

DOKTORI (PhD) ÉRTEKEZÉS

**TRANSGRESSING THE LIMIT:
RITUAL REENACTED IN SELECTED PLAYS
BY EDWARD ALBEE AND SAM SHEPARD**

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Transgressing the Limit:

Ritual Reenacted in Selected Plays by Edward Albee and Sam Shepard

Értekezés a doktori (PhD) fokozat megszerzése érdekében

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Én, Prohászka Rád Boróka, teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült. Jelen értekezést korábban más intézményben nem nyújtottam be és azt nem utasították el.

Határ-szegés: újra-játszott rítus Edward Albee és Sam Shepard válogatott színdarabjaiban

Kulcsszavak:

Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, színház, dráma, néző, paródia, Victor Turner, rítus, liminalitás, a liminoid, szubjektum, identitás, szubjektum-elmélet

Kivonat:

Doktori értekezésem Edward Albee és Sam Shepard négy-négy, 1995 és 2007 között írott színdarabját elemzi (Albee: *The Play about the Baby* 1998, *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia* 2002, *Occupant* 2002, és *Peter and Jerry* 2004; Shepard: *Buried Child* átdolgozott kiadás 1995, *The Late Henry Moss* 2000, *The God of Hell* 2004, és *Kicking a Dead Horse* 2007) Victor Turner rítuselméletének, a liminalitás és a liminoid fogalmainak elméleti keretében. Azt feltételezem és bizonyítom, hogy az archetipikus hárompilléres rítusszerkezet, amelyet Arnold van Gennep írt le *Átmeneti rítusok* című nagyjelentőségű munkájában, majd Turner fejlesztett és részletezett tovább, ezekben a drámai univerzumokban „csonkított” formában tűnik fel újra. Hipotézisem szerint a harmadik, visszailleszkedési fázis kiemelődik a színdarabok testéből, és áttevődik az előadás és nézők között létrejövő liminoid együttműködés terébe.

Elemzéseimben a szereplők életében végbemenő rítusok középső, liminális fázisára fektetem a hangsúlyt. A színdarabok – amelyeket eddig jobbra figyelmen kívül hagyott az Albee és Shepard kritika – szereplőiket életük „szakadáspontjainál” (Maffesoli 133) mutatják be, amelyek szükségszerűen átmeneti rítusok eljátszását követelik meg annak érdekében, hogy ezek által változás következhesen be. Azonban ezek a rítusok sikertelenek maradnak, hiszen a szereplők már eleve ilyen köztes állapotok csapdájában léteznek a normatív szabályok bizonyos múltbeli megszegése okán, emiatt elzárt térben, a társadalom peremén, a közösségi létből elidegenülten élnek. Képtelenek meghaladni liminális állapotukat abból kifolyólag is, hogy ezekben a drámai világokban oly strukturális egységek mint a különféle társadalmi csoportok, értékrendek, koherens, egységes és stabil közösségek, még a család is, megkérdőjeleződnek és instabillá válnak.

Az értelmezési szférát azáltal tágítom és teszem árnyaltabbá, hogy a turneri liminalitás fogalmát együtt olvasom a poszt-strukturalista szubjektumelméletek fogalmaival (Lacan, Belsey, Kiss, Foucault, Caruth és Felman, Baudrillard és Hutcheon elméleteivel). A szereplők

liminális megpróbáltatásai során felbukkanó áldozati rítusok értelmezésében René Girard mimetikus vágyra és az áldozati-bárány-effektusra vonatkozó elméletét hívom segítségül. Ugyanakkor meg is haladom egy ilyen elméleti keretbe szorított olvasat határait azáltal, hogy bizonyítom: a rituális áldozat szerepe szétosztódik a folyamat több szubjektumára, akik valamennyien megtapasztalják az identitásra mint egy természetileg/szakrálisan/kulturálisan adott, stabil és egységes entitásra vonatkozó illúzió elvesztését, és felismerik azt a tényt, hogy minden emberi struktúra (ezen belül az identitás is) konstrukció, tehát esendő és nyitott a vizsgálat és átalakulás előtt. Ezáltal értekezésem tesztelési területévé is válik egy interdiszciplináris értelmezési módszernek, amely—véleményem szerint—eredményesen alkalmazható majd a különböző kutatásokban.

Az első és utolsó fejezetekben összevető és összehasonlító megközelítést alkalmazok, míg a többi fejezetekben váltakozva a két szerző egy-egy színdarabját elemzem. Elsősorban az ezen drámai univerzumokban azonosítható rituális folyamatok aspektusait vizsgálom, és rámutatok azokra a színházi formákra és eszközökre, amelyek dramatizálják a szereplők liminális állapotát. Az első fejezet azt az „nevelési/beavatási folyamatot” és „a szentség kommunikálását” vizsgálja, amely a *Buried Child* és *The Play about the Baby* darabokban tetten érhető, valamint az ezekben a folyamatokban alkalmazott „domináns szimbólumok” azonosítását és értelmezését tűzi ki célul; a második Albee *The Goat* című drámájának műfaji sokrétűségét helyezi előtérbe különös tekintettel az áldozati rítusokra és a girardi áldozati-bárány-effektus szétosztódására; a harmadik fejezet a Moss testvérek sikertelen rítusait mutatja be, amelyek által megpróbálják halott apjukat eltemetni, valamint elszakadni trauma- és erőszak-telített hagyatékától Shepard *The Late Henry Moss* című művében. „Az eltűnés rítusa” című fejezetben a *Peter and Jerry* című darabot baudrillardi fogalmak alkalmazásával elemzem, rámutatva arra, hogy a szereplők önazonosságát megerősítendő, illetve a Peter által eljátszott „transzparencia rítusa” (Baudrillard, *Conspiracy* 108) a halál szimulákrumaiként nyilvánulnak meg, amelyeknek célja, hogy becsapják a halált, ismétlődővé tegyék, és ezáltal megfosszák egyediségétől és véglegességétől. Az ötödik fejezetben Shepard *The God of Hell* című színdarabját olyan liminális térként értelmezem, amelyben mind a normatív hatalmi struktúrák, mind pedig az ezekben a struktúrákban elfoglalható szubjektum-pozíciók felszámolódnak, a beavatandók pedig rákényszerülnek egy diktatórikus rend passzív elfogadására. A dráma ezáltal a totalitárius hatalom paródiájává válik, ugyanakkor azt is ironiával mutatja be, ahogyan a szubjektum képtelen felvállalni annak felelősségét, hogy ellenőrzési és ellenállási stratégiákat alakítson ki a hatalmi rendszerrel szemben. A „Haláltánc” fejezet Albee *Occupant* és Shepard *Kicking a Dead Horse* című darabjainak

párhuzamos elemzése, amely arra mutat rá, hogy a történetmondás és a paródia hogyan telít feszültséggel olyan „nem-drámai” formákat mint az interjú vagy a kiterjedt monológ, a színpadot a szereplők „identitás-táncának” terévé alakítva át.¹

A nyolc színdarab elemzése által azt bizonyítom, hogy a turneri rítuselméleti fogalmak kortárs szubjektum-elméletekkel való együttlvasása eredményes módszert biztosít a dráma-szövegek dekódolására, és olyan elméleti kutatások előtt nyitja meg az utat, amelyek az Albee és Shepard kánon újraértelmezését is eredményezhetik. Értekezésemben azt a következtetést is levonom, hogy a színdarabokban azonosított „csonkított” rítus-szerkezetek nem csupán abból fakadnak, hogy a koherens közösségek eszménye megkérdőjeleződik és illúzióként vetődik el. Ezek az elliptikus szerkezetek annak eredményei is, hogy az Albee és Shepard darabjaira oly jellemző paródia szükségszerűen egy olyan hermeneutikai kört képez, amely megköveteli és eszközli a megtekintett esztétikai tárgy folyamatos újraértelmezését, valamint a megfigyelő és értelmező „tekintet” állandó ellenőrzését és hozzáigazítását a változó jelentés-képződési helyzetekhez. A színház liminoid terében olyan aktív együttműködés jön létre az előadás és a néző között, amely ellenáll a lezárásnak, és állandósítja a liminális/liminoid élményt és tapasztalatot.

¹ Az „identitás-tánc” kifejezést Shewey fejezetcímeként alkalmazza Shepard-biográfiájában.

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ABSTRACT

Transgressing the Limit: Ritual Reenacted in Selected Plays by Edward Albee and Sam Shepard analyzes eight plays by Albee and Shepard written between 1995-2007 (Albee's *The Play about the Baby* 1998, *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia* 2002, *Occupant* 2002, and *Peter and Jerry* 2004; Shepard's *Buried Child* Revised edition 1995, *The Late Henry Moss* 2000, *The God of Hell* 2004, and *Kicking a Dead Horse* 2007), reading them within the theoretical framework of Victor Turner's concepts of ritual, rites of passage, liminality, and the liminoid. I hypothesize and demonstrate that the archetypal three-fold ritual structure outlined by Arnold van Gennep in his seminal *Rites of Passage* and developed and detailed further by Turner, resurfaces within these dramatic universes in a "mutilated" form with the final, reintegration phase eliminated from the body of the plays and transposed onto the liminoid interaction between performance and audience.

The focus falls on the middle, liminal phase of the implied rituals unfolding in the lives of the characters. The plays—mostly neglected by Albee and Shepard scholarship so far—present characters at "moments of rupture" (Maffesoli 133) in their lives that necessarily evoke and call for enactments of rituals and rites of passage to induce transformation. These, however, fail because the characters have already been trapped in such betwixt and between states on account of some past transgression of the normative rules, thus they are situated in a secluded space, on the margins of society, alienated from communal co-existence. They are unable to surpass their liminal condition also due to the fact that structural entities such as social groups, value systems, coherent, unified, and stable communities, even the nuclear family unit are subverted and overthrown within these dramatic universes.

I further widen and refine the interpretative field by reading Turnerian liminality together with post-structuralist theories of the subject (by, for instance, Lacan, Belsey, Kiss, Foucault, Caruth and Felman, Baudrillard, Hutcheon). In interpreting the sacrificial rituals that surface within the drama of the characters' liminal trials I have recourse to René Girard's concepts of mimetic desire and the scapegoating effect, transgressing the limits imposed upon a reading by such theoretical frames demonstrating how the role of the scapegoat may be dispersed upon several subjects of the ritual process, all of them experiencing the loss of illusions with reference to identity as a naturally/sacredly/culturally given fixed and stable entity, and recognizing the fact that all human structures (including identity) are constructs thus fallible, exposed to subversion and transformation. My dissertation, therefore, also

functions as a testing ground of an interdisciplinary interpretative tool that may fruitfully be employed in different fields of research.

In the first and last chapters I adopt a comparative and contrastive angle, while the others focus on individual plays alternately by the two playwrights. Emphasis is placed on analyzing different aspect of ritual processes detectable in these dramatic universes and pinpointing theatrical forms and devices through which the liminality of the characters' state is dramatized. Thus, the first chapter looks at the special "instruction process" and "communication of the sacra" that unfolds and the "dominant symbols" employed in *Buried Child* and *The Play about the Baby*; the second foregrounds the generic multivocality of *The Goat* with special focus on the sacrificial ritual and the dispersion of the Girardian scapegoating effect; the third chapter analyzes the Moss brothers' failed ritual of burying their father and separating themselves from his legacy of trauma and violence in *The Late Henry Moss*. "The Ritual of Vanishing" reads *Peter and Jerry* in a Baudrillardian context where rituals of self-affirmation and the "ritual of transparency" (Baudrillard, *Conspiracy* 108) that Peter enacts manifest as simulacra of dying with the aim of tricking death and rendering it repetitious, depriving it of its uniqueness and finality. In the fifth chapter I read *The God of Hell* as the dramatization of how liminality eliminates normative power structures and subject positions and involves initiands in a process of passive acceptance, as a parody of both implosive power and the subject's inability/unwillingness to devise strategies of resistance; while "Danse Macabre" offers a parallel interpretation of *Occupant* and *Kicking a Dead Horse* focusing on how storytelling and parody endow such "non-dramatic" structures as the interview and the extended monologue/one-man-show with suspense transforming the stage into a space of the protagonists' "identity dance" (a term used by Shewey as a chapter title in his biography of Shepard).

Through the analysis of these plays I demonstrate how Turnerian concepts of ritual broadened by contemporary subject theory may serve as an efficient tool in decoding theatrical texts and suggest further paths of theoretical research, while inviting a re-interpretation of the Albee and Shepard canons. I also conclude that the "mutilated" ritual structures identified in the plays arise not merely due to the fact that the ideal of coherent communities is scrutinized and discarded as illusion, but also because parody—as an inherent feature of both Albee's and Shepard's works—necessarily sets up a hermeneutical circle that demands and urges the constant reinterpretation of the contemplated aesthetic object as well as the continuous scrutiny and readjustment of the observing and interpreting "gaze," resisting closure and perpetuating the liminal/liminoid experience.

