

Who's Afraid of Sylvia?:

Edward Albee and the Tragification of American Suburbia*

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“The most profound question to be asked of a civilization is in what form it experiences its tragedies.” (Georg Lukács)

“YES! OF COURSE! I WANT YOU HERE! THIS IS MY HOUSE!
I WANT YOU IN IT! I WANT YOUR PLAGUE! YOU’VE GOT
SOME TERROR WITH YOU? BRING IT IN!”

(Albee, *A Delicate Balance*)

I. American Suburbia as a Problem

A major theme of post-war American literary landscape concerns the representation of American suburbia as the site of conflicting conceptions and affects. American suburbia is often seen as a uniquely realized reality, a triumphant post-war embodiment of democratic values and ideals homogenized

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by Levittown architectural engineering. In Dolores Hayden's words, the American suburb is "a landscape of imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and spiritual uplift" (*Building Suburbia* 3). The concept of American suburbia in which amorphous utopian aspirations are awkwardly juxtaposed with mechanically orchestrated realities, or what L. Buell has called "the schizophrenia of American naturism" (441), has been variously articulated and pungently diagnosed. A notable example can be found in Leo Marx's classic formulation of an industrial-pastoral utopia in terms of "machine in the garden": a powerful metaphor of contradiction that captures the attempt to domesticate both the explosive industrialization and nature's malevolent forces to create a distinctively American vision of nature in harmony with culture. Throughout his book, Marx uses the "middle landscape" as the dominant cultural and geographical imaginary. Located between wilderness and civilization, it is conceived as "a new, distinctively American, post-romantic, industrial version of the pastoral design" (32), as a "balance of art and nature" (226).

Marx's grand narrative of the opposition between nature and civilization increasingly takes on a pessimistic note, with the dehumanizing industrialization deemed unstoppable and the middle landscape doomed to disappear. In the end, American suburbia remains fugitive as ever: Marx endorses Thoreau's subjective retreat into a reimagined pastoral landscape as the only viable answer to the question "How is the alternative to be defined?" (255). Marx's view is historically grounded, his literary history of American pastoralism unfolding in temporal linearity. An urban landscape historian, Hayden proposes a more spatially-oriented understanding of American suburbia as the "site of promises, dreams, and fantasies" (*Building Suburbia* 3). It is a utopian form which is yet

to be materialized. American suburbia is thus a reality and a desire: it is here and now and not here yet, at the same time.

Divested of dialectical sublation (*aufhebung*), the binary of utopian impulse and dystopian melancholy found at the center of the conception of American suburbia has nested itself in a mere confluence and become a sterile cultural status quo, or a joyful expression of cultural fatigue in terms of Nietzschean irony. Rejuvenation or invigoration of American suburbia as the site of cultural ideals requires transcendental transfiguration, and therein comes the need for a new form of cultural mediation, that is, a specifically American form of tragedy. A defining characteristic of Edward Albee's dramaturgy is a thematic and formal link that is forged¹⁾ between the long-running American pastoral tradition and classical Greek tragedy. Nicely filling the void of American theatre in the late 50s and on (with Arthur Miller withdrawing himself after the malicious public campaign, Tennessee Williams struggling with his personal problems, and Eugene O'Neill finally dead), Albee embarked on a dramatic journey that would be trajected in tandem with the post-war sprawling and the subsequent compression of American suburbia.

Albee's consummate artistry is orchestrated to find a "delicate balance" between opposing impulses: he has thrived on the tension between his racial and sexual identities, embraced both the naturalistic tradition of American drama and the existential-absurdist in(ter)vention of European theatre, and has been fascinated with the formal beauty of tragedy that does not necessarily agree with his tragic sense of life. The residing presence behind all this is Friedrich Nietzsche. Albee's desire to reinvent American tragedy has taken the form of Nietzschean conception that is postulated in terms of the two warring

1) Forging is the key word in Jean Chothia's 1979 study of Eugene O'Neill, *Forging a Language: A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill*.

impulses of Apollonian beauty and Dionysian suffering. Naturalistic convention is the rightful heir to the Apollonian form, and Albee substitutes the Dionysian with the absurdist vision which he believes is more suited to modern sensibilities. Artful juxtaposition of the naturalistic and absurdist would generate a new form of tragedy, and this modern tragedy would most fully be materialized when set in American suburbia to create a uniquely realized form of American tragedy.

