

UFR Langues, Littératures et Civilisations Etrangères

Département d'Etudes du Monde Anglophone

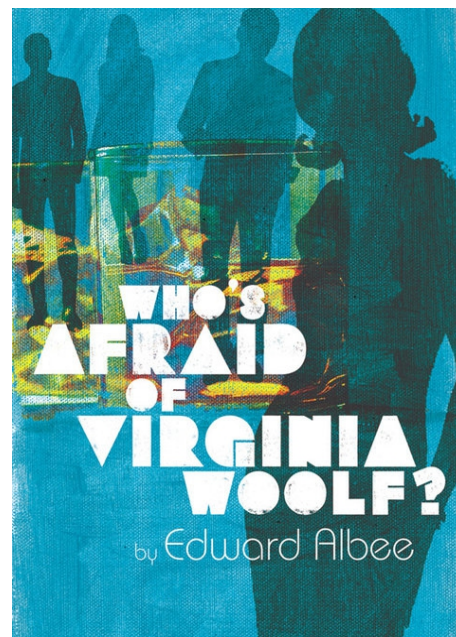
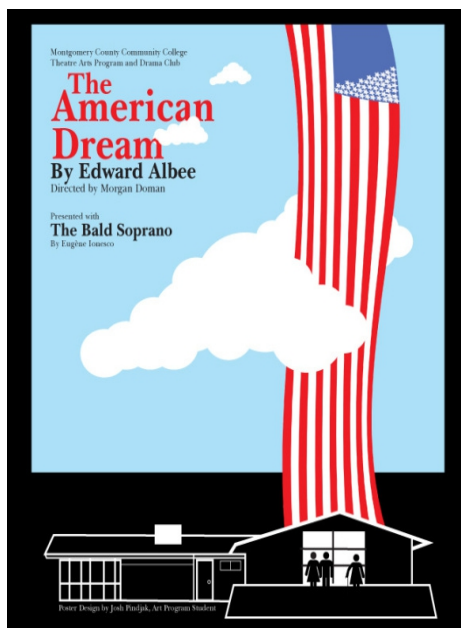
Mémoire de Master 2 Etudes Anglophones

Présenté par Ophélie de Seguins

Sous la direction de Madame Blandine Pennec, Maître de Conférences Habilitée à Diriger des  
Recherches, et de Madame Emeline Jouve, Maître de Conférences.

# **“We All Peel Labels”: Edward Albee's Critical Depiction of the American Society in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

## **A Linguistic and Theatrical Analysis**



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Illustrations de couverture : Affiche d'une représentation de *The American Dream* dirigée par Morgan Doman. URL :<https://mc3bignews.wordpress.com/tag/the-american-dream/> ; Affiche d'une représentation de *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* au Seattle Repertory Theatre. URL: <https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/05/13/behind-the-poster-whos-afraid-of-virginia-woolf/>

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## Introduction

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“Good writers define reality. Bad ones merely restate it.”

Edward Albee

To define or to restate (a social) reality? That is the question one might ask about Edward Albee's work. Born in 1928, the playwright witnessed the rise and fall of civilisation during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the Second World War and well into the 1950s, the United States of America was a society characterised by consumption and the American Dream, firmly rooted in the minds of millions of Americans. Even though Howard Schneiderman explains that “economic success is first” among the values of the American Dream, James Truslow Adams, in his preface to *The Epic of America*, defines the American Dream as “a better, richer and happier life” for all American citizens “of every rank” (xx). W. Lloyd Warner, for his part, describes the American Dream as a belief “that a man by applying himself, by using the talents he has, by acquiring the necessary skills, can rise from lower to higher status” (qtd. in Schneiderman xi). Thus, through hard work and individual effort, social achievement and fulfilment can be accomplished. In the midst of this American dream of economic success and social elevation, Edward Albee acted as a dissident, seeking to point at the flaws pervading the American society.

The two plays under study, *The American Dream* (1961) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) attack fundamental American values. Both plays present a more or less nuclear American “family” constituted of one couple with at least a child. In the 1962 play, the main protagonists are named after George and Martha Washington, the first presidential couple of the USA. This reference is of particular interest because the bases of American values were partly set during the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when George Washington became President of the newly formed United States of America, thirteen years after the Declaration of Independence of the USA. The very title of the play *The American Dream* speaks for itself. Like George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Mommy and Daddy are also the main protagonists and they live with Grandma. The characteristics of the characters are thus similar in both plays, these similitudes acting as a synecdoche of the mimetic desire pervading American society. Indeed, by writing about two families that are alike, Albee describes the general state of mind of American society in the 1960s: a wish for homogenisation in a consumer society.

After the Industrial Revolution, economic production rose dramatically, a trend leading to an over-

production which itself led to mass consumption. Thorstein Veblen explains that shopping became a popular leisure activity and, added to the growing leisure time at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, consumption became equated with the display of status: consumption is a “method of demonstrating the possession of wealth” and serves the “purpose of reputability”. Along with the notion of mass consumption is the concept of consumerism. According to Roger Swagler, “consumerism is a force from the marketplace which destroys individuality and harms society”. In both plays, the families display their goods as proof of their reputability and wealth, and they appear as individuals who have lost their individuality to conform to social forces. They are also examples of conformity, a notion parallel to mass consumption. On conformity and patriotism, Harry Carman explains that

Numerous Americans who insist upon the doctrine of conformity are quick to question one's motives and loyalty especially if he dares to be critical of American institutions, mores, or political and economic practices. [...] Many of them regard America as a finished product, perfect and complete and above criticism and improvement. (228)

Albee's characters are far from being finished, perfect and complete and they may be Albee's tool to criticise a conformist America, proud of itself and of its way of life.

Considering the American Dream and American society goes hand in hand with the American Way of Life. William Herberg offers the following definition:

The American Way of life is individualistic, dynamic, and pragmatic. It affirms the supreme value and dignity of the individual; it stresses incessant activity on his part, for he is never to rest but is always to be striving to "get ahead"; it defines an ethic of self-reliance, merit, and character, and judges by achievement: "deeds, not creeds" are what count. The "American Way of Life" is humanitarian, "forward-looking", optimistic. Americans are easily the most generous and philanthropic people in the world, in terms of their ready and unstinting response to suffering anywhere on the globe. The American believes in progress, in self-improvement, and quite fanatically in education. But above all, the American is idealistic. Americans cannot go on making money or achieving worldly success simply on its own merits; such "materialistic" things must, in the American mind, be justified in "higher" terms, in terms of "service" or "stewardship" or "general welfare"... And because they are so idealistic, Americans tend to be moralistic; they are inclined to see all issues as plain and simple, black and white, issues of morality. (55)

Herberg's definition is highly idealistic and subjective. Americans are portrayed as striving, self-relying, generous, plain, idealistic... However, Albee's characters are all but this vision of Americans: they are materialists, they are not humanitarian or moralistic, they seek to be wealthier and to “get satisfaction”.

Consequently, both families are caricatured as purely American and posited as leading the consumerist American Way of Life which destroys their individuality. The names of Mommy,

Daddy and Grandma are evidence of their lack of individuality as their names correspond to their function.

These fundamental concepts of American society collide: on the one hand, the USA is a country of freedom and individualism, and on the other hand, a country of homogeneous consumerism. Mommy and Daddy particularly represent the homogeneity of both consumption and behaviour; George and Martha, for their part, epitomise an individualistic America in which hard work and social elevation prevail. However, both visions are condemned by Albee's feather who believes that America is not a finished product.

Besides, if both couples wish to conform to society's desires they do not fully fulfill it because they do not conform to the ideal nuclear family. This is another common point between the two families: the absent presence of a child in each play. This absent character has an important role because it may embody the American norms and values criticised by the playwright. By murdering the children, the illusion-bearers, Albee deconstructs the consumerist and shallow aspects of American values, and he does so by deconstructing the very body of a child and by using language. In these two plays, language is violent, ironic, childish, sometimes emotional and it denounces a flawed society, primarily through satire. Albee uses his linguistic skills to satirise the middle-class American family which appears as an object of fetishism from the part of the writer. Family is the bulk of Albee's satire who describes it as an ideological construction, part of the American dream of social elevation and accomplishment.

Albee intends to amend the society he lived in by writing American plays about Americans which criticised American most cherished values; as he told Paul Zindel and Loree Yerby in an interview in 1962, “[i]t seems to me that the playwright has a responsibility in his society not to aid it, or comfort it, but to comment and criticize it [...] [a] playwright has the responsibility of artistic integrity” (12). Thus, Edward Albee asserted his wish to disturb his audience, to be involved in his society. Art, for the playwright, is not only aesthetic, but also socially useful. He reiterated his vision almost twenty years later when he said in 1981 that “[i]t’s the writer’s function to educate, to inform, to hold a mirror up to people” (160). These assertions make the playwright appear committed in his writing. Gerry McCarthy recalls that Albee was involved in direct political actions, proving Albee's commitment to amend society: “[t]here is a language for the practice of politics, and this Albee has frequently used, as in initiating a boycott of the Athens Festival in protest against the Colonels' coup in 1967, or in his speeches in support of Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaign in 1968” (23). Nonetheless, this political commitment does not necessarily mean that

Albee wrote political plays, but the playwright asserts that “[he] [has] never written a play which was not essentially political” and a political play, for Albee, operates at the unconscious level: “it is useless to attack the detail or the conscious [...] [w]hat you must lay siege to is the unconscious” (McCarthy 24). However, Albee as a political writer did not convince some critics such as Richard Schechner and Charles Marowitz. The latter finds Albee's political position “assumed and unconvincing” in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and concludes that *The American Dream* was more about the author's “private mythology than [...] about the society he is ostensibly attacking” (Marcia 35). Yet the playwright seemed convinced by the political scope of his two plays. He said in 1962 that “I think [*Who's Afraid*] has something to do with what I thought *The American Dream* had to do with – the substitution of artificial for real values in this society of ours. It's sort of a grotesque comedy” (Zindel and Yerby 17). Albee's last sentence raises an interesting question: How could his play be labelled? Absurd, grotesque, vaudevillian, realistic, tragic, comic, tragicomic?

Albee stated that he did not “like labels” (Wolf 116), but he was labelled more than once. Edward Albee was cast an American “absurdist” even though Martin Esslin only dedicates a small part to the playwright in the second edition of his seminal book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. The “Theatre of the Absurd” was a phrase coined by Martin Esslin and was not a formal movement but the works of writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter shared common points and according to Esslin, the absurdist's work “most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western world” (22) and *The Theatre of the Absurd* is “violent and grotesque” (25). On the Absurd, Neil Cornwell adds that “[i]n sociological terms, the absurd has been defined as ‘a breaking down of norms, or a series of grave disharmonies within them, as perceived by the individual’ and ‘a disengagement both resulting from and leading to a breakdown in human interaction’” (24). Cornwell also recalls Bergson who asserts that “the comic in its extreme form [is] the logic of the absurd” (19). This could partly correspond to Albee's writing because the playwright wanted to “hold a mirror up to people” and his plays, especially *The American Dream*, are violent and grotesque. Moreover, both plays break down social norms, disturb human interactions and the comic is extreme partly because of its social unacceptability. In this sense, *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are absurd plays.

However, Esslin explains that *The Theatre of the Absurd* “tends towards a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself” (26) and that *The Theatre of the Absurd* abandons traditional theatrical conventions: the



“plays [are] so strange and puzzling, so clearly devoid of the traditional attractions of the well-made drama” (28). On these points, Albee's plays are not Absurd because language is absolutely not devaluated; language is at the forefront of Albee's writing and characters are conscious of the importance of language. Meaning might be devaluated, but only through the careful evaluation of language. Moreover, Albee's plays do not abandon theatrical conventions but mix them: the two plays analysed borrow some characteristics of the well-made play even though they could be considered as not-so-well-made.

This first analysis of Albee as an absurdist shows that the conventions and expectations of the genre are not completely met. Albee stands at the frontier between several genres and even though, according to Esslin, Albee “comes into the category of the Theatre of the Absurd precisely because his works attack the very foundations of American optimism” (311-312), it is interesting to compare different points of view, as the question of Albee being an absurdist writer is far from being a consensus.

Wendell V. Harris is critical of Esslin's theories, believing that *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* are “best understood as examples of satire particular to the twentieth century, in that the two plays rely on the magnification of their characters' various foibles to such grotesque extremes that they become abstractions inhabiting an unreal world” (qtd. in Marcia 25). Brian Way, for his part, sees *The American Dream* as “merely satire.... [i]t is above all a play about other people, not ourselves” (qtd. in Marcia 26). Thus, Albee's plays would not be absurd, but satirical.

For Anne Paolucci, both *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream* reference the theatre of the absurd via their stripping down of dramatic action to its essentials. This is primarily accomplished through the allegory of an Everyman-like reduction of character that tends to “strip away the accidents of personality and show its substance (or lack of it)”(qtd. in Marcia 27). This externalization of motivation, where “pathos is juxtaposed with meanness,” generates vaudeville-like parody and is “grotesque in the true manner of the absurd” (Ibid.).

Writing in 1969, C.W.E. Bigsby focuses on the mimetic structure of *Virginia Woolf* as a parabolic “secular morality” play, where Albee is able to “accept the absurdist vision and yet to formulate a response that transcends at once despair and casual resolution.” (qtd. in Marcia 32).

These scholars have different opinions when it comes to categorising Albee's work. His plays are satires, vaudeville-like and morality plays. However, they are neither completely satirical nor moralistic, even less totally absurd. *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* cannot be labelled “absurd” because language is central and semantically meaningful in the plays

and they do not mirror the anxieties of the Western world, but denounce its flaws. Nonetheless, these plays cannot be categorised with absolute certainty because genres' expectations are not met in Albee's work and the playwright seems to “peel labels” and to deconstruct these expectations and the literary norms.

If *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* do not belong to the Theatre of the Absurd, could they be labelled realistic plays? Donna Campbell defines realism as “the faithful representation of reality' or 'verisimilitude’”; “realism is a technique, it [...] denotes a particular kind of subject matter, especially the representation of middle-class life”. For H. H. Boysen, the realist aims “to portray the manners of his time, deals by preference with the normal rather than the exceptional phases of life, and ... arouses not the pleasure of surprise, but that of recognition” (148).

The settings of *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are realistic. The initial stage directions of *The American Dream* read as follow: “A living-room. Two armchairs [...] Against the rear wall, a sofa. A door, leading out from the apartment [...] An archway, leading to other rooms [...]” (70) and the scene of exposition of the 1962 play makes it clear that the play happens in George and Martha's house because they open their door to their guests. Moreover, information about the characters indicate that they live a realistic life. Characters of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are in the academia while Mommy and Daddy form a typical middle-class couple as their conversations show: Daddy states that “When we took this apartment, they were quick enough to have me sign the lease; they were quick enough to take my check for two months' rent in advance...” (71) while Mommy recalls a story about buying a hat.

However, the crucial element of recognition is never totally present in Albee's plays. If the audience recognises the settings or the characters as typical American citizens and parents, the development of the plays turn these recognisable elements into unfamiliar ones. The main characters become unusual violent parents and their guests become unconventional. Albee plays with the codes and sometimes introduces uncanny elements in his plays which could be realistic, but these elements are exaggerated, thus transforming his work into unrealistic, vaudevillian plays.

If there is no consensus when it comes to categorising Albee's work, he himself called *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* a “grotesque comedy” and “grotesque” is a recurrent term used to define Albee's *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Geoffrey Harpham explains that “the grotesque is a structure, the structure of estrangement” and that “[s]uddenness and surprise [...] are essential elements in this estrangement; the familiar and commonplace must be suddenly subverted

or undermined by the uncanny or alien” (461). Thus, the grotesque is the subversion of familiar conventions which, consequently, become unfamiliar. Harpham adds that “[t]he characteristic themes of the grotesque [...] jeopardize or shatter our conventions by opening onto vertiginous new perspectives characterized by the destruction of logic and regression to the unconscious-madness, hysteria, or nightmare” (Ibid.). However, “this threat depends for its effectiveness on the efficacy of [...] the partial fulfillment of our usual expectations [...] we must be believers whose faith has been profoundly shaken but not destroyed; otherwise we lose that fear of life and become resigned to absurdity, fantasy, or death” (Ibid.). This explanation leads Harpham to assert that “[t]he Theater of the Absurd has rules of incongruity which effectively disqualify it from being truly grotesque [...] when the absurd happens, it must subvert rather than confirm our expectations (Ibid.). Hence, according to Harpham's theory, if Albee's two plays are considered “comedy of the grotesque,” they cannot belong to the Theatre of the Absurd. This raises once again the question of Albee's categorising: Esslin claims that the Theatre of the Absurd is grotesque whereas Harpham asserts the contrary. However, leaving aside the different definitions, Harpham's claim is that the Absurd subverts our expectations.

On a macro-level, Albee completely subverts the audience's expectations about the genres of his plays as they can seem grotesque, satirical, comic, tragicomic or absurd but none of this genre stands out as *the* genre and this is due to Albee's play with conventions. However, *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Both generate laughter, which may be the only stable and assured feature of both plays.

On laughter, Harpham explains that in some nightmarish grotesque situations, “laughter serves to diminish the horror or perplexity and make the nightmare seem more bearable” (464). This could explain why *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* provoke laughter; some scenes such as the child's dismemberment in *Dream* or some violent exchanges in *Who's Afraid* can be horrific, so laughter is a means to relieve tension. Moreover, Berger recalls that Francis Hutcheson (*Thoughts on Laughter*) argues that “laughter is the response to a perception of incongruity” (22). Albee's plays, then, might be more incongruous than absurd and comedy seems to be linked with absurdism and the grotesque.

Stefan Tilf explains that “the qualities particularly associated with comedy are the use of familiar language and a certain realism in the representation of common life and the exploration of moral values” (87). Both plays partly fall into this definition from the point of view of form because on the surface and at the beginning, both plays are realistic depictions of common life. As for content and the use of laughter, Timothy Gould, for his part, explains that

Dramatic comedy is not sheerly the pleasure of laughter at the deformity of our inferiors. Its structure includes the recognition of our own deformities and of our complicity in the pain of others. True laughter is rarely the response to our recognitions and much more often the relief we are granted in the struggle for recognition. Either laughter is on the way to something better, or it is cold comfort indeed. (97)

This corresponds to Albee's wish to hold a mirror in front of the audience when presenting a play because the audience is supposed to recognise its deformities and flaws. This is the first step, and then laughter comes as a relief. This mechanism is at work with the child's dismemberment: the audience recognises its capitalist and materialist flaw and when recognition is complete, the struggle ends with laughter. However, the murder of George and Martha's son does not operate in the same way because violence does not generate laughter. Thus, Albee constructs violence in such a way to either disturb his audience or to make them laugh. In this way, violence is de- and re-constructed to display its mechanisms.

Language is used by Albee to promote his political views using the theatrical medium, which is supposed to comment upon and criticise society. The very nature of plays means that dialogues and interaction are central. More than using language, Albee uses discourse and interactional techniques inherent to general language.

However, one cannot analyse Albee's use of language without highlighting the fact that the texts are dramatic dialogues and not natural conversations. The dramatic dialogue is first constructed and written and only then it is spoken. This situation is “exactly the opposite of naturally occurring conversations” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996: 5). Indeed, the structure of dialogue is constructed: turn-taking, acts linked to the managing of conversation (reformulations, comments, evaluations, paraphrases) are not spontaneous. Albee borrows the social codes and conventions as they are observed in the real world to create realistic dialogues, but they sometimes veer off into the absurd. This mix of realism and absurd is even the specificity of Albee's plays. Characters are realistic, but their conversations switch from realism to “absurdism” according to how language is used.

Hence, this dissertation will analyse the way in which Albee (de)constructs theatrical and linguistic codes and conventions as a means to criticise contemporary American society. To answer this question, the plays will first be compared to a theatrically staged environment which denounces the meaninglessness of the American society through comedy and metatheatricality. Edward Albee uses comedy and its genres to criticise the American Way of Life by presenting vaudevillian and

stereotyped characters who are themselves staged and who become metatheatrical types. Metatheatricality is a means to reflect on the theatre and its conventions and it is a way to unveil the hidden apparatus of theatre, which is equated with life as “all the world's a stage”.

Then, this study will move on to the analysis of social interactions which oscillate between the pacification of relationships or, on the contrary, the creation and emphasis of conflicts between the characters. This analysis of interactions will aim to reveal the mechanisms used by the playwright to deconstruct social conventions, turning them into unfamiliar reactions to better denounce the superficiality of conventionalised social interactions.

Finally, the way in which Edward Albee treats theatrical and linguistic violence, a significant feature of his writing. The use of violence in both plays will be examined and compared to analyse its mechanisms before wondering about the necessity of violence as a way to involve the audience and the extent to which violence in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is cathartic.

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## I – Albee's World's a Stage: The Use of Comedy and Metatheatricality to Denounce the Meaninglessness of the American Society

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“All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players.” This famous Shakespearean quote defines human beings as actors who would play given role(s);<sup>1</sup> Hence, life is part of a fiction that each person enacts and, like the plays they read/attend, they can pretend, conceal or feign. Life is thus seen as a supratheatrical production. Language, a tool that builds this theatrical world, cannot be trusted because it is malleable and its interpretation can vary from one speaker to another. Misunderstandings are one of the devices of comedy: language is used in such a way so as to deceive either a character or the audience.

The corpus under study is made of two plays which are, by definition, made of characters and roles. However, Edward Albee stressed the “acting part” of his characters because they enact types. Hence, the spectator witnesses characters themselves acting characters. George and Martha, the couple in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, spends the evening playing games with and without their guests. In *The American Dream*, all the characters except from Mrs. Barker are named after their social roles. They even bear childish and generic nicknames (such as “Mommy” and “Grandma”) which, added to their infantile language (found, for example in “You were a very deceitful little girl” (78) or “Why, Daddy, thank Mrs. Barker” (92)) participates to the diminution of the power generally assigned to the role of parents and grandparents. Hence, Edward Albee, especially in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, confronts the reader with characters that play roles and presents plays with several levels of illusion thanks to a *mise en abyme*: plays are fiction but there is also a play within the play. In order to achieve his aims, Edward Albee plays with language. Indeed, linguistic tools are used by the playwright and his characters to create a new fiction within the fiction. First, this part will study how Edward Albee designed his characters as merely players vaudevillian players and in a second phase, the author's disruption of theatrical rules will be analysed.

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<sup>1</sup> The roles mentioned here are "social" ones. In the Shakespearean period, that is to say the early Renaissance, there was a “shifting focus of attention from the medieval God-centered to the human-centered vision of [the] world” as Lawrence Gamache explains in his essay “Defining Modernism: A Religious and Literary Correlation” (67-68).

## A – Americans are Merely Vaudevillian Players

The first act of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is entitled “Fun and Games”. One can expect to find comedy in this first act because “fun” and “games” connote happiness and enjoyment. Comic situations create laughter or amusement, and they can derive from absurdity. Edward Albee wanted to ridicule American values in order to criticise them; this technique is reminiscent of the motto of comedy: *Castigat ridendo mores*, that is to say “one corrects customs by laughing at them”. By presenting comic and grotesque characters, Albee laughed at human flaws. Moreover, more than being comic, plots and characters are rooted in the vaudevillian tradition which characteristics include music, dance and burlesque (that is to say exaggerated) acting.

### 1. Albee's Criticism of the American Way of Life

“What is wrong with the myth of the American Dream is the notion that this is all there is to existence! The myth is merely a part of other things”  
Edward Albee

“The social satire in *American Dream*, for example, seems more pertinent to the American way of life than to all of anxious existence”  
Geri Trotta

*The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* depict flawed and amoral relationships at the micro-level (family) and macro-level (the characters behaving with one another).

As Brian Way writes, Albee “sees the American Way of Life as one in which normal human feelings and relationships have been deprived of meaning” (*Critical Essays on Edward Albee* 67). Indeed, especially in *The American Dream*, relationships seem meaningless. Mommy acts as a castrator with Daddy, Daddy just want “to get all over with” and Mrs. Barker is only acting her role as chairwoman of the association and representative of the Bye Bye Adoption service. She does not even know why she is supposed to be there: “But... I feel so lost... not knowing why I'm here... and, on top of it, they say I was here before” (101). Mrs. Barker's loneliness is underscored by the modifier “so” and also because the structure of the sentence puts her in opposition to the others. She is the “I” against “They”, isolated from this pronoun by suspension marks. Moreover, the personal pronoun “they” could refer to Mommy and Daddy (because they indeed say that she was here before), but it could also be impersonal, a fact which stresses that she does not really know who said that she was here before. If we concentrate more on this part, “I was here before” can be ambiguous

because of tense and the copula. It can mean that Mrs. Barker has spent some time in Mommy and Daddy's house or that she has already been a guest in the house. The clause "They say I have already been here before" would be less ambiguous. Hence, Edward Albee describes loss on several levels: the loss of a child, the loss of morality and the physical loss in an unknown place. Emptiness pervades Albee's writing. As for *The American Dream*, Brian Way asserts that "the gestures of love, sexual attraction, parental affection, family feeling and hospitality remain, but the actual feelings which would give the gestures meaning have gone" (*Collection of Critical Essays* 33-34). The fact that the characters do not have the feelings which would give the gestures meaning comes from their inability to express physical attraction or parental affection. The characters are defined by their talking, which is, on top of that, contradictory. At the beginning of the play, for instance, Mommy and Daddy say that they love Grandma but a few lines later Mommy adds "Well, heaven knows, I would [put Grandma in a nursing home]! I can't stand it, watching her do the cooking and housework, polishing the silver, moving the furniture..." (78). In Mommy's utterance, "well" introduces a shift in her thoughts and underlines that if Daddy does not want to put Grandma in a nursing home, *she* does. Mommy's violent and almost visceral exasperation is shown by the interjection "heaven knows" and the italicised "I" concluded by an exclamation mark. Mommy's sudden burst of anger contradicts her previous declaration of love to her mother, a mother who does not remember that Mommy is her daughter:

GRANDMA: [...] And I warned you, Daddy; I told you to stay away from her type. [...]

MOMMY: You stop that! You're my mother, not his!

GRANDMA: I am?

[...]

GRANDMA: Well, how would you expect somebody as old as I am to remember a thing like that? (81)

In this example, Mommy seems to exhibit real emotion, more precisely pain, towards her mother as seen with the use of the imperative and the exclamations. She is shocked by Grandma's previous cue. This shows that Grandma could be Daddy's mother because motherhood is vaguely described as a "thing". Parenthood is interchangeable. However, despite Grandma's sudden memory loss, she is the only reasonable character and helps all the characters remember: she seems to be the only living memory in the house. She also summarises the vacuity of gestures: "Well, that's all that counts. People being sorry. Makes you feel better; gives you a sense of dignity. And it doesn't matter if you don't care, or not, either" (77). Grandma initiates her answer by the discourse marker "well", which can have the function of a marker of response. However, she could have begun her cue without "well". In this sentence, this marker introduces a comment on Mommy and Daddy's apologies and it contains hints of aggression because it underlines Grandma's disagreement.



