover, Albee questions the frames of what the nuclear family was meant to represent: the indestructible unity of powerful fathers, beautiful, dutiful, loving mothers, and wise, nice children, and presents ironic alternatives to this idyllic domestic structure.\textsuperscript{42}

Edward Albee further consciously employs a considerable amount of personal stories that function as critical inter-texts. In this sense, Albee is both a post-nuclear writer and commentator of his own works because his alternating families set in critical motion a variety of almost obsessive autobiographical elements.

Edward Albee was given up for adoption shortly after his birth March 12, 1928 in Washington D.C. Although he knew he was adopted by the age of six, and therein lay the beginning of his alienation, he only learned the few details of the circumstances of his birth and adoption after his adoptive mother’s death in 1989.

Albee’s biological father had abandoned his mother Louise Harvey and given up her son Edward Harvey to an adoption agency two weeks after his birth. Reed and Frances Albee became his foster parents, bringing him to their home in Larchmont, New York when he
was only 18 days old; they officially adopted him on February 1, 1929, and changed his name to Edward Franklin Albee III.\textsuperscript{43}

The Albee’s were an old American family, having immigrated to Maine in the seventeenth century; an ancestor was one of the original minutemen in the Revolutionary War. Albee’s grandfather, Edward Franklin Albee II (1857-1930), was co-founder and partner with B.F. Keith in a chain of vaudeville theaters located throughout the U.S. Consisting of over 400 theaters, the Keith-Albee circuit, which later merged with other theaters to form RKO (the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corporation), made the elder Albee millions, subsequently inherited by his son.\textsuperscript{44}

Reed Albee was the rich-man’s son-type; he worked as an assistant general manager in the company until he retired the year he and his wife adopted their son. Reed had married Frances Cotter in 1925, a year after his first marriage of ten years ended in divorce; it was the first marriage for “Frankie,” who was twelve years younger than Reed. She was tall and imposing, he short and dapper. He bought thoroughbred horses for showing; she rode them and won the ribbons.\textsuperscript{45} Frances was working in a department store in Manhattan when she and Reed met; she came from a family of upstate New York farmers that apparently were not a significant part of young Edward Albee’s life, except for his grandmother, who eventually came to live with the Albee’s.

Albee did not have the kind of carefree, nurtured childhood one hopes for every child growing up. The affluence of his family did expose him to culture. His mother was emotionally cold and domineering; his father was distant and uninvolved in his son’s rearing.\textsuperscript{46} Albee’s closest adult relationships were to his nanny, Anita Church,
and to Grandmother Cotter. It was his nanny who introduced him to opera and classical music.\textsuperscript{47}

Even though Albee’s’ large Tudor house contained a library with classics of world literature, he was scolded for removing the volumes which were intended for show and not actual reading. Instead he was driven in a limousine to see Broadway productions deemed appropriate for his age, for \textit{e.g.}, \textit{Jumbo} with Jimmy Durante, Rodgers and Hart’s \textit{On Your Toes}, and \textit{Hellzapoppin}.

His unhappiness as a child was evidenced by his expulsion from three private preparatory schools: Rye Day School in New York, the Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, and Valley Forge Military Academy in Pennsylvania. However, he found his niche at Choate in Wallingford, Connecticut where he wrote a play, a novel, poems, and short stories in the manner of those published in \textit{The New Yorker}, an early inspiration, especially the work of James Thurber. Some of these juvenilia were published in the school literary magazine and one poem was published in a Texas literary magazine in 1945.

Upon graduation, Albee matriculated at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where he published in the literary magazine and acted in a couple of plays, but was expelled in his second year for not attending required courses and chapel. In the same year he left home after a fight over his late night drinking, which ceased all contact between him and his adoptive parents for twenty years.