II. Tragedy and the Theatre of the Absurd

Tragedy is such a protean term as to render any attempt to come up with a general definition of it dissatisfactory and almost futile. At the center of critical debates on tragedy is whether it is a historical or formal concept. Robert W. Corrigan talks about “the formalistic fallacy in the study of dramatic genres” that insists on the idea “that tragedy of all ages has certain formal and structural characteristics in common” (8). In a similar vein, Raymond Williams proposes a historical approach to the problem, seeing tragedy arising out of the precise “structure of feeling” which is conceived in terms of specific times and spaces:

Our thinking about tragedy is important because it is a point of intersection between tradition and experience, and it would certainly be surprising if the intersection turned out to be a coincidence. Tragedy comes to us, as a word, from a long tradition of European civilization, and it is easy to see this tradition as a continuity in one important way: that so many of the later writers and thinkers have been conscious of the earlier, and have seen themselves as contributing to a common idea or form. Yet, “tradition” and “continuity,” as words, can lead us into a wholly wrong emphasis.

When we come to study the tradition, we are immediately aware of change. All we can take quite for granted is the continuity of "tragedy" as a word. It may well be that there are more important continuities, but we can certainly not begin by assuming them. (15)

Here Williams criticizes the humanist view of tragedy such as George Steiner's. It is not difficult to discern in Steiner's radically pronounced book title (*The Death of Tragedy*) a beleaguered humanist position that is fraught with the contradiction of a nostalgic yearning for the dead art form and a desire to transcend it.²⁾ For Steiner, art and life are two separate categories, and tragic experiences are not the same as tragedy, which is a uniquely western art form. Extrapolating certain features from Greek tragedy and abstracting them to define tragedy, Steiner not only falls into the trap of circular reasoning but also advances a solipsistic vision of tragic hero as a transcendental being.

Against viewing tragedy as the cultural monument of the West's bygone past and thus relegating it to the status of glorious dead artifact in the museum, Williams points to the fluidity of the concept that constantly renews itself under the dialectic of "tradition" and "experience." Tragedy as art form evolves around the nexus of continuity and interruption, of art and life. And it is when the distance between tradition and experience is the widest that tragedy sets in. To put it differently, tragedy "emerges in a society which is undergoing a period of historical transition" (Wallace 75).

Although widely different in their *Weltanschauung*, Williams and Nietzsche share in common the need to find and identify a tragic form that captures and

2) Steiner is very positive about Brecht's achievement, for example, only to add that "Bertolt Brecht is dead, and time may deliver us from the nightmare of his politics" (350), confirming his humanist bias against the mixture of art with radical, or for that matter, any form of politics.

expresses *Zeitgeist*. There is a Hegelian residue in their tragic conceptions. And yet, both Williams and Nietzsche are more deeply aware of the reality of tragic suffering than Hegel would allow for. For Hegel, it is necessary for *Geist*'s journey of self-realization that it achieve its embodiment in tragedy. Tragedy attains its meaning only as an incomplete embodiment of *Geist*. Its limits would be superseded by philosophy. Thus, Hegel sees tragedy only as a perfect harmony, its calm monumentality overriding particular manifestations of human suffering.

Williams entitled his book *Modern Tragedy*, and Nietzsche originally called his *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. According to Nietzsche, appearance is necessary in order to shield us from the full truth of human suffering which otherwise would crush us with its magnitude. However, the existential need to veil the painful reality by art should not and cannot completely suppress that reality. Therefore, "the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality . . . , involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations" (33). His idiosyncratic view of Attic tragedy³⁾ is conceived in terms of the creative struggle between the Apollonian form of appearance and the Dionysian reality of suffering, with the aim of establishing Wagner's music as the modern alternative to classical tragedy. For Nietzsche, Wagner's music (and *Tristan und Isolde* in particular) lends a genuine force to the rejuvenation of the German culture. The German thinker believes that by allowing (as Attic tragedy once did) the Dionysian cry of suffering to perforate the Apollonian beauty of illusion, Wagner imbues his music with the heightened sense of the annihilation of individuals (tragic heroes) and of the affirmation of the blind universal will.