INTRODUCTION

I find that most people spend too much time living as if they're never going to die. They skid through their lives. Sleep through them sometimes. . . . [T]here are only two things to write about—life and death. Edward Albee

To me one of the strangest and most terrifying things about being human is the need to come up with an identity. Sam Shepard

The theatre has always been the space of representing, embodying, and demonstrating concepts and issues related to the creation and transformation of identity, argues Erika Fischer-Lichte in her innovative history of drama as history of identity. Like multiple other forms of “cultural performance” (Singer xii)—for example, rituals, ceremonies, or rites of passage—theatre is particularly concerned with the formation and change of identity, while the self-reflexivity of drama illustrates how the genre examines its own structure in the light of changes in the concept of identity. According to Fischer-Lichte, there has always existed a “dialectic relationship” between the theatre and the cultural and social reality of the outside world: theatre or drama has never been satisfied with merely mirroring or depicting this external world but has always also functioned as a forum of questioning and critical analysis, a sphere of experimentation “offering or even initiating alternative identities” (*History* 5).

Analyzing theatre from the double perspective of historicity and synchronicity, George Banu differentiates between two types of plays and performances, namely the “theatre of history” and the “theatre of memory” (17-19). The theatre of history turns towards external cultural, social, political reality, uses that as its referent, and formulates meaning—that comes into being on the stage—with that external world in mind, prompting future change. Its goal is reached if the external reality can “recognize itself” in the fictional one created on stage. This type of theatre is concerned with continuously coordinating between the inner and the outer spheres, and it formulates meaning relying primarily on the communicative power of the word, of language. The theatre of memory perceives the sphere within as “the whole world,” operating in a close collaboration with its audience. The clear-cut divide between stage and spectators that characterizes the theatre of history is annihilated here, as this kind of theatre

requires the active participation of audiences in the creation of meaning within the common experience. The theatre of memory remains within the theatrical space (Banu 68); it turns inside, towards the audience as well as towards its own structures and modes of operation, creating the opportunity for its spectators and for the genre to recognize and understand itself within this hermetically closed space. In contrast to the dominant role of the word in the theatre of history, this second type utilizes as major factors in the creation of meaning other forms of theatrical expression as well (movement, gesture, sound- and lighting effects, etc.).

Despite the differences, both types of theatre identified by Banu share a concern for the staging of identity formation and transformation that Fischer-Lichte views as the fundamental theatrical stance: thematizing and symbolizing the de-centered position of the subject who only “finds himself via the detour of another” (*History* 1). Whether theatre formulates meaning with “its eyes” focused on the outside world, or within the collaborative process unfolding within, necessarily it builds on the basic ontological condition of man’s need to observe himself from a distance and grasp identity in the process.

American culture has been constructed on the continuous questioning of subjectivity, on the ongoing process of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of a specific American identity—individual and collective—that would reshape the entire world. As Matthew C. Roudané phrases it, “the United States has been a matrix of communities in crisis” (*American Drama* x). This “new nation” and its creative artists have constantly been confronted with the problem of coming up with a stable image of the American—as an individual and as a community—that has constantly been destabilized by historic shifts and changes in the very concept of identity, as well as with the issue of finding or developing the adequate forms, genres, language that could express such an ongoing process of formation and transformation.

American theatre truly found its voice and place among the discourses of different “cultural performances” fashioning and propagating American identity/identities at the beginning of the twentieth century with Eugene O’Neill. His early experimental work, that I would cast in the category of the theatre of history (*The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*), as well as his later masterpieces that merge naturalism with psychological introspection and subtle self-referentiality build on an image of the American psyche and social context that are devoid of ideals and are marked by a tragic sense of isolation and abandonment. Reaching back to theatrical forefathers such as Ibsen and Chekhov, as well as the gloom and desperation characteristic of Edgar Allen Poe’s work, O’Neill draws the sketches of a subject in the grasp of melancholy dreams and the self-destructive hopelessness brought about by the

loss of any fixed and stable positions that could anchor identity. His plays dramatize the utter uselessness and irony inherent to his characters' futile attempts to exorcise from their lives the "dark forces" subverting their sense of self—from *The Emperor Jones* to *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh*—through personal and familial rituals of ruthless self-analysis. His use of masks, chorus, symbolic figures and objects, music, drums, his continuous experimentation with the forms and structures of drama read as the liminal trials of the creative artist to merge tradition with innovation in an attempt to devise a form adequate to express and represent his belief in theatre as the rightful heir and only possible replacement of religious ritual experiences.

Arthur Miller envisions an American identity that embodies the tragedy of the common man, torn between illusion and reality, flawed by the artificially sustained myths and dream of a stable familial and social structure that arises from and sustains a sanctified and unchangeable value system. Rejecting the thesis of the death of tragedy, he constructs realist-naturalist dramatic universes that demonstrate the tragic inherent in a person's struggle to sustain human dignity at all costs. His plays of the "historic" order (according to Banu's categorization) display his deep-rooted sense of responsibility to dramatize and stage contemporary issues on the individual and the social level, ironically de-masking the processes through which mediocrity, greed, indifference, raw reality subvert and make banal the grandest dreams. His characters are propelled into life-changing situations where their lack of adequate transformative rites and their clinging to the illusion of their imagined identities lead to their tragic downfall and the collapse of a belief in any one stable structure.

Another major playwright of the twentieth century Tennessee Williams transformed the realist-naturalist dramatic universe of the American theatre through lyrical melancholy and through staging the epic confrontations between larger-than-life representatives of different American subjectivities. In his plays he refuses to champion any of the staged models of American-ness: the strong, handsome, healthy, optimistic, but unimaginative, greedy, and plain American confronts the dreamy, mysterious, creative, but also neurotic and traumatized one unable to abandon illusion and face reality. In his characters he sketches an American trapped in the frustration of unsatisfied desires, uncontrollable drives, and personal relationships lived at the level of primitive rituals. His plays often operate with characters who seem dramatic representations of the two sides of a single persona (Stella and Blanche, or Blanche and Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*; Maggie and Brick or Brick and Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*), while his plots unfold as repeated rituals meant to bring the two together in an attempt to re-establish wholeness.

Starting from the sixties American theatre has experienced a proliferation of dramatic voices and forms all involved in the dramatization of an American identity that by then was recognized and declared fractured, manifold, unstable, in a continuous process of transformation. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as well as other European avant garde experiments, such as Antonin Artaud's theatre of cruelty, Jean Genet's ritualistic works, Harold Pinter's focus on the possibilities/impossibility of communication, had a deep impact upon American theatrical output. The dominant atmosphere of man's alienation from himself and the sense that power structures delimit subjectivity and maneuver individuals in concordance with their own schemes gave rise to a prolific experimentation in the theatre to design forms and put on performances that would heighten awareness and, if possible, initiate change in their audiences (with such authors as David Mamet, Arthur Kopit, and others), while minority/marginalized groups (ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, class) turned towards the theatre as a means of historicizing, contextualizing, and stating their identities and of dramatizing the process of transformation through which these borderline groups intended to posit themselves into the center of their own narratives.² Experimental theatre groups sprang up throughout the country like the ritual-oriented Bread and Puppet Theatre, Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre, or the Living Theatre, whose leaders, Judith Malina and Julian Beck formulated the mission of their group as follows: "To increase conscious awareness, to stress the sacredness of life, to break down the walls" (quot. in Roudané, *American Drama* 1).

Within such a carnivalesque abundance and polyphony, two dramatic voices arose—both embodying a radical new perspective and relentless innovative spirit that concerns the forms and structures of staging identity—that for the last fifty years have been shaping the American theatre: Edward Albee and Sam Shepard. In the "multivocal" context of the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, Albee's and Shepard's oeuvres emerge as outstanding not merely due to the fact that both encompass a period of half a century, but also because they have succeeded in transforming and renewing their genre over and over again without ever abandoning their quest for staging American identity as a process rather than a static entity, and their critical analysis, re-contextualization, and parody of contemporary social, cultural, and philosophical-theoretical trends.

They fruitfully merge the message-oriented, primarily language-based theatre of history and the self-reflexive and collaborative theatre of memory. Among their thematic

² Within the realm of the theatre of history, such "minority" voices are Imamu Amiri Baraka, Charles Fuller, Adrienne Kennedy, Maria Irene Fornes, and Luis Valdez and his El Teatro Campesino.

preoccupations one may list the American loss of values and profit-oriented mentality (*The American Dream* 1961; *Curse of the Starving Class* 1977), politics (*The Death of Bessie Smith* 1960; *States of Shock* 1991, *The God of Hell* 2004, *Kicking a Dead Horse* 2007), alienation and the impossibility of constructing meaningful contact or community among people (*The Zoo Story* 1959, *A Lie of the Mind* 1985), the decay of American myths (*The American Dream*, *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* 1968, *True West* 1980, *Simpatico* 1994), death and the inability of contemporary people to devise rituals that would provide the appropriate separation from the dead and an acceptance of mortality (*The Sandbox* 1960, *All Over* 1971, *Three Tall Women* 1991, *The Late Henry Moss* 2000), the individual trapped in the lure of illusions and self-deception and the possibility of a conscious, self-aware existence (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 1962, *A Delicate Balance* 1966, *The Play about the Baby* 1995, *Buried Child* 1978/1995, *Fool for Love* 1983), the confrontation of spouses, parents and offspring, brothers, and the internal struggles of the self (*Three Tall Women*, *The Goat*, *Peter and Jerry* 2004, *Me, Myself, and I* 2008, *The Tooth of Crime* 1972, *True West*, *The Late Henry Moss*, *Kicking a Dead Horse*). Their personal style, innovative spirit, their relentless search for new ways of dramatizing their hallmark themes add to the American theatrical discourse structures that merge elements of traditional tragedy, comedy, melodrama, domestic naturalist drama with elements of Beckettian and Pinterian absurd, ritual, contemporary performance art, Yeatsian lyricism, *comedia dell'arte*, storytelling, popular culture, rock and roll, film, myth, cartoons, biography and autobiography, journalism, and black comedy.

During the last fifty years these two major playwrights have been re-shaping the American theatrical scene, present or absent, as in Albee's career there have been extensive periods when he was not produced in New York (for example, 1982-1992), while Shepard has ventured into careers as film actor, musician, and fiction-writer as well. Their works have received numerous awards (Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* won the Tony in 1963, *A Delicate Balance* received the Pulitzer Prize as well as his *Seascape* in 1975 and *Three Tall Women* in 1994, while *The Goat* received the Tony Award in 2002; Shepard's *Buried Child* won both the Pulitzer and the Obie in 1979, and out of his numerous plays eleven received Obie Awards, his screenplay *Paris, Texas* won the BAFTA, and for his performance in *The Right Stuff* Shepard was nominated for an Academy Award). Canonical literary and drama histories have dedicated separate chapters to the discussion of their theatrical output, such as C.W.E. Bigsby's *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*, and Roudané's *American Drama*

since 1960. *A Critical History*, acknowledging their special formative role in the history of American dramatic literature.

Albee and Shepard both started their careers as experimental playwrights who then turned back toward more traditional forms of drama, producing plays consistent with the American tradition of domestic realism, following in the footsteps of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller. They have also striven towards the renewal of the genre and the development of forms that appropriately manifest the processes of formation and transformation of American identity, merging the American dramatic tradition with elements of the Beckettian absurd and Pirandellian and Pinterian preoccupation with language. While the term "turning back" may suggest a regression from a process of development moving toward some distant aim drama is meant to achieve, I see the "turn" Albee and Shepard have made as a spiral movement: they have recreated the traditional domestic play by enriching and transforming it through subversion, irony, and the inclusion of elements taken from ritual, vaudeville, film, and other forms of storytelling and conveying knowledge, often breaking through and blurring the taboo boundary between the performance and the spectator.³ From the perspective of Banu's categorization, transgressing the limits that a division between the theatre of history and the one of memory would impose upon their works, they formulate their themes always closely linked to contemporary reality in a manner that demands audience participation. Discarding the illusion of the fourth wall at the edge of the proscenium, they involve their audiences in a process within which voyeuristic observation becomes ritual participation. They strive to find the adequate structures, forms, language, and symbolic systems to be embodied on stage so that spectators might be transformed into "participants" at the unfolding events.⁴ This type of involvement with the audience brings about a proliferation of the functions fulfilled and the meanings created by and in these theatrical universes which aim to bring the elements of the efficacy/entertainment dichotomy defined by Richard Schechner closer together: entertaining audiences as well as engaging them in a transformative act of perceiving the world and themselves anew.⁵ In this sense, Albee's and Shepard's plays create a theatre that sets up a liminal sphere for their audiences within which, like in a laboratory, individuals can play and

³ For an insightful presentation and analysis of the concept of boundaries in the theatrical experience, see Mark Pizzato's *Edges of Loss*, while for a historical overview of theatrical space and its limits David Wiles' *A Short History of Western Performance Space*.