Thereafter, Albee spent the 1950s living in Greenwich Village in a number of apartments and working a variety of odd jobs for \textit{e.g.}, a telegram delivery person to supplement his monthly stipend from a trust fund left for him by his paternal grandmother.
In 1952 Albee met William Flanagan, who had come east from Detroit to study music and was the music critic for the *Herald Tribune* and other publications. He moved in with Flanagan who was an artistic and intellectual mentor and more than a lover to the young Albee, his first long-term gay relationship. Although he had had a few heterosexual experiences, had even been unofficially engaged to a socialite whose parents were friends of his parents, Albee had also had gay experiences as early as age 13, and frequented gay bars while he was in college.48

Flanagan and his entourage, of which the only writer was Albee, attended the theatre, art exhibits, and other cultural events, as well as frequenting lower Manhattan nightspots. During this time Albee saw Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party* on Broadway. Thus, in his twenties Albee experienced the equivalent and perhaps even better of a college and graduate school education than before.

In his early adulthood, Albee was still bent up becoming a writer, though not making much progress. On his first trip abroad to Italy and France with Flanagan, he searched for inspiration and wrote a great deal, but nothing came to fruition. He submitted to *The New Yorker* but was rejected. The nine plays, dozens of stories, and more than 100 poems Albee wrote over a ten-year period were never published or produced.49

It was till when Albee was approaching his thirtieth birthday that he first produced play indicating a sense of desperation that he would never be a writer. Using a typewriter from the Western Union office where he worked he wrote *The Zoo Story* (which for years he claimed was his first play) in three weeks as a birthday present to himself.
Although it took some time to get it on the stage, both Albee and Flanagan knew that he had taken a giant step forward. Gussow reports that upon listening to a staged reading of *The Zoo Story* at the Actors Studio, novelist Norman Mailer stood up and proclaimed it the best one-act play he had ever seen.

After the success abroad of *The Zoo Story*, American theatre producer Alan Schneider agreed to produce it off-Broadway in a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. This early association with Beckett served to cement Albee's connection to the Theatre of the Absurd. In fact, *The Zoo Story* was at the time of its production hailed as the birth of American absurdist drama. Immediately, Albee became perceived as a leader of a new theatrical movement in America. His success was in part predicated on his ability to straddle the two divergent traditions of American theatre - the traditional and the avant-garde, combining the realistic with the surreal. Thus, critics of Albee can rightfully see him as a successor to American playwrights like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Eugene O'Neill, while at the same time unmistakably, he was influenced by European playwrights like Samuel Beckett. Albee has also called Ring Lardner, James Thurber, and Jean Genet as important influences on his writing.

Throughout the following years, Albee strengthened his reputation with a series of one-act plays, including *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The Sandbox*, the latter of which he dedicated to his beloved grandmother. In 1961, *The American Dream* addressed themes that he would continue to explore throughout his long career. That same year, Albee adapted an unsuccessful production of Melville's short story *Bartleby* with his friend William Flanagan.
Despite the success of his original work, Albee's adaptations - of Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of The Sad Cafe* in 1963 and of James Purdy's *Malcolm* in 1965 - have not been critically or popularly successful. Critics described them as being static representations of literary works, simply transplanting existing scenes from the books to the stage.

After the failed McCullers adaptation in 1963, Albee's original drama, a dream play called *Tiny Alice*, opened in New York. That same year, Albee joined with two friends in creating an absurdist group called "Theater 1964," which produced, among other things, Beckett's *Play* and Pinter's *The Lover* at Cherry Lane Theatre. After *Malcolm* closed after only five days, Albee rebounded with the success of *A Delicate Balance* in 1966. For this play, he received the Pulitzer Prize.

Albee continued to write plays throughout the 1960's and 1970's. *Everything in the Garden*, adapted from a play by Giles Cooper, was produced in 1967, followed by: the original plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* in 1968; *All Over* in 1971; and *Seascape* in 1975. For *Seascape*, Albee was awarded a second Pulitzer Prize. *Counting the Ways and Listening*, which initially debuted as a radio play in England, was staged in New York in 1977.

Throughout the 1980's, Albee's playwriting career failed to produce a substantial commercial hit. Plays from this period include: *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980); an adaptation of *Lolita* (1981); *The Man Who Had Three Arms* (1983); *Finding the Sun* (1985); and *Marriage Play* (1987). During this time, Albee also taught courses at various universities, especially in Houston, TX, and maintained his residence in New York. Albee's other productions include: *Lorca Play* (1993); *Fragments: A Concerto Grosso* (1995); *The Play about the
Baby (1996); Occupant (2001); The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? (2002); Knock! Knock! Who's There!? (2003) and Me, Myself and I (2007).