3) It is even a falsifying conception in that the Greek deity that represented tragedy was neither Apollo nor Dionysus, but the Muses.

For Williams and Nietzsche, tragedy is an essential function and expression of cultural milieu. The question to be asked and answered for our purpose is, to rephrase Georg Lukács (quoted at the beginning of this paper), what dramatic form is available for postwar American society to experience its tragedies. Is the erstwhile lofty tradition of American naturalism still capable of carrying on its cultural mission? Tragic drama in post-war America has been a vehicle for moral indignation against social injustice (Arthur Miller) or a receptacle of life's ephemerality (Tennessee Williams). However powerfully conveyed the "messages" of their plays may have been, the dramatic forms that frame those messages tended to be conservative: the most radical invention takes the form of memory play which is often flooded with the nostalgic yearning for the (un)lived past. In Nietzschean terms, the plays of Williams and Miller assume the Apollonian beauty of appearance that can be rationally understood as well as emotionally felt. Albee's drama gestures toward a more formal kind, and we can detect a constant movement in form: a series of experimental plays ranging from hyper-naturalism (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) through mundane naturalism pitted against phantasmagoric expressionism (*Three Tall Women*) to(ward) a Nietzschean tragic form (*The Goat*), all peppered with strong elements of the theatre of the absurd. Albee has been concerned with finding a modern equivalent to the Dionysian ecstasy of suffering that goes beyond the limits of our understanding. He believes he has found it in the theatre of the absurd.

An essentially European phenomenon with Beckett, Adamov and Ionesco as its figureheads, the theatre of the absurd expresses "the same deep sense of human isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition" (Esslin, "Theatre of the Absurd" 4). Inhabiting the world "as an incomprehensible place" with few characters to recognize and identify with, the

theatre of the absurd is “found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure” (Esslin, “Theatre of the Absurd” 5). The absurdity of these plays, however, does not necessarily produce despair, pain or destitution. They may as well provoke wild laughter and evoke an elated sense of life. They can affirm human life mysteriously as they can negate it forcefully.

As Jennifer Wallace astutely observes, “the historical, cultural context of twentieth-century America bears some comparison with that of fifth-century Athens, with its similar confusion between traditional and avant-garde beliefs and its development of new political, social systems” (75). Wallace finds “the primary focus of American tragedy” in “the family” (75). She is right in that for many immigrants who settled in the new country with as much anxiety and uncertainty as hopes and dreams, the family offered the only safe haven. When this material and emotional foothold is shaken off, tragic situations set in. Wallace’s prime example of American tragedy is Eugene O’Neill. While agreeing with her, I would argue that post-war America underwent a profound transformation, and with the change in America’s social and demographic composition, the primary focus of American tragedy shifted from the family onto the more specifically suburban family.

Writing in 1968, Martin Esslin noted that there had never been a wholesale acceptance of the theatre of the absurd in the United States. Three American playwrights are listed in his seminal book, but Albee is singled out as the prime example of that rare breed called the American theatre of the absurd. (Esslin allots barely more than a page to the other two, Jack Gelber and Arthur Kopit, and rather reluctantly). The dearth of American examples is attributed to the fact that while “the convention of the Absurd springs from a feeling of deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and purpose in

life,” in the case of America, “there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose” (*Theatre of the Absurd* 311). Albee belongs to the theatre of the absurd because his drama “attacks the very foundations of American optimism” (*Theatre of the Absurd* 312). Although in a later edition of the book Esslin refers to Watergate and defeat in Vietnam as the events that shook off the optimism of the American public, his discussion of Albee stops at the 1966 play, *A Delicate Balance*, in one perfunctory sentence, and has never been revised or enlarged.