⁴ I use the term "participant" here as defined and differentiated by cultural anthropologist Yi-Fu Tuan.

⁵ See Schechner's "From Ritual to Theatre and Back."

experiment with different forms of identity, as Fischer-Lichte argues, drawing on Arnold van Gennep's and Victor Turner's anthropological concepts (*Theatre* 258). Spectators are also offered the possibility to join a temporary community and participate in the creation of a "collective identity," transposed in a state that Turner denotes "communitas" (*From Ritual* 45).

In accordance with their high status among contemporary American authors, there exists a considerable body of scholarship both in English and other languages (especially German) devoted to Albee's and Shepard's plays. This scholarship, however, tends to focus on their thematic richness, their technique, their relevance in presenting contemporary American society.⁶ At the same time, the latest Albee and Shepard works have not yet been treated at length by literary critics due to their recent appearance and entrance into mainstream American drama.

The vast amount of critical material on Albee's plays predominantly focuses on the playwright's recurring preoccupation with showing how rituals and ceremonies have been

⁶ Anne Paolucci, for example, in *From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee* (1972) analyzes in detail Albee's works from the point of view of their thematic concerns and Albee's mastery of the dramatic medium. Foster Hirsch looks at Albee's plays from the perspective of their characters "obsessed with deaths both real and symbolic" who are "[v]ulnerable to reality" and balance their lives "between order and chaos" (2) in his 1978 *Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?* Gerry McCarthy in *Edward Albee* (1987) discusses Albee's plays in chronological order of their publication/production looking into the ways that language, story-telling, and different types of narratives become fundamental elements of Albee's method. Leslie A. Wade in *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre* (1997) analyzes Shepard's plays in the light of their relationship with and presentation of the American cultural heritage and the re-writing of American myths. Don Shewey's biography *Sam Shepard* (1997) explores the life and works of this enigmatic figure of American culture, while Johan Callens collects into a volume a number of his essays on Shepard as one of the controversial playwrights in his *Dis/Figuring Sam Shepard* (2007).

A large number of essay and study collections on both playwrights have been published, among them *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays* edited by C. W. E. Bigsby and published in 1975; *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee* edited by Stephen Bottoms (2005); Bonnie Maranca's (ed.) *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard* (1981), the 1993 *Rereading Shepard: Contemporary Critical Essays on the Plays of Sam Shepard* edited by Leonard Wilcox, or *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* edited by Matthew Roudané, published in 2002.

There have also been attempts to compare and contrast individual plays of Albee and Shepard, as well as analyses of Albee's influence on the development of Shepard's career as a playwright: Ronald Hayman, for example, in *Theatre and Antitheatre. New Movements Since Beckett* (1972) discusses them within the same chapter comparing and contrasting the ways the two playwrights have been influenced by and took over from the experimental trends of twentieth century theatre.

emptied of meaning and have lost their function in everyday life. It also emphasizes Albee's perseverance in trying to draw attention to the dangers lurking in the mechanical re-enactment of rites and rituals understood as routinized action, as a means of covering or hiding the impossibility of meaningful conversation.⁷ The Shepard literature emphasizes the playwright's preoccupation with myths (first and foremost, the myth of the American West and of the all-American family) as well as the archetypal image of the all-American male as having lost any meaning, surviving as empty shells to cover up the fractured sense of self and identity that characterizes post-modern American society.

In the present dissertation my argument is based on an analysis of a selection of Albee's and Shepard's plays of roughly a decade (1995-2007). I have chosen these two quintessentially American playwrights, whose opus is imbedded in an archetypal American landscape, mentality, and experience, because of the similarities one can observe within their careers as dramatists, their mindset, and preoccupations, while the obvious divide of urban/rural America also materializes in their oeuvres. I believe that a parallel discussion of their works will offer a more comprehensive image of the duality inherent in American identity and mentality, of the two distinct aspects and spheres of American culture. Their indebtedness to both European and American dramatic traditions, their preoccupation with renewing the genre by drawing inspiration from contemporary theatrical experiments as well as theory and other forms of "cultural performances" lend their works well to a reading that wishes to focus on how traditional forms expressing cultural exchange and identity transformation, namely elements of ritual and rites of passage are reinvigorated in postmodern drama. At the same time, my selection of plays encompasses the period of the last fifteen years in their body of work, plays that are virtually unknown to the public of Eastern Europe. In this sense, my dissertation aims at familiarizing the Hungarian (and Romanian) theatre-lovers with Albee's and Shepard's recent theatrical output and hopefully prompting further studies and critical essays.

Within the limits of this dissertation, I present a reading of Albee's *The Play about the Baby* (1998), *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia? (Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy)* (2002), the yet unpublished *Peter and Jerry* (2004) that Mr. Albee graciously gave me in typescript format, and *Occupant* (2002); as well as Shepard's *Buried Child* (Revised edition 1995), *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), *The God of Hell* (2004), and his *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007). My

⁷ See, for example, Kathleen M. Sullivan's *Parodied Ritual in the Plays of Edward Albee*.

interpretation will focus on themes such as family relations, the subject and the community, sexuality, life and death and the transition between the two, and on the ways the plays reconstruct the Turnerian three-fold pattern of ritual both as on- and off-stage processes that incorporate the audience in the rites they re-enact and the limits of which they transgress.

I hypothesize that these works present characters and situations that can be interpreted within the conceptual framework of liminality.⁸ This term, first coined by van Gennep in his discussion of rites of passage, was developed and broadened further in the theoretical writings of anthropologist Victor Turner, as well as in the numerous volumes and articles published by scholars of ritual criticism, theoreticians and practitioners of both anthropology and theatre. The most pertinent example from the perspective of this study is Fischer-Lichte whose *History of European Drama and Theatre* (2002), as well as her *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* (2005), and *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008) interpret the theatrical space as a quintessentially liminal one within which identity and identity transformation is staged “opening a liminal field for the spectator which allows him to play with different identities and encourages him to make a change” (*History* 4). She pinpoints the difference between ritual and theatre in the facts that while both function as instances of fashioning and representing identity in the process of change, rituals do this in the “mode of belief” (*History* 4) and aim at the transformation of the actors involved in the enactment of the rite: theatre “opens up the possibility of transformation for individual spectators by transferring them into a state of liminality” (*Theatre* 253) where the occurring change is not irreversible, does not need a sacrifice, nor public acclaim but manifests as “aesthetic experience” (*Theatre* 254). Other studies on literature read with Turner’s anthropological terminology and concepts have been published in *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism. Between Literature and Anthropology* edited by Kathleen M. Ashley, a collection of essays on texts ranging from ancient Greek and Roman to late medieval Biblical drama, American fiction by Cooper, Hawthorne, Cather, and Fitzgerald, as well as Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*. Ashley’s Introduction together with the second part gathering essays on Turner’s theory and practice highlight not only the literary roots of Turner’s anthropology (Edith Turner’s study) but also how Turner turned to using metaphors from the field of literature and, more specifically, theatre in devising a terminology that would adequately express his views upon

⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte in her *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* argues: “Although it [liminality] arose and was developed in the context of ritual theory, there is no reason why it should not be applied to theatre even if theatre is not identified with ritual” (254).

rituals and rites of passage as “processual” and flexible in nature rather than the fixed structures defying transformation that structuralist anthropology promoted. His “Social Dramas and Stories about Them” (1982) is also included in the anthology of plays, criticism, and theory *Modern Drama* edited by W. B. Worthen (1995).

As further justification of my use of Turner’s anthropological concepts of social drama, liminality, the liminoid, as well as his denominations for the types, phases, elements, and characters of a ritual in the analysis of Albee’s and Shepard’s plays, I wish to point out that while Turner did publish most extensively on social issues and phenomena that he observed while working among the Ndembu of Zambia, and later researching complex post-industrial societies, in the latter part of his life, in the 1970s and early 1980s he turned towards an anthropological analysis of cultural manifestations of these complex communities, most pre-eminently the theatre. His collaboration with Richard Schechner resulted in several international conferences on the interfaces and parallel structures of ritual and theatre. Turner also developed the concept of the liminoid based on his observations regarding complex societies’ manifestations in leisure activities. His *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* published in 1982 opens with the specification made by Turner himself that “[t]he essays in this book chart my personal voyage of discovery from traditional anthropological studies of ritual performance to a lively interest in modern theatre, particularly experimental theatre” (7). In his “processual analysis” Turner argues that rituals share with other cultural manifestations—such as theatre—a deeply symbolic character, and convey in their workings a sense of community.

The term “ritual” and related expressions and concepts have become, however, excessively unstable both in the social sciences and in literary criticism. A vast number of definitions try to pinpoint and clarify them, and show their implications and applicability in various fields of study.⁹ Also, Turner’s definitions and descriptions of concepts and terms

⁹ For a summary and quite extensive bibliography of ritual, myth, and drama, see Richard F. Hardin’s eminent “‘Ritual’ in Recent Criticism: The Elusive Sense of Community” (1996). The study presents the development of ritual criticism in drama with such prominent promoters in the twentieth century as the theorists of the Cambridge School (Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, A. B. Cook, and E. M. Comford). These pioneers, applying Frazer’s concepts and presuppositions from *The Golden Bough*, developed a theory of drama and myth as originating in ritual, while Harrison’s concept of the mono-myth of the divine king’s sacrificial ritual posits this narrative as the origin of all other myths. Though there have been developments of these views, especially in the works of Hayman, Northrop Frye, and later René Girard, the 1960s brought about new discoveries that seriously challenged the theoretical premises of the Cambridge School and their followers. Hardin identifies as influential in the relationship between literature and ritual Francis Fergusson’s *The Idea of a Theater* (1949), and Gerald F.

such as liminality, the liminoid, social dramas, and the “communication of the sacra” are dispersed throughout the huge number of his published volumes and articles. Therefore, in the following passage I present the Turnerian concepts of the ritual process and the conjoining terminology pertinent to my reading of the chosen literary texts, also highlighting some instances in which I apply them in discussing these dramatic universes.¹⁰

Turner developed the concept of social drama as early as his 1957 publication of *Schism and Continuity*. The term is used throughout his works to identify social conflict and the mechanisms a community employs to overcome discrepancies among its members or groups. The process coined by the term can be divided into four phases: (1) a breach of the quotidian relationships among individuals or groups of the community in question; (2) a crisis resulting from the extension of the breach; (3) redressive mechanisms or strategies employed by leaders of the community; (4) reintegration of the given individual or group, or the recognition of irremediable differences that, according to Turner, often leads to the geographical separation of the conflicting bodies. Turner viewed social life “as essentially processual in form” (Deflem 4), developing the concept of social drama in order to transgress the static structuralist and functionalist anthropological approach of his time. I apply his concepts regarding social distress as a dynamic process in discussing dramatic conflict and the patterns of redressive strategies adopted by fictional characters in the hopes of overcoming their conflicted status.¹¹

In his research and description of the African Ndembu society, Turner gradually turned toward defining and analyzing ritual as symbolic action that involves “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine” (*Forest* 19), initiating

Else’s rejection of the theory of theatre’s ritual origin. Hardin specifies that Else identifies as the starting point of tragedy the heroic epic rather than religious cult; while Michael Hinden suggests a reading of tragedy and ritual as analogous and not interdependent (172). Hardin also draws attention to the fact that Antony Graham-White differentiates drama from rites based on audience participation, while Stevens locates them as mutually exclusive due to the fact that the theatricality of plays distances audiences from a truly ritualistic participation. W. B. Yeats, on the other hand, called his own plays “the ritual of a lost faith” (quot. in Hardin 172), while Frye perpetuated the Cambridge School’s claim that ancient Greek tragedy was born out of ritual. Hardin identifies Turner’s and Girard’s works as sensitive and fruitful developments that could serve as bases for further theories.

¹⁰ For an excellent summary of Turner’s life, career, and his position with the development of anthropology and interdisciplinary studies, see Mathieu Deflem’s “Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner’s Processual Symbolic Analysis.”

¹¹ See the chapter “Transgressing the Limits of Interpretation: Edward Albee’s *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy).”

and performing the passage of an individual from one state to another, from one identity to another, a transformation that is effected by the maneuvering of symbolic gestures, words, stories, and objects. Turner's interest lies predominantly in the middle phase of the ritual, defined by van Gennep as the liminal stage.¹² In *The Ritual Process* he argues that:

The attributes of liminality or of the liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous . . . Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. (95)

Accordingly, those going through a liminal phase are considered to be different, outside the structure, even dangerous or contagious, "dead" from the point of view of the given social order—just like the title character of Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*. They are reduced to uniformity and passivity towards their instructors who submit them to ordeal, arbitrary punishment, and pose them unanswerable riddles so that they are "ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life" (*Forest* 98)—as Boy and Girl are forced to abandon their ideas about gender or age differences and to submit to Man and Woman's orders in Albee's *The Play about the Baby*.