Grandma, contrary to Mommy and Daddy, is an articulated character. As Dircks writes, “although the other characters seem stylized and dehumanised, Grandma emerges as the only member of the family capable of genuine feeling, a representative of original 'pioneer stock', embodying the values that initially fuelled the original American dream” (65). Indeed, Grandma represents a character from another generation and she posits herself as a representative of “old people” who used to have feelings. Most of her cues contain the NP “old people” and her interventions are logically constructed: “Because I'm old! When you're old you gotta do something. [...] When you get so old, people talk to you that way. That's why you become deaf, so you won't be able to hear people talking to you that way” (77); “You don't have any feelings, that's what's wrong with you. Old people make all sorts of noises, half of them they can't help.” (80) and “There you go. Letting your true feelings come out. Old people aren't dry enough, I suppose” (91). Grandma's repetition of “old people” resembles a manifesto because she expresses causality: People talk in a certain way to old people because these people are old, thus old people are deaf. The noun phrase “old people” entails the verb phrase “old people are deaf”. Contrary to Mommy and Daddy, her interventions are logical and meaningful and, consequently, “Grandma dominates the play because of her sharp intelligence, as well as her keen insight” (Dircks 65). Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that, even though her discourse is logical, the causality entailed in “that's why you become deaf” is not true. Consequently, it diminishes Grandma's rhetoric power and her logical constructions become humorous.

As characters show some physical weakness, Albee depicts a sort of apathy or even asthenia in the play because the characters are unable to express true feelings and they lose their physical abilities (especially Daddy, who had an operation). Their conversations are superficial and nothing happens. If one considers the opening scene of the play, one can see that Mommy and Daddy's conversation is shallow. Mommy tells Daddy about her shopping of a wheat-colored/cream/beige hat but nothing else is given to the reader who knows nothing about the identity and past of the characters. Mommy is represented by her materialism and Daddy by his submission to his wife, shown in their exchange about Mommy's purchase:

MOMMY: All right, now. I went to buy a new hat yesterday and I said, “I'd like a new hat, please.” And so, they showed me a few hats, green ones and blue ones, and I didn't like any of them, not one bit. What did I just say? What did I just say?

DADDY: You didn't like any of them, not one bit.

MOMMY: That's right; you just keep paying attention. And then they showed me one that I did like. It was a lovely little hat, and I said, “Oh, this is a lovely little hat; I'll take this hat; oh my, it's lovely. What color is it?” And they said, “Why, this is beige; isn't it a lovely little beige hat?” And I said, “Oh, it's just lovely.” And so, I bought it. (*Stop, looks at DADDY*)

DADDY (*To show he is paying attention*): And so you bought it. (72-73)

Mommy begins her turn with the sentence “All right, now” which generally precedes a story and intimate silence. Mommy's shallowness is shown by the topic of her account which she describes using exactly the same words and the same structures. Indeed, the repetitions of “hat” and “lovely little hat” render her account childish and ridiculous because one of the signs of articulateness is the avoidance of obvious repetition. Moreover, her sentences are constructed in this way: Subject + Verb + Attribute. And so/then Subject + Verb + Attribute. And Subject + Verb + Attribute. The connector “and” either helps build polysyndeta or acts as an initiator of a sentence. Either way, Martha's rhetoric is not subtle and has a hammering effect on the reader who gets bored and annoyed. Moreover, repetition here conveys the idea of a robot-like account. Martha's personality is driven by materialism and consumerism and her account bears some characteristics of Fordism: Repeating the same gesture (here, words) again and again. As for Daddy, he is only here to acknowledge Mommy's speech. He has no opinion and scrupulously listens to Mommy. Daddy repeats Mommy's words like a child would do with a parent. This is flagrant when George infers from Mommy's look that he has to repeat. Both Mommy and Daddy do not have singular personalities: Daddy follows Mommy who herself follows societal rules; this is a form of relational subordination in which there is no real contact.

*The American Dream* is a plea for real human contact which is inexistent. Anne Paolucci argues that “Grandma’s boxes are the emptiness around which we wrap our illusions” (35). The characters' conversations are empty and, as Brian Way notes, “the characters are isolated from each other in little worlds of selfishness, impotence and lovelessness, and all warmth of human contact is lost” (*A Collection of Critical Essays* 34). Moreover, “*The American Dream* is the frustration which results from the disparity between things as they are and as they ought to be” (Paolucci 34). This can explain the disparity between what the characters have and what they wish for. Mommy's hat is never as she would like it to be. She is always contradicted by Mrs. Barker:

MOMMY: [...] And she said, “Oh, my dear, isn't that a lovely little hat? [...] I've always wanted a wheat-colored hat *myself*” And, I said, “Why, no, my dear; this hat is beige; beige.” And she laughed and said, “Why, no, my dear, that's a wheat-colored hat... wheat. I know beige from wheat.” (73)

MOMMY: [...] And look! You have a hat just like the one I bought yesterday.  
MRS. BARKER (*With a little laugh*): No, not really; this hat is cream. (88)

The first example shows that Mommy and Mrs. Barker's conversation is impossible. They remain

aloof and the contentious tone of their exchange can be seen with the mirrored-based conversation they have. They both repeat each other's words except from the color. The NP "my dear", first used as a sign of politeness, is turned into a sign of contempt. Indeed, "my dear" generally connotes liking but the repetition of the nonverbal clause "Why, no, my dear" connotes disdain and is used as a tool to maintain one's point of view. This is due to the use of the discourse marker "why", followed by the negation "no" and the nice "my dear". "My dear" becomes ironic because it is a weapon to politely contradict the other. The second example connotes the same ironic and contentious tone. Mrs. Barker "laughs" to show that Mommy is wrong and she asserts her point of view by uttering "No, not really". The pattern is the same: Mrs. Barker reduces the violence of her answer by using the modifier "not really" but her cue carries a lecturing tone because of her laugh and of the shortness of her utterance is comprised of a simple sentence: This (determiner) + hat (subject) + is (verb) + cream (attribute). She does not expand her answer because she thinks that she does not have to explain herself as she is right. Mommy's frustration stems from Mrs. Barker's contradiction whereas Mrs. Barker's frustration is a product of society. She wishes she had a hat like Mommy's "[herself]" whereas she already has the aforesaid hat. Hence, satisfaction derives from material belonging and power. Nonetheless, Grandma stands apart and is the voice of elderly people. She tells the truth and recognises the American Dream when it appears. More than representing a generational gap between Mommy and Daddy, she is also the allegorical representation of the old American Dream:

In the conversation between Grandma and the Young Man, it becomes evident that we are viewing two versions of the American Dream: its original Yankee version, defined by energy, pride and compassion [...] and the later, corrupted version in which all emphasis is placed upon image and appearance and in which the capacity for spiritual values has all but disappeared. (Dircks 65)

It is true that Grandma is energetic, she skilfully keeps the reader on the edge when she tells the story of the dismemberment of the child by structuring it as if it was an incredible story and by managing to build suspense. She intersperses her account with personal comments such as "Well, it was very sweet" (102); "Yup" (104) and a rhetorical "What did they do?". Grandma is an active and captivating storyteller. Contrary to Mommy's account of her purchase of the hat, she demonstrates some imagination to improve her storytelling: "But that was only the beginning" (104). "But... things didn't work out very well" (103) "there was a man very much like Daddy, and a woman very much like Mommy" (101). These examples show that Grandma can be enthralling and funny with the use of the marker "but" in the first example which has an emphatic and dramatic effect; it shows that Grandma creates some suspense to interest Mrs. Barker. As Schiffirin explains, it is "a point-

making device with additional expressive and interactional corollaries” (164). Moreover, Grandma's use of euphemisms in “things didn't work out *very well*”, “a man *very much* like Daddy” is all the more humorous. The italicised parts are ironic understatements because they are intensified by modifiers and there is a discrepancy between the words and the facts described. The Young Man, on the contrary, is a flat character, a type. He does not “sound very enthusiastic” (110) and he is “insultingly good-looking in a typically American way” (111).

With *The American Dream*, Edward Albee uses his characters to criticise the American way of life, the great American society through bland, lifeless, (stereo)typical characters living for material well-being but lacking singularity, morality and energy.

## 2. Grotesque Plays, Vaudeville and Dark Humour: A Perfect Blend of Comedy

“Dark comedy is drama which impels the spectator forward by stimulus to mind or heart, then distracts him, muddles him, so that time and time again he must review his own activity in watching the play”

J.L. Styan

Anne Paolucci argues that “humor, in Albee, becomes a trap: to laugh is to laugh at our own expense” (35). Laughter is indeed a way to correct one's behaviours. This laughter is “laughter which frees man from the anguish of his absurd condition, a laughter not of evasion but of awareness” (Debusscher 45). Consequently, how does Albee use humour? As characters are physically weak in *The American Dream* and as the characters of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* fight verbally, Albee uses language as a means to comic ends. Linda Ben-Zvi explains the mechanisms of Albee's humour:

Unlike Beckett's physical humor, Albee more often resorts to language-based comedy, played out as word games and comic routines often about grammar, with one character correcting the usage of another, usually at a critical time in the play, when there is the threat of a character revealing inner feelings (“Laughing Matters” 8)

In *The American Dream*, Grandma explicitly says that “for better or worse, this is a comedy” (128). The play should be interpreted as such, but the strangeness of the ending can leave the audience puzzled. Grandma interrupts the happy ending before it goes badly: “I don't think we'd better go any further” (128). Albee warns the reader that something is wrong and as Dircks notes, “the sardonic farce closes on the picture of the reconstituted ménage: the destroyer wife, the emasculated husband and the venal foster son – the beautiful American family!” (39).

One of the most violent moments in the play is Grandma's account of the dismemberment of the first child. However, this description "is Grand Guignol. It is the logical and ridiculously grotesque conclusion of the type of marriage which Albee is portraying" (Stenz 29). Humour mainly arises from Mrs. Barker's incongruous reaction. She punctuates Grandma's story with delighted and cheerful comments: "How fascinating!"; "How enthralling!"; "How spellbinding!"; "How engrossing!"; "How gripping!" (101-102). The comic tone of the situation is due to the repetition of the same adjectival form: How + adjective. This exclamatory form is by definition hyperbolic and connotes amazement. Mrs. Barker's comments are even more humorous as the adjectives chosen are different but they all end in -ing, hence creating a pattern. Comedy thus emerges from repetition and illogical semantics. *The American Dream* also contains surreal comedy:

DADDY: Poor Grandma, I didn't mean to hurt her.

MOMMY: Don't you worry about it; Grandma doesn't know what she means.

DADDY: She knows what she says, though.

MOMMY: Don't you worry about it; she won't know that soon. I love Grandma. (77)

Surreal humour highlights the violation of causal reasoning. Here, confusion is illustrated through the apparent difference between meaning and saying. If Grandma does not what she means, how can she know what she says? A proper causal relationship would be: "Grandma does not know what she means" entailing "Grandma does not know what she says" and vice versa. The contradictory tone of the reasoning is emphasised by Daddy's use of the adversative "though". He highlights the contrast between meaning and saying.

Humour, in *The American Dream*, mainly arises from surreal comedy, incongruity, dark comedy or the hyperbolic overtones of conversations. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, on the other hand, is based vaudevillian tricks, language games, tension followed by comic relief. More precisely, "the humor is broad, campy, sardonic, playful, full of quips, wisecracks and pop culture references" (Falvey 241).

The scene where George 'shoots' Martha is a striking example of the explosion of emotional tension into frivolity; it is a "moment of hysterical relief" (Paolucci 51-52). Indeed, just after the "shot", Honey "*screams again, this time less, and mostly from relief and confusion*" (62). George and Martha's games follow a process of gradation until they reach their paroxysm. In this scene, even though Martha "*almost breaks down, her great laugh booming*", the reader feels uncomfortable because there is a discrepancy between the calmness that precedes the fake shot and the hysteria that follows. A few lines later, Honey's admission that "[she's] never been so frightened in [her] life! Never!" and desperately repeats "I've *never* been so frightened... never." (63) generates humour.

The first example is peppered with exclamations which show that Honey raises her voice (she could even shout) whereas the italics in the second utterance indicates that she stresses the adverb “never”. Yet, her varying attempts to be heard remain futile. Her reaction generates comedy because there is a discrepancy between her strong emotional response to the shot and the general indifference of the other characters. Martha does not even remember whether or not she was afraid. In the play, humour generally arises from the situations in which the characters evolve. This comedy of situation is possible because of the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

By unsettling the reader, Edward Albee raises the audience’s awareness; if a play is disquieting, it will invite the reader to reflect on their own experiences. As Ben-Zvi concludes, it is “Albee’s hope that the audiences may be moved to change after watching his plays [...] [t]hat is Edward Albee’s American Dream” (10).

As for the 1962 play, Kate Falvey argues that *Virginia Woolf*’s humour “is multilayered and thematically integral, routing the almost unbearable emotional ferocity of its characters into an absurdist pronouncement on the true fragility of our most obdurate psycho-social beliefs” (241). The reader is put in a difficult position in the play because they witness the intense tension growing until the final exorcism. The final pages of the play are tragicomic and follow the pattern of “hysterical relief”. George begins to utter a funeral rite in Latin while Martha remembers her son. Actors on stage are supposed to utter the lines together, which makes them inaudible for the audience. Their linguistic games end on an imbroglio of words during which George kills their son. However, just after the killing, Martha becomes furious and asks George for the evidence he mentions (the telegram). He only answers “I ate it” after a long pause (248). George’s incongruous answer creates comic relief for the spectator. The humorous dimension of his cue is even greater on stage as there is a long pause before his answer. His silence builds unbearable suspense which ends on an absurd utterance. This mix of tragedy and comedy pervades the play and undermines the reader’s expectations. When Nick and Martha play the game “Hump the Hostess”, Albee makes an appearance in the stage directions: “*What might have been a joke rapidly becomes serious*” (181). He warns the reader that the characters may be about to have intercourse but later, at the beginning of act 3, Martha tells Nick that he is “a flop in some departments” (198) when she describes his “goddamn performance” (199). Albee’s resort to these tricks is typically vaudevillian as Linda Ben-Zvi explains:

These physical and verbal acts, usually executed in realistic settings and performed by recognizable types, create the same unsettling, disorienting, and explosive effect that Jenkins describes as the vaudeville aesthetic: dissolving or calling into question the carefully delineated world of the play, rendering it strange and disturbing. (Laughing matters 10 )

Both plays are based on the familiar becoming unfamiliar, or even disturbing. Linda Ben-Zvi compares Edward Albee to Antonin Artaud who thought that a powerful anxiety could emerge from incongruous comic acts. She explains thus:

Antonin Artaud, in a note praising the Marx Brothers' films, made a similar observation about the subversive power of anarchistic comic acts in otherwise traditional, realistic settings [...] Such humor, he argued, can lead "toward a kind of boiling anarchy, an essential disintegration of the real by poetry," culminating in "the powerful anxiety which their total effect ultimately projects into the mind". Some of the same observations might be made concerning Albee's tendency to inject exploding comedy routines into his otherwise recognizable family dramas, momentarily shaking the realism of the scenes and creating the type of "powerful anxiety" to which Artaud refers. ("Laughing Matters" 10)

Indeed, Albee, by filling his plays with incoherent comic aspects, evokes a peculiar feeling within the reader who does not know if they are supposed to laugh or contest what is written. At the beginning of the play, before Nick and Honey arrive, George and Martha argue over George not putting enough ice in Martha's drink:

GEORGE: [...] It's that habit you have... chewing your ice cubes... like a cocker spaniel. You'll crack your big teeth.

MARTHA: THEY'RE MY BIG TEETH! (15)

In this extract, George's comparison is perhaps funny, but Martha's answer is surprising. Her sudden burst of violence, through her shouting, is irrational and thus confuses the reader. This disparity creates laughter but also a "powerful anxiety".

In *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, a chapter written by Linda Ben-Zvi is dedicated to the vaudevillian aspect of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. She states that George and Martha are physically typical of vaudevillian characters because she is "large and boisterous" and he is "physically slight as befitting the familiar straight man" (183). Thus, "From their first entrance [George and Martha] assume these fixed roles, in keeping with vaudeville rules requiring immediate audience identification" (Ibid.). Moreover, the wordplay used at the very beginning of the play generates laughter because of the numerous repetitions and both frivolous and contentious talking point: the name of the film Martha mentions. The following example summarises the grotesque of the situation:

MARTHA: Aw, come on! What's it from? *You* know...

GEORGE: ... Martha...

MARTHA: WHAT'S IT FROM, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE?

GEORGE (*Wearily*): What's what from?

MARTHA: I just told you; I just did it. "What a dump!" Hunh? What's that from? (4)

In this extract, the grotesque stems from repetition and violence which emerge because of a futile matter. This discrepancy between content and reaction is borne of laughter in the audience and

[the audience] complicity through laughter is similar to what spectators often feel in vaudeville routines, particularly the more outrageous and violent acts. Thus, in the first minute of the play, Albee skillfully establishes the themes and the tensions to follow, condensed and simplified for maximum effect, just as a well-written vaudeville act does. (Ben-Zvi 183-184)

These vaudevillian characters make the audience laugh with clownesque tricks, but even though the characters play games, they are physically unable to do anything; everything is managed linguistically and words govern the play; this is why “[t]he scathing verbal skirmishes of the game-playing protagonists, with their cheap shots and deadly accuracy, creates a kind of set piece in which language itself is center stage” (Falvey 241). Characters want or need to perform their acts through language, but performativity is not felicitous, except from George who manages to kill their son. John Austin developed felicity conditions for a performative to be felicitous. Yan Huang recalls the necessary conditions for a performative to be felicitous:

1. (i) There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect. (ii) the circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure.
2. The procedure must be executed (i) correctly and (ii) completely.
3. Often (i) the persons must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure, and (ii) if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must so do. (99)

Here, all the rules are respected. George respects the conventional procedure of a funeral rite – particularly as it is said in Latin because it acts as an argument of authority – and he is the appropriate person (He says to Martha “I’M RUNNING THIS SHOW!” (243). He executes the procedures correctly and completely: “Martha... our son... is dead...” (245) and he has the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions. Hence, George successfully performs the death of “sunny Jim”.

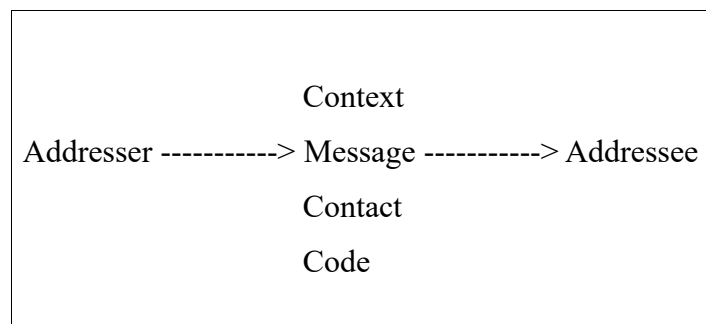
Repetition is a linguistic tool that Albee uses again and again to highlight the vaudevillian aspect of the characters and the situations. However, it is not always used with the same aim. In the example above, Martha repeats her sentence to make herself heard by her husband and to dominate the conversation. She is looking for a clear answer that George is unable to give. The capital letters which indicate shouting and the informal expression “Christ’s sake” display her anger. Laughter is a result of George’s lack of understanding which, as a consequence, ridicules Martha’s exasperation



because the characters do not share the same context of enunciation as George does not understand that Martha refers to what has been mentioned previously. Lack of understanding can lead to humorous situations because communication is supposed to be a vector of a message. Thus, if characters misunderstand each other, they cannot communicate. The main function of language is to carry a message, but not only. In his article entitled “Linguistics and Poetics”, Roman Jakobson theorised a scheme of communication: between the addresser and the addressee,

1. a message is sent
2. it is surrounded by
  1. a context
  2. a contact
  3. a code

as shown below:



In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, part of Roman Jakobson's scheme is broken because if the context factor is not shared, then the receiver (that is, George) cannot decode Martha's message. The same happens at the beginning of act 2 when the use of the pronoun “she” disturbs George and Nick's mutual understanding:

NICK (*After a silence*): I... guess... she's all right. (*No answer*) She... really shouldn't drink. (*No answer*) She's... frail. (*No answer*) [...]  
 GEORGE (*Quietly*): Where's my little yum yum? Where's Martha?  
 NICK: She's making coffee... in the kitchen. She... gets sick quite easily.  
 GEORGE (*Preoccupied*): Martha? Oh no, Martha hasn't been sick a day in her life [...]  
 NICK: No, no, *my wife*... *my wife* gets sick quite easily. Your wife is Martha. (99)

The stage direction “*No answer*” shows that George is not responding to Nick. There is no acknowledgement that George has received the information; the channel factor is missing and the communication is not effective. Hence, as Linda Ben-Zvi explains, the misunderstanding between the two men is created by “the repetitions and confusions [...] [that] are patterned directly on

common vaudeville dialogues built on pronoun juggling” (“Playing the Cloud Circuit” 184). Nick's repetition does not hold the same meaning for the two men: George thinks that Nick answers his question while Nick continues his first cue. The consequence of George and Nick not listening to one another is comic and this comic aspect is corroborated by the final “Your wife is Martha”. A disambiguating sentence was expected in response to the referent “she” but not this one because George knows who his wife is. Nick's first sentence is disambiguating but then, he clarifies that George's wife is Martha in case “my wife” would be ambiguous. Thus, Albee creates a discrepancy between what is expected concerning disambiguation and what occurs in practice. Hence, laughter arises from the characters. They are the source of comedy because “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*” (Bergson 3). Indeed, Bergson states that one laughs at man's features, characteristics or expressions. The human being is an “animal which is laughed at” (3-4). Moreover, laughter is often accompanied with an “absence of feeling” (4). Emotion prevents humans from laughing, so that we have no interest in it when we are moved by something. Therefore, the audience who laughs at Albee's characters may be emotionless and the grotesque nature of the characters is devalued, devoid of humanity into the audience's mind.

### 3. Characters as cliché-ridden stereotypes

“Vividly as each personage is drawn, they all nevertheless remain flat – caricatures rather than people [...] We do not actually identify with anyone except editorially”  
Harold Clurman

Characters, especially in *The American Dream*, are stereotypes. They are nameless and defined by their position in a family and/or society. The characters' “namelessness is Albee's technique for diminishing their humanity; each is a human reduced to a functional type” as Roudané explains (*Understanding Edward Albee* 56). This also contributes to a generalisation of Albee's characters. Mommy could be anyone's mother and Grandma anyone's grandmother. Her monologue concludes the play, with the final words “Good night, dears” (128). “Dear” is a term of affection, forcing the audience to be(come) part of the play. The absurdity of the play prevents any identification with the characters but Grandma's words remind the audience that they are watching a play. If they don't identify with the characters, they should still reflect on this “comedy”. According to Matthew Roudané, characters are not only stereotypes, but they “become mere extensions of the play's set design: they are objects, types living in a sterile apartment filled with gaudy furniture” (*Understanding Edward Albee* 60). Indeed, if the characters are empty of feeling

and meaning, they become mere stage props. Anne Paolucci disagrees with Roudané, arguing that

pushed to the extremes, the dissolution of character takes on the appearance of types, on one hand, and symbols, on the other – ready-made clichés and enigmatic representations. The protagonists of *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream* point up the danger in Albee's plays – but even in these experimental pieces, [the characters] have their own individual charm as dramatic characters. (12-13)

This may be true for Grandma and The Young Man, who seem to be the only characters aware of their condition, but Mommy, Daddy and Mrs. Barker are only empty reflections of society's wish, driven by materialism and superficiality. At no point their conversation is deep and meaningful, even when they meet The Young Man:

MOMMY (*Herself again, circling the young man, feeling his arm, poking him*): Yes, sir! Yes, sirree! Now this is more like it. Now this a great deal more like it! Daddy! Come see. Come see if this isn't a great deal more like it. (125)

Mommy's reaction could correspond to her response to a good. She inspects the Young Man as the stage directions indicate and she refers to him using the neuter pronoun "it". "It" refers to the satisfaction Mommy and Daddy had been looking for. The evolution of Mommy's description indicates her growing satisfaction, from "this is more like it" to "this is a *great deal* more like it". Albee explicitly demonstrates her cognitive process of appreciation and Mommy's internal mechanisms are exposed to show her satisfaction. It is interesting to note that she uses the demonstrative "this" to refer to the Young Man. She could have employed the personal pronoun "he" as he is a man, but she uses a demonstrative which generally refers to an inanimate object. This emphasises the symbolic and consumerist aspect of the Young Man who embodies the American Dream *and* a good. The more she sees from the Young Man, the more she likes him, even though she does not know him. The Young Man has the physical appearance of satisfaction, he is Mommy's epiphany.

Characters are stereotypes in their way of talking, but they are also caricatures themselves. Anita Maria Stenz asserts that

Albee's caricature in [*The American Dream*] is of the man who spends his life earning money and then, when he stops, wakes up to discover that he has no further reason to live. He rapidly dwindles into a comatose, acquiescent, puttering old man. Mrs. Barker is a parody of the wife at the other extreme from Mommy. (31)

This comment is interesting when compared to another writer from approximately the same period. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* depicts a man, Willy Loman, who cannot work anymore and consequently cannot earn money, who discovers that he has lost his life and his family because of his illusions of becoming the greatest salesman. Miller does not portray Loman as a caricature, but

both playwrights seemed preoccupied with the American dream of earning money. Albee describes Daddy as the opposite of the virile husband and father; rather, Daddy is the antithesis of the American man. He obediently repeats what Mommy says and has no opinions of his own. Daddy is portrayed as a weak character through his language because, contrary to Mommy, he never uses the imperative form and he nuances and softens the blow of his sayings: “We might consider the pros and the...” (84); “Maybe we can send them away” (85); “No, now, perhaps, I can go away myself...” (95) or he exaggerates his feelings in order to preserve the others like a real “lady of the house”: “They're wrapped so nicely” (79), “I'm really very sorry, Grandma” (80); “A very good question” (90). Daddy's use of modifiers shows that he is less blunt and sometimes indecisive, contrary to what Mommy asserts when he opens the door to Mrs. Barker: “And was I decisive?/SO decisive!” (84).

In short, Albee stages empty stereotypes who evolve in a materialistic society and this is why they are extensions of the play's set design. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the characters are also caricatures of themselves: George and Martha engage in games, verbal joustings and physical fights while Nick and Honey embody a dysfunctional couple incapable of sharing feelings. Games enable George and Martha to control their marriage and their guests, but the couple also tells stories to their guests such as the boxing match between them that Martha won, or George's story on a teenager who murders his parents. Albee commented his work on stories within plays:

What stories usually seem to be [...] end up being a microcosm in the play. [...] I think they are microcosms and they occur so frequently in the play, as in *The American Dream*, the Young Man telling Grandma about what happened to his identical twin.” (*Conversations with Edward Albee* 184)

Hence, Albee stresses the importance of having his characters tell stories because it creates social microcosms. When a character tells a story to another character, it forges a kind of intimacy between them. At the beginning of the second act, Nick and George are alone. They share a moment of complicity as “[t]hey both laugh, and are a little surprised that they do” (104).

On a macrolevel, both plays are social microcosms of the American society and, as Harold Clurman argues,

the inferno is made very funny. The audience at any rate laughs long and loud – partly because the writing is sharp with surprise, partly because an element of recognition is involved: in laughter the audience hides from itself while obliquely acknowledging its resemblance to the couples on the stage. (*A Collection of Critical Essays* 77)

Indeed, even though identification with the characters is almost impossible in both plays, the audience is involved through laughter. One laughs about things one knows or acknowledges. Albee

uses comedy to try and amend society and he uses comic types to reveal what the audience refuses to see. Bergson argues that “Every comic character is a type', presented with one side only towards the spectator” (148). Moreover, if these characters are types, then they are easy to recognise. This is why “in dark comedy, the comic-pathetic hero, a creature who at the crisis is so human [...], often tends to assume universal qualities through the very individual and contradictory details that go to make him up” (Styan 260). This implies that comic protagonists are anti-heroes.