It is quite likely that Esslin had lost his interest in Albee as the absurdist writer by the time the final revision of his book came out in 2001. However, the truth is that from the beginning of his career, Albee's has never been a pure theatre of the absurd. It is true that he introduced some powerful elements of the absurd in the early one-act plays such as *The Zoo Story* (1959) and *The American Dream* (1961). Nevertheless, they were all framed in a recognizable setting: *The Zoo Story* is set in Central Park in New York; *The American Dream*, the closest Albee comes to the theatre of the absurd, is sprinkled with little details of American life.

In fact, Albee has focused on how the ideals and realities of American suburbia are played out and transformed in, or more precisely, *toward* tragic form. It is important that the subtitle that Albee gives of his last major play *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?* is “Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy.” Albee sets up for himself the task of testing tragic possibilities of violence and sacrifice in curative and restorative terms: can violence be sacralized through ritual sacrifice on the dramatic terrain? Amid the overabundance of meaningless violence and pointless human sacrifices in cultural representations as well as the real world of everyday life, and under the barrage of loud-banging but empty-handed moralizing against violence, Albee has been looking for an

expressive outlet through which to achieve an economy of sacrificial violence: a theatre of and as scapegoat.

III. Edward Albee and the Suburban Tragedy

The three plays I have chosen to discuss (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Three Tall Women* and *The Goat*) are all set in a suburban family home. Whether in American television sitcoms like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-66), *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63) and *Family Ties* (1982-89) that are all set in what Hayden calls "sitcom suburbs" ("Revisiting" 39) or philosophical reflections such as Martin Heidegger's notion of dwelling as authentic existence and Gaston Bachelard's idea of home as a first universe, the centrality of home/house in constituting one's self has been taken to be universally valid. Home is a primary place, a space particularized by deeply shared experiences and memories. As Tim Cresswell puts it pithily, "Home is where you can be yourself" and it "acts as a kind of metaphor for place in general" (39). What has been disputed is the putative nature and meaning of our experience of home as place.

Traditionally, home and house have been equated to express the interior and exterior of human nature. For example, the American preacher Henry Ward Beecher wrote in the late nineteenth-century: "A house is the shape which a man's thoughts take when he imagines how he should like to live. Its interior is the measure of his social and domestic nature; its exterior, of his esthetic and artistic nature. It interprets, in material form, his ideas of home, of friendship, and of comfort" (qtd. in Grene 4). However, the traditional conception of home as the essential and ideal human space is based on "the

masculinist notion of home/place" (Rose 53) which covers up the reality of home as the central site of oppression in general, and of women in particular. According to Gillian Rose, our actual experiences do not lend support to the rosy view of home as "conflict-free, caring, nurturing and almost mystically venerated by the humanists" (56).

More generally, critical human geography points to the danger of the philosophical impulse to essentialize "place," of which the home is regarded as the most natural. As David Harvey contends, "Place, in whatever guise, is like space and time, a social construct" (261). Once the constructed nature of place is acknowledged, the essentialized idea of home needs to be problematized. The mythic-philosophical identification of home with existential being and its rootedness must also be debunked. Albee's (re)presentation of American suburban home focuses on the social and philosophical processes by which home as place has been constructed and reinforced. He uses dramatic space as the site of a fiendish battle of the sexes (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), deconstructing a feminine self (*Three Tall Women*), and an incredulous interspecies love affair (*The Goat*). As these themes are framed in the form of claustrophobic realism, naturalism and expressionism in juxtaposition, and absurdist-Dionysian tragedy respectively, the suburban space is interrogated, transcended, and transfigured alternately.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962) is Albee's breakthrough (and his first full-length) play. Set in a New England suburban home, the play shocked the audience with its language of vehement disgust that easily outdoes anything written by O'Neill and Williams. The action is set in a recognizable time and space. George, an associate professor in a small college in suburban New England, and his wife and daughter of the college president, Martha (Albee here is obviously toying with the Washingtons), invite a newly arrived young

professor of biology Nick and his wife Honey for a “night cap” after the president’s faculty party. The torturous verbal abuse launched by Martha and George against each other is joined by the younger couple. Drawn into Martha and George’s sadomasochistic “game,” they divulge the truth that behind the façade of the stereotype happy couple (familiarized by advertising and TV shows from the 50s), they have absolutely nothing in common.