Liminality is perceived as a "no longer, not yet" state where ritual subjects are secluded and isolated (an isolation that manifests geographically and socially in the case of the families in Shepard's *Buried Child* and *The God of Hell*, or his lone character in *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and which characterizes the spiritual state of Albee's characters in *Peter and Jerry* and *Occupant*). According to Turner, neophytes or initiands of a ritual process are often hidden or disguised, said to be "in another place" as "[t]hey have physical but not social 'reality,' hence they have to be hidden, since it is a paradox, a scandal, to see what ought not to be there" (*Forest* 101). Accordingly, ritual subjects are structurally invisible and ritually polluting, and their isolation and separation marks not only place but temporality as well. The time of ritual must be perceived as a period out of the ordinary flow of time, out of the

¹² The term "liminal" comes from the Latin "limen" meaning "threshold."

chronological structures of quotidian social activities—a period when the supernatural invades the natural like in Albee's *Occupant* with the dead interviewee mocking and parodying her interlocutor for his expecting factual proof of the validity of her stories, or in Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss* where the flashback scenes bring back to life the dead patriarch and trap his sons in a futile struggle to surpass their liminal condition. Liminality means withdrawal from normal modes of existence and action. As rituals represent a passage from one position to another, they may be seen as possessing temporal structure; but as Turner suggests, the threshold phase is portrayed by its actors as being timeless where “the structural view of time is not applicable” (*Dramas* 238), what Mircea Eliade calls “a time of marvels” (quot. in Turner, *Dramas* 239).

In *The Forest of Symbols* (99-108) Turner differentiates among the components of liminal processes the “communication of the sacra” that involves the exhibition of sacred objects (relics, masks, instruments, “what is shown”)—such objects carrying symbolic valences within the dramatic works analyzes being Shelley's fur coat in *Buried Child*, or Ross's letter in *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*—as well as actions (“what is done”)—like the symbolic burials of Dodge in *Buried Child* and the continuous role reversals of Man and Woman in *The Play about the Baby*—and instructions (“what is said”) delivered by the ritual elders—a role masterfully and ironically played by *The Play about the Baby*'s Man and Woman, something that Ann and Jerry aspire to be in *Peter and Jerry*, or a role of which Man is quickly dispossessed by the grand diva Louise Nevelson in Albee's *Occupant*. The second component consists of the ludic deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural configurations, the exaggeration or distortion of characteristics of familiar objects, deviant or grotesque representations of states and identities, and strange appropriations of roles (as Esteban or Conchalla do in *The Late Henry Moss*, Man and Woman in *The Play about the Baby*, or Welsh in Shepard's *The God of Hell*). These force the ritual subjects to think about their society, they provoke them to reflect on the basic values of their social, cultural, and cosmological order, urging self-reflection and transformation of identity. The third component is defined by Turner as the simplification of the relations of the social structure characterized by the authority of the ritual instructors and the submission and passivity of the initiands—dramatically represented in the chosen plays through the relationships among family members, representatives of power and subjects of the very same power, or between individuals and the entire surrounding world.

Turning towards phenomena in complex societies, Turner introduced the term “liminoid” to describe the “quasi-liminal character of cultural performances” (Deflem 14)

such as theatre, music, art exhibitions, and leisure activities like sports events. The liminoid differs from the liminal as it does not necessarily take place as a result of a crisis within the social structure or according to a biological or calendrical pattern as rites of passage do ("Liminal to Liminoid" 84-86). It arises due to the differentiation made by complex industrial and post-industrial societies between "work" and "play," as a characteristic state of "play," outside economic, social, or political structures.¹³ The liminoid, however, just like liminality, though self-imposed, creates opportunity for reflection on the structures and values of the social order and, therefore, it may result in revolutionary ideas and may challenge the existent structure. Turner argues that the liminoid is individualized and it originates from the efforts of one individual or a particular group, a feature that Fischer-Lichte identifies as the "process of self-organization" in the constitution of temporary communities within the theatre's liminal space (*Theatre* 255).

Discussing the similarities and differences between liminal and liminoid states in *From Ritual to Theatre* (20-60), Turner identifies the former as an obligatory process to be undergone by members of a community at different stages of life and social status, characterized by a combination of work and play, with emphasis on the "human seriousness of play" (as the subtitle of the book suggests) and the transformation of identity as well as the conceptualization and acceptance of its elusive and processual nature. Such processes are dramatized in Vince's homecoming in *Buried Child*, the Moss brothers' attempted separation from their dead father in *The Late Henry Moss*, Frank's initiation ritual in *The God of Hell*, and Hobart Struther's attempted ritual of separation from an empty and meaningless life in *Kicking a Dead Horse*; while in the Albee plays: Boy and Girl's initiation into parenthood and into loss in *The Play about the Baby*, Martin's love rituals and the Gray family structure's collapse in *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?*, Jerry's ritual of taming the dog and "taming" Peter in *Peter and Jerry*, and the protagonist's ritualistic re-telling of her life's events in an attempt to order them into a meaningful narrative of a fate destined for greatness in *Occupant*. The liminoid, on the other hand, represents a state that one enters voluntarily, and is perceived as leisure rather than work—just like Peter's long reads in the park, on "his" bench on sunny Sunday afternoons. None the less, the liminoid does share with liminality the potential for renewal of its participants and a reaffirmation or a re-evaluation and challenging of the value-

¹³ See, for example, the difference Peter (*Peter and Jerry*) makes between his reading for work and his reading in the park as typical instances of "work" versus "play."

systems and structural orders outside its sphere—phenomena that both Albee and Shepard hope their plays will generate and urge in their audiences.

Without aiming at identifying theatre with ritual, or attempting to demonstrate a fusion of these two forms of “cultural performance,” in my dissertation I analyze the ways in which Albee and Shepard construct dramatic situations that may be interpreted through utilizing the pattern of rites observed and outlined by van Gennep in his seminal *Rites of Passage*: the three-fold model of separation or pre-liminal phase, transition or liminal phase, and reintegration or post-liminal phase. As did Turner in his theoretical reflections, in my interpretative work I place special emphasis on the middle, liminal stage of the ritual process uncovered. I argue that the dramatic structures chosen for analysis eliminate the final elements of ritual’s three-fold pattern, leaving their characters—though, hopefully not their audiences—in a perpetuated liminality. The archetypal ritual structure resurfaces in a “mutilated” form—a term I borrow from anthropological and ethnographic descriptions of certain rites of passage involving mutilations of the body, also referred to explicitly in Albee’s *Peter and Jerry*.

By identifying these fictionalized rituals in the plays I do not aim to demonstrate that rituals do still exist in post-modern communities and neither that individual rites of passage would fulfill the same functions as they did in earlier times or in other, non-industrial cultures. I adopt these ritual structural models, widened and detailed further through reading them together with post-structuralist theories and concepts, in order to highlight a transformation in the dramatic structure of the plays: traditional denouement (that shows correlations with what Turner defines as the post-liminal or re-integration phase of rituals) has been eliminated, leaving the dramatic structure open-ended and its characters trapped in their in-between states, outside the normative structure, isolated on the margins, deprived of the illusion of a stable identity or of authentic, non-artificial subjectivity. The two playwrights thus scrutinize and re-interpret the myths of unified social structures such as the nation, rural or urban communities, or the nuclear family, units imagined as fixed and unalterable in the American public consciousness.

In these elliptical works the third phase of the implied ritual has been moved out of the body of the plays to resurface in the playwrights’ confessions about how they imagine the fashion and manner of an idealized audience’s involvement in the theatrical experience. I claim that Turner’s concept of the liminoid can be applied when looking at the plays from the perspective of their relation to and engagement with spectators, who may be perceived as

entering such a phase or state when in the theatre. Albee in a 1996 interview with Steve Capra argues:

I get criticized for not having the catharsis in the body of the play. I don't think that's where the catharsis should be. I think it should take place in the mind of the spectator sometimes afterwards—maybe a year after experiencing the play. . . . [O]ne of the interesting things that happened with twentieth century drama [is]—that it moved the catharsis out of the body of the play. (*Stretching* 180)

Building on Albee's claim, I suggest that by perceiving the audience as "witness" to the symbolic structure on stage, they become indispensable participants in the ritual. For such rites only become legitimate and valid if they are witnessed and acknowledged. Thus the audience willingly enters the liminoid space and situation of the theatre that might have a transformative effect on their existence.¹⁴ The staged ritual most often leaves the characters "hanging" rootlessly in a seemingly eternal liminality. The audience's theatrical experience—if successful—may, however, end in a re-incorporation: the "aggregation" of a transformed audience into a state of awareness different from their pre-liminoid status. The Liminal Man of the beginning of the twenty-first century enters theatre as a sphere of the Baudrillardian "hyperreal" and finds comfort in this liminoid state, where simulation does not have to be denied and disguised, but can be accepted as such. Within the frame of this game the third phase of the ritual, which I equate with Albee's definition of the delayed catharsis, becomes possible. Acknowledging that "this is game," and playing it as if it were not, the audience may acquire an understanding of how simulation functions, and may be sensitized to their status within it, as true neophytes prepared and skilled to step back into the community and social structure outside the seclusion of the initiation process, the theatre.¹⁵

Gauging audience response poses problems and obstacles from a methodological and theoretical perspective. My dissertation, therefore, functions, in part, as a means of posing

¹⁴ The issue of the witnesses' transformation has been discussed in detail by several theorists, the study most relevant to my argument being Barbara Myerhoff's "The Transformation of Consciousness in Ritual Performance: Some Thoughts and Questions."

¹⁵ Fischer-Lichte also argues that theatre as a liminal sphere offers audiences the ludic possibility to experiment with different identities fashioned and staged in the performance and it may have a transformative effect on the spectators' either communal or individual sense of self. See "Theatre and Identity: Theatre as Liminal Space?" in her *History of European Drama and Theatre*.

questions and gesturing towards some tentative answers—an investigation and a way of gaining knowledge—rather than having been written with any exhaustive claims. My argument also suggests several issues closely or partially related to its main hypotheses—such as myth-making and myth-deconstruction within the narratives of the different characters, the issue of margins and the frontier, the theme of doubling and the figure of the Doppelgänger. I consign treatment of these to the periphery of my analysis. I make reference to anthropological, ethnographic, sociological, and philosophic works without claiming expertise in these complex fields but extracting from them ideas and concepts pertinent to my own reading, primarily concerned with examining the dramatic texts as sites of liminal spheres and creators of a liminoid state of instability in audiences/readers within which the catharsis Albee describes may take place.

I aim to present a more extensive analysis of Albee's and Shepard's recent works than the current body of scholarship published on these plays, consisting mostly of reviews of different productions. At the same time, my interpretation focuses on yet uncovered aspects of these dramatic structures. I demonstrate how the plays recreate the three-fold pattern of rites of passage. By definition, ritual represents a process involving and appealing to all the senses of the participants and demanding active collaboration from all those present: through striking visual images, sound effects, and the construction of dialogues that carry powerful symbolic valences. Albee creates orchestrations of discourses that reproduce these "ultimate building blocks" of the ritual process, whereas Shepard employs memorable visual images and powerful poetic soliloquies to convey the same sense of ritual and magic.¹⁶

Examining the time and space structure of the plays, elements which again define the sphere of ritual and distinguish it from everyday-life events and processes, leads to focusing on the methods and techniques the two playwrights utilize to create what the anthropological literature defines as the "communication of the sacra" through showing, telling, and symbolic action. It also highlights the disproportional, monstrous, and mysterious aspects of this "communication" of sacred knowledge that, Turner argues, lies "at the heart of the liminal matter" (*Forest* 95). The sacrificial rituals presented within the plays and the function of these within the constructed system of symbolic action and language as well as the workings of the

¹⁶ Turner coins the term "building block" in *The Forest of Symbols* arguing that rituals—as well as social dramas—are constructed based on the employment of ritual activity and language that can be broken down to these central dominant symbols and metaphors that may also be perceived as representations or variations of archetypes specific to the given culture.

scapegoating effect are also central to the plays' themes and aims, in the analysis of which I resort to concepts and definitions by René Girard.

In "Symbol Turned Flesh: Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and Edward Albee's *The Play about the Baby*" I analyze the ritual structure of these two dramatic works focusing on what Turner defines as the "smallest unit of the liminal process" (*Forest* 48), dominant symbols and their use in the "communication of the sacra" within the initiands' instructions. Role-reversals and –appropriations, doubling and mirroring, repetition, subversion of roles, tests and riddles, the manipulation of symbolic objects, all function as instruments in the education and training that Vince and Boy and Girl are subjected to. Their "ritual elders" introduce and demonstrate to them the different aspects of liminal existence: showcasing the components of the normative structure and subject positions as well as the experimental and ludic deconstruction of this very structure.