However, laughter does not only happen in the audience. George and Martha also laugh together. They are aware of these games and act like conniving partners. First because they name these games and secondly because it is a reuniting moment for them. At the beginning of the play, when they wait for Nick and Honey, they talk about a shared memory but the conversation ends up in a fight with Martha telling George “You make me puke!” (14). However, right after this quarrel, a linguistic game enables them to make up again:

MARTHA: [...] You're such a... such a simp! You don't even have the... the what?  
GEORGE: ... guts?...  
MARTHA: PHRASEMAKER!  
(Pause... Then they both laugh) (15)

The stage directions indicate that they laugh; laughing enables the couple to be complicit with one another. However, without this indication, the noun “phrasemaker” can have a positive or a negative connotation because the capital letters and the exclamation mark indicate that Martha yells. The ambiguous effect of the noun is also emphasised by the pause between them, as if they were evaluating each other. Even though they verbally and physically fight throughout the play, they can experience a moment of connivance through laughter. Furthermore, one can see that Martha relies on George to finish her sentence; this shows their linguistic interdependence and social need for each other.

George and Martha also need each other to keep their son's memory alive. As it is a verbal construction, they need to talk about it. In the following example, George and Martha finish each other's sentences in order to evoke memories of their son:

MARTHA: [...] And we raised him... (*Laughs, briefly, bitterly*) yes, we did; we raised him...  
GEORGE: With teddy bears and an antique bassinet from Austria... and *no nurse*.  
MARTHA:... with teddy bears and transparent floating goldfish, and a pale blue bed with a cane at the headboard when he was older [...]. (231-232)

In both examples, their finishing sentences is explicitly underlined with the use of “...” and they begin their sentence with the last word uttered by the other, thus creating a process of enumeration and a polysyndeton. The repetition of connectors emphasises the childlike style of George and Martha and the enumeration creates a suffocating atmosphere. Their conversations are full of

clichés: Martha cannot remember a fixed expression and their story about their son is not original: the images of a teddy bear and a goldfish are commonly associated with children. This is why George and Martha are actors. They play the role of both parents and a couple. When Nick and Honey arrive, Martha orders George to go open the door, an order to which George answers “All right, love... whatever love wants” (19). The use of the pronoun “whatever” indicates that because George and Martha are married, George needs to listen to what “love wants” and does anything that is expected of him.

Social expectations also pervade *The American Dream*. Mommy and Daddy are supposed to play the roles of a couple: “We were very poor! But then I married you, Daddy, and now we're very rich” (78), “I can live off you because I married you” (79) or “You're my sweet Daddy; that's very nice/I love my Mommy” and the role of parents. However, there is a discrepancy between what is expected of them and the way they act when they meet their second “Bumble of joy”, the Young Man:

MRS. BARKER (*To the Young Man*): This is Mommy.

YOUNG MAN: How... How do you do?

MRS. BARKER (*stage whisper*): Her name's Mommy.

YOUNG MAN: How... how do you do, Mommy?

MOMMY: Well! Hello there!

MRS. BARKER (*To the Young Man*): And that is Daddy.

YOUNG MAN: How do you do, sir?

DADDY: How do you do? (125)

The Young Man's embarrassment is apparent in his hesitations; he does not know how to address his “parents”. Mommy and Daddy answer him casually and in an impersonal way. The adjacency pair question/answer is nevertheless respected as it is their first encounter, so their reactions are socially accepted. This is indeed their first encounter with their future son whom they do not know. This is why they also play the role of parents. They murdered their former child because of his nonconformity, and they greet their new son as if he were an acquaintance. Their interactions are not absurd from the point of view of form, but the content is because they only utter social phatic expressions expected from them. “Like articulated puppets, the protagonists are wooden, empty: their lives are meaningless expect for the meaning that society, the great puppeteer, imposes on them” (Jouve 4). This corresponds to Albee's wish to criticise social values: These social constructs are devoid of meaning.

If Mommy and Daddy play the roles of parents, George and Martha play several roles, including the one of actors. From the very beginning, the reader is presented a play made of games that will be present throughout the book. These games are more verbal than physical because they require little action (on the part of the characters). Thus, language is at the heart of these verbal battles. The four games are entitled “Humiliate the Host”, “Get the Guests”, “Hump the Hostess” and “Bringing up Baby”. The first striking feature of these titles is the alliterations in each title and even the paronomasia “get the guests”. Moreover, all of them have a verbal form and three of them are imperatives, which constitute injunctions to the players who nevertheless to play the games by George and Martha's rules. These phonetic similarities make the titles sound catchy and enjoyable even though they connote violence. Consequently, games permeate *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. However, as Bollobás claims, the games' “rules are principles of uncooperative behavior” (324). Nick and Honey lack a necessary knowledge about George and Martha's past or “rhetorical practices”, which compromises their ability to play fairly. During the last act, George recalls a story about him sailing past Majorca; Martha says that he lies and is supported by Nick.

GEORGE: Don't you side with her, houseboy.

NICK: I'm not a houseboy.

GEORGE: Look! I know the game! You don't make it in the sack, you're a houseboy.

NICK: I AM NOT A HOUSEBOY! (214).

George saying “I know the game” indicates that he has power to decide about the outcome of the game because he has knowledge that Nick is lacking. Nick is then compelled to repeat the sentence “I'm not a houseboy” to try to win the verbal jousting but George knows the rules and knows how to manipulate language. Nick is eventually defeated because he asks Martha to take his side “*quietly, with intense pleading*” (214). Another repetition is found in the second act, when George and Nick are alone, talking about their wives. George is, once again, in power:

NICK: I find it... embarrassing.

GEORGE (*Sarcastic*): Oh, you do, hunh?

NICK: Yes. Really. Quite.

GEORGE (*Mimicking him*): Yes. Really. Quite. (*Then aloud, but to himself*). IT'S DISGUSTING! (101)

It is interesting to note that the first example differs from the second one because of the intonation and the pragmatic value. The first utterance of the sentence “Yes. Really. Quite” said by Nick implies that he wants to impose his view on George; it conveys anger and irritation. The second one, uttered by George, is ironic. Irony arises from with the context and with the stage direction indicating that George mimicks Nick. This repetition is a face-threatening act because George attacks Nick's positive face by expressing contempt and ridicule (Brown and Levinson 66).

George first has Nick repeat his sentence, but tension forces Nick to modify it using adverbs<sup>2</sup>. Then George repeats Nick's words before a violent outburst. The discourse marker "Oh" indicates that George has received the information as a hearer, but it also enables George to initiate his answer as a speaker. He is in control of the conversation and the marker "Oh" is anticipatory of his ironical answer. Indeed, in this sentence, the marker "Oh" should indicate an approval of what Nick has said because George's answer is not an "other-initiated repair" where he would correct Nick's utterance (Schiffrin 76). By using language so as to embarrass their guests or mocking them, George and Martha play unfairly with their guests because they weaponise language and do not give their guests a chance to compete against them.

Albee uses the dramatic medium to criticise the American way of life and to make his audience aware of the fictitious aspect of social relationships and norms because he not only transforms his characters into vaudevillian players by means of stereotypes, but he also plays with several genres of comedy to mock traditional American habits. For Albee, art is not pacification; "it's disturbance" (*Conversations with Edward Albee* xiii). The writer disturbs his audience with comedy, so as to have the audience laugh at their own expense, laugh at their own flaws and he does so by means of exaggeration and distortion, which corroborates Bergson's views on laughter: "[f]or exaggeration to be comic, it must not appear as an aim, but rather as a means that the artist is using in order to make manifest to our eyes the distortions which he sees in embryo" (24). By distorting and exaggerating recognisable patterns of behaviour, Albee points at the flaws that the audience may have. This mirroring effect invites identification with the characters, but this identification remains partial and enables the audience to reflect upon their own actions by laughing at themselves. Albee wants his audience to be afraid of Virginia Woolf like Martha is, and Albee wants his audience to not "leave things as they are now" (*The American Dream* 128).

## **B – Albee's Disruption of Theatrical Rules: The Well-Made Play and Metatheatricality**

As previously mentioned, Albee's world is a stage. The playwright indeed wrote and staged plays but he never stuck to the rules.

Both plays are set in living-rooms. This feature is evocative of British "drawing-room drama" popular during the Victorian era. A "Drawing-room" play is a play in which the action takes place in

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2 The value of "quite" can, according to the context, be of a medium degree or high degree. Here, the paratactic structure it is inserted in favours the interpretation of a gradation. Moreover, the question asked ("You do, hunh?") bears on the whole predicative relation (I-find X), which is not gradable and thus tends to trigger the interpretation of a high degree as well.



the drawing room of home. It is generally a comedy depicting the” psychological and social problems of the upper middle classes” (Lahr 41). Lahr adds that the characters were “as a general rule, wealthy, well-bred, articulate and motivated by the exigencies of the world to which they belonged” (Ibid.). Through the use of the comedy of manners this genre of drama satirised the Victorian society. Satire “is the deliberate use of the comic for the purpose of attack” (Berger 157) and it can also be “educational: it may be a result of the satirist's labors that the audience comes to understand the desirability of what is attacked (Berger 158). Thus, satire is the critical and comic representation of a vice or a limitation observable in reality and one concerned with religion, ethics or society among other themes. The satirist denounces a flaw (to do so, he distorts reality) and he often wants to mend the society in which he lives. Edward Albee satirised his society by denouncing his contemporaries' flaws. This conventional writing demonstrates that Edward Albee, the American absurdist, may have written traditional plays. Moreover, the two plays under study seem to belong to a traditional vein of theatre because it is reminiscent of the “well-made plays” which dominated the stage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Albee's attempt to define a standardised American way of life and to denounce the meaninglessness of the American society is shown through his use of comedy, but also in the way in which he manipulated theatre and its rules. By disrespecting and mocking conventions of theatre, Edward Albee highlights the incongruity of human life in a capitalist society. Indeed, even though his plays display some traditional features of realism, the playwright instilled puzzling absurd acts to question the validity of what is recognisable and accepted. In the two plays under study, for instance, the settings and characters are familiar, traditional even. However, Edward Albee transgresses established codes and conventions to denounce a materialist America. He also introduces metatheatricality, the self-conscious reference to theatre, to show how theatrical life is. The characters, especially in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, play roles, play games, play with their identity. As George says in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, “truth and illusion. Who knows the difference, eh, toots? Eh?” (213).

### **1. Fake Drawing-Room Drama and the Not-So-Well-Made Play: Mocking the genres**

Douglas Cardwell recalls the main principles of the well-made play theorised by Eugène Scribe.<sup>3</sup> It appears that Albee did not respect all the rules because the exposition scenes are

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<sup>3</sup> Eugène Scribe greatly influenced the type of drama called the “well-made play” which became the rule to follow in order to write what was considered as a “good play”.

Goldberg explains that “[t]he nineteenth century was also the age of what the French, who pioneered the style, called *la*

supposed to be “complete” (877), namely that details of the plot must be mentioned. In both plays, almost no details are given except that the characters are waiting for someone. Cardwell also adds that “[t]he action of the well-made play is made up of attempts to overcome a series of obstacle” (878) but both plays lack obstacles because they lack clearly defined plots. The reader never knows what is happening and what is going to happen. Hence, Albee respects the rule of suspense (an important aspect of the well-made play), but he does so by preventing the audience from knowing the plot twists (or even the plot itself since there is no defined plot in both plays) whereas Scribe stresses the significance of the reader's knowledge and collaboration in the creation of a play:

Le publique m'aime parce que j'ai soin de le mettre toujours dans ma confiance; il est dans le secret de la comédie; il a dans les mains les fils qui font jouer mes personnages; il connaît les surprises que je leur ménage, et il croit les leur ménager lui-même; bref, je le prends pour collaborateur; il s'imagine qu'il a fait la pièce avec moi, et naturellement il l'applaudit. (qtd. in Douglas 879)

Edward Albee does quite the opposite because he hides some information from the audience. Albee does not share his “secrets” or surprises, he imposes them upon the audience, and they are often surprising. This concealment is seen from the very first lines of the plays where nothing is learned from the exposition scene. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, characters are unable to finish their sentences:

MARTHA: Jesus...

GEORGE: ... Shhhhhhh...

MARTHA: ...H. Christ...

GEORGE: For god's sake, Martha, it's two o'clock in the...

MARTHA: Oh, George!

GEORGE: Well, I'm *sorry*, but...

MARTHA: What a cluck! What a cluck you are! (3)

Both characters are unable to properly express themselves and there is no definitive end to their conversation. Overlaps characterise their conversation and they fight for verbal dominance. George interrupts Martha with an interjection which Martha completes before finishing her sentence. Martha is literally trying to have the last word because she constantly interrupts her husband. Hence, the play opens on a verbal jousting whose matter is unknown. George is unable to talk to Martha because she refuses to cooperate with him. The role of the reader is thus to finish their cues to try to derive some meaning from their conversation. Albee is not on the side of the reader but an antagonist who prevents the reader from fully understanding the scene. The conversation lacks

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*pièce bien faite*, "the well-made play." Its founder was Eugene Scribe, and his disciples included Eugène Labiche, Victorien Sardou, and ultimately Georges Feydeau” (63).

Marvin Carlson, for his part, claims that Scribe's influence “cannot be overestimated”.

action in itself because there are no verbs. “Be” is repeated three times, but it is a verb of state; it conveys the idea that the characters are immobile and unable to live by themselves. The interjections “Jesus Christ” and “For god's sake” are informal, connoting violence but they can also refer to religion in their strict semantic meaning. This religious overtone may indicate that the characters are subjected to a superior force controlling them. Their lack of action is a result of God's control over them. From a more general point of view, Albee presents characters subjected to the society they live in, especially in *The American Dream*. Mommy and Daddy's conversations are centred on consumerism and materialism as is shown in the exposition scene where Mommy tells George about her wheat-colored/cream/beige hat purchase. Hence, Scribe's rules of the well-made play are not respected by Albee who presents weak characters from a physical and cognitive point of view. Characters are obstacles to themselves.

By staging his plays in drawing-rooms, Albee borrows a feature of the drawing-room drama. He also depicts couples, families and strangers. In *The American Dream*, The Young Man appears at the end of the play like a twist. In traditional plays he would represent the revelation, “the handsome stranger who traditionally brings news of importance”. In melodrama, the presence of such an intruder initiates a twist in the plot or introduces threat to one or more of the protagonists” (Knowlson 60). In the play he initiates the reconstruction of the family. If we compare the mechanism of reconstruction happening in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* it would correspond to the groundbreaking revelation of their imaginary child who does not exist. Albee skillfully plays with traditional theatrical rules and distorts them. Indeed, as Emil Roy notes, “[d]ramatically, the action of *Woolf* has a concrete, realistic, recognizable setting and situation. It is constructed like the bourgeois drawing-room, around what amounts to a ceremonial social occasion” (*Critical Essays* 91). Hence, Albee plays with the genre of the naturalistic drawing-room drama. Moreover, “[i]n his use of the social ceremony – arrivals, departures, anniversaries, parties – Albee is close to Chekhov” (Ibid.). This author is a pure realistic playwright; Chekhov could even be considered as the father of Russian realism. Even though arrivals and departures are staged rationally in both plays, the events happening during these social ceremonies are nonsensical. In *The American Dream*, Mommy and Daddy's departures enable Grandma to tell Mrs. Barker the story of the mutilation of the child. This is a classic way of announcing an important fact to the audience who has a feeling of connivance with the actors. However, the audience can hear Mommy and Daddy talking off stage:

DADDY (*Off stage*): Mommy! I can't find Grandma's television, and I can't find the Pekinese, either.

MOMMY (*Off stage*): Isn't that funny! And I can't find the water.

[...]

DADDY (*Off stage*): The truth of the matter is, I can't even find Grandma's room. (106)

This participates to create a comic atmosphere to the scene. Albee mocks the traditional rules of arrivals and departures by making the situation increasingly absurd. The conversation has a comic dimension with the repetition of the structure “And I can't find X” and it ends on Daddy's irrational cue with the intensifier “even”. Indeed, the enumeration evolves from a sort of realism (“television”) to absurdism (“Grandma's room”). The linguistic collocations are quite common, but the context renders them incongruous. This could correspond to the process of dissolution of Grandma representing the old American dream, and enhance her domination over the other characters. She first says to Mrs. Barker “Heh, heh, heh. I told them everything was hidden” (107) and then she admits “I told you. I hid everything” (107). The transition from a passive voice to an active one indicates that Grandma is in charge of the play.

As for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the disruption is even more visible given the extreme realism of the characters and setting. Brian Way argues that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* “is, for all its showiness, no more than a cross between sick drawing-room comedy and naturalistic tragedy” (*Critical Essays* 65). Albee uses a well-known method of writing to better criticise the subjects of his plays. Emil Roy highlights the “machinery of contemporary realism” in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* : “the well-made secrets and letters, the careful exposition, the eternal triangle and the attack on the oppressive bourgeois family” (*Critical Essays* 90) are means to transform the familiar into the unfamiliar.

For Way, then, *Who's Afraid* does not belong to The Theatre of the Absurd. However, Albee has often been compared to Eugène Ionesco. The Romanian's play *The Bald Prima Donna* was an influence for Albee. George and Martha have common traits with Mr and Mrs. Smith and the settings are similar. Brian Way notes that “Ionesco and Albee use this method of exposing the essential meaninglessness of most middle-class language and gesture as a basis for much wider effects than the mere deflation of certain speech-habits” (*Critical Essays* 67). Albee mocks the drawing-room drama to better criticise the flaws of the middle-class.

In *The American Dream*, characters utter grammatical and logical sentences, but the subject they talk about is never explained:

MOMMY: I don't know what can be keeping them.

DADDY: They're late, naturally.

MOMMY: Of course, they're late; it never fails.

DADDY: That's the way things are today, and there's nothing you can do about it.

MOMMY: You're quite right. (71)

In this extract, lack of knowledge is directly expressed by Mommy who begins her sentence by “I don't know”. “Know” is a cognitive verb indicating the presence or absence of knowledge. This metareference to this lack of knowledge proves that Albee bends with the rules: if his characters do not know, how can the reader know? Albee spreads confusion even more when he has George answer “They're late, naturally”. The adverb “naturally” implies that the couple knows who is coming and that the situation is not new for them. Their guests are late, “it never fails”. Linguistic markers show that their exchange is mainly made of immutable banalities and generalities. This kind of conversations happen in naturally occurring conversations because it enables the communication to start<sup>4</sup>, but it is not expected from a theatrical exposition scene where tension is supposed to emerge. In this example, lack of tension is expressed through linguistic tools because the adverbs “of course” and “never” along with the copula indicate that the state of their world has always been unchanging whereas the deictic of time “today” implies that the situation has not always been this way. However, the pronoun “nothing” conveys the same idea of an impossible change. Like George and Martha, Mommy and Daddy are unable to resist superior forces. George's “That's the way things are today” allude to society which dictates that things be a certain way and the pronoun “nothing” signals the characters' failure to fight against society. Hence, Albee introduces another dimension to this banal conversation by emphasising the characters' lack of power when faced with society. The playwright presents a kind of state-of-the-nation play by taking an opposing view to the traditional well-made play.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning of the 1960s, Edward Albee was in his thirties. *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid* both denounce a state of the American nation, that is why one might see Albee as an “Angry Young Man”.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the playwright accused the American society of subjecting Americans to its capitalist norms and he did so by disrupting theatrical rules of the drawing-room drama, a technique used by the British Angry Young Men.

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4 This situation corresponds to Jakobson's study of the phatic function of language.

5 A state-of-the-nation play is a theatrical piece that reflects society at a given time. It is supposed to be naturalistic.

6 The term comes from John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* published in 1956 in the UK. The phrase was originally coined by the Royal Court Theatre's press officer in order to promote Osborne's 1956 play. Osborne was the first playwright of a generation of authors called the “Angry Young Men”. They wrote state-of-the-nation plays in which they denounced social norms and gave voice to the working class.

The term was then used to describe a group of writers with common characteristics. In 1959, Morton Kroll wrote that “a conglomerate group of young English writers has come into prominence in the 1950's under the highly marketable label of “Angry Young Men.” Their writing ranges through and beyond the political spectrum, taking varied form, including essays, picaresque and comic novels, heroic tragedy, attempts at literary criticism, motion pictures, poetry and drama” (555). He explains that

The instrument of dissent is their story of young men with all or a substantial part of a university education and of financially difficult middle-class and proletarian backgrounds. The major conflict is between the individual *qua* individual and his society. The heroes are either repelled by a society to which in large part they think it hopeless to relate themselves, or, as with [John] Braine's hero, they are consciously warped by a major value into a pattern of behavior which, if superficially successful, is fundamentally megalomaniacal. (556)

Albee, by borrowing several of the features of the drawing-room drama and introducing contestation, did not entirely belong to any literary movement; he created his own kind of state-of-the-nation play.

## 2. Stories within the Play; Play within the Story

“Everybody plays games. People play games with truth; they play games with reality, with illusion” Edward Albee

“Every human being is an actor *manqué*. [...] Besides the faculty of laughter and the faculty of thought, he has also the faculty of taking the part of others. He reproduces within his imagination situations and circumstances which are not his own in order to comprehend the life about him”  
Ian Watt

If one agrees with Ian Watt's view, quoted in the epigraph, then all the world is indeed a stage. The audience who attend a play acknowledge the need to be given “situations and circumstances which are not [their] own”. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George and Martha joyfully accept their role of actors. They take Nick and Honey on a tumultuous ride of games and, “[a]s creatures with a taste for metatheatre, George and Martha know that the best way to [draw Nick and Honey in their net] is to make the audience uncomfortable while using their voyeurism to put them off guard and draw them in” (Davis 220). George and Martha need their audience in order to play out their marriage: “[t]he audience, which is crucial in motivating the events that lead to the “Exorcism” of the fantasy child, go home at seven in the morning thoroughly wilted and shaken” (Stenz 52).

When George tells Nick about the boy who killed his parents, the motif of laughter runs through the story and the audience becomes uncomfortable as the story grows incongruous and exaggerated, like the laughter described:

[...] we ordered our drinks, and when it came to his turn he said, I'll have bergin... [...] Well, we all laughed [...] and then more people were told and the laughter grew, and more and more laughter, and no one was laughing more than us, and none of us laughing more than the boy who had shot his mother. [...] (105-106)

In the story, laughter is the product of mispronunciation. The boy said “bergin” instead of “bourbon”. Such laughter is hysterical because it increases as the story continues, and becomes oppressive. The gradation of hysteria is visible in the length of the sentence, the polysyndeton and what can be termed the “Russian doll” effect: at first everyone laughs, with more and more people

joining in, and no one laughing harder than the boy. George eliminates the whole to concentrate on the teenager with a decreasing order. He passes from “all” to “no one” both of which convey the same meaning; George could have said “We all laughed less than the boy”, but the sudden change of quantifier is puzzling. George's story is a bid on laughter and the reader feels overwhelmed by the amount of information as a result. A few lines later, Nick learns that the boy also killed his father in a car accident and succumbs to hysterical laughter again. At the end of the book, George tells Martha that their son killed himself in the exact same way as the teenager who killed his parents. The similarities between these stories is not explained, but at the beginning of the bergin story, George asks Nick if “Bourbon” is the right word. Hence, one is able to infer that George is the teenager in question. He decides to kill his son the same way he killed his own father. This hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that George tells the death of sunny Jim with “*a tiny chuckle*” (245). The (narrative) exorcism is complete: George has killed parents and son while playing a game.

In an interview, Edward Albee made clear that George and Martha are aware of their games with Nick and Honey:

Interviewer: You're suggesting that George and Martha have at no point deluded themselves about the fact that they're playing a game.

Albee: Oh, never. Except that it's the most serious games in the world. And the nonexistent son is a symbol and a weapon they use in every one of their arguments.

Interviewer: A symbolic weapon rather than a real weapon. In the midst of the very real weapons that they do use.

Albee: Indeed, yes. Though they're much too intelligent to make that confusion. For me, that's why the loss is doubly poignant. Because they're not deluded people. (*Conversations with Albee* 59)

Indeed, George and Martha are aware of the fact that they play games in front of an audience:

- GEORGE: Martha's a devil with language; she really is. (21)

This comment serves as a warning for the audience. George reinforces his assertion by adding “she really is”, revealing that he knows his wife perfectly. If he had only said “Martha's a devil with language”, his assertion could have been interpreted as a simple metaphor with no real denotation.

- GEORGE: It's just a private joke between li'l ol' Martha and me. [...] (32)

In this example, George acknowledges the private joke between he and Martha and reassures his interlocutor (Nick) using the adverb “just” in order to make him feel comfortable. The adjective “li'l ol'” connotes connivance between George and Martha who play together.

- GEORGE: [...] Martha and I are merely... exercising... that's all... (35)

This remark is an answer to Nick who says that George and Martha “seem to be having *some* sort of a...”. Nick’s sentence could reasonably be concluded with the noun “argument”. However, George answers that they are “exercising” as if they were warming up for a competition or a lighthearted sport session. This indicates that what Nick has witnessed was only the beginning. George's utterance suggests complicity because they are exercising together against Nick and Honey.

- GEORGE: What are we going to have... blue games for the guests? Hunh? Hunh? (64)

Here, George explicitly says that they are about to play games. The interjection “Hunh? Hunh?” is directed towards Martha. He looks for her approval which she does not give. He then assures her that “[e]verything in its place, Martha... everything in its own good time” (64), indicating that he knows that this is the right time to play games, and that he has waited for this moment to begin them.

MARTHA: We're alone!

GEORGE: Uh... no, Love... we've got guests.

MARTHA (*With a covetous look at NICK*): We sure have. (136)

In this conversation, Martha does not acknowledge the presence of their guests and when she is reminded by her husband that Nick and Honey have in fact arrived, she pulls herself together and seems to prepare her next move towards Nick, as indicated by the stage direction and the adverb “sure”.

As George and Martha are aware of their games, why would they play until the point of no return leading to a “total war”? McCarthy argues that this is a means to protect themselves:

George and Martha’s games are not strictly illusions: they are routines with which they fill a life which is intrinsically lacking in the completeness of social and family relationships. The play shows these coexisting with a sensation of the true state of the couple: alone together and threatened by reality. (77)

Such a view would explain why George and Martha stand together until the very end of the play when they physically get closer to one another.

Imitation is likewise a meatheatrical device and is a concept used by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The characters' imitation of human traits and action is necessary to provoke a reaction within the audience. Imitation is inherent in acting because one becomes an actor. At the beginning of the play, Martha imitates a child and says “I'm firsty” (17). As a result, Martha the character becomes another



character. This last feature is comic and reminiscent of the vaudeville genre.