The verbal war fought between Martha and George, which is a sort of ritual game to maintain the appearance of the ideal American nuclear family, pivots on a lie: they tell Nick and Honey that they had a son and he was killed in an accident, while the truth is there was no child in the first place. The sense of fictional loss keeps Martha and George going on as a couple. At one level, therefore, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a trenchant critique of the fictive ideal of American suburban family. At another, it is a dramatic representation of the illusory nature of lived reality. As George says:

There are few things in this world that I *am* sure of . . . national boundaries, the level of the ocean, political allegiances, practical morality . . . none of these would I stake my stick on any more . . . but one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the . . . creation of our . . . blond-eyed, blue-haired . . . son. (202)

To rephrase it from the Nietzschean perspective, the play shows the necessity of the illusions of Apollonian appearance, and yet in the absence of Dionysian flashes of lacerating truth, those illusions are not life-sustaining in the end. The fact that the fictive child is a necessary condition of American home and the rules of the game are constructed by Martha and George reveals that home is not a natural place.

There are limits in this play, though. The (almost) unbearable intensity of the linguistic engagement, however unsettling and shattering it may be, is still not powerful enough to allow the Dionysian suffering to break down the fourth wall of naturalistic illusion.⁴⁾ The structural movement from “Fun and Games” (Act 1) through “Walpurgisnacht” (Act 2) to “The Exorcism” (Act 3) suggests the carnivalesque ritual of subversion-transgression-order. And yet, it is confined to the ever-diminishing consciousness of George and Martha, who remain imprisoned in the suburban house of language. Moreover, the dramatic language of the play is still linguistic: although the whole game of language battle (from a proficient repartee of acerbic wits to a nasty duel with verbal swords) is predicated on the fiction, it is still coherent and cohesive in its semantic and rhetorical flows. By the end of the play, “our enduring impression is not that of exorcism but of skillful verbal exercise” (Cohn 218). We witness a most refined bickering on the stage (which is a laudable achievement in itself), but not much else.

Albee introduces a radically new form in *Three Tall Women* (1991). Formal juxtaposition is a key device with the play as it straddles mundane realism and phantasmagoric expressionism. The playwright's attempt to challenge the dominant tradition of American naturalism does not just reflect the postmodern milieu in which the play was born. I have argued elsewhere that a distinctive feature of postwar American drama is a widespread identification of tragedy with a tragic sense of life, which explains its generally conservative form(s).⁵⁾

4) Matthew Roudane gives a view that sees a greater transformative power of language and gesture of the play than suggested here. According to him, it is “a Pirandellian work, a play whose words, gestures, absurdist moments, and epistemological questions transform much of the action – despite its surface realism – into an essentially metatheatrical experience” (49).

5) The postwar American obsession with tragedy bore out the “belief in the

Notwithstanding its autobiographical origin (the play was penned after the death of Albee's adoptive mother), *Three Tall Women* is the child of the world-historical moment at which America emerged as the indisputable global power in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike his predecessors like Williams and Miller, Albee refuses to sit comfortably in the confidence of representation at "the end of history," to borrow the title of Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay. On the contrary, he demonstrates and acts upon an acute sense of the crisis of representation by breaking up the unity of linear time and recognizable space.

Act 1 of *Three Tall Women* is inhabited by three different women who react to each other in naturalistic way. These women are simply named A, B and C, surely a Beckettian echo. A is a 92-year-old woman constantly nagging about the indignities and infelicities of aging. B is a 56-year-old caretaker. C, a young woman of 28, represents A's lawyer. Poorly coordinated and eventually immobile, A dies. Her inconspicuous death reflects the perfunctory nature of Act 1 which is conspicuous in its absence of dramatic action. A *coup de theatre* takes place as Act 2 opens: A, who died in bed at the end of Act 1 reappears "*in a lovely, lavender dress*" (354), with a dummy propped up in bed in place of her. Equally baffling is the fact that when A intervenes in their conversation, B and C "*are not surprised to see her*" (354). The shock increases when it is gradually revealed that they now are the embodiments of the same woman at three different stages of her life.

Unlike Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*⁶⁾ in which an old man confronts his

representational congruence and correspondence between art and the world as America, as the superpower, conceives and perceives the world and itself" (Lee, "Ethical Contours" 248).