I demonstrate that Turnerian liminality may fruitfully be read together with the Lacanian concepts of the Imaginary, the mirror stage, and the phallic symbolic system. In my reading, liminality is revealed as a new mirror stage within which, through the utilization of dominant symbols and the process of communicating the sacred knowledge and demonstrating different skills, the initiands face the instability and constructed nature of any one subject position and normative order they may occupy or belong to. Through the ludic and subversive mirroring and, at the same time, undermining of the initiands' beliefs, preconceptions, roles, and patterns of behavior, the "ritual elders"—unconscious of their role as instructors in *Buried Child*, while very much self-conscious, ironic, and self-ironic in *The Play about the Baby*—transform their neophytes into doubles of themselves. Liminality turns into a sphere of uncertainty where the Imaginary, the taboo, the grotesque, the unnamable erupts into the patriarchal order of the characters' narratives and destabilizes any rule and/or role. It proves to be a state indescribable with and through terms and concepts of the phallic symbolic system. Therefore, both plays continuously question and deconstruct their own narratives, styles, and language. Through a comparative and contrastive analysis, I show how the neophytes of the enacted ritual initiations—together with the audience—are educated in and about loss and the instability of any one human construct, including language, through dominant symbols that become corporeal: the shocking image of the buried child's corpse at the end of Shepard's play and the "palpable" absence of Boy and Girl's baby, a void also embodied in the menacing figures of Man and Woman.

"Transgressing the Limits of Interpretation: Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*)" focuses on the tragic unfolding of a familial

conflict as a Turnerian “social drama,” with emphasis on the sacrificial ritual enacted as a redressive strategy. I read the play as a process of creating a ritual space of the grotesque and the contaminated, where taboos are transgressed and where no normative order or rule applies. *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* becomes a testing ground of ritual and dramatic conventions, of language as the means of communication, and of different narrative genres and forms.

The Grays face a crisis familiar to theatre-goers from the tradition of domestic drama, marital infidelity, that here occasions the deconstruction of both subject positions of those involved in the crisis and conventions of this classical genre. Through the dispersion of the scapegoating effect, Albee casts all three members of the Gray family in the role of the tragic victim subverting thus the dichotomy of transgressor versus injured party. Martin, Stevie, and Billy all lose the base upon which they have built their identities so far and experience what contemporary subject theory defines as the processual nature of subjectivity (Belsey 65). They are forced to realize that identity defies fixation and that it is transmitted within linguistic clichés (Kiss 146). Language, however, as the repository and transmitter of meaning proves itself flexible and elusive. Different narrative forms and strategies, generic elements, and theatre conventions are juxtaposed in order to demonstrate the fallibility of communication strategies as well as of any interpretation of this metatheatrical text that would force upon it the limits of “normativity.”

My chapter on Shepard’s *The Late Henry Moss*, “Ghost Resistant to Being Laid” foregrounds the failure of an enacted rite of separation and thus the insurmountable state of liminality that the Moss males experience. The two sons find themselves in the “toxic grip” of their dead father, the late Henry Moss who embodies what I call the ultimate “Liminal Man.” His past traumas—of war, of violence and destruction, of his own brutality towards his wife—haunt and define not only his, but also his offspring’s entire existence. Trauma represents a constituent element of social existence handled within ritual, thus I resort to concepts of contemporary trauma theory for widening the interpretative field of the Mosses’ liminal state.

In this play Shepard constructs a non-linear dramatic plot juxtaposing and intermingling different layers of narrative and various techniques of representation: recollection, indirect speech, interview, and flashback scenes, in order to present the two interwoven rites of passage. The Moss sons’ ritual of separation from their father becomes the site of endless speculation as they try to recreate Henry’s last days and death. It also transforms into an attempted coming to terms with their own traumas that disrupt their present

and result in “uncontrolled repetitive . . . intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11) in their behavior. They become mirror images of their father whose ritual of passing started thirty years earlier, gradually transforming him from “Living Man to Ghost Man to Dead Man” (Roudané, “Sam Shepard” 288). Henry Moss is trapped in a state of liminality, on the margins both geographically and socially. His neither dead nor alive state originates from his inability to “assimilate into full cognition” (Felman 5) and to understand and surpass the traumatic experiences he underwent and inflicted upon others; a state compulsively repeated and re-embodied in his sons unable to lay these “ghosts” of the past.

In “The Ritual of Vanishing” I interpret Albee’s *Peter and Jerry* as a play presenting the clash of rituals of self-affirmation and the inherent human desire to withdraw and vanish into obscurity through repetition and the simulation of the self, hoping thus to avoid and trick the basic predicament: mortality. Liminality appears here as a sphere marked by overt and manifest simulation, inviting a Baudrillardian reading.

Peter functions as the reluctant participant in Ann’s and Jerry’s rituals aiming to propel them into a power-position within their own narratives. His continuous attempts to undermine communication, to disguise himself as a non-presence can be defined as “rituals of transparency” (Baudrillard, *Conspiracy* 108) within which he constructs his identity “through rejection” (Baudrillard, *Conspiracy* 148), through the endless repetition of routines—familial, social, work, and linguistic—that become simulacra of his presence.

Ann and Jerry operate as catalysts of the crisis and “ritual elders” in the unfolding liminal processes. They too submerge into a complex system of simulation, but their goal with these multiplied images of themselves consists in attaining control. Ann envisions and verbally creates simulacra of herself, her life, and her decay in order to place herself into the center and by simulating chaos and death to render it repetitious, thus deprived of “reality.” Jerry desires to inscribe himself into a story that is memorable. So he orchestrates his assisted suicide that will/might be picked up by the media (*Reader’s Digest*) and multiplied so that the “base,” the “original,” his death would become just another eternally ongoing image.

In “Effacing Myths and Mystification of Power: Sam Shepard’s *The God of Hell*” I use Michel Foucault’s “The Subject and Power” in the interpretation of liminality, which leads to a further deepening of understanding ritual processes. I read the play as a representation of liminal withdrawal’s social implications and the strategies employed by power to manipulate subjects into the passive acceptance of their predicament. I argue that liminality cannot be described within the terminology and context of power relations. Within such periods initiands are forced to face grotesque simulacra of known and accepted subject

positions and of the whole symbolic order. Normative power relations existent within the given culture are suspended as neophytes are necessarily reduced to uniform passivity and deprived of their will and/or ability to act individually and autonomously. The play presents this state through the horrific torture scene with Haynes attached to and being maneuvered by the remote control in the hands of the devilish representative of power, Welch into whose grotesque duplicates both Frank and Haynes are transformed.

From this perspective, *The God of Hell* becomes doubly sarcastic and doubly critical: it unmasks a power that feeds on its own subjects and reduces them to mere puppets. But it also highlights the fact that within normative power structures, the subject has not only the freedom but also the responsibility to function as a control mechanism toward and within the structure.

In my last analytical chapter, “Danse Macabre,” I return to the contrastive and comparative angle, reading Albee’s *Occupant* parallel to Shepard’s *Kicking a Dead Horse*. I focus my analysis on the implied “rites of separation” the protagonists of the two plays undergo through the narrative revision of their lives, as well as on the generic implications of the adopted retrospective perspective. Albee’s biographic play summons to life the grand diva of twentieth century American sculpture, Louise Nevelson in a posthumous interview that becomes the liminal site of scrutinizing and deconstructing normative subject positions and of revealing the constructed nature of all the personae the creative artist devised in the course of her quest to “occupy her space.” Hobart Struther, Shepard’s protagonist, embodies yet another male in the playwright’s oeuvre who, frustrated by a phony, inauthentic urban existence built on the exploitation of old images of frontier American-ness, embarks on a journey towards the West imagined to hold the promise of authentic living. His extended monologue that he delivers while struggling to bury the horse that was supposed to carry him back to “authenticity,” occasions the analysis and re-evaluation not only of his previous life and subjectivity, but also of his desired future and of myths, history, and politics all promoting an identity devoid of stability and a reliable base.

The two protagonists read as alter egos of their authors who, within the construction of narratives that revive and parody themes, forms, sources of inspiration, and modes of their earlier works, create the necessary critical distance that allows them to confront and examine their own works and creative attitudes “reflected in the eyes of another” (Fischer-Lichte, *History* 1). Thus, the chapter also looks at how techniques of storytelling and parody as a means of both “enshrining” and questioning the past (Hutcheon 126) are employed in the construction of these dramatic universes that transgress the limits set up by Banu when

differentiating between the theatre of history and that of memory. The plays turn within, towards theatre and the genre, and establish a hermeneutic space within which audiences/readers are invited to abandon preconceptions, reshape expectations, decode allusions, references, and symbols, and recognize the fact that identity is always a construct that urges scrutiny, reevaluation, and reconstruction. At the same time, *Occupant* and *Kicking a Dead Horse* also formulate “messages” about and towards the world outside the theatre, staging models and modes of American identity un-stabilized by the myths, legends (urban and historical), and normative structures undermined and de-masked here as mere clichéd narratives of desire. The two plays present an interplay of genres and a tapestry of “texts”—in the broadest sense of the word—unfolding as ludic liminoid experimentations with theatre as a form of narrativizing/dramatizing the formation of individual, cultural, and theatrical identity.

Through my reading of their plays, I involve Albee and Shepard in a dialectical discussion—not as opposing poles contradicting and undermining each other, but rather in the sense of a “progressive conversation” where observations made about the works of one playwright intensify and deepen the discussion of the other’s plays. I also demonstrate how an analysis based on the Turnerian structuralist model can be extended and enriched by employing it together with contemporary theories, resulting in an interdisciplinary interpretative tool that may prove fruitful not only in analyzing literary works but also in anthropological and ethnographic research.

I demonstrate how the plays recreate, in a subversive manner and often adopting an ironic tone, the three-fold pattern of rites of passage, the third phase of which may occur through and within the active participation of their audiences. They present characters, situations, narratives that—unlike scientific theses, historical knowledge, and images of the world continuously challenged and refuted by new data and information—remain forever fresh and their truthfulness unquestioned (Eco 4 May 2008).¹⁷ Their characters’ ritual passage and liminal trials may assist audiences in understanding that the unavoidable “miscarriage” of the ritual on stage should not necessarily be a mirror image of the rituals they enact in their lives. The theatrical experience thus becomes the mirrored Other—not in the traditional realist

¹⁷ At the lecture at Cooper Union, Umberto Eco asserted: “I know Daedalus better than my own father,” adding that the truth of *King Lear* is always much more real and stable than the truth of Napoleon Bonaparte.

sense of art mirroring some external reality or even an imagined internal one, but as Turner argues in *From Ritual to Theatre*:¹⁸

In a complex culture it might be possible to regard the ensemble of performative and narrative genres, active and acting modalities of expressive culture as a hall of mirrors, or better magic mirrors (plane, convex, concave, convex cylinder, saddle or matrix mirrors to borrow metaphors from the study of reflecting surfaces) in which social problems, issues, and crises (from *causes celebres* to changing macrosocial categorical relations between the sexes and age groups) are reflected as diverse images, transformed, evaluated, or diagnosed in works typical of each genre, then shifted to another genre better able to scrutinize certain of their aspects, until many facets of the problem have been illuminated and made accessible to conscious remedial action. In this hall of mirrors the reflections are multiple, some magnifying, some diminishing, some distorting the faces peering into them, but in such a way as to provoke not merely thought, but also powerful feelings and the will to modify everyday matters in the minds of the gazers. (104)

Turner suggests that distorted mirror images “provoke reflexivity” (*From Ritual* 105) like matrix mirrors that will change the size, shape, and orientation of the mirrored object in “dramatic and disturbing ways” (*From Ritual* 106).¹⁹ I demonstrate a deeply rooted belief shared by both Albee and Shepard in theatre as such a matrix mirror, in an archetypal structure that is meant to help people—as Weston puts it so eloquently in Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class*—“figure out the jumps” (194).

¹⁸ Martin Esslin in his chapter “Drama as Ritual” asserts: “Hamlet speaks of the theatre holding a mirror up to nature. I think in fact it is society to which the theatre holds up the mirror. The theatre and all drama can be seen as a mirror in which society looks at itself” (103).

¹⁹ Here Turner—in the manner and style of a true interdisciplinary scholar—is quoting a scientific study by David Emil Thomas on matrix mirrors, “Mirror Images” published in the *Scientific American*.