Furthermore, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George and Martha welcome guests and play games in front of them. Nick and Honey are a reflection of the audience sitting in the theatre. Hence, there are three levels of *mise en abyme*:

1. Martha, George, Nick and Honey are characters
2. George and Martha enact roles in front of Nick and Honey
3. Martha, George, Nick and Honey act in front of a real audience

Thus, by reflecting the audience's position on stage, Albee distorts reality given that the spectator understands that a play is happening within the “real” play. After proposing several games, George says “We *gotta*<sup>7</sup> play a game” (155). The characters’ existence depends on the playing of games. When Martha and George play games, they are actors performing in front of an audience (made up of Nick and Honey). The characters are supposed to be aware that they are playing games; thus they know that they do not perform reality. The reality of their situation (in Albee's play) is mingled with the fiction of their game (the play within the play). During their first game, when George “kills” Martha, the reality of the stage shows that Honey “*screams... rises*” and is “*beside herself*” (62) whereas Martha, the performer, “*almost breaks down, her great laugh booming*” (Ibid.). Martha's reaction is hyperbolic, underlining the absurdity of the moment. Their games are intended to be entertaining and funny, but the final one, “Bringing up Baby” is the game that kills their fictional son. Nick and Honey are needed as an audience (George says “We can't play without everyone here” (218)), but the fundamental message is directed towards the “real” audience. The question raised about the fictiveness of the baby is about to be answered. Nick and Honey are not aware of the conflict happening between Martha and George (partly because they leave the stage for a moment) and are simply players in the couple's game. However, the audience is given hints and is able to guess that this is a trope because George says “We all peel labels” (225), answering Honey who physically peeled the label. Hence, illusion and additional interpretations are found on various levels because there are different enunciative levels: the final message is addressed to the reader/spectator, but there are different senders: Edward Albee, the characters and the actors on stage.

Metatheatricality occurs on several levels. Firstly, it is interesting to note that Edward Albee's voice sometimes appears in his own play when he has his characters comment on the action and offer clues to the audience. This authorial intrusion is a means for Albee to underline the theatrical aspect

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7 Emphasis added.

of his work. His characters' commentary on the action allows Albee to involve the audience and target the audience's unconscious by reminding them that the interactants are mere characters:

GEORGE: When is our son coming home?

[...]

MARTHA: I said never mind. I'm sorry I brought it up. (76)

GEORGE: Him up... not it.

GEORGE: Nonsense! (116)

HONEY: VIOLENCE! VIOLENCE! (153)

Like George, Albee gives clues to what language can do: give meaning to a meaningless and obscure world. "It" suggests that their son is inanimate, or at the very least dehumanises him and the last examples are metalinguistic references to what happens in the play and on stage. George and Martha's exchanges are highly metatheatrical given their fight for verbal domination. They highlight the importance of mastering language, but they equally emphasise the fictitious aspect of language in itself: both life and theatre are fictitious worlds.

Edward Albee thus disrupts theatrical and linguistic rules to emphasise the shallower aspects of life, even on the stage.

Secondly, metatheatricality could have been even more striking because Albee first thought of Bette Davis for the role of Martha; so Martha's imitation of Davis "comically riffs on the theme of role-playing" (Falvey 245). From the very beginning, metatheatricality is therefore at the heart of the play. When Martha says "What a dump", the stage directions indicate that she "*imitates Bette Davis*" (4). Martha is conscious that she is playing a role, and George refuses to be part of the game: "... Martha..." (4). This is the first indication that George is not to play during the evening. is Martha's mention of their son that triggers George's anger and wish to play games. When he learns she told Honey about sunny Jim, he remarks to himself "O.K., Martha... O.K." (48). The evolution of George's state can be seen, from surprise "WHAT?" (47) to resignation "She told you about him" and anger "O.K., Martha... O.K." (48). The variations in intonation and accentuation depict these different states of mind. Martha, who dominates the first act of the play, has disobeyed the only rule set by George: she mentioned their son. This confirms that "Martha's a devil with language; she really is" (21). The prepositional phrase "with language" stresses the central role of language in the play, as George could otherwise have said "Martha's a devil" which would have defined Martha as a devil. Hence, it is language which defines the characters: "this double-edged verbal swordplay makes the language a kind of character or, more accurately, George and Martha take the shape of

the words slung to fill their hollowness” (Falvey 246). Indeed, as mentioned early in this paragraph, voice modulations play an important role in the play. The use of capital letters, stage directions and punctuation indicate how the characters speak and voice modulations can greatly influence the intended meaning of a sentence: it can become more violent or, on the contrary, more joyful. One example to illustrate this point is the utterance “I’m here”. If a speaker yells “I’M HERE.” or “I’M HERE!”, the resulting effect is different in each case: for instance, the first can convey impatience and the second happiness. A vocalisation without any modulation would convey the simple information that the speaker has arrived.

To return to the claim that George and Martha “take the shape of the words”, an example of this is illustrated at the very end of the play when George and Martha exclusively use short sentences:

MARTHA: [...] (*A long silence between them*) Did you... Did you have to?

GEORGE (*Pause*): Yes.

MARTHA: It was...? You had to?

GEORGE: Yes.

MARTHA: I don't know.

GEORGE: It was... time. (254-255)

George and Martha are distraught after the killing of their son; this is visible in their difficulty speaking - as seen with the ellipses. Silence fills Their conversation, and subsequently the stage itself.

George and Martha have been presented as the only metatheatrical couple but Nick and Honey play an equal part in the performance. They

give every indication that [their manners] are not just the masks they wear in public but also the way they relate in private. Privacy for them is the acting out of the social roles assigned by the Big Other. [...] George and Martha are uneasy in public, given to acting out behaviors, because they see social space (academic evenings, etc) as a vast theatre of lies. Their desire is to bring the truth of privacy onto the public stage, which is precisely what they will do in the play. (Davis 216)

The difference between the two couples is that Nick and Honey do not change their behaviour throughout the play whereas George and Martha act out their relationship when they are in public. When it is indicated that George and Martha are playing, there is no such hint or indication that Honey and Nick do the same.

At the beginning of the play, Martha tells them to have a seat. Honey answers that it is “lovely” (22) while Nick repeats the same adjective, but “*perfunctorily*” (22). Nick acts mechanically because he has to, partly because of politeness. As for Honey, she plays the part of the obedient and mindless wife but at the end of the play, she sides with George when she confirms that Martha mentioned the child to her. She also participates in George's funerary prayer, - she says “Amen”, indicating that

she understands and supports the son's death. One wonders, therefore, to what extent Honey is presented as a character with no personality. In the end, both couples are highly (meta)theatrical and both end up playing with their public personae.

Metatheatricality and metalinguistic references question Albee's vision of truth and reality. Several of his tools to criticise American society are found in his writing itself. The author stages plays, borrowing features of the well-made play and drawing-room drama. He presents recognisable characters and settings, and disrespects the conventional rules of each genre. His plays can be considered as state-of-the-nation plays: the playwright denounces middle-class manners and linguistic habits to make the reader laugh and, subsequently question what is being written and staged. Albee also stages plays within the play, stories within the play and identities within identities. Characters, above all in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are not stable and, as The Young Man says, "Be careful; be very careful. What I have told you may not be true. In my profession..." (117).

The concluding note of the first part of this study is left to Edward Albee who stated that "[t]he audience can be corrupted in the direction of the truth as the playwright sees it" (*Conversations with Edward Albee* 28). Indeed, Edward Albee skillfully controls and directs his audience by subverting their expectations, by experimenting with rules and playing metatheatrical games. Albee got to "the marrow" of his plays by dissecting the manners of the American middle-class. Comedy serves as a powerful tool to raise awareness and consciousness without being too irreverent or controversial. It is well known that Molière played for and in the French royal court. However, Albee does not allow the spectator any hope of avoiding a moral questioning at the end of his plays. The use of several genres of comedy, from situational comedy to the comedy of words, from vaudeville to dark comedy leaves the reader puzzled and on the edge. Albee's primary technique is to transform the familiar into the unfamiliar. A conversation in a living-room can lead to deadly games while the appearance of a young man, typically American, can restore a family after the terrible mutilation of his twin. Albee's characters are grotesque figures and animals of metatheatre, depicting life as a perpetual performance and consumerism as a good way of life. However, neither ending is entirely optimistic nor pessimistic. The final answer is left to the reader who may have been corrupted in the direction of the truth after having witnessed these two frenzied stories.

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## II – Social Interactions in the Plays: Between Appeasement and Conflict

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Aristotle, in his *Politics*, wrote that human beings are “by nature social animals” (1253a). They live in a society, they share feelings and opinions (in this way they are also sociable animals), they interact with one another and communication is at the heart of their social life. Dialogues are the most common way to interact and, as dialogues are at the basis of plays, characters, in the same manner as human beings, communicate and interact.

When people communicate, they interact with one another and conversations are intended to be purposeful and carry meaning. When talking, a person seeks information, approval, agreement or, on the contrary, a debate, but talking can also become an action in itself. In any case, interaction consists of sharing a given moment in a given situation. In the introduction to his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman states that “information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him” (13). Interacting with someone consists of giving information and expectations about oneself, but it also involves adapting to the other person. Indeed, when people communicate, they permanently adapt to their environment and to their interlocutor(s). This concept is called “accommodation strategies” and it consists of “acting to remove obstacles to the achievement of goals that we attribute to others” (Thomason 332). Therefore, the speaker and the hearer must recognise their mutual intentions and build their conversation around two central rules: first of all, “[p]rivate memories and intentions of the participants cannot be part of the conversational records unless they are explicitly entered into it” and, secondly, the “subjects discussed in a conversation must be taken for granted” (von Fintel 2). Interestingly, the conversations in the plays under study both respect and do not comply with these rules, as the characters generally know the subjects discussed but do not always recognise each other's intentions. This leads to social rules and norms not being respected; such situations lead to absurdism. The principles presented above are basic notions of linguistic cooperation and coherence; thus, Albee displays a discrepancy between interactions borrowing the same mechanisms as naturally-occurring conversations and exchanges displaying vaudevillian and caricatured aspects. Even though conversations that are based on traditional phatic expressions or showing linguistic precision and coherence appear realistic, their content can become absurd, particularly when characters are in conflict.

*The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are vaudevillian comedies. Thus, it is unsurprising that language plays a significant role in ridiculing situations and characters. In vaudevillian plays, one expects to find misunderstandings, asides or running gags. Nonetheless, characters are often tactful and socially polite. Several of their exchanges reveal mechanisms that are present in naturally-occurring conversations, thus making the plays appear less absurd or grotesque, and more realistic.

Styan explains that in absurdist plays, “[t]he dialogue is commonly no more than a series of inconsequential clichés which reduce those who speak them to talking machines” (*Modern Drama* 126). A striking example is the opening scene of *The American Dream* in which Mommy and Daddy discuss trivial issues. It is interesting to note that, on the linguistic level, the conversations between the characters are extremely realistic most of the time as the entrance of Mrs. Barker in *The American Dream* shows:

DADDY: Uh... Mrs. Barker, is it? Won't you sit down?  
MRS. BARKER: I don't mind if I do. (87)

The content of the conversation (asking someone to sit down) and the use of correct grammar, syntax and a marker of orality (“Uh”) give this exchange a realistic aspect. Discourse markers, which pervade the play, serve as indicators of realistic conversations, as they are widely used in naturally occurring conversations. Below are examples of discourse markers found in the plays:

Oh:

- HONEY: **Oh**, wasn't that funny? That was so funny... (*Who's Afraid* 26)
- MRS. BARKER: **Oh**, I think so. (*Dream* 93)

Well:

- MARTHA: **Well**, you figure it out, and you let me know when you do. (*Who's Afraid* 139)
- GRANDMA: **Well**, maybe not. [...] (*Dream* 113)

According to Deborah Schiffrin, discourse markers “bracket units of talk” (35); they can precede, occur within or after these units. They offer information about the speaker's stance, help create coherence in the process of conducting conversation and are sometimes informal. As a result, they serve as indicators of realism.

On the other hand, the conventionality of banal conversations is mocked by Albee. At the beginning of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, when Nick and Honey arrive, Nick points out that it is late for a friendly meeting:

HONEY: Yes... *it is* late, and...

MARTHA: Late! Are you kidding? Throw your stuff down anywhere and c'mon in.

GEORGE (*Vaguely... walking away*): Anywhere... furniture, floor... doesn't make any difference around this place. (21)

Martha's exclamation containing the hetero-repetition of "late" and her rhetorical question indicate that both she and George are not concerned about the time. Martha interrupts and corrects Honey about her notion of "late". It is obviously late (2 o'clock in the morning) and too late to receive guests, but Martha's answer indicates that they are glad to welcome their guests. This is a sign of social politeness, particularly when receiving unknown guests. However, the second part of Martha's cue is socially unusual. She entreats her guests to "throw" their "stuff". The imperative form and the verb "throw" are the antithesis of a polite welcome. Her utterance gives rise to an additive comment on George's part who specifies the meaning of the adverb "anywhere", by definition indicative of vagueness. In this extract, social conventions are both observed and ignored.

Thus, language is revelatory of the absurdism of the characters' interactions but it is also what makes the play realistic, along with the setting. Moreover, language is a means to demonstrate power over and dominate the other, as rectifying someone or engaging in verbal joustings are forms of battle. Furthermore, given the essence of theatricality, it is interesting to study linguistic interactions as the battlefield on the stage. This section will focus initially on the manner in which (im)politeness disrupts social rules, before analysing the social effects of linguistic adjustments and readjustments.

## **A – (Im)politeness: Disrupting Social Rules**

Politeness is central to social interactions because it helps maintain harmony between the speakers. Several scholars such as Geoffrey Leech, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson and Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni have theorised politeness. According to Leech, there is a politeness principle with conversational maxims (similar to Paul Grice's maxims): tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy maxims. Brown and Levinson base their theory on Goffman's notion of "face" and they focus primarily on Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). Kerbrat-Orecchioni modifies their theory by expanding upon it Face-Flattering Acts (FFAs) which do not only save the other's face, but also enhance it (compliments are a good example):

Si la plupart des actes de langage sont potentiellement menaçants pour les faces des interlocuteurs, il en est aussi qui sont plutôt valorisants pour ces mêmes faces, comme le remerciement, le vœu, ou le compliment (traité par Brown et Levinson comme un pur FTA

pour la face négative du destinataire, alors qu'il est d'abord et surtout un acte « flatteur » pour la face positive de ce même destinataire). Il est donc souhaitable et même nécessaire d'octroyer dans le modèle une place à ces actes qui sont en quelque sorte le pendant positif des FTA, et que nous avons baptisés *FFA (Face Flattering Acts)* (37).

Politeness will be analysed from Brown and Levinson's point of view because of the link between face-work and politeness, but some features of Kerbrat-Orecchioni's theory will also be used.

Politeness has a social function, but it is not its sole purpose. Phatic utterances have little content and meaning, but they have a significant pragmatic effect: they show to the addressee that the addresser is supposedly friendly and ready to begin a conversation. Phatic expressions are thus examples of politeness and the observation of social norms. It would appear both surprising and impolite not to say “Hello” to someone; it would threaten the other's “face”. As explained in the introduction of this section, speakers adapt to their interlocutors to save their “face”. Erving Goffman, in his article “On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interactions”, coined the term “face” to define one's social behaviour:

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes. (7)

In their seminal study on politeness, the linguists Brown and Levinson develop Goffman's analysis and add that “face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction” (61). An individual possesses two faces: the negative face which consists of one's personal preserves and freedom of action which correspond to inner desires and wants and the positive face, the self-image presented to others with the desire for approval. In his article, Goffman adds that,

The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to *maintain both his own face and the face of the other participants*.<sup>8</sup> (7)

In other words, a person seeks to behave in such a way that enables both interactants to save their face. This echoes Grice's Cooperative Principle. Grice explains that communicative exchanges are “characteristically, to some degree at least, *cooperative efforts*;<sup>9</sup> and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction” (307). He adds that certain rules must be followed: “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction

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8 Emphasis added.

9 Emphasis added.



of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Ibid.). Thus, in naturally occurring conversations, participants tend to respect Grice's Cooperative Principle and Goffman's theory on face-work more or less consciously. However, *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* present characters who are in conflict. Conversations do not always run smoothly; it could even be argued that language jeopardises the characters' positive relationships when they are in conflict. Conflict is either the cause or the consequence of linguistic manipulation, but it can also become humorous as a result of the incongruity or the exaggeration of these conflicts. This corresponds to Bergson's claim on laughter: “[a]ny arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement” (51). Albee's drama gives the illusion of life through the reproduction of social behaviours, but also as an impression of mechanical arrangement when exaggeration highlights the apparatus of social conventions. This use of language as an alienating agent of social relationships will be studied in the following sections.

### **1. On Face-Work in the Plays: Saving and Threatening One's Face**

In the two plays in question, many examples do not respect Goffman's analysis. These are called “face threatening acts (FTAs)” by Brown and Levinson. Such acts can threaten either one's positive face or one's negative face. Brown and Levinson recall that the negative face concerns “personal preserves, freedom of action” while the positive face consists of one's “self-image or personality (the desire that self-image be approved) by interactants” (61). The study of FTAs is of interest in this examination because natural social mechanisms are distorted and exaggerated by Edward Albee in the two plays under study, revealing that social interactions can lead to conflict. Conflict is inherent to theatre, but exaggerated conflicts highlight the superficial conventionality of patterns of behaviours and emphasise the possible alienation of relationships due to conventionalised social interactions.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, FTAs primarily concern the other's positive face, and either display the illusionary nature of the characters or are used to take control over the other. Brown and Levinson list several FTAs in their work; the following example of a conversation between Martha and George takes place at the beginning of the play, before Nick and Honey arrive. It corresponds to two FTAs: FTAs that show that “the speaker (S) doesn't care about the addressee's (H) feelings, wants, he doesn't want H's wants” (66-67) and “those acts that show that S has a negative evaluation of some aspects of H's positive face” (Ibid.). The conversation below is an example of

the second type of FTA:

MARTHA: I swear... If you existed I'd divorce you...

GEORGE: Well, just stay on your feet, that's all... These people are your guests, you know, and...

MARTHA: I can't even see you... I haven't been able to see you for years...

GEORGE: If you pass out, or throw up, or something...

MARTHA: I mean, you're a blank, a cipher... (18)

The fact that George and Martha do not listen to one another is a symptom of carelessness and Martha insulting George indicates her “negative evaluation” of him. This impolite exchange is not socially accepted and the first line (uttered by Martha) is surprising in that “If you did not exist, one would need to invent you” could generally be read as a sign of affection. However, Albee again plays with the rules given that “If you existed” is another example of metatheatricality: Martha highlights the fictive situation of her husband as a theatrical character and her cue emphasises the illusionary nature of life. In a naturally-occurring conversation, this FTA would be considered to impolite, but in the case of the play, it is revelatory of the fictitious nature of the characters and enables Albee to prevent the audience from identifying with George and Martha in order to reflect on the play.

The 1962 play displays situations that correspond to almost all FTAs showing that “S doesn’t care about (or is indifferent to) H’s positive-face” as listed below by Brown and Levinson (66-67) and characters at the origin of the FTAs seek to take control over and destabilise the other:

1. Expressions of violent (out-of-control) emotions (S gives H possible reason to fear him or be embarrassed by him)

GEORGE (*As if she were some sort of bug*): No... no... you're sick.

MARTHA (*Rises – Screams*): I'LL SHOW YOU WHO'S SICK! (171)

In this exchange, Martha's violent reaction is triggered by George who openly attacks the state of her mental health. Martha's answer is, in return, an overt threat to her husband as shown by the use of the modal verb “will”, which expresses certainty. Moreover, she warns him that she will prove “who” is sick, implying that she is not the sick one. The use of the pronoun “who” while using the same predicate is a conventional way to respond to an attack: Martha could have said “I'll show you that you're sick”, but she would have closed the possible competition between them. “Who” means that she accepts being part of the challenge, as she herself could be the “who”. Thus, George has reasons to fear her.

2. Irreverence, mention of taboo topics, including those that are inappropriate in the context (S indicates that he doesn't value H's values and doesn't fear H's fears)

GEORGE: Ohhhh. (*Too formal*) Martha? When is our son coming home, Martha?

MARTHA: Never mind.

GEORGE: No, no... I want to know... you brought it out into the open. When is he coming home, Martha?

MARTHA: I said never mind. I'm sorry I brought it up. (76)

George mentions their son, the only topic that is taboo for the couple. It is not inappropriate in the context, because Honey mentioned their child, but George provokes Martha and forces her to invent a lie about the return of their son. Martha expresses her fear with the imperative "Never mind" used in a pragmatized unit. She attempts to "close the file", but George insists. He chooses Martha as his target by repeating her name incessantly when it is unnecessary. The use of Martha's name as a vocative in the example above underscores that Martha is the target.

3. Raising of dangerously emotional or divisive topics (politics, rage, religion) (S creates a dangerous-to-face atmosphere)

MARTHA: [...] Hey, George, tell'em about the boxing match *we* had.

[...]

GEORGE (*With a sick look on his face*): You tell them, Martha. You're good at it. (*Exits*) (58)

Martha impels George to tell their guests about a boxing match that took place between them: the stress on the pronoun "we" indicates that she mentions a specific match fought between them. This emphasis is the first indication of a divisive topic, given that a boxing match entails that there is a winner and a loser. The stage indications reveal that George is sickened by Martha's behaviour, another hint that mentioning the topic serves as a face threatening act towards George. Martha begins to narrate and when she reaches the end of her narration, Nick and Honey learn that she won the match: "[...] CRASH, he landed... flat... in a huckleberry bush!" (61). Martha uses onomatopoeia in her storytelling such as "POW" and "CRASH". At the very end of the boxing story, George appears with the fake gun and "kills" Martha by uttering the onomatopoeic "POW!" (62) as a reference to Martha's own use of onomatopoeia: George answers Martha's provocation by using the same weapons she used. The dangerous atmosphere has been built, fought and brought to a climax by George before relief.

4. Bringing of bad news about H, or good news (boasting) about S (S is willing to cause distress to H, and/or doesn't care about H's feelings): This corresponds to the moment in which George tells Martha that their son has died.
5. Blatant non-cooperation in an activity – e.g. disruptively interrupting H's talk, making non-sequiturs or showing non-attention (S indicates that he doesn't care about H's negative or positive-face wants)

NICK:... if you're going to start that kind of stuff again...

GEORGE: Hark! Forest sounds.

NICK: Hm? (110)

The men are interrupted by Martha who screams off-stage; it is George who answers her, not Nick. This example shows a total lack of cooperation, because George goes beyond demonstration of non-attention in ignoring Nick's unease at George's topics of conversation altogether. Moreover, George employs a non sequitur by referring to the sound of Martha voice; it is as a result of this that Nick expresses his lack of understanding through the interjection "Hm".

The examples raised under each category show that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* fulfils the conditions of what one could call a "Positive Face Threatening Play" in which FTAs are used to destabilise the other. Characters, by playing on face-work with one another, attempt to dominate one another. *The American Dream*, on the other hand, chiefly displays acts that threaten the negative face listed by Brown and Levinson; these FTAs show that two characters, Mommy and Mrs. Barker, seek to control one another and possess what the other possesses (66). This is noteworthy in the parameters of this essay given that *The American Dream* is a criticism of materialistic America:

- Those acts that predicate some future act A of H, and in so doing put some pressure on H to do (or refrain from doing) the act A such as:

1. Orders and requests, mainly from Mommy:

To Daddy: "All right, Daddy; now listen." (72) ; "Open the door" (84)

To Grandma: "Go to bed" (82); "You be quiet" (85)

To Mrs. Barker: "I won't have you smoking in my house, and that's that! [...]" (89)

The order directed towards Mrs. Barker is one of the rare imperatives used towards the guest. It is interesting to note that Mommy elaborates upon her utterance when compared to the imperatives she uses with Grandma and Daddy. The structure she adopts is more polite than "Don't smoke", but Mommy expresses her domination over Mrs. Barker because "I" is the active subject in the sentence and so highlights her position of host with the possessive "my". However, the juxtaposed clauses reveal the weakness of her argument: "This house is her house and that's the way it is". An argument with subordinate clauses and causal relationships would strengthen her point of view, but Mommy does not demonstrate any logical explanation excepting the fact that she owns the house. Mommy's search for domination is also evident in the sentence "You be quiet" as addressed to Grandma. An explicit subject is not needed in the imperative form, and Mommy's utterance is a direct answer to Grandma in the text, so the hearer is known. Thus, the explicit reference to Grandma enables Mommy to establish her authority over her mother and places Grandma in an

infantilised position as this process is more aggressive and humiliating than an “elementary” imperative.

Returning to FTAs, one can also find

- Acts that predicate some desire of S toward H or H’s goods, giving H reason to think that he may have to take action to protect the object of S’s desire, or give it to S:
  1. Compliments, expressions of envy or admiration (S indicates that he would like something of H’s):

Mrs. Barker who says “I’ve always wanted a wheat-colored hat *myself*” (73).

Mrs. Barker is the embodiment of capitalist America; thus, such an expression of envy is not entirely surprising coming from her. The adverb “always” and the doubling of the personal pronoun under the form of a possessive pronoun reinforce Mrs. Barker’s envy. However, a comical note emerges: she possesses the same hat as Mommy, but the two women argue about its colour.

The link between performance and face-work offers significant interest because of the fact that interactants juggle between Face-Threatening Acts and Face-Flattering Acts entails that they perform according to the context and to their interlocutors. In *The American Dream*, Mommy performs another “self” when she welcomes Mrs. Barker and displays hyperpoliteness: “Would you like a cigarette, and a drink, and would you like to cross your legs?” (87). This feature of a character performing another role could be considered as a metatheatrical means to highlight the “hyperperformance” displayed in social interactions. The discrepancy between Mommy’s two selves is even more striking considering that a several lines before Mommy comments “We’re very glad to have you here, late as you are” (86), which is not a socially accepted behaviour.

These examples of FTAs corroborate the initial claim made: freedom of actions and personal desires are denied in *The American Dream* while the notion of self-image and personality is damaged in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. George and Martha seek to dominate both their guests and one another. They do so by blatantly threatening each other faces. The battle led by the characters of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is based on the individual’s personality; in *The American Dream*, the fight is conducted on materialist grounds. However, *The American Dream* offers few examples of FTAs other than Mommy’s blatant domination of her husband. Mrs. Barker is a respectable woman who needs to be flattered; thus, the family seeks to please her by being obliquely polite, or, to use Brown and Levinson’s term, by using negative or positive politeness by which the characters seek to minimise the threat to Mrs. Barker’s negative and/or positive face. The notion of

performance has likewise been analysed in relation to face-work: characters perform several roles by means of FTAs or FFAs

Nonetheless, this politeness can become incongruous when it is exaggerated and consequently, becomes humorous; such will be the focus of the next subpart.

## 2. Extreme Politeness

Let us return to Martin Esslin's claim that the Theatre of the Absurd expresses the senselessness of the human condition through “the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thoughts” (24). Rationality is absent in the two plays under study because the characters are impolite most of the time; they do not save each other's face, but they can be polite and at times even too polite.