6) It was with Beckett's play that Albee's *The Zoo Story* was first performed

younger selves through a disembodied voice taped on the recorder, *Three Tall Women* stages three fully embodied selves of a woman who is split and tripled across time. The simultaneous difference and identity is realized on a single dramatic canvas to produce "a kind of Cubist stage picture" (qtd. in Adler 8), as John Lahr calls it in his 1993 *New Yorker* review. This self-fragmentation is devised to show how C became B and B became A, and A is the sum of C and B, and yet each is irreducible to the other. The concurrence of different emotions is in order, creating the pain of memories for A, existential inertia for B, and dashed hopes for C. Memory, anxiety and hope cancel one another. The play suggests fear and certainty are the only responses to death that are available to us. Fear of death leaves us restless and listless while certainty of death offers us a time for stoic resignation. As A ruminates, "There is a difference between knowing you're going to *die* and *knowing* you're going to die. The second is better" (384).

Whereas Krapp has no way of communicating with his younger selves, A converses with her younger selves. A is resigned to and reconciled with her past while Krapp remains stultified by and alienated from his. A's final reconciliation within the multi-embodied self is the more painful in that it not only reveals the Dionysian truth of suffering previously kept hidden in the illusory realism of the first act, but also highlights the agonizing truth that the full imbibement of one's life in all its glories and vagaries can be achieved, if at all, only after death. And yet, the poetic diction of finality is one of affirmation: "I was talking about . . . what: coming to the end of it; yes. So. There it is. You asked, after all. That's the happiest moment. When it's all done. When we stop. When we can stop" (384).

With *Three Tall Women*, Albee points to the Nietzschean irony. Realism with its proximity to, and approximation of, reality is an Apollonian illusion. With three embodiments of the same, dead woman occupying the same time and space, the theatre of the absurd (Albee's substitution for the Dionysian suffering) offers a glimpse into the painful yet oddly affirmative truth of reality. Apart from the contrasting effects of the juxtaposition (representational in Act 1 and expressive in Act 2), it does not seem clear what the precise nature of the relationship is between the two acts. Mirroring fails to hold, the forging of the two acts is not fully effected. And yet, the second act shows that death is more telling of life's truth than the stultifying life that has been lived in Act 1. Act 1 is therefore a prelude to the main drama of Act 2 in *Three Tall Women*. However, without the prelude, the drama would not stand, and the prelude of life underpins the drama of death. It is theatre's magical privilege that it can evoke the dead to speak the truth of life.

Betrayal is the great theme of tragedy, and it runs through Albee's major plays. It is the name of the game in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the experiential truth for A in *Three Tall Women*. However, it is in *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?* (2001) that the most crushing consequence of betrayal is found. Testing the limits of tolerability,⁷⁾ the play draws on an unlikely combination of Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, Beckett and Woody Allen. Ruby Cohn considers Albee's affinity with Beckett as an inspirational source: citing a line from Beckett's *Molloy*—"I would have made love with a goat, to know what love is"—Cohn ponders, "Could this sentence have inspired Albee's play?" (228). Also, it comes to mind that Woody Allen's 1972 comedy *Everything You Always*

7) In an interview with Steven Drukman, Albee said, "With any luck, there will be people standing up, shaking their fists during the performance and throwing things at the stage" (qtd. in Lee, "*The Goat*" 172).

*Wanted to Know About Sex * But Were Afraid to Ask* shares a thematic concern with Albee's play: one of the seven vignettes that constitute the film is called "What Is Sodomy?" in which a medical doctor (played by Gene Wilder) falls in love with the partner of his Armenian patient that turns out to be a sheep.