SYMBOL TURNED FLESH: SAM SHEPARD'S *BURIED CHILD* AND EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE PLAY ABOUT THE BABY*

Victor Turner in *The Forest of Symbols* defines ritual as a symbolic process the smallest unit of which is the symbol itself; a “storage” of vast amounts of information. Objects, activities, words, relationships, gestures, space can function as symbols within rites that are meant to reveal crucial social, moral, and spiritual values as well as transform human attitude and behavior. Accordingly, a ritual unfolds as a process within which, by the manipulation of powerful and multivocal symbols, initiands are instructed and transformed in order to make them able to step into their new assigned roles within the social structure.

Turner differentiates dominant (alternatively called “core,” “key,” “master,” “focal,” “pivotal,” or “central” in Turner, *Dramas* 152) and instrumental symbols. Dominant symbols constitute autonomous and consistent elements of the total symbolic system of a community, and they may reappear in several different rituals; while instrumental ones function as means of performing and attaining the goals of one particular rite.

Dominant symbols are characterized by three major features. Their “multivocality” means that one single item can represent many different meanings. Their “unification of disparate significata” refers to the fact that they gather within themselves meanings that are interconnected by their analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought. The “polarization of meaning” signifies that within one dominant symbol we can identify two different poles of meaning: one that Turner calls the “sensory or orectic pole” with reference to natural or physiological phenomena, and the “ideological or normative pole” with a cluster of meanings connected to the moral and social order.

Sam Shepard and Edward Albee create literary universes on stage which can be read within the frames of the Turnerian ritual structure. They operate with large sets of symbols (objects, place, characters, relationships) that function as instrumental symbols within the liminal processes their characters undergo, and grow into dominant ones reflecting a shifting, open-ended chain of signifieds, fleshed out in their relations to each other and the Other.

The plays chosen for analysis in this chapter set up a field of expectations defined by the dominant symbol of the child. *Buried Child* creates a complex system within which, by the end of the play, the symbolic “secret treasure” from the backyard turns into flesh in the shocking image of the unearthed infant’s corpse as a grotesque mirror image of both its dead and living relatives. *The Play about the Baby* “deals with a . . . baby who by the end of the

play ceases to exist” (Albee, *Stretching* 24) functioning as the multivocal symbol of the problematic nature of constructing subjectivity.

BURIED CHILD

Shepard’s play, with its plot focused on the gradual disclosure of the family secret, reads as the dramatic representation of a rite in progress: a process that started long ago with incest and the killing of the newborn child. This ritual, however, has never been brought to closure, it overshadows and defines the whole existence of this doomed family. They have been caught in the phase of liminality for the last thirty years. The grandson Vince’s reappearance and his girlfriend Shelly’s relentless attempts to disclose “the horrible secret that lies at the root of the family’s plagued condition” (Wade 101) trigger them to move out of the “vicious equilibrium” they have been trapped in, and try to bring the ritual process to an end.

The multivocality of the symbolic title becomes evident when analyzing the state and condition of all of Dodge and Halie’s offspring. They all—Tilden, Bradley, Ansel, and Vince—represent different aspects of “being buried,” liminal personae neither dead nor alive, struggling to come to terms with their in-between position and conflictual relationships with people around them and, first of all, with themselves.

In the Preface to the revised edition of the play, Shepard argues:²⁰

[T]he character of Vince seemed to be hanging in the wind, without real purpose. Even though a core truth of this character is his aimlessness and passivity, there seemed to be no point in allowing him to be completely outside the play almost in the predicament of the narrator. So I began to try to find ways to bring him around, to “see the light,” as it were, without turning him into some kind of hero or even Sherlock Holmes. (vii-viii)

Buried Child does not present heroic destinies. It reads, rather, as a mystery play with a dark secret lurking behind every word. As Shepard asserts, Vince does not turn into a detective aiming to discover the cause of the family’s damnation. This venture is undertaken by Shelly—and with her guidance, by the audience—with arguable success. Although he does

²⁰ The revised play was first produced by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, Illinois in October 1995, and published in book format in 2006.

not transform into a hero or a sleuth, Vince still plays a central role. The story may be interpreted as his story of reintegration into the family he left behind six years earlier. It builds upon his attempt to carry out a ritual of reaggregation, the third phase of his rite of passage. He appropriates the role of the neophyte who arrives home in the hope of finding his roots. Strangely enough, nobody recognizes him. The attitude of the family towards him, however, is consistent with his state: those going through a rite of passage in the liminal phase are considered to be outside the structure, different, even dangerous or contagious, sacred and horrific, and—most importantly—“dead” from the point of view of the community they have exited from and are to re-enter with the completion of their instructions.

From this perspective, *Buried Child* becomes the enactment of an attempted ritual of reintegration of the prodigal son (echoing Pinter’s *Homecoming* and intertextually evoking such other Shepard plays as *True West*, *Fool for Love*, *The Late Henry Moss*). The ceremonial overtones are made even more emphatic by the manifold implicit rituals performed throughout the play: several attempts on the part of different family members at rites of separation (all of them have left at one time or another, only to be drawn back into the malefic circle, incapable of escaping and functioning successfully in the outside world); Tilden’s and Bradley’s symbolically charged interactions with their father as rituals of scarification of the “old corn king,” of the decaying and infertile patriarch.

Several critics have argued that the ending of the play carries hope, with Tilden having found the corpse of the buried child and carrying it up to “reunite” it with the mother, and with Halie’s description of the flourishing garden: “It’s a miracle Dodge. I’ve never seen a crop like this in my whole life. Maybe it’s the sun. Maybe that’s it. Maybe it’s the sun” (120).²¹ The repeated word “sun” homophonically echoes the “son” who has been found, but also subversively undercuts the possibility of a hopeful denouement: what has been found is the rotten corpse of an infant; while the “sun”—“son” analogy also sheds light on all the other “sons” who have been and remain outside the structure.

Ansel, the heroic soldier and great athlete, at least according to Halie’s stories, died a shameful death. “It’s not fitting for a man like that to die in a motel room” (27), the mother complains, also pointing to the fact that Ansel, similarly to the other family members, was unable to play the social roles he undertook appropriately and successfully. His failure

²¹ Ron Mottram reads the final images of the play as being a positive denouement with Vince, the young generation taking over the formerly barren farm; Doris Auerbach also argues on behalf of an optimistic and hopeful ending of the play.

becomes even more emphatic when all the stories Halie boastfully tells about her “heroic” son, her own private myths built around Ansel’s memory, are questioned: “TILDEN Ansel was a hero? . . . I don’t remember that. I must’ve been gone somewhere” (27-28); “BRADLEY He never played basketball” (97). His inappropriate death and Halie’s resistance to laying his ghost (her sole purpose of interacting with society consists in having the town erect a statue of her dead son) suspend him in the realm of liminality.

Bradley, the invalid who lost his leg in a grotesque chainsaw accident, represents the physically monstrous and grotesque that Turner defines as constituting part of demonstrations within the liminal process aiming to highlight different elements of the whole (the body, social structure, moral value system) and their importance within the efficacious functioning of the whole. He stands in as the embodiment of raw and brutal force. He is described in the stage directions as being “*a big man . . . His arms and shoulders extremely powerful and muscular due to a lifetime dependency on the upper torso doing all the work for the legs*” (42)—a symbolic representation of the impossibility for him to leave, his entrapment within the family’s debilitating grip and their state of dysfunctional existence. All of his words and actions display a sarcastic disregard for everything and everybody around him, violence and brutality, while his body and movement display a grotesque deformity and, at the same time, illustrate the fragility of the human body. With his wooden prosthetic left leg “*he moves an exaggerated, almost mechanical limp,*” while “*squeaking sounds of leather accompany his walk coming from the harness and hinges of the false leg*” (42). All these suggest something inhuman in Bradley that also resurfaces in the calm and detached manner in which he commits his “crimes”: he clips Dodge’s hair till the scalp bleeds, and symbolically “rapes” Shelly placing his fingers into her mouth, with a sarcastic smile on his face: “Open up. (*She opens her mouth slightly.*) Wider. (*She opens her mouth wider.*) Keep it like that. (*She does. Stares at Bradley. With his free hand he puts his fingers into her mouth*)” (81). His cold and deliberate violence makes any kind of opposition useless.

Throughout the play, Bradley is involved in such symbolic actions that Turner describes as processual rituals of separation of the young generation from the old. He symbolically castrates Dodge, an ironic twist of their power-relation as earlier Dodge remarked that he was going to “separate him [Bradley] from his manhood” (15) were he ever to show up at the house again. He also covers his father’s head with Shelly’s fur coat symbolically burying the “old king” and occupying his place on the sofa, thus displacing Dodge in the role of the head of the family. But even though he temporarily gains control by victimizing Shelly and occupying the central position on the couch—a centrality that also

carries total passivity, utter unwillingness to actively participate in anything—he proves an unworthy “new king,” only duplicating the old one’s dysfunctionality. His power, that manifests itself in his physical brutality, has a weak spot: his “Achilles heel,” his wooden leg. The moment Shelly grabs the prosthetic and takes it out of his reach, Bradley is reduced to a whining child-like state, helpless and exposed to mistreatment by those around him. He is deprived of control, he has lost his authority, and remains the liminal embodiment of both: physical force and violence and lack of “wholeness,” the frailty of the body.

The figure of Tilden may be interpreted as the other pole of the “polarity of meaning” associated with disability. The family’s oldest son, in Martin Tucker’s words “an American Gothic retard” (82), seems mentally disabled. He shares his time between the downstairs area of the house, involved in strange conversations with his father and feeble attempts at gaining some control, and the backyard, an area—as he is time and again reminded by Dodge and Halie—off-limits to him. A grown man in his late forties, he lives with his parents, often acting like and being perceived by the others as “a child” who needs continuous looking after.²² He is another one of the “buried children” with a past trauma that made him incapable of coping with the world around. His attempted “escape” to New Mexico proved a failure. The nature of the trouble he got himself into is never revealed, but in light of his confessions one may argue that his mistake was the fact that he even attempted to leave. He fled the seclusion of the parental house, but having been caught in a liminal position since the incest, his getaway was doomed from the very start. He was unable to build any contacts: “I was by myself more than I’ve ever been before” (23) due to the fact that his liminality positioned him in a state of “structural invisibility.” His departure functioned as the enactment of his wish to gain independence and become self-sufficient as Dodge boasts he used to be, but he proved unable to “make a living down there” (36). He describes New Mexico as being “foreign,” “different than Illinois” (36), a place where he lost his voice and thought he was dead.²³ As a liminal entity, he cannot, he must not enter the social structure for he is different, voiceless, and dangerous. Such social dysfunctionality may be read as a dominant symbol within the literary universe created by Shepard. The community of men and society is always far

²² Orbison argues that Tilden “is one of the buried children, who like repressed memories, must return” (515).

²³ J. Chris Westgate argues that Shepard’s plays “rarely reward their characters for their devotion to the West, nor do they endorse any nostalgic return to the West. The many journeys west, whether desired or undertaken, are ultimately impossible (Austin and Lee), futile (Weston), or catastrophic (Tilden and Vince) . . . The West is continually associated with decay, trauma, loss, and regret; it is generally more of a purgatory than a paradise” (728).

removed from the world of his characters who rarely manifest any desire to try to become members of such social orders. They do wish to escape the isolation they find themselves in, but these dreams of getting away always focus on remote places of further isolation and liminality: the West, Mexico, the desert, even Alaska, or simply the road.²⁴ There appears to be a continuously renewed attempt on the part of the males in Shepard's plays to "conquer" the West for themselves, to cross frontiers and borders, an act that Heyne describes as "quintessentially American . . . , our national (male) rite of passage" (quot. in Westgate 731).

Such escapes, however, always prove to be futile, and even more destructive than the liminality they were trying to leave behind. The escapees always return to the known marginality of the home, a position that does not require from them any active participation (at which they would fail as they have been either traumatized to an almost debilitated state—like Tilden—or physically mutilated by their earlier attempts at escape or acting—like Bradley), but rather the passive endurance of the given state. Thus, Tilden came back to the seclusion of the hermetic "hell" of the family, and his desire turned towards his immediate surroundings: the backyard.

His obsession with the garden, another item that functions as a Turnerian multivocal and polarized symbol, may be interpreted as his subconscious attempt to bring an old ritual to an end. The unearthing of the corpse of the buried child, the "sacred buried treasure" (77), and taking it upstairs to the mother, could mean the end of Tilden's quest, but not the absolution of the family from their liminality. Though in his simpleminded way Tilden is trying to get the unsuccessful sacrificial ritual undone, he commits another sin. By focusing exclusively on the past, he sacrifices the next generation, he never recognizes Vince whom he has also fathered, but leaves "buried."

The identity and condition of these "buried sons" depends on and is defined by their father, the Other. Their liminality reads as a kind of suspended Lacanian mirror stage where the reflection's decay and dysfunctionality infests the offspring and makes it impossible for them to surpass this stage and step into the symbolic system of law and structure, or as Turner identifies it, complete the rite of passage through their reaggregation into the community.