This is what Kerbrat-Orecchioni calls “hyperpoliteness” which consists of “excessive markers of politeness in relation to conventional norms”; in the case of ironic intentions, hyperoliteness can morph into impoliteness (“L'impolitesse en interaction” 39). These extremes are not socially rational and, indeed, the characters' politeness can become ironic or incongruous. Why would they go to such extremes? This enables Edward Albee to criticise the artificiality of social norms and values by showing that even when one respects them, they can still appear absurd; language serves to intensify absurdity. While the example of the two arrivals illustrated below demonstrates that the entrances are socially conventional, given that the characters welcome their guests and the cues are made of phatic expressions and polite remarks, it equally reveals the meaninglessness of such conventions:

MARTHA (*A little too loud... to cover*): H! Hi there... c'mon in!  
HONEY AND NICK (*ad lib*): Hello, here we are... hi... *etc.*  
GEORGE (*very matter-of-factly*): You must be our little guests. (20)

GRANDMA: Come on in! (*The Young Man enters. Grandma looks him over*) Well, now, aren't you a breath of fresh air!  
YOUNG MAN: Hello there.  
GRANDMA: My, my, my. Are you the van man?  
YOUNG MAN: The what? (109)

The first example highlights the shallow aspect of the use of social conventions as the guests explicitly say “*etc*” as a marker of disinterest and George speaks mechanically, a feature reminiscent of Bergson's claim that what is comical is “[s]omething mechanical encrusted on the living” (31). Characters enact what they are supposed to say but reveal these polite expressions to be void of meaning. The same can be seen in the second example, although the absurd aspect of the Young

Man's arrival is depicted with a semantic misunderstanding. Grandma thinks that he is the van man whereas the Young Man is unaware of the existence of a van man. The theatrical nature of the plays makes it possible for Albee to stage the illusion on several levels, among them the illusion of social values through absurd and unconventional greetings. Yet, greetings are not the only social gestures mocked by the playwright. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Nick asks about a painting, a conventional way to open the conversation, but the exchange rapidly turns into an absurd conversation, sabotaging Nick's attempt to be polite:

NICK (*Indicating the abstract painting*): Who... who did the...?

MARTHA: That? Oh, that's by...

GEORGE:... some Greek with a mustache Martha attacked one night in...

HONEY (*To save the situation*): Oh, ho, ho, ho, HO.

NICK: It's got a... a...

GEORGE: A quiet intensity?

NICK: Well, no... a...

GEORGE: Oh. (*Pause*) Well, then, a certain noisy relaxed quality, maybe?

NICK (*Knows what George is doing, but stays grimly, coolly, polite*): No. What I meant was...  
(23)

Nick makes an effort to show interest in the painting he is unable to characterise. George decides to answer his guest in a comic fashion and Honey's interruption is an attempt to stop the war before it begins. Nick attempts to describe the painting while George impersonates an expert in abstract art and mocks them by using oxymorons such as “quiet intensity” and “noisy relaxed quality”. In this example, Albee not only mocks conventional social interactions, but also middle-class Americans who exhibit an abstract painting of which they know nothing purely because it is conventional to find an abstract painting in the living-room of academics.

Irony and distorted conventions are not the only tools used by Edward Albee. The playwright also denounces the artificiality of these social norms through exaggeration. When Mrs. Barker enters stage, she continually repeats “I don't mind if I do”, a very polite and highly conventional way to accept something from someone. Nonetheless, the conversation escalates to complete absurdity:

MOMMY: Would you like a cigarette, and a drink, and would you like to cross your legs?

MRS. BARKER: You forget yourself, Mommy; I'm a professional woman. But I will cross my legs.

DADDY: Yes, make yourself comfortable.

MRS. BARKER: I don't mind if I do.

[...]

MOMMY: [...] Are you sure you're comfortable? Won't you take off your dress?

MRS. BARKER: I don't mind if I do. (*She removes her dress*) (87)

Mommy begins her cue realistically as it adheres to social convention: she proposes a cigarette

using the polite modal “would”. The polysyndeton that follows (“and a drink, and...”) evokes this gradation from realism to absurdism. Indeed, Mommy ends her question by asking her guest if she would like to cross her legs, an impolite offer. Throughout the conversation, Albee exaggerates the use of the structure “I don't mind if I do”. In the adjacency pair question/pair, the question “Do you mind if...” generally expects the answer “I don't mind” as a polite answer. Here, Albee misuses the clause “I don't mind” because Mrs. Barker is supposed to say “Yes” or “No, thank you” rather than “I don't mind if I do”. Once again, Albee mingles different strategies of politeness or impoliteness; by pointing out the incongruous effects of these forms of politeness, Albee succeeds in criticising expected social norms and values.

In the United States of America, social ambition is one among several prized social ambitions. “Ambition! That's the ticket.” as Mrs. Barker says (92). To illustrate her aphorism, she recalls the life of her brother, an ambitious man, who runs a newspaper called *The Village Idiot*. She comments on this newspaper, saying:

MRS. BARKER: [...] And he'd never admit it himself, but he *is* the Village Idiot.

MOMMY: Oh, I think that's just grand. Don't you think Daddy?

DADDY: Yes, just grand. (92)

Mrs. Barker's last sentence is obviously comical. The italicised copula shows that she stresses the identity of her brother as the village idiot. However, Mommy and Daddy's answers correspond to Mrs. Barker's whole story about her brother, whom she depicts as a successful man. His career is obviously not “grand,” but Mommy and Daddy attempt to save Mrs. Barker's positive face. Nonetheless, their exaggerated and mechanical reaction can appear ironic given that Mrs. Barker makes fun of her brother, which is why this situation of politeness is humorous. This form of exaggerated politeness is not the only comedic device which generates laughter; the example below demonstrates a traditional instance of situation comedy *à la* Molière:

MOMMY: Oh, I'm so fortunate to have such a husband. Just think: I could have a husband who was poor, or argumentative, or a husband who sat in a wheelchair all day... OOOOHHHH!  
*What* have I said? What *have* I said?

GRANDMA: You said you could have a husband who sat in a wheel...

MOMMY: I'm mortified! I could die! I could cut my tongue out! I could...

MRS. BARKER (*Forcing a smile*): Oh, now... now... don't think about it... (99)

This conversation is based on Mommy's apparent clumsiness which provokes uneasiness and laughter. Mommy's cues are hyperbolic, she screams, uses interjections and stresses some words because she is annoyed at herself about her mistake. Her exaggerated reaction is itself humorous: the change in accentuation in the sentence “what have I said?” is inexplicable. The stress in the first utterance is expected, but not in the second. She could have stressed the pronoun “I” or the verb



“said” but stressing the auxiliary “have” is odd and therefore humorous. Moreover, the sequence of exclamatives is highly theatrical because of the gradation of violence around death. Furthermore, the reference to cutting one's tongue makes even more sense when one thinks that Mommy and Daddy did cut the tongue of their child and, by doing so, gave life to a well-known metaphor. Grandma also participates to the awkwardness of the moment as she answers Mommy's rhetorical question word for word. Grandma appears impervious to all social norms and does not seem to implicate anything from what her family members or guest say. She is a down-to-earth character; the opposite of the other characters who try to please one another. An example of an attempt to please the other is found below. Mrs. Barker, who is part of the Ladies' Auxiliary Air Raid Committee, asks her hosts about their opinion on air raids:

MRS. BARKER: [...] how do you feel about air raids?

MOMMY: Oh, I'd say we're hostile.

DADDY: Yes, definitely; we're hostile (98)

The subject matter is obviously comical and ironic: how could a ladies' committee defend air raids? Even though the question is debatable, Mommy and Daddy do not have close relationships with Mrs. Barker and they barely know her and her interests. Thus, they would be expected to comply with Mrs. Barker's thoughts on air raids to avoid offending her, but they do not. They give their opinion, a controversial one from Mrs. Barker's point of view, but they hedge their answer, especially Mommy. The discourse marker “oh” is the first instance of Mommy's negative answer. She prepares Mrs. Barker for a disagreement; “oh” enables the beginning of the hedging which is completed by the conditional “would” which implies that Mommy's point of view is not definite. Mommy avoids plainly asserting her point of view in order not to risk agitating Mrs. Barker. Daddy does the contrary by overtly asserting that they are hostile. He does so by opposing Mommy's conditional with the adverb “definitely” which leaves no room to doubt. The playwright, by exposing the machinery of politeness, shows that politeness can lead to the erasure of one's personal opinion. In spite of this exhibition of impoliteness, Daddy dares express his point of view, perhaps one of the only times he appears resolute.

*The American Dream* is the play containing most traces of politeness. The characters of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* do not trouble themselves with a form of politeness, however faked it can be. From the very beginning of the play, they ignore any conventional forms of social interactions with a wave of their hand. In *The American Dream*, on the other hand, a socially accepted behaviour with Mrs. Barker is a requirement, even though Mommy and Daddy seem to only play at being polite, to mimick polite patterns without meaning. Mommy and Daddy greet her warmly, offer her

to take off her dress and avoid any controversy. This aseptic behaviour becomes comical when politeness takes over personal opinion or even authentic humour. A balance cannot be found between convention and extreme politeness, this unbalance giving rise to humour. But Edward Albee is resourceful when it comes to humour. If politeness becomes comical, so does impoliteness.

### 3. Impoliteness and Humour

Impoliteness is an offence; it can lead to tensions between interactants and thus generate anguish or uneasiness. It is an overt way to antagonize someone, but in the case of *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, it can generate humour because the impoliteness is so extreme that it becomes incongruous and consequently, absurd. The encounter between Mommy, Daddy and Mrs. Barker is the first disruption of social rules. Deborah Schiffrin, when introducing her analysis of discourse markers, explains that boundaries of social life are often marked linguistically. They can “provide frames of understanding through which social life is defined [...] [e]ncounters, for example, are bracketed by opening sequences” (36). Albee displays absurd and humorous greetings in *The American Dream* when Mrs. Baker arrives at Mommy and Daddy's house:

DADDY: Come in. You're late. But, of course, we expected you to be late; we were saying that we expected you to be late.

MOMMY: Daddy, don't be rude! [...] Won't you come in?

MRS. BARKER: Thank you. I don't mind if I do.

MOMMY: We're very glad that you're here, late as you are. [...]

[...]

DADDY: Now that you're here, I don't suppose you could go away and maybe come back some other time. (86)

In this exchange, impoliteness and extreme politeness cohabit and create an absurd atmosphere. Daddy is impolite and threatens Mrs. Barker's positive face by mentioning that she is late and by insinuating that he does not want her presence in his house. However, he displays some kind of politeness when he uses the verb phrase “I don't suppose” and the adverb “maybe”, explicitly showing that it would be impolite to directly ask her to come back another time. By doing so, he saves Mrs. Barker's negative face by using one of the strategies of negative face: being conventionally indirect. However, the content of his sentence indicates that this preservation is superficial because Daddy indirectly asks Mrs. Barker to leave. On the other hand, Mommy also intends to save their guest's face by ordering her husband not be rude. This mix of politeness and impoliteness creates absurdity which in turn generates humour, because of the extreme discrepancy

between each social move. One can repair impoliteness, but not with a false negative politeness. Hence, by displaying blunt impoliteness, Edward Albee creates humour because of the incongruous situations these exchanges generate. The conversation above is set in a conventional social situation, greetings, so some traditional norms are respected such as the expressions “come in” or “we're very glad that you're here”. Humour emerges from the mix between conventional politeness and incongruous politeness. Nevertheless, an exchange between Grandma and Mrs. Barker displays a more direct impoliteness:

MRS. BARKER: Yes, we're here, Grandma. I remember you; don't you remember me?  
GRANDMA: I don't recall. Maybe you were younger, or something. (86)

The question tag “Don't you remember me?” displays that Mrs. Barker seeks approval from Grandma's part. Grandma's impoliteness is twofold: she admits that she does not remember Mrs. Barker and she adds this may be due to her age. Grandma threatens Mrs. Barker's positive face by hurting her self-image. Grandma remains the same, impolite from the beginning to the end of the play as these examples show:

MOMMY: Daddy had an operation, you know.  
MRS. BARKER: Oh, you poor Daddy! I didn't know; but then, how could I?  
GRANDMA: You might have asked; it wouldn't have hurt you. (91)

Here, Mrs. Barker saves her own face by uttering the rhetorical question “how could I?” which, in social situations, does not require any answer, or simply a sympathetic nod or “yes”. Grandma's answer, in all its impoliteness, still retains some polite traits. She uses the modal “might” in its epistemic value signalling a suggestion, but the end of her utterance is not accepted in social interactions; it is a typical way to blame someone for not having done something. The same pattern happens at the end of the play, when Mrs. Barker wishes to leave the house:

MRS. BARKER: Well, now. I think I will say good-by. I can't thank you enough (*She starts to exit through the archway*)  
GRANDMA: You're welcome. Say it!  
MRS. BARKER: Huh? What?  
GRANDMA: Say good-by.  
MRS. BARKER: Oh. Good-by. (*She exits*) (121)

This exchange is humorous because Edward Albee displays the apparatus of socially accepted and polite conversations. It is usual to say “I think I will say goodbye” as a preparatory manner to leave. It would appear blunt and impolite to stand up and utter “Goodbye”. Mrs. Barker implicates that she is about to leave but her implicature is refused by Grandma. Grandma wants her to perform what she says, that is to say uttering the word “Goodbye”. It is ironic that Grandma is impolite because

she takes the polite common phrase literally, and this irony is comedic. Mrs. Barker is herself surprised as she does not know what she has to say. Thus, humour emerges from the inadequacies between what is implicated and what is actually said.

If the examples above show explicit impoliteness, Albee also presents situations in which the reader's expectations about conventional expressions are deceived:

MRS. BARKER: [...] My, what an unattractive apartment you have! (87)

In this example, Mrs. Barker does the exact contrary to what is expected from a guest who comments on someone's house. The exclamative clause "what an unattractive apartment you have!" swindles the reader's expectation because this kind of clause is the expected way to compliment someone or someone's goods. This is emphasised by her use of the discourse marker "My" which shows her surprise. This discourse marker starts an utterance in which the speaker's stance is to be shown. The effect is even greater from the reader's part who expects Mrs. Barker to show her amazement. If Mrs. Barker says what she thinks, it was mentioned earlier that Mommy and Daddy attempt to remain polite towards Mrs. Barker so as to respect what is expected from them. The exchange below shows that the couple remains polite despite its bluntness:

DADDY: It's a very interesting answer.

MRS. BARKER: I thought so. But, does it help?

MOMMY: No, I'm afraid not. (91)

In this exchange, Mommy and Daddy both save and threaten Mrs. Barker's face. Daddy saves her positive face by using the stylistic tool of exaggeration as seen with the use of the intensive modifier "very". Mommy, on her part, admits that Mrs. Barker's "very interesting" answer is not useful but she attenuates her disappointment by hedging her utterance with the clause "I'm afraid not".

Impoliteness becomes a humorous tool in the hands of Edward Albee. It can be overtly offending, especially in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but in the case of *The American Dream*, impoliteness plays with the reader's expectations. Politeness is part of a set of expected behaviours, such as complimenting someone's house. In *The American Dream*, Albee presents the exact opposite of conventional politeness, thus creating laughter but also anguish, derived from tensions created by impoliteness. Contrary to impoliteness in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee plays with social norms in *The American Dream*. When George mocks Nick's attempt to describe the abstract painting, it is more violent than Mrs. Barker saying that she is in an unattractive apartment because irony, by its sarcastic nature, can be more hurtful than a straightforward impolite remark. Thus,

impoliteness is hurtful in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* whereas it is mostly humorous in *The American Dream*.

Edward Albee thought that artificial values pervaded the US because of “moral, intellectual, and emotional laziness” (Diehl 25). *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The American Dream* are not intended as passive theatrical experiences. Albee staged two plays in which social interactions are both realistic and absurd. Creating tension between conventionality and incongruity raises awareness within the audience, such that they analyse their own social habits. Preserving or threatening one's face as well as being polite or impolite is usual, but Albee pushes these behaviours to the extreme in his plays.

Impoliteness is not always total in *The American Dream*, except with Grandma who shares common traits with Martha and George. *The American Dream* is a play about artificial values. It is Albee's plea for a better society and he attempts to amend the American society by showing incongruous social behaviours on stage or on the page. Grandma is the embodiment of real values as she says what she believes. She is impolite, but she is an authentic character. Grandma's cues are humorous because one can recognise the social situations depicted and the excess of these situations. When reading Grandma's lines, one laughs at oneself, but when confronted with Daddy and Mommy's incongruous politeness, one spots the downward spiral of society. Politeness ensures the survival of social interactions and well-being, but it also sterilises social relationships. Thus, a “Delicate Balance” needs to be found to develop true relationships.

## **B – Pacification Towards a Consensus versus a Thirst for Power: Adjusting to the Other, Readjusting the Other**

As explained above, when people communicate they tend to adapt to each other because speakers may not share the same representations, connotations and denotations of the words used as well as the same register. Obstacles tend to be removed for the conversation to go smoothly. Thus, speaking is not an entirely mechanical process devoid of choices. Speakers make several choices when they utter a sentence such as the choice of words, intonation or stress. If the activity of speaking was determined by strict rules, there would be no misunderstandings, no irony, no puns or no metaphors. Antoine Culioli defined the activity of language as a construction: “an utterance is an event which, through the traces which realise it, adjusts the representations of a locutor to the

ones of an interlocutor” (1999b: 9).<sup>10</sup> Thus, Culioli links the concept of utterance with the concept of adjustment. From his point of view, an utterance contains one or several adjustments so as to recenter understanding between the locutor and the interlocutor. Indeed, “we adapt, we adjust to one another so that our subjective representations are understandable by others” (1999b: 92).<sup>11</sup>

Culioli built his theory of language around the notion of enunciative operations. Marie-Line Groussier describes the main tenets of Culioli's *Theory of Enunciative Operations*. She explains that the title refers to several concepts:

*enunciative* highlights the prominent place, in the theory, of the uttering Situation (*Sit.*) in which an utterance is constructed by an enunciator (S,) at a moment of uttering (*TO*). As for *operations*, it refers to the formalized processes of construction of utterances from notional representations. (161)

From this definition, the reader can infer three pieces of information: The speaker utters a sentence from “notional representations” in a given situation. Culioli specifies that a “notion can be defined as a complex of physic-cultural representations and should not be equated with lexical labels” (1990: 181). On notions, Groussier adds that they “do not emerge as such in linguistic phenomena: they emerge as occurrences, that is, as mentions of the notion in a specific context” (165). This is why speakers may have different representations of a notion. It amounts to saying that the sentence “I like this wine” does not have the same meaning for a speaker A and a speaker B in contexts X and Y. This utterance can mean “I like this wine and not another” or “I like this wine, although I usually don't like it”. Culioli also argues that “the activity of language does not consist in conveying meaning, but it consists in producing and recognising forms as tracks of operations (of representation, referenciation and regulation)”(1990: 26).<sup>12</sup> This is why speaking is not a mechanical process but more a process of recognition and representation of notions. Culioli notes that “the notion is a work of abstraction, a construction of organised representations which allows intersubjective adjustment”(1999b: 18).<sup>13</sup> As notions are abstraction, they need to be recognised by the interlocutors, hence intersubjective adjustment.

On the subject of adjustment, Culioli specifies two measures that result from intersubjective adjustment (2018: 167):

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10 « Un énoncé est un événement qui, à travers la trace qui le matérialise, ajuste les représentations d'un locuteur à celles d'un interlocuteur »

11 « Nous nous accordons, nous nous ajustons les uns aux autres, de sorte que nos représentations subjectives soient à portée d'autrui »

12 « L'activité du langage ne consiste pas à véhiculer du sens, mais à produire et à reconnaître des formes en tant que traces d'opérations (de représentation, référenciation et régulation) »

13« La notion est un travail d'abstraction, une construction de représentations organisées qui permet l'ajustement intersubjectif »

- A measure of adequation between what is said what actually is; or between two states of affair (description, argumentation, polemic, etc.). The adequation lies in the non-discontinuity between the present state and the considered state: no material, psychological or institutional obstacle.<sup>14</sup>
- The measure of strength (intensity) of the commitment or of the reaction (positive or negative) of a subject towards another subject. Hence surprise, indignation, empathic confirmation, irony...<sup>15</sup>

More broadly, Culioli describes the activity of language as happening on three levels (1999a: 161-162):

- Operations of representations which themselves contain three levels:
  - The notional level: level of mental representations, linked to our cognitive and emotional activities
  - Arranging markers (mental operations which allow the transition from the first level to the second one; level where tracks form utterances)
  - Representations of the representations of the second level. This level enables to model the representations.
- Operations of referenciation
- Operations of regulation

If one keeps in mind that language is not built but recognised, then “the relation between production and recognition supposes the capacity of adjustment between the subjects” (1990: 26).<sup>16</sup> Adjustment between the enunciators is fundamental because speakers may have different representations of notions. Adjustments correct possible misunderstandings. Moreover, more than claiming that language is a construction, Culioli argues that “we always adjust, and we perceive the existence of adjustment in others' productions. The absence of adjustment is perceived as strange or intentional” (1990: 38).

Adjustments are justified by the fact that language is not a strict formula:

We need to consider at the heart of the activity of language [...] adjustment, which involves at the same time stability and deformability of objects being in these dynamic relationships, the construction of areas and fields where the subjects will have the necessary looseness to their activity of enunciators-locutors.<sup>17</sup> (1990: 129)

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14 « Une mesure d'adéquation entre ce qui est dit et ce qui est le cas ; ou entre deux états de choses (description, argumentation, polémique, etc.). L'adéquation réside dans la non-discontinuité entre l'actuel et l'envisagé : pas d'obstacle, matériel ou psychologique ou institutionnel. »

15 « La mesure de force (d'intensité) de l'engagement ou de la réaction (positive ou négative) d'un sujet à l'égard d'un autre sujet. D'où la surprise, l'indignation, la confirmation empathique, l'ironie... »

16 « La représentation n'est donc pas véhiculée, mais reconstruite. La relation entre production et reconnaissance suppose la capacité d'ajustement entre les sujets »

17 « Il nous faut poser au cœur de l'activité du langage [...] l'ajustement, ce qui implique à la fois la stabilité et la déformabilité d'objets pris dans ces relations dynamiques, la construction de domaines, d'espaces et de champs où les sujets auront le jeu nécessaire à leur activité d'énonciateurs-locuteurs »

However, if the activity of communication is not strictly stable, it is not totally unstable: “without stability, there would be no regular adjustment, no communication [...] and interaction would only be a succession of incoherent events”(Culioli, 1990: 129).<sup>18</sup>

In a nutshell,

Uttering is building an area, it is orienting, determining, establishing a network of referential values, in short, a system of identification. Every utterance is identified in comparison to a situation of enunciation which is defined in comparison to a first enunciative subject L0 and to a time of enunciation T0. <sup>19</sup> (1999b: 44)

Thus, one could claim that “to communicate is to adjust”. The enunciator will adjust his utterance to the representation he has of his interlocutor. For example, no citizen would use an informal register with the Queen Elizabeth II because they would have a specific representation of her that would be political superiority.

However, adjustments are not the only technique to modify one's utterance. Readjustments also exist, and they occur after the process of adjustment has been made, when the markers used by the enunciator “do not, or no longer, suit [the intended representations]” (Pennec 8). This technique enables the enunciator to re-adjust his utterance. “Readjustments relate to either preventing or eliminating discrepancies or non-coincidences” (Pennec 9). Non-coincidences entail a lack of mutual understanding, of harmony between the co-enunciators. One can nuance or specify their utterance to avoid any ambiguity. “Reflexive comments” such as “X, if you know what I mean”, “X, in a figurative sense” or “X, or rather Y” illustrate cases of non-coincidences according to Jacqueline Authier-Revuz (25).

The two plays under study display such phenomena of adjustments and readjustments. They allow adaptation and accommodation to the other in order to preserve or readjust social norms. Indeed, even though the plays are demonstrations of impoliteness and domination through language, some attempts are made to preserve a bearable atmosphere. On the other hand, (re)adjustments enable the characters to establish one's authority or superiority. To correct or rectify someone is to highlight a mistake. Some of the examples of socially accepted adjustments will be studied below to show that the plays are not only absurd and incongruous and that humour can emerge from recognisable

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18 « Sans stabilité, il n'y aurait pas d'ajustement régulier, pas de communication [...] et l'interaction ne serait qu'une succession d'événements sans cohérence »

19 « Enoncer, c'est construire un espace, orienter, déterminer, établir un réseau de valeurs référentielles, bref, un système de repérage. Tout énoncé est repéré par rapport à une situation d'énonciation qui est définie par rapport à un premier sujet énonciateur L0 et à un temps d'énonciation T0 »



situations in which characters adjust to one another. The following sections will help understand the mechanisms disrupting or preserving social harmony.

## **1. Adjustment and Readjustment: Adapting to the Other and Readjusting Social Norms**

Adjustments and readjustments allow a mutual understanding between the interlocutors which means that conversations are led without provocative intentions. In the two plays under study, these mechanisms show a wish to pacify situations and to readjust social norms. Readjustments are divided into two subcategories: Intersubjective readjustments and intrasubjective readjustments. Intersubjective readjustments enable “the locutor to adapt to the co-enunciator” (Pennec 41); as for intrasubjective readjustments, “the enunciator aims as a matter of priority for the coincidence between his/her own thoughts and words, or between the words and things they refer to” (Ibid.).

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, George is the character who attempts the most to adapt to his interlocutors. Martha is in conflict with both her husband and her guests while Nick and Honey, for their part, are subjected to George and Martha's games and interrogations. Some conversations will be analysed below in order to highlight the apparatus of George's adjustments to the others and his intrasubjective readjustments.

At the beginning of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George and Martha argue about George's lack of energy and when Martha says that she doesn't bray, George answers “All right... you don't bray” (8). He decides to give up the verbal fight to save Martha's positive face by using the concessive interjection “all right”. It is interesting to note that Martha claims that she does not bray while she is actually braying: “I DON'T BRAY” (8). This comical note sets the tone about Martha's behaviour and partly explains why George gives up the linguistic battle and pacifies the situation while Martha's reaction increases tensions between them.

In the middle of the play, Nick does the same when Honey wants to drink another glass of brandy:

NICK (*Giving up*): Well, if you think it's a good idea.

HONEY: I know what's best for me, dear (137)

Here, concession is seen with the stage direction “*giving up*”, but also with the discourse marker “well”. Schiffirin explains that “well” can precede a parents' response to their children's request when those responses reject rather than grant (102). Most of Honey's remarks are childish and Nick

is often patronising her. In the example above, “well”, generally signalling an obstacle encountered in discourse, is here used as a concessive device. However, another meaning can be derived from the context: disapproval.

Later in the play, George has a conversation with Nick which could be characterised as trivial. It is a conventional way to fuel a conversation:

GEORGE: [...] Well... (*Pause*) You like it here?

NICK (*Looking about the room*): Yes... it's... it's fine.

GEORGE: I mean the University.

NICK: Oh... I thought you meant...

GEORGE: Yes... I can see you did. (*Pause*) I meant the University. (33)

This example is a case of fluctuating reference, reference meaning “the set of phenomena allowing us to associate an utterance with entities and events in the world” (Pennec 28). A few lines before this exchange, George and Nick were talking about the reasons why they became teachers, so the deictic “here” refers to the University in George's mind.<sup>20</sup> However, Nick infers that “here” refers to the room they are in. This misunderstanding – reminiscent of the vaudevillian tradition – forces George to readjust his utterance by explicitly mentioning the University. He clarifies his question in a polite way. This readjustment is an exhibition of cooperative behaviour from George's part, even though the misunderstanding is comical. Later in the play, George attempts to remain polite so as to not hurt Nick's feelings:

GEORGE: [...] You wife doesn't have any hips... has she... does she?

NICK: What?