More pertinently, the subtitle of the play alludes at once to Greek tragedy and Shakespeare. "Who is Sylvia?" is a well-known song in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* which was translated by Goethe in German and turned into a popular lied by Franz Schubert. It is not immediately clear what relevance Shakespeare's song and play has for Albee's play. Shakespeare's play is a romantic comedy about lovers' reconciliation and forgiveness after betrayal and treachery, whereas *The Goat* allows its lovers (Martin and Stevie) no such felicity, and only dreadful incomprehension and vengeful killing preside over them. As Thomas P. Adler suggests (12), it is perhaps the last two lines of the song that offer a hint at what Albee attempts to draw from Shakespeare: "She excels each mortal thing / Upon the dull earth dwelling" (IV, ii, 51-2). Sylvia is a most beautiful lady that brightens the otherwise depressingly boring world. However, when she turns out to be a goat, things may go awry, as they do in Albee's play. The opening act swiftly moves on to reveal that Martin, an award-winning architect who just turned 50, has fallen in love with a goat he names Sylvia. Martin's confession is too ridiculously out of ordinary to be rejected as a sick joke. Nor can it be, as Michelle Robinson rightly points out, simply thrown out the window as "a perversion that can easily be pathologized" (72). In consequence, apprehensive incomprehensibility on all parts (Stevie, Billy and Martin himself) gradually takes on cosmic weight that crushes the compact order of the American home.

Martin has been a near-ideal husband for Stevie: indeed, he has been a Sylvia for Stevie. The fact that their teen-aged son Billy is an "experimenting"

homosexual does not bother them. Here we do have an ideal American nuclear family that neither George and Martha (with their “dead” fictive son in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) nor A and her perverted husband (with their adoptive son in *Three Tall Women*) can aspire to. Tired of seeing building after building and yearning to be in touch with nature, Martin decides to buy a farmhouse which is located “beyond the suburbs” (566). Once a utopia on earth, American suburbs have lost the appeal of a tranquil pastoral-urban presence. With the innocent glamour of American suburbia dimming out, its residents have become just “each mortal thing / Upon the dull earth dwelling.” Thus, Martin’s search for a farmhouse amounts to the breakdown of “machine in the garden” in Leo Marx’s phrase. Martin’s quest for the recovery of the long-lost American pastoral tradition brings him to the fateful encounter with the goat, which in turn brings the suburban American family down to its destruction.

Up until he meets Sylvia the goat, Martin has never been unfaithful to his wife, who regards him as “decent, liberal, right-thinking, talented, famous, gentle” (572). The Apollonian beauty of Martin and Stevie’s relationship is put in stark contrast to the sensuous bestiality of Martin and Sylvia’s. Martin is fatefully attracted to Sylvia through her “gaze,” which amounts to an optic arrest: “And there she was, looking at me with those eyes” (567). When Stevie finally flies into a rage, her anger is expressed less in emotional and intellectual terms and more in immediately physical senses: “Stay away from me; stay there. You smell of goat, you smell of shit, you smell of all I cannot imagine being able to smell. Stay *away* from me!” (575). The word “smell” is repeated four times, and her frustration is raised to its full crescendo in “away,” signifying an irrevocable separation. The ensuing verbal war between Stevie and Martin is characterized by the olfactory language of Martin (“nose around”) against the semantic practice of Stevie (“search”). Martin inadvertently

accuses Stevie that it was her desire to live in a pastoral environment that caused his affair with Sylvia: “*You’re* the one who said it. Verdancy: flowers and green leaves against steel and stone. OK?” (585). As Stevie’s frustration and detestation escalate, her linguistic exercise turns into sheer physicality: “Yes! *More!* Finish it! Vomit it all up! Puke it out all over me. I’ll never be less ready. So . . . *do* it! *DO IT!!* I’ve laid it all out for you; I’m naked on the table; take all your knives! Cut me! Scar me forever!” (595).

Martin’s desperate plea is couched in terms of self-incomprehension and self-apprehension. Stevie becomes increasingly animalistic, shedding the calm dignity of her indignation. At the end of Scene 2, Stevie howls at Martin: “You have brought me down, you goat-fucker; you love of my life! You brought me down to *nothing!* You have brought me down, and Christ!, I’ll bring you down with me! (605). The curse is classical in its powerful simplicity, at once ominous and delirious. When the blood-covered Stevie enters the stage in the final scene dragging Sylvia the goat that she killed with vengeance, the play climaxes into a full-blown Dionysian tragedy. Now and finally, Sylvia the goat is brought back to her age-old role: a sacrificial scapegoat at the altar of Dionysus. As tragedians danced upon the corpse of the goat, so do Martin and Stevie shout and scream at each other, which is Albee’s version of “Who is Sylvia?” After all, it is a potent reminder that the word “tragedy” originates from a Greek word meaning “goat-song.”