Dodge, who is himself mirrored by and multiplied in his sons, proves a monstrous father/Other for he is the ultimate "Liminal Man." According to Turner, liminal personae are

²⁴ As Westgate specifies, Vince—for example—is on the run from the family "[o]n the midnight highway toward the Iowa border, [following] the archetypal pattern of seeking renewal and rebirth on the frontier, away from the deadening weight of the family" (731).

neither dead, nor alive and/or both dead and alive, a feature emphatically present in the figure of Dodge. Halie complains that he does nothing but “decompose” on the sofa, “[s]melling up the house with [his] putrid body” (32)—an image echoed in the decomposing corpse of the baby at the end of the play. His question, “Are we still in the land of the living?” (13) destabilizes and subverts the divide of such a binary opposition, and also the possibility of a purely realistic play, and sets the scene for the liminal processes to unfold from the outset.

Turner defines disguise as another characteristic of threshold people. Dodge explicitly describes his being masked by Halie as something else than he is, ironically calling himself a corpse, integrating the two features of liminal personae: “Time to dress up the corpse for company! Lower the ears a little! Put up a little front! Surprised you didn’t tape a pipe to my mouth while you were at it! . . . Maybe a bowler hat! Maybe a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* casually placed in my lap! A fat Labrador retriever at my feet!” (15-16).

He has no connection with the outside world, even the possibility of such relations seems a mere bad joke: “I rarely go out in the bright sunshine, why would I go out in this [rain]?” (14). According to Turner, liminality represents an “interstructural” zone in which the ritual personae are secluded and isolated from everyday life, hidden and disguised. They are neither here, nor there, betwixt and between positions and social status. The family in *Buried Child* inhabits such an area of separation.²⁵ Such isolation and seclusion characterize the state of neophytes, as Turner argues: they are often said “to be in another place” (*Forest* 101).

Initiands “have physical but not social ‘reality,’ hence they have to be hidden” (Turner, *Forest* 101), they are ambiguous, and therefore, as Mary Douglas argues, society necessarily views them as ritually unclean and polluting (9). Threshold people “are not only structurally ‘invisible’ (though physically visible) and ritually polluting, they are very

²⁵ *Buried Child* leads us into a space that at first glance seems nothing out of the ordinary, a naturalistically built stage in the tradition of the realism of American domestic drama. We “step into” the living room of a dilapidated old farmhouse, as we learn later, set somewhere in Illinois, with “*an old dark green sofa with the stuffing coming out in spots,*” “*lamp with a faded yellow shade,*” and “*large, old-fashioned brown TV*” (7). What makes the place suggestive of something mysterious is its isolation from the outside world: the stage directions describe a “*large screened-in porch with a board floor*” with a “*solid interior door*” (7). The screened-in porch and the solid door have twofold functions: to shut the world outside the space of the family, but also to enclose them into their appointed area. Their separateness and seclusion from the outside—from society—suggest that those inside are different from the ones outside. Even the background bears symbolic meaning: the elm trees—“*Beyond that [the porch] are the shapes of dark elm trees*” (7)—echo Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms*, an early hint that directs us towards the theme of doomed destinies due to incest and child murder. (An excellent comparative study of O’Neill’s and Shepard’s plays is Peter L. Hays’ “Child Murder and Incest in American Drama.”)

commonly secluded, partially or completely from the realm of culturally defined and ordered states” (Turner, *Forest* 98). Hence, Dodge’s and his family’s isolation suggests that they are undergoing a process that separates them from social structure, and also signals their decay and pollutedness, while the family’s contagiousness is illustrated by the transformation Vince and Shelly undergo, affected by the behavioral patterns they witness and are exposed to.

But Dodge is also isolated from the rest of the family, passivity and aimlessness define his existence, just like that of ritual personae in the phase of liminality deprived of free will, individual desires, and the freedom to act. The symbolic burials and castrations his sons perform while he is sleeping also emphasize his “neither dead nor alive” state.²⁶ His actual physical death is only noticed by Vince who covers the corpse and places roses on his grandfather’s chest, like on a coffin, and then positions himself on the sofa in a posture mirroring that of the old man’s, symbolically displacing Dodge, just as Bradley does earlier.

The sons identify themselves in relations to Dodge, who within the sphere they have all been trapped in functions as a Turnerian ritual elder modeling liminal behavior. The younger generation thus become his Doppelgänger. Collectively, however, all males within the household come into being in their opposition with the female Other. Halie and Shelly both seem to occupy positions of resistance towards the patriarchal order.

Rituals aim to reinforce such orders within a community by demonstrating—through various symbolic means and procedures—its structure, mechanism, and fundamental values. *Buried Child* displays the perpetuated “order/disorder” state of liminality that continuously subverts the “normal” logic and causality of social or family interactions. At the same time, it also goes beyond simple structures of determinism (in the Newtonian or Darwinian sense). Instead of simply displaying a universe of chaos, it is governed by the rules and laws of liminal periods where strange and monstrous constructs are juxtaposed in a ludic manner with role-shifts and identity swaps brought about by “the identity crisis necessary for the eventual illumination of the subject” (Morgan 97). The female characters within this universe are characterized by a flexibility and multiplicity of subjectivities that constantly undermine the already problematic “symbolic order of the phallus.”

²⁶ First Tilden covers Dodge’s body with corn husks, an appropriate ritual for the “corn king” (Orbison’s article presents an insightful discussion of *Buried Child* as a postmodern representation of the myth of the Corn King). Then Bradley emasculates him by cutting his hair without his consent. Bradley also performs Dodge’s second symbolic burial throwing Shelly’s fur coat over the old man’s head; while act three abounds in metaphoric actions all representing the interment of Dodge’s body: for example, Halie covers him with the blanket and throws a rose onto him that remains standing between Dodge’s knees, an ironic image of his long-lost virility.

At the beginning of the play, Halie occupies the upstairs area of the house representing the domineering Mother.²⁷ She symbolically presided over the whole world “down there.” She first appears as a disembodied voice from above, which already suggests her physical, spiritual, and emotional separateness from the rest of the family. She proves yet another liminal persona, wearing masks and also embodying another element of this state that Turner defines as the second component of this transition period: the ludic deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural configurations, the exaggeration and distortion of characteristics of objects, deviant or grotesque representations, strange appropriations of roles (*Forest* 99-108).²⁸ She represents this ludic component through her appropriation of different roles. When she appears on stage—after having commanded the men from off-stage, like a “divinity”—she is already wearing another mask: that of the mourning mother. Mustazza, discussing Halie’s transformations, argues that her role-shifts and role-reversals, as well as the ones witnessed in Shelly’s behavior, may be interpreted as a sign of women’s power and skill to adapt to the dire conditions they find themselves in, and to stand up against the violence of the men around them (37). The argument is sustainable in the case of Shelly who shifts from role to role confessedly in order to survive: “I’ll do whatever I have to do to survive. Just to make it through this thing” (62), although even in her case, the survival instinct rules her behavior only till she sleeps in the house once and appropriates it as her own: “. . . Last night I was scared” (86) but now “[the house is] [m]ine. . . . I know my way around here” (87-88).

Halie’s role-shifts, however, do not arise as attempts to save herself, but rather as experiments she has the opportunity to carry out within the liminal position she has been caught in. She plays each role to the extreme and she seems to enjoy observing herself in the different disguises she puts on. First she functions as the concerned mother and attentive but severe caretaker of the disabled, childish, helpless men around her, who seem to slip into such an utterly debilitated state whenever this “domineering” female figure appears. She also puts

²⁷ Orbison discusses Halie as the incarnation of the Terrible Mother in “Authorization and Subversion of Myth in Shepard’s *Buried Child*.”

²⁸ Turner argues that the ludic, grotesque representations of ordinary objects, roles, and activities force the ritual subjects to think about their society, they provoke them to reflect on the basic values of their social and cosmological order. He uses the model of the lion’s head placed on a man’s body, a combination that makes the ritual subject think about all the social and cultural valences of the lion-head: symbolizing power, wisdom, and authority. If one is exposed to the lion-head in its “normal” position, on the lion’s body, one would accept it as a given, and would not reflect upon its symbolic values. I argue that in the case of *Buried Child* the audience, the liminoid participant of the ritual, is the one who can and is also expected to reflect upon these social and cultural basic values.

on a mask that she brings forth from her memory: the seductively young and innocent woman enjoying the company of suitors with money who would take her to the races with sunshine, flamingoes (a reference to Blanche Dubois's stay at the Flamingo Hotel). Like the memory of Ansel, this image of her past is an idealization the truthfulness of which is undermined by the fact that she does not remember whether she was "escorted" to Florida or California. By the time she appears on stage, she "*is dressed completely in black as though in mourning*" (27) having re-envisioned and re-dressed herself in the mask of the tragically devastated mother.

Upon her return to the house in act three, she has changed masks once more. She is playing the role of the seductive and sophisticated upper-class woman—a further development of her memory images, this time acted out—openly flirting with her companion, hypocritically worrying about the state of affairs she finds in the house, with reminiscences of her "extreme religious tendencies" (Mustazza 37) from act one: "Oh my gracious! What in the name of Judas Priest is going on in this house?! . . . You can't leave this house for a second without the devil blowing in the front door!" (94).

Confronted with Shelly, who has taken over the role of the mistress of the house, Halie is forced to transform herself again, this time into a woman fighting for her position within the household, another image of the clash of generations in the battle for power and control. She, similarly to Dodge, is doomed to lose this fight and retreat to her domain upstairs, a former symbolic sign of her dominance, now representing only her isolation.

Halie fulfills those female stereotypes that as constructs of patriarchal power lend themselves as possible subject positions to women.²⁹ Her transformations and role-shifts, however, destabilize the patriarchal symbolic order that would make it impossible for her to function as an active agent and strip her of any desire. She embodies that which Luce Irigaray playfully calls the impossibility to identify a woman "as either one person, or as two" (25). Working within the symbolic system of the phallus—problematic, but still sustained by the male family members—but also assuming the ludic possibility for experimentation granted to her by liminality, she becomes a subversive power, refusing to be fixed within the negative pole of the binaries that make up such a restrictive structure, as well as the passivity that her

²⁹ Germaine Greer defines the stereotypes as "the Eternal Feminine," arguing that "[s]he is the Sexual Object sought by all men, and by all women. She is of neither sex, for she has herself no sex at all. Her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others. All she must contribute is her existence. She needs never give positive evidence of her moral character because virtue is assumed from her loveliness and her passivity. . . . There are stringent limits to the variations of the stereotype, for nothing must interfere with her function as sex object" (67-68).

“femininity” should cast upon her. The multitude of roles she takes on and the ease and flexibility with which she shifts from one to the other transform her figure into a demonstration of the utter instability of any one subject position and an active pole in the mirroring process unfolding on stage. While the sons passively reflect and are paralyzed by the traumatizing image of the father, Halie functions as the monstrous, repressed, disruptive Other, desired and feared, who evades the patriarchal law, thus being impossible to fix or name within that symbolic order. In relation to her active experimentation within the family’s liminal sphere, the men can define themselves as the passive, uniform, and ultimately powerless neophytes, desiring and trying to sustain an order that can only exist and be perceived as the opposite, the negative other to Halie’s constant self-affirming ludic liminality.³⁰

Shelly also functions as a role accumulator. She is quickly drawn into the liminal existence of the family, falling victim to “contamination” by such spheres that Turner and Douglas coin as the motive of liminal seclusion. She accepts the rules first just in order to survive, but later the mysterious liminal sphere seems to capture her in its spell; she is “domesticated” to the point where she feels it is her house, her domain: “I had that feeling . . . that nobody lives here but me . . . You’re [Dodge] here, but it doesn’t seem like you’re supposed to be. . . I don’t know what it is. It’s the house or something. Something familiar” (87-88). Thus she posits herself in opposition to the passive males, occupying a control position in which she can become an active agent. “She is caught up in this nightmarish family reunion that now she wants to come to terms with,” so “she becomes different people, adjusts her position continually, becomes, in fact, so many different people that by Act Three, which contains her confrontation with Halie (who has also changed radically), she is hardly recognizable” (Mustazza 39).³¹ Her role-swaps also symbolically display different modes and patterns of behavior in strange combinations and perplexing constructs. She appropriates several “female” roles, socially constructed “appointments” for women in conformity with the law of the father. Her relationship with Tilden and later with Dodge materializes in her switching to the mother-wife mode, while the men in the house also attempt to force her into

³⁰ In *The Forest of Symbols* Turner argues that “[t]he passivity of neophytes to their instructors, their malleability, which is increased by submission to ordeal, their reduction to a uniform condition, are signs of the process whereby they are ground down to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to cope with their new station in life” (98).

³¹ Florence Falk, similarly to Mustazza, also suggests that though women are often cast in the role of the victim in Shepard’s works, they are also the ones “more skilled in survival strategies” (100).

passivity and into the role of the sacrificial victim, a position that she withstands and flees from.