GEORGE: I don't mean to suggest that I'm hip-happy... [...] I was implying that your wife is... slim-hipped. (41)

This excerpt is an example of intersubjective and intrasubjective readjustments. The intersubjective readjustment happens after Nick explicitly asked for a readjustment (“What?”) following George's attempt to minimise the effect of his utterance. This is a case of “distancing process”, when “an enunciator can remove him/herself from an initial enunciative perspective so as to adopt another, that is more relevant in his/her eyes” (Pennec 44). First, George tries to adjust and nuance his question with an attempt to find the right formulation so as to avoid hurting Nick: “has she... does she...” and then, he goes through a distancing process in the clause “I don't mean to”.

Even though George sometimes attempts to please and preserve his guests, he also shows disinterest in the others and, consequently, he displays self-interest:

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<sup>20</sup> A deictic is a word or phrase whose semantic meaning depends on the context in which it is used. Deictics include space deixis (“here”), time deixis (“today”) and person deixis (“You”).

GEORGE: The *Biology* Department... of course. I seem preoccupied with history. Oh! What a remark. (*He strikes a pose, his hand over his heart, his head raised, his voice stentorian*) “I am preoccupied with history”. (53)

This excerpt illustrates George's umpteenth mistake on Nick's specialty. This example is interesting to analyse because George comments on his own utterance and reformulates it with a change in verb. From a nuanced “seem”, George asserts his claim through the use of “be”. This is justified by the theatricality of his claim, which then needs to be reinforced.

In the 1962 play, George adapts to his guests, especially Nick, but also puts on a performance. Adjustments are an attempt to save his guests' faces, while intrasubjective readjustments are a way to put himself on a pedestal, to prove his knowledge and his metatheatrical identity.

*The American Dream*, on the other hand, displays very few instances of adjustments. Accommodation and adaptation are not a priority for the characters. Grandma is the only one who attempts to adapt to her interlocutor, namely The Young Man.

GRANDMA: [...] Why do you say you'd do almost anything for money... if you don't mind my being nosy.

YOUNG MAN: No, no. It's part of the interview. I'll be happy to tell you. [...] (115)

The suspension marks indicate Grandma's cognitive process. It seems that the question she just asked is too straightforward, so she must add a polite and rhetorical element to her utterance. Grandma rarely adjusts to her interlocutors and examples in the second subpart will illustrate her as the main source of intersubjective readjustments in *The American Dream*. However, she displays some marks of politeness towards the Young Man. The added structure “if you don't mind my being nosy” is an avowal of her curiosity, which may be inappropriate and she supposedly gives a choice to The Young Man: he can answer her question, or not, or rather he can answer her question honestly or lie. Thus the added structure has more a pragmatic value than a semantic one.

These few examples show that adjustments and readjustments as a way to preserve the other are scarce. Both plays are concerned with dominating the other. This echoes what was studied earlier about impoliteness and the threat of one's face to dominate the conversations. It corresponds to what Culioli specified about adjustments: “adjustment is not (except in the case of standardised activities operating homogeneous and restricted domains) a benevolent activity aiming to result in a transparent and successful communication (informative or injunctive)” (1999b:137).<sup>21</sup>

21 « L'ajustement ne se ramène pas (sauf dans le cas d'activités normées opérant des domaines homogènes et restreints) à une coopération bienveillante, en vue d'aboutir à une communication (informative ou injonctive) transparente et réussie »

Communication is not benevolent and transparent in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; communication is a weapon to destabilise the other.

## 2. Readjustments: Destabilising the Other

*The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* do not display a significant communicative cooperation; one mainly witnesses attempts to destabilise the other by correcting him/her. This process of taking power through readjustments is largely used by the characters in both plays. Highlighting that one is wrong is a way to assert power and domination. The examples studied in this part will show the different ways in which the characters rectify one another with the purpose of destabilisation, which shows that characters seek to take control over the others and, consequently, that the thirst for power and domination permeates social relationships.

The beginning of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* sets the tone of the play, with George and Martha having a heated conversation:

MARTHA: THEY'RE MY BIG TEETH!

GEORGE: Some of them... Some of them... (15)

This exchange happens after George accused Martha of eating ice cubes which could cause her “big teeth” to “crack” (15). Martha's utterance implies that she is talking about the whole set of her teeth, but George corrects her as the quantifier “some” shows. This reformulation is an attack on Martha's integrity because it does not participate in reestablishing a truth or bring about a clarification.

George, in a different kind of conversation, also takes power over Nick when he dwells on details and forces Nick to admit defeat:

GEORGE: What made you decide to be a teacher?

NICK: Oh... well, the same things that... uh... motivated you, I imagine.

GEORGE: What were they?

NICK (*Formal*): Pardon?

GEORGE: I said, what were they? What were the things that motivated me?

NICK (*Laughing uneasily*): Well... I'm sure I don't know.

GEORGE: You just finished saying that the things that motivated you were the same things that motivated me.

NICK (*With a little pique*): I said I imagined they were. (32-33)

This conversation is one example of the cockfight led between Nick and George throughout the play. George provokes Nick until he loses his temper. Nick's first cue is a conventional way to avoid giving a precise answer. His hesitation is visible through the use of the discourse markers “oh” and “well” which suggest that George's question surprises him; that is why his answer is vague.

However, George ignores Nick's uneasiness and insists, pushing him to the limits. Nick asks for a clarification of George's question, but George repeats his first question word for word before readjusting it. This hetero-repetition could be interpreted as a form of humiliation because "Pardon?" does not mean that Nick did not hear George, but he that did not understand the meaning of his question. A second intersubjective readjustment comes into play when Nick rectifies George's choice of verb. Nick did not say but imagined that they were both motivated by the same reasons. From the last few examples studied, George seems to be a dominant character who underlines the others' weaknesses, and Nick seems to suffer from George's attacks, but Nick quickly forgets his good manners:

GEORGE: You're twenty-one!

NICK: Twenty-eight.

GEORGE: Twenty-eight! Perhaps when you're forty something and look fifty-five, you will run the History Department...

NICK: ... Biology... (41)

In this example, George makes two mistakes about fundamental pieces of information on Nick: his age and the department he works in. As George already knows these facts, Nick's reaction is not surprising. Nick does not produce complete sentences; he only rectifies the necessary words uttered by George. By doing so, Nick allows himself to boldly correct his interlocutor. This is a sign of superiority which shows that Nick is not afraid of George. George generally dominates his exchanges with Nick, but here, his guest masters language and takes power over George as his boldness and impoliteness show.

In *The American Dream*, Mommy is the dominant character. Most concessions come from Daddy who avoids arguments:

DADDY: That's the way things are today; you just can't get satisfaction; you just try.

MOMMY: Well, *I* got satisfaction.

DADDY: That's right, Mommy. You *did* get satisfaction, didn't you? (74)

This exchange is interesting to study because concession occurs on several levels: Daddy emphasises the fact that she got satisfaction by using the interjection "that's right", italics and the question-tag "didn't you?". The purpose of this negative interrogation is to seek approval, which Mommy does not give in her next answer. Another important feature of this dialogue is the presence of a rectification from the part of Mommy. She rectifies Daddy to dominate him and to force him to adapt to her.

If Mommy is the dominant character, Grandma revolts against Daddy's childish behaviour when he

wants his audience to watch him open the door. Mommy answers “We're watching; we're watching” while Grandma rectifies her sentence: “*I'm* not” (85). However, even if Grandma appears like the most reasonable character, she sometimes loses verbal jousting because her interlocutors do not save her face:

GRANDMA: Well, you were. You weren't *here*, exactly, because we've moved around a lot, [...] up and down the social ladder like mice, if you like similes.  
MRS. BARKER: I don't... particularly (103)

It is interesting to note that Grandma is aware of the misunderstanding that the deictic “here” can provoke, so she readjusts her utterance by explaining that “here” does not refer directly to the place they are in. Grandma also attempts to create connivance between her and Mrs. Barker by emphasising her use of a simile, and even though Mrs. Barker refuses to build this bond, she readjusts her discourse to save Grandma's face by using an adverb. This addition modifies the scope of the negation because without the adverb “particularly”, the negation would cover “I don't + like” whereas here, “particularly” is under the scope of the negation which, consequently, modifies Mrs. Barker's whole message who evaluates the scope of the negation afterwards. The cognitive process she goes through is visible with the use of ellipsis; she seems to realise that she needs to be tactful.

Readjustments are a way to destabilise the other. However, rectifications also participate in giving an absurd and humorous aspect to the conversations. When Mommy asks Mrs. Barker to take off her dress, she does so; then, Mommy says “You must feel a great deal more comfortable” to which Mrs. Barker answers “Well, I certainly *look* a great deal more comfortable” (88). The change affecting the verb phrase is the only major change which happens in these utterances. The predicative relation remains quite the same as it could be summarised as “Mrs. Barker/is comfortable”. The difference is based on the semantic meaning of “feel” and “look”. “Feel” refers to Mrs. Barker's own sensation, whereas “look” refers to her external appearance and knowing that she is nearly-naked, one could say that she definitely looks a great deal more comfortable. Consequently, her cue is witty and she swindles the readers' expectations.

Rectifying one's utterance is, as we have seen, a way to dominate the other because the one who rectifies is the one who has the last word. When underlining that the locutor is wrong, the interlocutor takes over and proves his/her superiority. Nonetheless, if adjustments and readjustments are used to destabilise the other, they are also a tool to show one's linguistic adequacy and superiority.

### 3. Readjustments: Mastering Linguistic Knowledge

Correcting the other is a way to destabilise and dominate when the readjustment is based on what is said, but it is not the only purpose. When the readjustment is based on how things are said, the interlocutor proves that he/she masters language; it is also a demonstration of power because mastering language is an evidence of knowledge.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the characters fight on linguistic grounds to diminish the accuracy of what the other says. In this way, the one who corrects is the one who has power. The excerpts analysed below show how the characters point out the others' linguistic mistakes to control the situations and protect themselves by threatening the others' faces.

GEORGE: You're the one! You're the one who's going to make all that trouble... making everyone the same, rearranging the chromozones, or whatever it is. Isn't that right?

NICK (*With that small smile*): Not exactly: *chromosomes*. (39)

Nick's rectification of George's mistake is a demonstration of power. In the play, the one who masters language is the one who wins the battle. This intersubjective readjustment is based on a misunderstanding. George looks for Nick's confession with the question-tag "isn't that right?", but this approval concerns his whole idea of "making everyone the same". In return, Nick corrects him and does not answer his question in the end. This shows that Nick is not interested in what George says or asks about, but he enjoys underlining George's mistake. Martha, in all her showiness, fights the "total war" she began with her husband. One of her weapons is linguistic adequacy, more precisely conjugation. In the example below, she interrupts George to correct his grammar:

GEORGE (*Very cheerfully*): Well, now, let me see. I've got ice...

MARTHA: ... GOTTEN...

GEORGE: Got, Martha. Got is perfectly correct... it's just a little... archaic, like you. (183)

In this conversation, Martha corrects George on the conjugation of a verb, but George uses "a perfectly correct" form. Thus, he rectifies her rectification and then allows himself to make a witty comparison between Martha and the archaic form he uses. More than correcting Martha, George also shows his mastering of stylistic devices. Martha's attempt to highlight a mistake ends up being corrected and defeated. However, if this excerpt displays George's supposed liking of linguistic accuracy, he does not worry about preserving Nick's face when it comes to apologising:

NICK (*Almost a warning*): I told you we didn't have children.

GEORGE: Hm? (*Realizing*) Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't even listening... or thinking... (*With a flick of hand*)... whichever one applies. (49)

In this example, George intends to be semantically precise. He corrects himself by changing the

verb “listening” into “thinking”, from a verb of action to a cognitive verb, but he does not seem convinced so he makes another intrasubjective readjustment with the last segment “whichever one applies”. The indefinite pronoun “whichever” suggests vagueness, so one can infer that George is not sure of which verb to choose and he is not troubled by the situation. This intrasubjective readjustment is first an illustration of George's attempt to find the right formulation, and secondly his carelessness.

Correcting the other is a way to push oneself forward, to show one's mastery of language, but it is also a way to rectify the other's thoughts and opinion on oneself. In the conversation below, Nick and George discuss about the difference between being sick and throwing up:

GEORGE: Your wife throws up a lot, eh?

NICK: I didn't say that... I said she gets sick quite easily. (103)

George's comment on Honey's sickness is true, but Nick prefers to correct George's register which can appear too familiar or blunt, and he does so by using a euphemism. It is more socially accepted to say that one gets sick rather than throws up. Thus, the intersubjective readjustment made by Nick concerns the lexical choice to name Honey's sickness. Semantically, both utterances are true and have the same meaning, but Nick attenuates both the verb chosen and the modifier; “a lot” becomes “quite easily”. The resort to euphemism is a technique used by Honey and underlined by George at the beginning of the play:

NICK (*To Honey*): Are you all right?

HONEY: Of course, dear. I want to... put some powder on my nose.

GEORGE (*As Martha is not getting up*): Martha, won't you show her where we keep the... euphemism? (30)

George, by bringing the euphemism to light, cancels its effects but also perpetuates the euphemism by avoiding mentioning the toilets. Even though Nick and Honey use litotes to save their face and remain polite, they can be more straightforward:

HONEY: I like to dance with you and you don't want me to.

NICK: *I like you to dance* (144)

In this example, the readjustment is based on the play on personal pronouns. “I” is always the enunciator and “you” the co-enunciator but these roles are inverted when turn-taking happens. Thus, Nick's hetero reformulation is in fact about himself. The difference is also made between the complements of the transitive verb “like”. Honey's utterance can be outlined as such: “I like to X (complement) with Y” whereas Nick says “I like Y (complement) to X”. This shows that Nick's answer is witty because he manipulates language by using the same words as Honey. This strategy



enables him to use Honey's "weapon" against herself and, consequently, to justify his refusal to dance with her.

In *The American Dream*, readjustments occur less often because Mommy has already established her authority in the household and is rarely contradicted, except from Grandma who revolts against her daughter:

MOMMY: [...] (*To Grandma*): And it's you that takes up all the space, with your enema bottles.<sup>22</sup> [...]

[...]

MRS. BARKER: I've never heard of enema *bottles*...

GRANDMA: She means enema bags, but she doesn't know the difference. (95)

Grandma's commentary is comical because she does not rectify Mommy's mistake until Mrs. Barker raises the semantic issue. Moreover, Grandma assumes that her daughter's mistake is normal because of her lack of knowledge. Grandma corrects her daughter several times throughout the play. She does not debate with her on her ideas, but she corrects her mistakes as the example below shows:

MOMMY: You seem to forget that you're a guest in this house...

GRANDMA: Apartment! (107)

This example is slightly different from the one mentioned above because Grandma does not refer to Mommy's lack of knowledge, but to her lexical choice. Grandma's readjustment is unnecessary in the plot or even in the conversation between Mommy and Mrs. Barker, but, by reminding her daughter that they live in an apartment, Grandma may implicate that Mommy and Daddy were not successful enough to live in a house or she can imply that she sides with Mrs. Barker because in rectifying Mommy, she points out a linguistic weakness, a lack of linguistic precision and, by highlighting Mommy's mistake, Grandma takes power over her daughter.

Nonetheless, agreement with social linguistic norms also happens with Grandma who accepts Mrs. Barker's rectification when she recalls the story of the child's mutilation:

MRS. BARKER: A what?

GRANDMA: A bumble; a bumble of joy.

MRS. BARKER: Oh, like bundle.

GRANDMA: Well, yes; [...] (102-103)

Grandma admits her mistake and complies with Mrs. Barker's rectification as the marker "well" shows. This acceptance from Grandma's part, however surprising it can be, can be explained by her wish to tell her story. Making a linguistic mistake is less important than telling Mrs. Barker the

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22 Grammatical mistake originally present in the play.

story about the “bumble of joy”.

The excerpts analysed above are instances of linguistic rectifications. If readjustments can happen on a semantic or lexical level, they can also concern linguistic adequacy itself. These corrections are not vital to the plots because they do not have any repercussion on what is intrinsically said. Even if Grandma says “bumble” instead of “bundle” or if George says “chromozones”, the content of their utterances are understandable. These mistakes can make the reader laugh or at least smile, but the impact on the plots is weak. Thus, one can wonder why Edward Albee has his characters correct one another. This can be explained by the fact that, as mentioned in the first part of this study, linguistic knowledge and mastery are the battlefield. The characters rarely fight physically, and one way to get the upper hand is to show one's expertise in the linguistic field.

As Culioli asserts, language is made of subjective representations of notions. This view justifies the need for adjustments and readjustments in the activity of language. These phenomena enable the interlocutors to understand each other and, in the end, communicate. But this does not mean that adjustments allow a benevolent and transparent communication. Some misunderstandings can still emerge, deliberately or not. In the two plays under study, adjustments and readjustments are mainly made to take power over the other. The first subpart concerning the adaptation to the other showed that these phenomena were rare in the plays. Indeed, characters mainly seek to correct and rectify one another to demonstrate their amount of semantic and lexical knowledge. Moreover, when a character interrupts the locutor to correct him/her, he has his/her voice heard. Interrupting someone is stopping an utterance, a flow of words, a flow of ideas that are about to be materialised, so it is another way to destabilise the other. Interruption occurs on two levels: First, the uttering in itself is stopped, and then, the notions that are subjectively materialised are corrected, discredited. Thus, adjustments and readjustments are tools and even weapons to take power, not to adapt to the other.

Social interactions are central in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because both plays begin on the social activity of welcoming guests. While Mrs. Barker is late in *The American Dream*, Nick and Honey are not made welcomed in George and Martha's house. They are visiting because Martha's father “said [they] should be nice to them!”(11). Thus, the reader can sense some animosity from the beginning of the plays. But animosity does not only concern the guests. Both couples fight, each in its own way: Mommy wants Daddy to listen and agree with her while Martha and George are fighting a merciless linguistic battle. These linguistic conflicts are fought on several levels: the choice between preserving or threatening one's face through (im)politeness and the deliberate rectification of one's mistakes. The interactions between the

characters are both socially realistic and incongruous. Characters are sometimes polite, but they mostly display incongruous politeness. Contrastingly, characters are often impolite, and this impoliteness is either comical or almost violent. The numerous resorts to imperatives, exclamatives or irony are instances of aggressive atmosphere reigning in the plays. Preserving the other's face or adapting to the other in order to facilitate communication are not priorities. These are even exceptions to the rule as the rule is to take power over the other and to insinuate "Who's Afraid of Me?". Albee deconstructs the social codes and conventions ruling social interactions and it is made through the theatrical medium. By having his characters either try to save or threaten the other's face, the playwright shows the power tensions underlying social relationships and interactions. Moreover, face-work is a performing ground for the characters who wear masks and perform different roles.

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### III - “Violence! Violence!”: Edward Albee’s Bloody Theatre

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“I find pain and laughter very close.”

Edward Albee

Why would Edward Albee's drama be partly defined as bloody? *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* do not display blood, not even physical violence. Edward Albee intends to “bloody” his audience by strongly involving it; he wants to shock the spectator and violence is a means to this end. He stated that “I want the audience as participant [...] sometimes we should literally draw blood” (Personal interview with M. Roudané qtd. in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* 50). Albee further explains his point of view in an interview with Matthew Roudané:

All drama goes for blood in one way or another. Some drama, which contains itself behind the invisible fourth wall, does it by giving the audience the illusion that it is the spectator. This isn't always true: if the drama succeeds the audience is bloodied, but in a different way. And sometimes the act of aggression is direct or indirect, but it is always an act of aggression. And this is why I try very hard to involve the audience” (“Thematic Unity in the Theater of Edward Albee” 195)

Colin Enriquez develops Albee's claim and points out that “[a]s an antidote to this passive complicity to the irresponsible distraction from matters of human development and social injustice, Albee prescribes a treatment of shock by way of violent confrontation” (147). This “violent confrontation” seems to be the only means that would make the audience react and become conscious: “Albee sees dramatic violence both as metaphoric of sublimated social violence and as an alarm to wake somnambulant audiences from their complicity to the social injustice around them”. (Enriquez 148). It is important to note that dramatic violence in the two plays under study is verbally performed on stage (for instance, George and Martha's verbal jousting) and physically performed off stage (the dismemberment of Mommy and Daddy's child). This difference in the performance of violence can be linked to the concepts of “mimesis” and “diegesis”, the former being “imitation”, “representation”, “enactment” and the latter being defined as “narrative”, “narration” (Halliwell 129). Thus, in *The American Dream*, the child's homicide is diegetic whereas in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, it is almost mimetic. Indeed, even though the murder is linguistic, the representation of the child (which could almost be palpable) is killed. This difference between the two modes is significant because it modifies the analysis of violence in the two plays: Violence is almost physical (and it is performed on stage) in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*,

whereas it is verbal, performed off-stage and before the time of narration in *The American Dream*.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The American Dream*, Edward Albee mixes comedy with violence. These two concepts are not antithetic: laughter can emerge from violence and violence can emerge from laughter. This combination of comedy and violence is neither new nor unique to the two plays under study because, as Matthew Roudané explains, “[v]erbal dueling and death – real and imagined, physical and psychological – pervade the Albee canon. Throughout his career, Albee continually returns to exploring the darker side of the human soulscape” (“Thematic Unity” 106).

These darker sides are treated with humour, thus creating a discrepancy between form and substance. The conversation between Grandma and Mrs. Barker about the mutilation of the baby, for instance, is cruel but Mrs. Barker's reaction generates laughter. She comments upon the proceedings by adding her own impressions: “A much better idea!”, “Well, I hope they cut its tongue out!” (105). This moment is particularly destabilising for the audience who may feel unsettled. The articulation of humour and a serious subject is typical of dark comedy. Dark comedy is the “swing between the extremes of tragedy and farce” (Styan 282); a dark comedy first “must surprise, dislocate, fragment and disorient, forcing the spectator to uncomfortable judgment” (Orr 11). Moreover, a writer must “balance loves and hates, which may cause us to sympathize with the villain, laugh at misfortune, and forgive the sinner” (Styan 286). Dark comedy displays “comic repetition against tragic downfall. It demonstrates the coexistence of amusement and pity, terror and laughter” (Orr 1). Colletta explains that dark humour “presents violent or traumatic events and questions the values and perceptions of its readers as it represents, simultaneously, the horrifying and the humorous” (2).

Berger summarises these different genres of humour:

So-called black humor defies the tragic, as its synonym, gallow humor graphically suggests. Then there is grotesque humor, in which the tragic is absorbed into an absurd universe [...]. In tragicomedy, the tragic is not banished, not defied, not absorbed. It is, as it were, momentarily suspended. (117)

Albee's writing falls into these definitions because the playwright presents taboo subjects such as sexuality, maternity and murder from a comic point of view as a way to question the values of the play's audience. This use of dark comedy, along with other writing techniques, enable the author to widen the tensions between realism and absurdism as well as to shock the audience.

The same distortion happens in the 1962 play. When George announces to Martha that he received a telegram informing them that their son was dead, she becomes hysterical and violence escalates

until a grotesque move from George:

MARTHA: YOU CAN'T KILL HIM! YOU CAN'T HAVE HIM DIE!

[...]

GEORGE: There was a telegram, Martha.

MARTHA (*Up; facing him*): Show it to me! Show me the telegram!

GEORGE (*Long pause; then, with a straight face*): I ate it. (248)

George's answer suspends the climatic tension that was built between he and Martha. First because his answer is incongruous and, consequently, funny; secondly because he utters a simple sentence made of a subject, a verb and an object; and finally, because he gives no explanation for his act. In her previous cues, Martha uses the imperative and expressed emotion through the use of capital letters and an exclamation mark. George's answer is simple and straightforward, as indicated in the stage directions. Hence, violence emerges from the tension between realism, created by a logical and grammatically correct linguistic use of words, and incongruous reactions.

Mansbridge assures that in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*,

humour also destroys. There is little room in this play-world for language as a productive tool used to cultivate closeness; rather, it is used as a weapon. This verbal violence imbues the play with a 'coldness,' which is further underscored by its immaculate linguistic precision and its disembodied imaginative play (217).

Psychological and physical violence are prevalent in the plays and violence is exaggerated to the point of deforming reality and, perhaps, with the aim of denouncing reality. Even though violence is part of reality, Albee pushes it to the extreme and transforms it into an unbearable phenomenon. In the plays, extreme violence sometimes loses intensity because of incongruity. What Mommy and Daddy did to their "bumble of joy", a story coldly told by Grandma, is hard to listen to, but the discrepancy between the words and Mrs Barker's one-upmanship lighten the story. However, by exaggerating violence and making it unbearable, Edward Albee raises awareness within his spectator and illusions about values and society are shattered.

Thus, the first sub-part of this final chapter will first analyse how linguistic tools are used to dominate and even destroy the other, while the second sub-part will study violence as a shifter to raise awareness within the reader.

## **A – Tools used to Dominate and even Destroy the Other**

In his book *Interaction Ritual*, Erving Goffman explains that "[i]n aggressive interchanges, the winner not only succeeds in introducing information favorable to himself and unfavorable to the

others, but also demonstrates that as interactant he can handle himself better than his adversaries” (25). This notion is central to the plays under study because, as violence is mainly linguistic, the characters always seek to win over the other from a linguistic point of view. Moreover, it is important to note that the interactants are mere characters, so they are linguistic constructs; this is why it is significant to work on linguistic violence: the linguistic mechanisms are directly linked to the essence of theatricality. Even more striking is the power of language that the characters display. In *Modern American Drama*, Bigsby claims that “[f]or George, language is a substitute for the real. His fantasy son exists only in language; he is a literary construct, a character brought into existence by his joint authors, George and Martha” (131) and Salimi-Kouchi adds that “the characters' existence and actions depend on the use or abuse of language” (62). This tension of power echoes the analysis described above on adjustments and readjustments because we have seen that (re)adjustments often enable one characters to dominate the others. However, the character who corrects the other is not always the one who wins: Goffman notes that “[i]f [the adversaries] succeed in making a successful parry of the thrust and then a successful riposte, the instigator of the play must [...] accept the fact that his assumption of superiority in footwork has proven false. [...] He loses face” (Ibid.). *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* offers an example of this process when Martha corrects George by saying that “gotten” is better than “got”. This example is one among many others as George and Martha “obsessively discuss their words, bicker over their verbal styles, win or lose at language-games as these were concrete realities” (Malkin 162), as if George and Martha lived through their words. This is in fact the case because they are characters made of words and not flesh. Furthermore, their son is a linguistic invention, their games are verbal, and they tell stories. In the end, George and Martha “inhabit a city of words” (Bigsby 267). Arthur K. Oberg adds that

As Albee's characters learn what speech can and cannot do, they realize that the efficacy of language lies in manipulating and controlling themselves, others, and the unknown. What can be named is manageable. The danger, most prominent in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is that the rules keep changing and that language, as dialectic, becomes a dangerous game (142)

Thus, language is used to manipulate the other characters but when the rules change, language becomes dangerous.

Daddy and Mommy, on the contrary, inhabit a city of goods where consumption governs. Words are used to describe goods such as the colour of a hat, or the condition of the icebox or the doorbell. Mommy and Daddy do not fight, they agree, or, more precisely, Mommy violently forces Daddy to side/agree with her. The verbal fight is led by the couple against Mrs. Barker (without forgetting good manners) and Grandma. Thus, violence is different in both plays: it has different fighters and

different grounds. The first subsection of this analysis of violence will study the different forms and realisations of violence, while the second part will focus on the performativity of violence in both plays, especially the linguistic killing of the sons.