IV. Return to Athens

Cohn concludes her analysis of *The Goat* with these words: “the words and the pretentiously tragic theme are ill-matched” (229). Whether the play’s tragic

theme is pretentious or not is a moot point. Instead of being an essential shortcoming, however, the incongruence that Cohn finds between the language and the theme of the play constitutes Albee's contribution to tragic art: tragic situations are still with us, but tragic language is available to us no more. Albee invests heavily in the failure of language to enunciate modern tragedy. In Albee's drama, naturalism's prerogative to illusion is not so much rejected as acknowledged as an existential necessity. So is the absurdist puncture of that illusive whole that leads us to see through the fiction of naturalism's self-enclosure.

As Nicholas Grene has shown, home on the naturalistic stage "keeps reappearing to haunt modern dramaturgy" and "[t]he best that playwrights can do is to adapt it, deconstruct it or play games with it" (205). Albee has been an exemplary playwright in this regard. The two common denominators of the three Albee plays, which have been discussed here, are the suburban home and naturalism, with the latter being variously inflected: he has adapted the American suburban home on the naturalistic stage, deconstructed it, and played games with it. Indeed, the subtitle of *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* captures Albee's life-long journey with form: "Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy." His never-ending experimentation has been geared toward finding form(s) that impose a sense of order in the world of un-decidability without sacrificing the chaotic. In other words, Albee's drama is "an exercise in *re*-definition of the tragic genre, since the tragedy in Albee's *Goat* [and other plays] resides not primarily in an individual's fall from a lofty position after violating a taboo, but rather in the narrow strictures of a society which will not accept following the vagaries of the human heart" (Adler 12). In Adler's words, we can clearly detect an echo of Miller's protestations in "Tragedy and the Common Man."

Albee is not a "social" playwright in the sense that Miller and Odets were.

This does not mean that Albee is a self-regarding writer who distances himself from concerns with social change, safely nesting himself in the artist's haven. In his "Introduction" to two early plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, Albee elaborates on the "two obligations" of a playwright:

first, to make some statement about the condition of "man" (as it is put) and, second, to make some statement about the nature of the art form from which he is working. In both instances he must attempt change. In the first instance—since very few serious plays are written to glorify the status quo—the playwright must try to alter his society; in the second instance—since art must move, or wither—the playwright must try to alter the forms within which his precursors have had to work. (261-62)

In Albee's drama, investigation of the existential status of humanity goes in tandem with formal concerns. Albee has been true to himself, and what is innovation and experimentation to others is the norm to him. He goes on to invite the audience to join his (ad)venture: "an audience has an obligation (to itself, to the art form in which it is participating, and even to the playwright) to be willing to experience a work on its own terms" ("Introduction" 262). In the end, Albee's tragification of American suburbia is a plea to (re)establish the Athenian ideal of community theatre where playwrights, actors and audiences are all participants in the lofty citizenry.

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Who's Afraid of Sylvia?:

Edward Albee and the Tragification of American Suburbia

Abstract

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Three concerns come together to form the major argument of this essay. First, American suburbia as the locus and reservoir of post-war American values, ideals and desires has been variously conceptualized, elaborated and problematized by scholars of various disciplines. Second, Edward Albee has focused on the (re)presentation of American suburbia throughout his career. His radical experimentations with dramatic form as well as his thematic concerns do not lend support to a widely held view of him as the quintessential American practitioner of the theatre of the absurd. Finally, a re-reading of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* has led me to inquire into the formal relationship between tragedy and the theatre of the absurd. Suburbia, tragedy and Albee are key words here, and this essay argues that Albee's drama has moved from deconstructing the essentialized idea of American home to transfiguring American suburbia by imbuing the latter with a renewed possibility of tragedy. The essay discusses three plays (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Three Tall Women*, *The Goat*) as the major sign-posts of Albee's dramatic trajectory.

Key Words Albee, American suburbia, naturalism, Nietzsche, the theatre of the absurd, tragedy

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