A member of the Dramatic Guild Council and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Albee has received three Pulitzer Prizes for drama, i.e., for A Delicate Balance in 1967, Seascape in 1975, and Three Tall Women in 1994. His play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf was selected for the 1963 Pulitzer Prize by the award's drama jury, but was overruled by the advisory committee, which elected not to give a drama award at all.

Albee was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1972. In 1985, Albee was inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame. In 1999, Albee received the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award as a Master American Dramatist. Later he received a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement (2005); the Gold Medal in Drama from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1980; as well as the Kennedy Center Honors and the National Medal of Arts, both in 1996. In 2009 Albee received honorary degree, Doctor Honoris Causa by the Bulgarian National Academy of Theater and Film Arts, a member of the Global Alliance of Theater Schools. Albee was also the President of the Edward F. Albee Foundation Inc., which maintains the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center, a writers and artists colony in New York.

Edward Albee is one of the celebrated representatives of the theatre of the absurd in United States of America. It must be noted though, that the European kind of absurdism that springs from deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and
purpose in life never really took root in postwar America. As Christopher Bigsby points out:

America was ill suited to the absurd in a number of respects, first, its actor-training (based on the Stanislavski method) was committed to psychological veracity; second, its theatrical tradition was at odds with the absurd’s denial of social conflict; and third, the absurd was in radical conflict with basic American myths having to do with the integral self and the inevitability of progress.53

Edward Albee bore the marks of the absurd and more importantly, innovative dramatic forms certainly flourished in his works. In his plays character and plot seem to be drained of content and are both often presented as mere puppets.

Albee burst onto the American theatrical scene in the late 1950s with a variety of plays that detailed the agonies and disillusionment of that decade and the transition from the placid Eisenhower years to the turbulent 1960s. Albee’s plays with their intensity, their grappling with modern themes, and their experiments in form, startled critics and audiences alike while changing the landscape of American drama.

Albee’s plays form a body of work that is recognized as unique, uncompromising, controversial, elliptical, and provocative. Although hailed as America’s finest playwright of the “theater of the absurd,” Albee went on to write plays that diverged from the absurdist formula. His widely recognized successful play Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962), for instance is written in the realistic tradition of O’Neill and Arthur Miller. Nonetheless, Albee can be seen as an absurdist in a uniquely American tradition, which not surprisingly, given America’s Puritan heritage, comes with a strong moral
component. In this regard, Albee explained why most of his plays are written with serious social aims:

> Directly or indirectly any playwright is a kind of demonic social critic. I am concerned with altering people’s perceptions, altering the status quo. All serious art interest itself in this. The self, the society should be altered by a good play. All plays in their essence are indirectly political in that they make people question the values that move them to make various parochial, social, and political decisions. Our political decisions are really a result of how we view consciousness. Plays should be relentless; the playwright shouldn’t let people off the hook. He should examine their lives and keep hammering away at the fact that some people are not fully participating in their lives and therefore they’re not participating with great intelligence in politics, in social intercourse, in aesthetics. It’s something that I dearly hope runs through all of my plays.  

The entire passage quoted above indicates Albee’s serious attempt to redefine the play, its nature and texture, its intent and arena. His conception of play, as we have seen, is determined by the socio-moral, cultural and political propensity of the genre. He ardently believes in creatively participating in and making people participate intensely in the life with greater intelligence in politics, social intercourse, and in aesthetics. His play invariably takes into account all the necessary minutiae of the quotidian.

Some of Albee’s best-known plays, especially *The Sandbox* (1959) and *The American Dream* (1960), are absurdist in the obvious way that much of Beckett’s and Ionesco’s work is. Put in its simplest terms, this kind of writing echoes the meaninglessness (therefore the absurdity) of human existence in the form of the work itself. However,
neither the *American Dream* nor *The Sandbox* bothers to be realistic or illusionistic in the sense of depicting life as it appears to ordinary vision.