### 1. How to be Violent With Words

Violence characterizes both plays. Watzlawick et al argue that, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George and Martha's relationship is "a system of mutual provocation" (136) which proceeds through "symmetrical escalation" (140) – "the constant need to compete and outdo each other – and forms a circular 'game without end'" from which "neither can escape" (qtd. in Malkin 171). Watzlawick et al explain that "in a symmetrical relationship there is an ever-present danger of competitiveness" and interactants are not equal (87). Symmetrical escalation happens when the interaction has lost its balance. Watzlawick et al explain that the "game without end" can only end with a specific change:

The only change that can conceivably be brought about is a violent one, a revolution through which one party gains power over the others and imposes a new constitution. The equivalent of such a violent change in the area of relationships between individuals caught in a game without end would be separation, suicide, or homicide. (218)

In George and Martha's case, the violent change is the homicide of the construction of their son. Their kid represents the illusion of a fulfilling life and it is a common ground for them in which they can be together. Their son is the only thing they share and he "belongs" to both of them. The killing of the construction of their son represents the beginning of a new life without illusions, with a new language:

Once so ennobled by their lexical inventiveness, by the very performativity of their performance, which conferred upon an illusion the status of objective reality, George and Martha are brought to earth, not merely by sacrificing their son, but also by sacrificing the kind of language that so animates this evening's actions. (Roudané, *Cambridge Companion*: 45)

Thus, the symbolic homicide of their illusory son appears like a necessary sacrifice. Sacrifice, in the case of the play, could be considered as a ritualistic murder. Sacrifice can be considered as the "oldest ritual" in all religions and it was intended to be "a gift to the gods," as Fischer-Lichte explains (31). It creates a bond between the community and the gods and "[s]uch a bond is even stronger when the sacrificial animal is regarded as a deity in the sense of totemism (32). It is possible to consider George and Martha's child as a deity, given his importance in shaping the couple's dynamic. The sacrifice of the son reinforces the bond between Martha and George, and is the only



way for them to reunite. Thus, after having fought throughout the evening, the unavoidable conclusion at dawn is the sacrifice of their son and of their violent language and system of communication. Watzlawick et al define more precisely the type of communication between Martha and George; they argue that their competition is at the same time symmetrical and complementary:

The “everything you can do I can do better” format of symmetrical competition inexorably leads to more of the same, with increment piling on augmentation in runaway proportions. Conversely, a switch to complementarity in this system—acceptance, compliance, laughter, sometimes even inaction—usually brings closure and at least temporary surcease of struggle. (137)

George and Martha switch to a complementarity system of communication at the end of the play, when Martha eventually answers George's “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” by saying “I.. am” (256-257).

However, both characters fight for superiority for most of the play; balance is almost never found, this is why George and Martha compete throughout the play. Even though conflict and tension are essential characteristics of theatre, George and Martha fight with an increasing intensity. This exacerbated violence could be metatheatrical because Albee points out the conflictual nature of theatre.

An instance of symmetrical escalation is found at the very beginning of the play, when George and Martha discuss having guests over:

MARTHA: A nightcap? Are you kidding? We've got guests.  
GEORGE (*Disbelieving*): We've got what?  
MARTHA: Guests. GUESTS.  
GEORGE: GUESTS!  
MARTHA: Yes... guests... people... We've got guests coming over. (9)

When Martha announces the imminent arrival of their guests, George rhetorically asks her to repeat her sentence. Martha begins the verbal fight by repeating the noun “guest” twice, emphasising the second time by shouting, which is an aggressive act. Escalation happens when George echoes Martha with the same yelling tone, as if he wanted to be louder than her. Martha has the last word when she finds a synonym of “guests”, an ironic move to silence George. George and Martha ignore discursive cooperation to seek verbal domination. This sense of competition is also central to Malkin's analysis of the play as she asserts that George and Martha's “communication system is [...] dependent on verbal imagination and a lust for verbal control” (Malkin 162). Verbal imagination can be a form of linguistic mastery if the aim is to be witty. George's “ABAMAPHID” (39) or the song “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” are examples of witticism derived from verbal imagination.

Moreover, the more imaginative the characters are, the more they can dominate over the other who then needs to be even more imaginative.

Another example of fighting for superiority is found at the very beginning of the play when George and Martha argue about the name of the movie featuring Bettie Davis:

MARTHA: [...] You never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk.

GEORGE: What do you want me to do? Do you want me to act like you? Do you want me to go around all night braying at everybody, the way you do?

MARTHA (*Braying*): I DON'T BRAY! (11)

George's rhetorical questions and the use of capital letters in Martha's answer indicate a confrontation between the couple. As Jeannette Malkin states, “[t]he way the subject is discussed replaces the subject itself and becomes the source of dispute” (168). Indeed, in the example above, George and Martha do not argue about the name of the movie anymore, but about George's lack of energy and the way Martha speaks and behaves. Moreover, this exchange is highly ironic because Martha answers “I don't bray” in braying as indicated by the use of capital letters and the stage directions. She attacks George on linguistic grounds because while he criticises her way of acting, she emphasises George's critic by braying. Thus, Martha still retains violent characteristics in her utterance which show that she does not give up the linguistic fight. Besides, it is interesting to stress the double meaning of “act” in George's cue “Do you want me to act like you?”: acting refers to the essence of theatre and, George being a character, this cue could be considered as metatheatrical. This underlines the fictitious nature of the characters and which reinforces the fact that all the world's a stage.

The examples analysed above are part of the exposition scene. The first pages of the play already display competition between the two characters and their conversation is crucial to understand how their relationship will lead to the final exorcism: “George and Martha try to unburden themselves of aggression by a play of aggression. But working off what's left of one's wit is a dangerous game, and by the end of the scene each character will have made an irreversible choice, with the moment of devolution thereby engaged” (Davis 217). The characters's choice area is about breaking or not breaking the unbreakable rule about their kid:

GEORGE: Just don't start in on a bit about the kid, that's all.

[...]

MARTHA (*Really angered*): Yeah? Well, I'll start in on the kid if I want to.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This excerpt was removed by Edward Albee in the edition chosen for this study. The exchange happens just before George welcomes Nick and Honey and is of prime importance. The extract is from the following edition: Albee, Edward. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Scribner Classics, 2003. 18-19.

“That's all” means that not mentioning the kid is the only rule governing their games for George, because their son is the last safeguard of their illusory life. George's use of the negative imperative form and the contrast with Martha's use of the modal “will” illustrate the tension between them. Martha acknowledges George's rules as the marker “Yeah” shows but she defies him. The only condition, introduced by the conjunction “if”, is her personal wish to mention the kid or not. From this moment, each character has made a choice and violence escalates until the last pages of the play because Martha decides to break the rule when she mentions their son. Jeannette Malkin explains the pattern of violence in the play and she argues that language aggression moves in two directions:

- From a general point of view, it is asserted that “language is a power tool, to be controlled and possessed” (171);
- George and Martha “wield language together against the numbing platitudes of the outside world – as represented by Nick and Honey. Verbal power is not given through linguistic control or by “knowing words,” but through wit and creativity” (Ibid.).

The games they play are examples of wit and creativity, especially the names; the song “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” is also creative, given the play on the phonetic aspect of the signifier which could be replaced by “wolf”. Other instances of wit fill the play:

NICK: Bourbon on the rock, if you don't mind.

GEORGE: Mind? No, I don't mind. I don't think I mind. (24)

Here, George mocks social manners by answering Nick. He seems to wonder whether or not he minds Nick's wish by thinking aloud. This causes the reader to smile because one would not say “I don't think I mind” to such a request.

GEORGE: I'm a Doctor. A.B...M.A...Ph.D...ABMAPHID! Abmaphid has been variously described as a wasting disease of the frontal lobes, and as a wonder drugs. It is actually both. I'm very mistrustful. Biology, hunh? (39)

In this example, George derides academic diplomas and creates the name of an imaginary disease with the acronyms of these titles, mocking biology at the same time. George himself acknowledges that he cannot be trusted and it is indicated that “*Nick does not answer*” (40). By being creative, George has won verbal power over Nick.

GEORGE: *Monstre!*

MARTHA: *Cochon!*

GEORGE: *Bête!*

MARTHA: *Canaille!*

GEORGE: *Putain!* (113)

Here, the verbal joust is made more difficult but also more playful for George and Martha since it takes place in a foreign language. Nick and Honey probably do not understand French, so they

cannot participate in the conversation. The nouns used in French are very colloquial, and they could even be aggressive but Martha and George share a private joke, a moment of childish fighting. In the end, George and Martha constantly play games, whether they be acknowledged as such or not, but the games they play are “terrifying games, devoid of all playful characteristics, and their rules are their own best explanation” (Watzlawick 133-134). John Schimel explains the pattern of George and Martha's fun and games:

It is appropriate that the first act is entitled “Fun and Games,” a study of repetitious, although destructive, patterns of behavior between people. Albee graphically represents the “how” of games and leaves the “why” up to the audience and critics. (from Schimel 141, qtd. in Watzlawick 133-34).

George and Martha's fun and games are left unexplained and the couple “contrive[s] to one-up each other as their games grow more treacherous, their “in-jokes” more lacerating and strained” (Falvey 246).

Another example of verbal power is explained by Jeannette R. Malkin: “[t]he misuse of language is, in this play, a sign of weakness, and carries an immediate loss of power” (168). When the characters make a mistake, they get corrected by their interlocutor and repeat the correct word. This can be interpreted as an avowal and a recognition of their mistake and, consequently, of the other's gain of power or it can highlight the wish of preventing the “corrector” from having the last word. In either way, this is a form of linguistic violence.

MARTHA: [...] And she's married to Joseph Cotten or something...

GEORGE: *Somebody*

MARTHA:... *somebody*... (5)

GEORGE (To NICK): I wouldn't be surprised if you *did* take over the History Department one of these days.

NICK: The Biology Department.

GEORGE: The *Biology* Department... of course (53)

The use of italics emphasises the characters' mistake, but one can imagine that the actors impersonating the characters would stress the words in italics, thus indicating a confident tone. This use of voice modulation enables the character to preserve some power. Italics are found in another example where Nick does not understand a word George utters. However, instead of repeating the word, Nick changes it:

GEORGE: A beanbag. Beanbag. You wouldn't understand. (*Overdistinct*) Bean... Bag.

NICK: I *heard* you... I didn't say I was deaf... I said I didn't understand.

GEORGE: You didn't say that at all.

NICK: I meant I was *implying* I didn't understand. [...]

GEORGE: You're getting testy.

NICK (*Testy*): I'm sorry. (110)

George counters Nick's argument by not only repeating Nick's sentence but also by adding the intensifier “at all” to emphasise Nick's “lie”. George repeats the word “beanbag” three times, with an exaggerated articulation the last time. This repetition is humiliating for Nick because George underlines Nick's lack of understanding by implying that his interlocutor did not hear him. George's move triggers Nick's explanation “I said I didn't understand” to which George answers “You didn't say that at all”. George seeks linguistic precision as a way to justify his humiliating repetition. In the end, Nick has to rule in favour of George who was right: Nick did not “say”, he “implied”. This total lack of discursive cooperation creates a form of violence.

Malkin argues that the misuse of language is a sign of weakness, but it can also be purposeful. Ruth Meyer asserts that this is a tool used to dominate:

The contrast between Martha's disregard for precision and George's meticulous and exaggerated insistence upon the right word seems clear. And yet at times George, too, pretends to slip. As he tells Nick that "since I married . . . uh, What's her name . . . uh, Martha" it is not because of the forgetfulness or confusion which causes Martha to use "What's their name" in reference to Nick and Honey. How better to show detachment and disregard of someone or something than either to forget the name or to get it wrong. (63)

George pretends to slip in order to show disregard to his guests, but also to make fun of Martha. Indeed, by intentionally making the same mistake as Martha, George highlights her lack of linguistic precision. Martha's disinterest in precision is shown at the beginning of the play when she says “she's married to Joseph Cotten or something...” (5). Later in the play, she makes another mistake: “[...] Biology is even better. It's less... abstruse” (69). She also mistakes “pagan” with “atheist” (80). Between George and Martha, stage murders are verbal: “Martha may have downed George with boxing-gloves, but he outpoints her with words” (Cohn 91-2).

According to Meyer, George purposefully mistakes a word with another when interacting with Nick as a way to show contempt: “[a]s George discusses the proposed scientific advances with Nick, he says, 'You're the one's going to make all that trouble . . . making everyone the same, rearranging the chromozones, or whatever it is'. Contempt could scarcely be more clearly expressed” (63). By adding the segment “or whatever it is,” George indicates that he knows “chromozones” may not be the right word, but the pronoun “whatever” stresses his contempt and his carelessness.

Insults are also central to the violent atmosphere that reigns in both plays. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, violence reaches a climax when Martha is about to have intercourse with Nick:

NICK: You're disgusting.

GEORGE (*Incredulous*): Because *you're* going to hump Martha, *I'm* disgusting? (*He breaks down in ridiculing laughter*)

MARTHA (*To GEORGE*): You motherfucker! (190)

George answers Nick's insults logically: he calls into question the causal relationship introduced by “because” in order to counter Nick's stance and he makes a contrast between Nick and himself as the italics again show, even though, logically, the subjects in the main and in the subordinate clause should be identical for the causal relationship to work.

Apart from Martha, George's favourite adversary is Nick. Watzlawick et al assert that “George’s digressions on history and biology can be seen as provocations disguised as defense and, thus, as a [...] communicational phenomenon involving disqualification [and] denial of communication (with the effect of progressive involvement)” (134). The notion of disqualification of communication suggests that an interlocutor

may defend himself by means of the important technique of disqualification, i.e., he may communicate in a way that invalidates his own communications or those of the other. Disqualifications cover a wide range of communicational phenomena, such as self-contradictions, inconsistencies, subject switches, tangentializations,<sup>24</sup> incomplete sentences, misunderstandings, obscure style or mannerisms of speech, the literal interpretations of metaphor and the metaphorical interpretation of literal remarks, etc. (56-57)

George uses these communication techniques to disqualify communication:

GEORGE: [...] How much do you weigh?

NICK: I...

GEORGE: Hundred and eighty-five, hundred and ninety... something like that? Do you play handball?

NICK: Well, yes... no... I mean, not very well. (37)

This exchange is an example of subject switch. George's sudden question about handball destabilises Nick who does not know how to react. The suspension marks (signaling Nick's hesitation) show that he is in a difficult position. The last segment, “I mean, not very well”, is a readjustment of the previous segment. The fixed phrase “I mean” modulates his ability; Nick attempts to find the right balance in his ability to play handball. Saying that he can play handball would be a lie, but showing his inability to play handball would be a sign of weakness because if

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24 Tangentiality is “a communication disorder in which the train of thought of the speaker wanders and shows a lack of focus, never returning to the initial topic of the conversation” (Tanner 289)

George asks the question, it may mean that he plays handball or is interested in the sport. From a theatrical point of view, the exchange is comical and this subject switch could be considered a comical feature because the sudden change of subject is unexpected and off-topic.

Another technique to disqualify communication is the use of an obscure style or mannerisms of speech. When George says to Nick “Your sympathy disarms me... your... your compassion makes me weep! Large, salty, unscientific tears!” (102), he displays a sudden poetic style which is incongruous to the rest of the conversation. These disqualifications of communication phenomena occur seldomly throughout the play because violence is not hidden. Violence is plain and meticulously targeted.

In *The American Dream*, violence pervades the play through Mommy and Grandma. Patterns of violence are more obvious and mechanical than in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because the play is intended to shock. Grandma even insults her own daughter when she says “Shut up!” twice in the same exchange (80). Moreover, as she is the storyteller of the baby's killing, she is the one who transmits violence. Mommy and Daddy physically dismantled their son, but the “violence bearer” is Grandma as she is the character who tells the story. Once again, violence is verbally expressed and almost physically enacted upon. Moreover, Albee presents an exaggerated and vaudevillesque form of violence. Where *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* displays subtle mechanisms and rules which govern violence, *The American Dream* exhibits a pattern of violence attenuated by incongruous reactions. The characters are devoid of meaning, as are their words. Nonetheless, violence has several effects on the audience. The violence that emanates from Mommy is comical because Mommy is a vaudeville character and violence is part of her type. Grandma, for her part, is a sensible character, so her display of violence is more shocking for the audience who takes her seriously. The most obvious moment of violence is Grandma telling Mrs. Barker the homicide of the “bumble of joy” with a lively description. Grandma recalls this moment in the most serious manner all while using a childish register. This mix of registers is puzzling for the audience because it is neither totally grotesque, nor completely awful. When Grandma says that the baby “only had eyes for its Daddy” and Mrs. Barker answers “any self-respecting woman would have gouged those eyes right out of its head” (104), the contrast between the solemnity of both women and Mrs. Barker's incongruous answers is troubling. In this way, Edward Albee succeeds in expressing violence in the play: violence is almost always linked to nonsense or incongruity. Contrary to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* violence in *The American Dream* is gratuitous and mechanical. Violence is part of this family's life as it is with most American families.

We have now analysed how violence is treated in both plays. It is part of George and Martha's games, it is a way to entertain them, but also a way of disrespecting the rules they agreed on. George and Martha seek to take power over one another because it is part of their relationship but they also compete together against their guests. Verbal violence displays the characters' weaknesses and it decreases when they reach an agreement, a form of communion. In *The American Dream*, violence does not have any benevolent purpose. Characters are stuck in their types and they blindly follow society's norms and rules. Violence is directed towards the audience who needs to be shocked and baffled. Edward Albee mostly uses verbal violence in these two plays, but violence can become performative, and thus, almost physical.

## 2. Performing or not Performing Violence

In the two plays under examination, violence is mostly verbal, so how can verbal violence become performative? John L. Austin sheds light on the performative nature of utterances in his seminal work *How to do Things with Words*. The philosopher argues that “[i]t was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do either truly or falsely, which means that utterances were analysed in terms of truth value” (1). Austin claims that some utterances do not have a truth value, and moreover, that a speaker is doing something by uttering these sentences. This is what Austin calls “performatives”. In his early analysis of performativity, he distinguishes “performatives” from “constatives,” the latter corresponding to “statements”. Austin argues that performatives fulfil two conditions: A. “they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constative anything at all, are not ‘true or false’”; and B. “the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something” (5).<sup>25</sup> To illustrate Austin's point of view, we can consider a famous example: “I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth”. When uttering this sentence, the speaker is actually naming the ship, that is to say that the speaker is doing the action of naming the ship and the action could not be accomplished without uttering the

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<sup>25</sup> It is important to differentiate performative utterances (which perform an action when the words are uttered) from speech acts (which enable the speaker to accomplish an action). Austin developed a theory of speech acts divided into three categories: “locutionary”, “illocutionary” and “perlocutionary”. A locutionary act is the basic act of speaking, of uttering a sentence. An illocutionary act refers to the type of function the speaker intends to fulfill, or the type of action the speaker intends to accomplish in the course of producing an utterance. It is an act defined within a system of social conventions. In short, it is an act accomplished in speaking. Examples of illocutionary acts include accusing, apologizing, blaming, congratulating, giving permission, joking, nagging, naming, promising, ordering, refusing, swearing, and thanking. Finally, a perlocutionary act concerns the effect an utterance may have on the addressee.



words in question. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* displays an instance of an overt performative:<sup>26</sup>

GEORGE (*Very quietly*): I warn you.  
[...]  
MARTHA: I stand warned! [...] (92)

Martha defies George, but it is a dangerous move. As Jill R. Deans explains, “[t]here’s a context and a convention at work according to an implicit understanding between George and Martha. For her to continue her train of speech would be to invite retaliation on his part.” (143). One of Austin's felicity conditions about performatives is: “the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked” (II, 15). In the case of a warning, if the warning is a threat, the speaker is supposed to have some authority on the hearer and, consequently, the hearer is not in a suitable position allowing him/her to defy a warning. Martha's rebellious reaction creates a dangerous and heavy atmosphere which will eventually reach its climax with the killing of the son. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, performativity is at its highest when the characters kill their son. As C.W.E Bigsby writes, “[w]ords give place to act” (265).

However, violence cannot be considered as performative in *The American Dream* because words do not kill the kid. Mommy and Daddy dismembered their child off-stage, before the time of narration. Yet, in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, Philip C. Kolin argues that “language in *Dream* is more than devalued; it is performatively destructive [...] [w]hen it is abused, so is the family, sex, history, even theatre” (30). He adds that “[t]he Bacchae-like dismemberment of 'the bumble of joy' is described by the very characters who perform it in the most cartoonishly, matter-of-fact way and as a perfectly reasonable response to their dissatisfaction with an inferior consumer product” (Ibid.). This assertion is not entirely accurate because the dismemberment of the child is described by Grandma who did not perform the homicide and her uttering the murderous words does not kill the son. Even though the dismantlement of the baby is described step by step and logically, like an instruction book, Grandma only recalls what happened. Like the characters, words are meaningless because nothing happens and there is no consequence in the world of the play. Moreover, even if Grandma's story could be broadly analysed as a performative discourse, it does not fulfil all of Austin's felicity conditions: the preterit tense is used instead of the present.

Nonetheless, the killing of the son is a striking symbol as it means the destruction of illusions, until the arrival of the Young Man. However, the bumble of joy does not exist as such. Malkin recalls that in the two plays, both sons are “propositions, syntactic constructs, elaborated platitudes” (181).

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<sup>26</sup> An overt performative, contrary to an implicit performative, contains a performative verb.

Indeed, the sons do not exist physically, they are just verbal constructions, a feature highlighting the nature of theatre. Both sons could be considered as metatheatrical devices because they are words, they are never seen on stage and in the case of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, “murderous dialogue leads obliquely to murder” (Cohn 90) and “George performs their son’s death through the way he lived: in language” (Malkin 183). The logical ending is that “the son who was born and raised in verbal cruelty can only die when the language which created and defined him also dies” (Malkin 184). The funeral rite led by George is itself an action. By pronouncing words, a prayer, George *is* killing their son. This may explain why Honey screams “STOP IT! STOP IT!” (242) but George refuses to do so and the son dies from the words which created him. This moment is highly emotional and becomes physical.

On physicality, Roudané points out that “Albee strengthens the correspondence between George’s fictive and actual experiences by elevating emotional intensity, the verbal duel turning, for the first time during the evening, to the physical assault” (*Understanding Edward Albee* 75). When, for instance, George says “I’LL KILL YOU” to Martha while “grab[bing] her by the throat”, words equate gestures; Honey even screams “VIOLENCE! VIOLENCE!” (152) which could be interpreted as the author's emphasis on violence. By having Honey name violence, Albee highlights the inescapable presence of violence and he indicates the metatheatrical aspect of this exchange because he reflects on his own means and tools as a playwright. George's utterance is not performative (even though it is a speech act) because George does not actually kill Martha and Austin's rule on using the present tense is not respected. Nonetheless, George, in a way, threatens to kill Martha through the use of a speech act. This moment is a turning point in the play because, as Jill R. Deans explains,

Martha transgresses the boundaries of the ritual by first mentioning Sonny-Jim to others, then by seducing Nick as a son-figure (a doubly illicit act). By the end of a long night of discursive torture, physical violence begins to bleed into the dialogue as the text reaches beyond its verbal limits. (145)

Violence indeed bleeds into the dialogue, and it is easy to see Martha's furious and hysterical reaction when she learns that her son is dead. She continuously yells; her suffering comes to life on stage and her words give place to a physical and living reaction. The performativity of words is emphasised by Ruby Cohn who suggests that “[s]nap – sound, word, and gesture – becomes a stage metaphor in the destruction of lies, which may lead to truth” (93). The verb “to snap” denotes a sudden change of state: something can break and someone can lose control of one's emotions or begin to speak aggressively. The play snaps when George decides to kill their son.

The use of onomatopoeias is of particular interest because they mimic an action. When George informs Martha that their son is dead, he says: “[...] there was a car accident, and he's dead. POUF! Just like that!” (247). By saying “pouf!”, George is killing his son because voicing the onomatopoeia equates to his son disappearing. Right after he has pronounced “pouf!”, he says “just like that!” further indicating that the onomatopoeia is a weapon. The same happens when he shouts “POW” just before “shooting” Martha. On the use of onomatopoeias, Dan Ducker argues that “[o]ne of the things George learns from the experience is that communication is a form of action, something one performs by speaking, although the words need not necessarily have meaning in the usual sense.” (471).

In *The American Dream*, violence is mostly performed by Grandma who plays the part of a storyteller. She instils personal comments and even imitates the behaviour of Miss Bye-Bye (in fact Mrs. Barker): “the dear lady, who was very much like you [...] listened with something very much like enthusiasm. 'Whee,' she said. “Whooooopeeeee!” (103). Given that Grandma is a character and that, as a character she imitates another character, this imitation of behaviour could be considered as metatheatrical because imitation is at the heart of theatre, as Aristotle claims: “[e]pic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic: poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation” (I). Aristotle adds that “[s]ince the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type [...], it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are” (II). Grandma represents a woman in action worse than she is, which has a comical effect. The comparison is even more humorous given Mrs. Barker's enthusiast reaction to Grandma's story. Grandma's storytelling is in the end farcical because of her numerous insinuations such as “there was a man very much like Daddy, and a woman very much like Mommy” (101) as well as her childish description of the mutilation.

The dismemberment follows Grandma's story. The child loses its eyes, its hands, its “you-know-what” and in the end, the child does not have a head on its shoulder or a spine. Then, the child dies and Mommy and Daddy want “their money back” (105). On the child's homicide, Philip Kolin comments that

Most damningly, though, the mutilation of the child is disclosed in righteous and matter-of-fact language as if Mommy and Daddy were the aggrieved parties whom the child/bumble offended. *This ritualistic slaughtering is debased into a comic nightmare through the very act of telling about it.*<sup>27</sup> Building a play around a lost, imaginary, or deceased child is a staple of Albee's dramatics from *Virginia Woolf* to *A Delicate Balance* to *The Play About the Baby*.

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27 Emphasis added.

While George's funeral rite starts the homicide, Grandma's account debases it. For *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the ritual is beneficial, for *The American Dream*, the ritual is almost mocked, and useless because a ritual is supposed to be “an act of solemn ceremonial” and in *The American Dream*, the ritualistic act of dismembering the child is farcical (Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice* 2: 145). Moreover, George and Martha have some hope of redemption whereas Grandma goes gentle into that good night while “everybody's got what he wants” (128).

In both plays, the constructions of both children are deconstructed in violence. The aim of George's prayer and fatal telegram is to destroy the illusions which pervade both his life and Martha's. Their son is a verbal construction, an illusion, a myth which needs to be erased. Martha is aware that George is killing their child because she says “You can't do this” several times, to no avail. In the case of *The American Dream*, Grandma's account of the ritualistic murdering is both dreadful and farcical. This grotesque feature undermines the violence of the murder which has a soothing effect on the audience. However, one can wonder about the purpose of the killing: if it is vaudevillesque, is it useful? By ending her story on financial matters, Grandma dehumanises the child as an aid of financial matters for Mommy and Daddy rather than a living being. The child takes the form of a financial symbol whose treatment is criticised by the playwright. Edward Albee ends the play on a bittersweet taste, whereas *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which premiered a year after *The American Dream*, opens up on a possible redemption now that George and Martha's son, their myth, is dead.

## **B – Violence as a Means to Peel Labels and to Raise Consciousness**

In *The American Dream*, violence is permanent and it is embodied by all the characters. Grandma and Mommy's form of violence is more verbal than physical but Daddy, before he was operated, used to display physical violence when he imposed his sexual needs on Mommy. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, violence is triggered by certain behaviours such as Martha who does not respect the rules, George who wants to make Nick and Honey uncomfortable or Martha who simply provokes George without any apparent purpose. Ebrahim Salimi-Kouchi and Mohsen Rezaeian argue that conflict is inevitable in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* because

language is assumed to be central to the existence of characters. The characters are college professors and their wives. Based on their level of education, the professors use fluent and precise language. Endowed with a more precise and superior use of language, George is

linguistically superior to Martha. Confronting the verbal attack and adolescent vocabulary of his wife, George is indirect, ironical and restraint. However, he fails to communicate with his wife and others. As a result, verbal and physical violence pervades. (61)

Thus, violence pervades the play because of a failure of communication. This assumption seems paradoxical as language is central to George and Martha's relationship. Even though Martha is linguistically imprecise, she still uses language to provoke even though she needs George's help as a "phrasemaker" (9) . However, she seems to be more comfortable with physical action. She wins the boxing match against her husband and she physically gets closer to Nick during the game "Hump the Hostess". She compensates her linguistic weakness with strong physical competitions. Martha and George spend the evening playing with their guests and "[t]he games are cruel and have rules as does life, self-created rules. Martha violates them as an instrument of torturing George" (Lewis 34). This violation of the rules lead to the total war fought between the couple. This war seems inevitable because George and Martha begin the play with a violent conversation, and the further the play develops, the greater the tension. : "George and Martha revel in their excesses: they continue beyond reason – indeed, beyond realism – in the throes of a murderous verbal orgy" (Malkin 164). Even though tension is typical of theatre, it is pushed to the extreme in the play and one may wonder to what extent this feature is metatheatrical because, by highlighting significant tensions, the playwright displays the basic mechanisms of theatre.

The introduction notes that Albee's plays present a realistic world. The setting is a living-room in *The American Dream* and a middle-class house in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. The realism of the characters and settings involve that the plays' environments are recognisable for the audience. However, violence is pushed to the extreme and the way it is dealt with (light sentences or games that accompany it) transforms this realistic world into an absurd one. The slow discovery of the baby's fictive nature makes *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* shift from realism to absurdism. The fact that the couple invents a child is not absurd, but the way they talk about it and kill it is. George says that their son is "blue-haired" (79), an infrequent collocation, while Martha claims that he has "green eyes like [her]" (82) even though Nick tells her that her eyes are brown. "They *look* brown, but they're green" answers Martha (Ibid.). The conflict between appearance and being is also at stake with George saying to Martha "Your father has tiny eyes... like a white mouse. In fact, he *is* a white mouse" (Ibid.). The discrepancy between looking and being creates nonsense and violence because Martha cannot stand that George calls her father a mouse. At this stage of the play, language creates absurdism. The following sections will first focus on the question of a necessary violence which fulfils a social role to arise consciousness within the audience and secondly, we will

wonder to what extent violence is cathartic in both plays.

## 1. Necessary Violence

In an interview with Matthew Roudané, Albee said: “I am very interested in the cleansing consciousness of death; and the fact that people avoid thinking about death – and about living. I think we should always live with the consciousness of death. How else can we possibly participate in living life fully?” (*Critical Essays* 195). Such a statement explains why death and violence are recurring themes in the work of the playwright. Presenting death on stage is a way to force the audience to become conscious about it. In *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, death is either meticulously described by Grandma who goes into disturbing details of the mutilation or carefully prepared by George with the funeral rite. If Albee wants to bloody and involve his audience, a certain kind of violence is necessary. According to Philip Kolin, “Albee’s satiric techniques interrogate the relationship between this dysfunctional society and its (ab)use of language. Grandma’s declaration that “we live in the age of deformity” expresses this reciprocal stigma” (*The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* 30). Albee analyses the abuse of a society whose language has become deprived of fundamental values. Mommy and Daddy live in a consumerist dream while George and Martha maintain, through words, the illusion of a life they do not have. For Arthur Koberg,

language is employed as dialectic and exorcism – in *The American Dream* Albee uses the metaphysics of cliché to indicate the sterile and outworn lives of Mommy and Daddy; in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the play moves toward a ritualistic disposing of an imaginary love child by George's recitation of prayers for the dead in Latin. Words, both white and black magic, are wielded as weapon and talisman. (142)

Exorcism, the process of expulsion of evil spirits from a person, is a central notion in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. More than being the name of the third act, it is also Albee's purpose for the audience in both plays as the sterile lives of Mommy and Daddy are criticised and the illusion invading George and Martha's lives is destroyed. Words are both weapon and cure.

Jean Luere asserts that “[i]n *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the interchange of George and Martha occurs on a plateau of hostility [...] their bickering is incessant and shows an undeviating pattern of recrimination and one-upmanship [y]et their interchange appears successful” (51). It means that despite their violent interactions, George and Martha still succeed in their interchange. Violence is

necessary because it is the only way in which George and Martha can reach a calming down, a relief. However, if violence is necessary, it does not mean that it works freely, without any rules.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, violence works around the rules and boundaries of the communication between George and Martha. In acts II and III, George and Martha go through a process of metacommunication and, according to Jeannette Malkin, these discussions have two functions:

- They alert us to the logocentric reality which Albee is setting up (and which he will destroy by the end of the play);

- The terms in which the communication is discussed, the metaphors used, confirm the violent and even deadly potential of language. (174)

Let us consider some examples of metacommunication:

GEORGE: It's perfectly all right for you... I mean, you can make up your own rules... you can go around like a hopped-up Arab, slashing away at everything in sight, scarring up half the world if you want to. But someone else try it... no, sir!

MARTHA: You miserable...

GEORGE: Why, baby, I did it all for you. I thought you'd like it, sweetheart... it's sort of to your taste... blood, carnage and all [...] (169)

GEORGE (*Very pointedly*): You try it and I'll beat you at your own game.

MARTHA (*Hopefully*): Is that a threat, George? Hunh?

GEORGE: That's a threat, Martha.

MARTHA (*Fake-spit at him*): You're going to get it, baby.

GEORGE: Be careful, Martha... I'll rip you to pieces. (175)

The exchanges above contain the nouns “rules” and “games”, which are precisely what George and Martha do during this afterparty. George first calls into question Martha's rules by accusing her of doing whatever she wants and then, he justifies himself. Calling her “baby” and “sweetheart” in such a strained atmosphere is ironical and patronising. Accusations followed by irony can only lead to violence which explodes in the second exchange.

Both examples display George in a superior position where he more or less leads the conversation. In the first exchange, the deadly potential of language is found in the words “blood” and “carnage” which describe the current state of affairs between George and Martha whereas in the second example, violence is more physical and more personal as it is based on threats. However, violence is never enacted between the couple; once again, violence is verbal, so even though they threaten each other, it is never physical. Hence, language could be analysed as a tool for threat as it is a way to warn someone and by doing so, to intent to get the upper hand over the other by instilling fear.

An interesting point to raise is that the excerpts are only a few moments apart and violence escalates

between the couple. This is explained by Malkin: “[t]he communicants enact that brutal verbal style, as their metacommunication itself escalates into aggression; and the aggression sets off another round of verbal violence. This cyclical communication pattern is called a “game without end” by Watzlawick et al (174). Thus, metacommunication enables the reader to understand how dangerous language is in the hands of George and Martha, but this violence is necessary to reach the climax, which is the homicide of their son.

In *The American Dream*, violence, alongside comedy, is part of the vaudevillian aspect of the play. Without violence and, first and foremost, the reactions to violence, the play would be less vaudevillian and maybe more tragic. Indeed, violence is pushed too extreme so it becomes grotesque.

GRANDMA: [...] [Mommy] was a tramp and a trollop and a trull to boot, and she's no better now.

MOMMY: Grandma!

GRANDMA (To MOMMY): Shut up!

[...]

MOMMY: You stop that! You're my mother, not his!

GRANDMA: I am? (80-81)

In this excerpt, Grandma's outburst is triggered by Daddy's comment on her “whimpering for hours” while Mommy intends to pacify the atmosphere. Violence comes from Grandma's description of Mommy and the direct insult to her daughter. Tension increases little by little until the comical forgetfulness of Grandma which brings comic relief.

Mommy is also violent towards Grandma because she threatens her mother to send her away and she uses numerous imperatives such as “Be quiet” or “Go to bed” when she talks to her. Yet, this violence is useful because it enables Grandma to utter (some) senseful sentences and to distinguish herself from her daughter. Grandma is the voice of reason of the play, the character that the reader can trust, this is why violence is necessary because even when it emanates from Grandma, it means something about the flawed society represented by Albee. His voice is heard behind Grandma. When she says “[Mommy] was a tramp, a trollop and a trull to boot, and she's no better now” (80), she is right because Mommy will warmly welcome the Young Man who represents the satisfaction she could not get with his twin. The alliteration in “t” shows that Grandma can manipulate language even though her description of Mommy is utterly familiar and violent. Mommy is surprised by the way Grandma talks and she thinks that her mother gets the words on television (97). The reference to television is ironical because Mommy is herself drowned into a consumerist world where television dictates the rules to follow. Grandma may “get the words” from television, but she is able



to utter logical sentences, and when Mommy tries to speak logically to imitate her mother, Grandma contradicts her:

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

GRANDMA: Well, you got the rhythm but you don't really have the quality. Besides, you're middle-aged. (94)

Mommy's sort of syllogism is refuted by Grandma who considers that Mommy lacks the "quality" and reminds her that she is middle-aged, not old. In the play, Grandma masters language and she has the crucial role of mutilating a second time Mommy and Daddy's child. She exhibits Mommy's flaws, Daddy's immobility and the couple's cruelty. When she is not needed anymore, she decides to leave the stage; she is empowered and, as she says, "I'm way ahead of you" (107).

In order to achieve his aim, to bloody the audience and to wake the audience's consciousness, Edward Albee chose violence. This violence is necessary because it highlights the cruelty of human beings subjected to materialism and it underlines the issues a couple faces when drowned in an illusory world. A social satire was not enough because even though laughter can amend society, violence can shock and leave the reader on the edge, puzzled. For Albee, to question a flawed society involves a cruel and murderous treatment.

## 2. Is Violence Cathartic?

"Catharsis" is a classic word to refer to tragedy as defined by Aristotle:

[Tragedy is] the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." (*Poetics*, chapter 6)

The perfect tragedy arises pity and fear and consequently, produces a feeling of catharsis, that is to say the purgation of passion. Belfiore explains that "[a]lthough Aristotle nowhere explicitly tells us what the matter of pity is, he does tell us that pity is painful [...] [p]ity is associated with weeping in his works" (187). In *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, pity is not painful and it does not lead to weeping. Pity cannot be complete because incongruous and comical elements prevent the audience from fully feeling pity for the characters, especially in *The American Dream*.

In *The American Dream*, the story of the baby's mutilation is one of the only times when conversations are fruitful. Indeed, the futility that characterised the first conversations centered on the colour of Martha's hat has disappeared. However, the childish register used by Grandma ("It began to develop interest in its you-know-what" (104)) renders the story more comical, farcical than horrible. The disparity between the acts of dismantling the baby and the register used is destabilising for the reader. It is even more destabilising because Mrs. Barker reacts with joy and interest: "Naturally!" or "Well, I hope they cut its tongue out!" (105). "Naturally" and "Well" are phatic indicators that the hearer follows the speaker's story. The discourse marker "well" here precedes an answer to what Grandma says. As "coherence in conversation needs the speaker's utterance and the hearer's response" (Schiffrin 103) the way the conversation is conducted between the two women is coherent. However, the content is not.

As for the 1962 play, pity might be felt for George and Martha because they seem to be left helpless, but it is not transparent in the play. Pity and terror lead to catharsis and if we concentrate on terror, violence can be analysed as cathartic. Considering violence in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Walter A. Davis suggests that aggression has different purposes for George and Martha: "[t]he goal of aggression for Martha is to strike through masks in the belief that through this process she and George can regain human contact" while "[a]ggression for George, in contrast, is the perfection of death-work, the attempt to strip away everything that protects us from the void" (209-10). Davis uses the expressions "regain human contact" and "strip away". These could correspond to a purgation of passions because George and Martha succeed in reaching their goals. Towards the end of the play, a stage direction indicates that there is "*a hint of communion*" (252) from Martha's part and George has managed to strip away the illusions which leads him to comfort his wife: "It will be better" (255). Killing the son seems to have redeemed the couple, so this homicide can be considered as a necessary sacrifice. On the death of Sonny-Jim, Emil Roy adds that

George's brilliant improvisation of the 'death' is a ritual purgation in a deeply religious sense, an act which re-enacts the destruction of Martha's first marriage by her father (thus dissipating the illusion of her father's love for her), and which destroys George's illusory guilt for the accidental death of his own father in an automobile accident. (92)

Thus, Roy argues that the death ritual has not only reconciled George and Martha but it has also unburdened each of them from guilt and illusory love. On the homicide, Matthew Roudané adds that,

Structurally, the scene parallels the opening moments of the play with Martha's repeated question-asking. Whereas the opening questions were laced with sarcasm, gamesmanship, and anger, however, the closing inquiries are free from such nervous tensions. Earlier, George and

Martha revealed in questions that maimed. They are now more willing to ask difficult questions tenderly, questions geared toward restoring order and marriage. The rhetorical gallantries and linguistic attacks are nowhere in evidence. (*Understanding Albee* 45)

The notion of stripping away is also present in *The American Dream*: “[w]ith *The American Dream*, we are cast firmly once more in the area of rituals, the *stripping away of masks* until we see the impotence,<sup>28</sup> sterility, viciousness that, in Albee's eye, pervades so much of contemporary American life” (Lee 60). This “stripping away of masks” is about the shattering of illusions. After having witnessed a couple debating about getting satisfaction, the reader is left with a dead baby and the appearance of his twin who can be interpreted as the other half of the American Dream, the surviving one who is deceitful (“What I have told you may not be true” (117)) and unable to love him. In *The American Dream*, illusions are stripped away for the reader only, because the characters are trapped in their world, but violence is cathartic for George and Martha. Their final outburst occurs in the following example:

MARTHA: HE IS OUR CHILD!  
GEORGE: AND I HAVE KILLED HIM!  
MARTHA: NO!  
GEORGE: YES! (250)

The capital letters indicate yelling, which is an expression of a violent interaction, but this marks the last time they argue. Contrary to other conversations, they stop their verbal jousting and the length of their cues is reduced to monosyllabic answers, which means that they have nothing more to say and that George has won the battle.

Later, towards the end, violence reaches a climax that becomes unbearable for the reader and Honey who shouts “STOP IT! STOP IT!” during George's liturgy (242). The use of the imperative and again, of capital letters, show Honey's strong emotional state. Honey, who was a weak character saying only futile maxims such as “Never mix, never worry” or senselessly repeating the others' words: “You're a bunny, Honey?/ I'm a bunny, Honey” (223) becomes a character on her own. The play's stability is then threatened: Honey gains confidence and George and Martha are weakened by the death of their child. This weakness is visible at the very end of the play where they only talk using monosyllabic words such as “yes” or “no”. Their mastery of language does not count anymore; they cannot produce complete sentences. Thus, violence is correlated with an inability to talk in *Who's Afraid of Virginia of Woolf?*.

In *The American Dream*, violence is not cathartic as such because the mutilation of the baby is more

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28 Emphasis added.

farcical than dreadful and it is too violent to be believable. Moreover, the play ends on a happy note. During the epilogue, Grandma even says that the play is a comedy, but she adds that “we'd better [not] go any further” (128), which can mean that if we went further, we would probably have a tragedy. At the very least, the play is a tragicomedy and catharsis is half effective. Berger explains that “[t]ragicomedies can be described as that which provokes laughter through tears. [...] [i]t does not bring about a profound catharsis, but it is moving nonetheless” (117) and his definition does not correspond to *The American Dream*. Laughter is not provoked through tears, but provoked by unease.

Some authors such as McCarthy and Emil Roy consider *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a tragedy, at least during the last act. It is important to recall that act three is called “Exorcism”. An exorcism is the expulsion of a devil spirit from a human body. The effect of an exorcism can be cathartic because emotions are purged. This is what McCarthy asserts as he links exorcism with catharsis. He asserts that the play has “classic tragic quality of recognition and reversal” (77). He also argues that [t]he play works towards a catastrophe in which [...] the moral values of the characters will be affirmed and the dignity and resource of humanity will be celebrated with an audience made aware of its own circumscribed happiness (Ibid.). In Aristotelian terms, “recognition” corresponds to *anagnorisis*, “reversal” is called *peripeteia* and the *catastrophe* corresponds to a reversal of fortune. In the play, recognition would correspond to Martha acknowledging that her son is an illusion and needed to be killed; the *peripeteia* would be George killing their son against Martha's will and the catastrophe would correspond to the homicide. Emil Roy argues that,

In a broad sense *Virginia Woolf* embodies Scott Buchanan's fundamental notions of tragedy: hybris and nemesis. Hybris involves “the arrogance arises from blindness in human nature”; nemesis is that “eventual consequence of that blindness and arrogance” (From S Buchanan in an address entitled “The Anti-Hero in Literature,” delivered at the University of Southern California, LA, May 17, 1964 qtd. 94)

Anne Paolucci, for her part, disagrees with Roy and McCarthy because “[t]he exorcism which finally comes about is a vacuum – stylistically, the play reflects the collapse of the will in a quick staccato of monosyllables which brings the action to its close” (51).

Other researchers consider that laughter acts as a relief. Kate Falvey asserts that

It is clear from the outset that George and Martha's interdependency is shaped by their verbal sniping and their shared jokes, which are like habitual relational tics. The obvious layers of meaning in their banter provide dramatic tension: What will be revealed? Who will be left standing? At the same time, their exchanges are often used to release tension (244)

Indeed, one can find moments of relief and sometimes reconciliation after a verbal assault:

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

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

GEORGE: So are you. (*Pause... Then they both laugh*) Hello, honey. (16)

This exchange is more childish than violent; George and Martha try to beat one another on a game of appearances like children would do. One could even argue that the whole exchange is a relief because their remarks are quite harmless. The beginning of the play presents some moments of complicity in which both characters complete each other. When Martha says that George is a “phrasemaker” (15), they both laugh. The conversation following the fake shot is another instance of relief. George claims that he once found one of Martha's glasses in the freezer, a fact that “amuses” Martha (67). Gilbert Debusscher explains that “[t]he situations and dialogue provoke a laugh which congeals into a strained grin as the vital stakes are revealed to us. Without these sporadic outbursts which free the spectator from his tension, there would only remain unbearable cruelty, a sadistic play” (56). Here, it is more comic relief than violence that is cathartic but Walter Davis argues that violence is necessary to relieve the characters:

George and Martha use language to jab at one another in an effort to pin down in words the attribution needed to arrest and discharge conflicts. Verbal aggression is the *modus operandi* of desire-in-language: the necessary detour through and fixation on speech as the way to rid ourselves of anxiety” (218)

Thus, opinions differ as to define *The American Dream* and especially *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as tragedies. Emil Roy and Gerald McCarthy assert that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a tragedy while Anne Paolucci considers that the exorcism is a “vacuum”. Kate Falvey, for her part, stresses the importance of laughter as a means to relieve dramatic tension.

The American Dream can be considered as a tragicomedy even though it is more a social satire, but *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* could be defined as a tragicomedy.

The endings of both plays are open to different interpretations, but the audience is left disturbed. Violence has a cathartic effect in the sense that it allows a relief of tension for the characters and the audience. Matthew Roudané considers Albee “as leading proponent of using cruelty as a method of purging oneself of demons, of effecting a sense of Catharsis, factors which seem germane to Artaud’s “theatre of Cruelty” (*Edward Albee: A Critical Introduction* 66). Thus, if his plays are not tragedies, could they belong to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty?

The use of violence in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* takes many forms

and has several purposes. Edward Albee uses violence to raise awareness within the spectator as he sees violence and shock as a way to make the audience react. Violence is necessary in the plays of Edward Albee, because humour is not enough. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, violence arises between George and Martha but also towards their guests. Violence is a way to regain human contact and to shatter illusions because it exorcises the characters' fears and it enables them to go "towards the marrow", that is to say, the essential, as George would say. When Martha breaks the rule and mentions their mythical son, George goes on a crusade to destroy him. In *The American Dream*, violence is part of the play from the beginning to the end. It is mostly embodied by Mommy but Grandma also uses violence to shed light on the flaws of our contemporary society.

This use of violence also has a different purpose: the purgation of passions. When reaching the last lines of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the audience is as exhausted as the characters after nearly three hours of verbal assault and revelations. The play is, in a way, cathartic, because terror has been aroused by the playwright. The moral ending could be summarised as "Don't live in a world of illusions". *The American Dream* ends on a happy note, with the family being reunited and the characters being eventually satisfied. Mommy and Daddy have the perfect son and The Young Man has found a job, but Grandma highlights the grey areas of this perfect ending. This mix of comedy and morality attenuates the cathartic effect of *The American Dream* and each spectator has to analyse the play personally. In these two plays, Albee provides more questions than answers, but the playwright provides some hints as to how American society can be amended.

J. L. Styan writes that people "weep at moments of great happiness and laugh at times of great anguish, which may naturally happen through an unconscious apprehension of life's vagaries" (278). In the case of *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, people laugh and weep at times of great anguish, especially *The American Dream* which "has something to do with the anguish of us all" as Albee said in the preface to his play. One could say that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has something to do with the illusions of us all. Both plays display violence, either inherent to the characters in the case of *The American Dream* or triggered by an unacceptable revelation in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. For Edward Albee, violence is a tool to confront reality because violence exacerbates extreme and flawed behaviours. Matthew Roudané argues that

Albee's theatrical strategy ideally minimizes the actor/audience barrier. [...] As active participants within the play the audience contributes to the ritualized forms of confrontation and expiation that characterize much of Albee's work. This is why Albee sees the violence and death as, finally, and paradoxically enough, life-giving" (*Understanding Albee* 13-14).

In Albee's drama, a way to make the audience participate in his plays is violence, which the playwright uses as a political weapon. Showing cruelty, or "blood," as he would say, is the only way to shock and raise awareness within the spectator, according to him. Extreme violence distorts the values of our contemporary world and it displays a cruel universe where no rules are respected except the rules of satisfaction and consumerism. Violence in both plays is employed to show the nature of human beings, that is to say that they seek power and domination, but also to shatter illusions. In the end, violence reveals what is hidden behind our public selves. Death is a synonym for truth because when the children die, illusions also disappear and the characters and/or the audience become aware of the absurdity of American values and can live differently.

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## Conclusion

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“You have two alternatives: you either affect people, or you leave them indifferent. And I would loathe to leave an audience indifferent.”

Edward Albee

*The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* do not leave the audience indifferent. Whether or not one laughs at the plays and the characters, the endings are puzzling and no real answer is given. Are the plays absurd, realistic, tragic, tragicomic, grotesque, or all of these? In both plays, Albee skillfully blurs the lines and it is impossible to cast him in a category, to clearly label him, but the issue about Albee as an absurdist has partly been answered in the introduction regarding the different definitions of the Theatre of the Absurd: the playwright does not belong to the Theatre of the Absurd. Edward Albee's plays are incongruous, but they neither reflect the anxieties of our times nor devalue language. On the contrary, language is almost overvalued and has significant consequences on the characters and plots, as language is a demonstration of power which kills, mocks and humiliates in *The American Dream* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Language is a carefully constructed tool used to “get to the marrow”.

However, if language is carefully constructed, the author nonetheless plays with codes and conventions to better deconstruct familiar literary and linguistic concepts. His use of comedy is multilayered as it is both a way to innocently laugh at incongruous situations but also to reflect more broadly on the society we live in. Albee uses stereotyped characters to overstate the point that the American Way of Life needs to be amended and less idealised.

The playwright completes his recipe by presenting different genres of comedy, among them vaudeville, grotesque comedy and dark humour to better castigate the American society. This is especially the case for *The American Dream* as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is less overtly satiric. In this play, metatheatricality is Albee's main means to criticise American values. Different levels of fiction are proposed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with a system of *mise en abyme*: there is a play within the play with Martha and George performing in front of their guests. This metatheatrical aspect of characters being “merely players” raises the question of the legitimacy of our social behaviours. By presenting characters who play at being characters, Albee points at the fictiveness and superficiality of social conventions: the audience is involved in the play, but at the same time, it is alienated, in Brechtian terms. If one watches a story within a play which is itself a play, then the whole play takes a different direction because the play is a reflection on theatre and,



more broadly, on life.

After a broad study of Albee's use of comedy and meta-theatricality to denounce the American society, a closer analysis of social interactions has shown that characters (ill)-used social codes and conventions either to pacify relationships or to create a conflictual atmosphere.

Edward Albee has his characters either being extremely polite or impolite. Hence, even when the characters respect the rules of politeness, they become incongruous. This criticism and deconstruction of social rules show that they appear to be useless because their use does not prevent the characters from being impolite and, more importantly, from intending to dominate the other. Thus, politeness rules are double-edged and even when the characters intend to accommodate to each other to restore accepted social behaviours, violence and power tensions are always underlying.

In the dichotomy appeasement/conflict, linguistic adjustments and readjustments are more used to dominate and destabilise the other. In both plays, characters rectify one another in an attempt to prove their superiority. This focus on the importance of linguistic mastery is interesting to underline because the essence of characters is that they exist through their words, and this could be considered as another meta-theatrical device from Albee's part because he highlights the illusory nature of his characters who nonetheless have something to say about society. Moreover, by having his characters live through their words, he solves what he thinks is a significant issue of modern civilisation: "people's refusal to communicate with one another, which I sometimes think is probably much closer to the problem – not that people can't communicate with each other, but that they choose not to, because it's easier and safer not to" (158). Rather than preserving his audience, Albee confronts it with its own flaws and he sometimes uses violence to this aim.

Michael Y. Bennett asserts that Albee's use of violence and terror is "an adjunct to the omnipresent issues of communication, awareness, and identity" and violence is indeed omnipresent in the two plays under study (103). It is used to underline the social issues Albee fights against and it is a way for the audience to react and, therefore, to be involved. This heavy presence of violence due to the grotesque aspect of the plays transforms Albee's theatre into a cruel theatre, even though it is not cruel in Artaud's terms. Characters are cruel and violent and even if violence is part of reality, its extremeness and the incongruity surrounding it makes it absurd, both unbearable and bearable for the audience because incongruity acts as a relief. Thus, Edward Albee is successful in making the audience smile because of the grotesque situations, but also think about the society that surrounds them. Albee's play with theatrical, linguistic and social conventions is a means to involve and to

shock the audience so as to have them “corrupted in the direction of the truth as the playwright sees it”, as Albee said.

Violence, adjustments, readjustments, metatheatricality and the mix of literary genres are Albee's solution to depict and denounce the American society of the 1960s, but his use of such weapons does not always meet the audience's expectations because they stand in-between. When some hints are gathered to lead to a clear conclusion, an incongruous, violent or comical element always disturbs this smooth development. Edward Albee never gives a clear-cut authorial opinion in his plays, which contradicts his claim that the author's need to lead his audience in the direction of truth. The playwright indeed deconstructs theatrical and linguistic codes, but he also goes as far as not giving any conclusion at the end of his plays. This could be considered as democratic because democracy is about multiplicity and Edward Albee's writing is multiple: multiple genres, multiple possible endings. The audience has a choice to consider these plays absurd, comic, satirical, tragicomic, realistic... This democratic dimension of Albee's plays would be an interesting following to this notion of deconstruction.

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