Albee has famously claimed that his play *The American Dream* is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen. The mutation of American values into unselfconscious egotism and intellectual vacuity is most evident in the character of Mommy who represents all that is worst about American’s zealous capitalism and stands as an omen of might happen, should Americans capitulate to the pressures of crass consumerism.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* there are several themes Edward Albee has incorporated, for instance: the themes of reality versus illusion, the nature of domestic reality and also the themes of love and hate placed against the backdrop of radical social and ideological transformations taking place during his times. In love and hate theme, Albee seems to make the not-uncommon literary assertion that love and hate are two parts of a single whole. From their vitriolic banter, it clearly appears that George and Martha hate each other. In fact, they say as much and even pledge to destroy each other. Nonetheless, there are moments of tenderness that contradict this hatred. George even tells Nick not to necessarily believe what he sees. Some of George and Martha's arguments are for show; others are for the challenge of arguing, while still others are indeed meant to hurt each other. However, Martha's declaration that George is really the only one who can satisfy her suggests that there are or have been positive aspects to their marriage. Clearly, as much as they fight, they also need each other, even if just to maintain the illusions that keeps them going.
Moreover, Edward Albee attempts to move beyond the narrowness of his personal interests by having his characters speculate from time to time upon the metaphysical and historical implications of their predicament. In *Tiny Alice*, the metaphysics, such as they are, appear to be Albee's deepest concern—and no doubt about it, he wants his concerns to seem deep. But this play isn't about the problems of faith-and-doubt or appearance-and-reality, any more than *Virginia Woolf* was about "the Decline of the West"; mostly, when the characters in *Tiny Alice* suffer over epistemology, they are really suffering the consequences of human deceit, subterfuge, and hypocrisy.

In summary, it can be noted that the American realistic drama, which came into its own at the turn of the century, was idea-oriented, standing for the controversial social and ideological concerns of its main practitioners. Thus, all the dramatic elements of realistic drama are structured in order to completely reveal the mystery around which drama is built and provide solutions to problems raised in the plays so far in existence in the United States of America.
END NOTES:


7. A melodrama is a drama such as a play, a film, or a TV program, characterized by exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts.

8. A farce is a light dramatic work in which highly improbable plot situations, exaggerated characters, and often slapstick elements are used for humorous effect.


13. Ibid., p. 571.


15. Ibid., p. 571.


35


27. *Supra* note 29.


35. Manvell, Roger. *Theater and Film: A Comparative Study of the Two Forms of Dramatic Art, and of the Problems of Adaptation of Stage Plays into*

36. Ibid., p. 129.


42. Ibid., p. 155.


47. Ibid., p. 94.


The Edward F. Albee Foundation was founded in 1967 by Edward Albee, after proceeds from his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* proved abundant. The foundation had maintained the William Flanagan Memorial Creative Persons Center (better known as "The Barn") in Montauk, on Long Island in New York, as a residence for writers and visual artists. The mission of the foundation is to serve writers and visual artists from all walks of life, by providing time and space in which to work without disturbance. The only criteria for selection is talent and need and the foundation invites any and all artists to apply.

Ibid., p. 450.

Christopher Bigsby, *A Theater Divided: The Postwar American Stage*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1966, 264-274. Christopher Bigsby born in 27 June 1941, is a British literary analyst and novelist, with more than forty books to his credit. Educated at the Universities of Sheffield and Nottingham, he is Professor of American Studies at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. Bigsby is also considered one of the world's best analysts of American theatre, and in particular the definitive commentator on playwright Arthur Miller. Bigsby's books on Miller include, but are not limited to, *Remembering Arthur Miller* (2005), *Arthur Miller & Company* (1990), *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller* (1997), and the definitive work on the great American playwright, the 514-page *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study* (2005). In November 2008, Bigsby published *Arthur Miller*, a definitive biography of the eminent American playwright, based on boxes of papers Miller made available to him before his death in 2005, as well as countless interviews and conversations during a friendship with the playwright that lasted over three decades.