Upon her arrival, she is cast as the girlfriend expected to make a good first impression, a role that she repudiates with irony after having been insulted by Dodge: “And you [Vince] were worried about me making the right first impression” (54). She does not understand or even contemplate Vince’s reasons for coming home, she only came along “for the ride” (55)—a confession foreshadowing her being a drifter, defying any fixed position. Dodge’s attacks on her origin and her person make her put on the mask of the disengaged and uninterested outsider, while Tilden’s appearance on stage with the carrots in his arms creates for her the opportunity to slip into another role, and she—like Halie—starts enjoying these sudden transformations. She rapidly becomes the “housewife” and sides with Tilden, the “provider.” She also accepts the position of the idealized but also objectified idol of the male gaze, with Tilden circling around her like around a beautiful animal captured and admired from a distance. Her fur coat stands in as a substitute to be caressed by Tilden, whose object of desire escapes victimization by metonymically replacing herself with the “remains” of a dead animal, a Turnerian polarized symbol whose sensory pole refers to the experience of touching something soft and soothing, a sensation associated with women, and an ideological pole connected to the objectification of women.

In her confrontation with Bradley, however, this kind of displacement proves impossible. She has no means to stand up against brute physical force. But Bradley’s casting her as the victim forces her to find a way of avoiding such victimization again, and she finds it in appropriating the role left behind by Halie, that of the domineering matriarch. She sleeps in the upstairs room symbolically displacing the older woman (Mustazza 40), cooks bouillon and offers it to Dodge, thus substituting for Halie also in the role of the caretaker and nourisher of the “lord of the house.” The older woman’s return, however, endangers her position as both of them are striving for the same status: Halie wants to regain power and control over “her house” and “her men,” thus she tries to dispossess Shelly, first by ignoring her existence, then by stressing her own ownership, and finally by trying to get her drunk. Drunkenness for Halie is connected to the appropriation of roles other than that of the mistress of the house; therefore she believes that by forcing Shelly to drink she would also force her out of her position of power.

Shelly faces two possibilities: either to stay and try to gain permanent control, or be victimized, transformed into another sacrifice. She tries to sustain her dominance; she employs physical tricks in “disarming,” symbolically castrating Bradley; and verbal ones

convincing Dodge to reveal the “secret.” She manages to win this battle even though Halie’s tactics are just as subversive as hers. Vince, however, returns so dramatically changed that Shelly can no longer relate to him: “What happened to you, Vince? You just disappeared” (117). At this point the only role she is still free to assume is that of the victim, thus she flees.

Despite her liminal experimentation and games, throughout the play Shelly remains the outsider. Similarly to a field anthropologist, she observes the “natives” obsessively involved in their mysterious and strange activities, trying to make sense of these as well as of the seemingly incoherent and sometimes even nonsensical story-fragments they tell her. She asks questions, interrogates her “informants,” participates in their activities (mostly without really understanding their reasons or goals) and shares their living space trying to adapt to and internalize the habits and workings of the house. But she remains the observer whose self-awareness does not dissolve under the pressure of the roles she is forced or willing to assume; moreover, when faced with ignorance towards her persona, she emphatically demands the acknowledgement of her existence and presence. She does not become liminally “invisible” like Vince or the rest of the family, so she must leave.

Vince’s ritual involvement is twofold. Firstly, he is involved in an initiation rite that started when he left home, and now, after six years of liminality, he returns—like neophytes from seclusion—with the hope of being reintegrated into the family as an adult. His departure may be interpreted as the first phase of his initiation; his life apart as his liminal instruction; and what he wants to achieve or enact now reads as the third phase, his re-entrance into the idealized structure from his memory in a new status. This hope, however, is shattered when nobody in the family seems or admits to recognizing him. They show no interest and no intention to try to remember. Dodge’s sarcastic remarks, “How am I supposed to remember if you don’t” (51), referring to Vince’s incapability to recall specific details of the past, something he seems to have inherited from Halie, emphasize not only the family’s inability, but their unwillingness to do so. For them—and in conformity with his liminal state—he is “invisible.” Their own liminal position requires certain modes of behavior and conduct, and while Shelly is quickly accepted as a participant for she immediately adapts to the rules of the family’s marginal position, Vince’s attitude is inappropriate for the given situation: “SHELLY Vince, don’t be pathetic, will ya? They’re not gonna play. Can’t you see that?” (64).

The two superimposed rituals, Vince’s desired reintegration, and the family’s perpetuated sacrificial ritual, cancel out the possibility of a successful denouement for either of these rites. An integration process, however, gradually unfolds: Vince’s aggregation into

the family's liminality. He is to leave his own personal threshold position in order to be integrated into the family's juxtaposed one. He is invited to step into their marginal world and take part in it. Going to fetch a bottle of alcohol for Dodge becomes a test he submits to. He attempts to flee: "I was gonna run last night. I was gonna run and keep right on running" (117), but as the other men in the family, his escape is also doomed to failure. It only occasions his recognition that he is carrying within himself the traits and prerogatives of those he is trying to reject:

I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. I studied my face. Studied everything about it as though I was looking at another man. . . . I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time and every breath marked him. Marked him forever without him knowing. And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed to his grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath. Same eyes. Same mouth. Same breath. I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the corn belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. (117-18)

Vince's examination of himself in the glass brings about a textual turning point; the reflection of himself and, at the same time, his non-self symbolically in the form of his father's, grandfather's, and all of his predecessors' faces proves to him that he cannot evade "the patriarchal order" that in the case of this family materializes in repetition "as a kind of hell" (Bigsby, *Modern* 184). He undergoes powerful transformative emotions and experiences. The discourse of the play embodies here the ambiguity and self-subversive quality of threshold periods, where ordinary and quotidian activities and values are suspended or disintegrated to form grotesque and monstrous combinations.

Vince does finally step out of his six-year initiation. But his recognition that his very self can only be defined and perceived within the seemingly lunatic repetitious routines of this dialectic of the self and the Other within the family, reproduced once again in the final image of Vince taking over Dodge's position on the sofa with his body posture exactly mirroring that of the dead patriarch, the possibility of his reintegration into the ideal he imagined vanishes. His reunification with the family does not result in a transcendence of their suspension in liminality. The idyllic image of the prodigal son's homecoming turns into a

grotesque mirror image of itself: the youth's perversion into a duplicate of the decaying and dysfunctional older generation. Following the revelatory experience while on the run, he acts according to the rules: drunk, violent, aggressive. He becomes "visible" to the rest of the family and enters the participants' contest for control and power, a "competition" that lies at the base of the family members' relations with each other.

René Girard's concept of mimetic desire attains a masterfully realized expression in these relationships. He argues that

[i]f one individual imitates another when the latter appropriates some object [or role], the result cannot fail to be rivalry or conflict. . . . Beyond a certain intensity of rivalry the antagonists tend to lose sight of their common object and focus on each other, engaging in so-called prestige rivalry. In human beings, the process rapidly tends toward interminable revenge, which should be defined in mimetic or imitative terms. (*Double*, vii)

Vince's imitation of Tilden's and Bradley's behavior (violence, inconsistent and logically incoherent speech, drunkenness, awkward movement, and destructiveness), as well as his mimetically taking over Dodge's position reads as the displacement of all the other male family members and Vince's appropriation of all their roles. Despite his pledge to renew the farm, he is doomed to perpetuate the destructive and self-destructive existence of his forefathers. He duplicates the "decomposing" patriarch validating Girard's thesis that "the world of reciprocal violence is one of constant mirror effects in which the antagonists become each other's doubles and lose their individual identities" (*Double*, 86).

The incomprehension that manifests in Vince's behavior as well as his inability to transcend the family's liminal position is also motivated by the fact that much of the "communication of the sacra" that Turner defines as the key component of liminality goes on with Vince off-stage. Turner describes this "communication" process as consisting of the exhibition of sacred articles ("what is shown"), actions ("what is done") and instructions (stories and mythic histories, "what is said") (*Forest*, 99-108). Within the play, all three of these components can be identified. The armfuls of corn and carrots carried into the house by Tilden function as "what is shown," together with the shocking final image of Tilden with the corpse of the baby in his arms. Vince does witness Tilden bringing in the bunch of carrots, symbols of the mysterious fecundity of the farm. He, however, is unable to see or decode the

symbol; baffled and shocked by this display of crops, he—unlike Shelly—misses the point of Tilden’s unconscious demonstration.

The same “disinterest” and ignorance characterizes his behavior at the end of the play. Tilden has finally found the corpse of the baby under the mud, and carries it into the house; but Vince “*keeps staring at the ceiling as though Tilden weren’t there*” (120). By this point, he has been fully integrated into the liminal status of the family and thus has become “blind” and “deaf” toward a “communication” that within this phase is considered a taboo.

He is also absent when Dodge decides to break the “pact” (108) and talk about the taboo (as partly Tilden did in act two, another instance when Vince was off-stage), an act that may be interpreted as the “instruction” part of the “communication of the sacra.” But “what is said” proves futile as well: Vince, the one who could pick up the role abandoned by Dodge the moment he murdered the infant, that of the well-established and self-sufficient farmer, is not present when the possibility of that role is presented. By the time he returns, the only models of behavior “shown” to him are that of the brutish mutilated Bradley, the mentally debilitated Tilden, and the unredeemed, liminal Dodge.

Missing the “demonstration” of the role, skills, and knowledge that could terminate their liminality, Vince’s mimetic desire is focused on the communications he is exposed to: “what is done,” the behavioral patterns of the communicators. He appropriates Bradley’s physical brutality (smashes bottles and destroys the house) as well as his awkwardness (Bradley stumbles and almost crashes into the house; Vince cuts through the screen and climbs in); the general sustained drunkenness, even their inability and unwillingness to recognize him: “Vincent who? What is this?! Who are you people?” (112). His interaction with Shelly verbally echoes Halie and Dodge’s from the beginning of the play:

HALIE’S VOICE . . . I’m coming down there in about five minutes if you don’t answer me!

DODGE Don’t come down. (9);

SHELLY I’m coming out there now, Vince.

VINCE Don’t come out. Don’t you dare come out here. It’s off-limits. Taboo territory.
(114)

If Shelly has appropriated Halie’s role as the mistress of the house, Vince is “cast” as Dodge, assuming all the characteristics and prerogatives of his condition. Instead of transforming into the young and virile “corn spirit,” Vince “brings to the surface a buried demon” (Orbison

511), he fails as a savior due to the fact that “[h]e regresses from the well-meaning innocent of Act Two to the violent sadist of Act Three” (Orbison 511).³² Dodge’s death that “*ha[s] come completely unnoticed*” (119) cannot function as a redeeming sacrifice to eliminate the menace, for Vince has already become the exact duplicate of the “dead king,” an image in opposition with the mysterious fecundity of the garden.

Throughout the play, the garden functions as one of the “dominant symbols.” Shepard masterfully juxtaposes the inside domain with the exterior, while movement from one sphere to the other always becomes metaphorical and driven by the mimetic desire of the one who moves from the condition represented by one area to the state he/she is moving into. At first, the garden illustrates the family’s state: barren, muddy due to the persistent rain perceived by Dodge as the curse befalling no other state but Illinois. Later it becomes the representation of the lost fertility of the males and the family’s past prosperity. It mirrors their liminality, bearing both the possibility of salvation and eternal doom.

Douglas argues that all margins are dangerous but also desired as being on the threshold is an empowering position: it is there that the liminal persona acquires “gnosis,” a state of instruction where the ones to be initiated reflect on the conditions and values of the center (thought of as structure) revealed through the view from the margin, from a position of “anti-structure” (Turner’s term). The symbolic order displayed in the family’s liminality in *Buried Child* builds upon the binary poles of the inside and the outside, the inside of the family home and the backyard. According to Turner, the dominant symbol should be considered as a dynamic system of “significata,” a vehicle that carries loads of meanings, and—by the principle of economy—that may represent logically antithetical processes of death and growth, opposed states of fall and salvation. The backyard within the discourse of the play becomes such a polarized item. It represents both decay and fertility, death as well as rebirth. Similarly to the rain that carries both the meaning of flood and destruction, and regenerative and purifying water, the backyard becomes a locus of fertility and, at the same time, of death, as it is the place that holds the corpse of the buried child. According to Turner, the function of a dominant symbol within a ritual process is to summarize experience, while it is also used as a source of new experiences. The backyard in *Buried Child* is employed as a concentrating mirror of the family’s past condition of prosperity and fertility, and their present

³² Orbison develops his argument of Vince’s failure as a savior as a response to Rodney Simard’s reading of the play that interprets Vince as an “errant quester, a prodigal son returned to seek significance, meaning, and place in the roots he had once abandoned” assigning him the responsibility “to unearth the past, purify it, and look toward the future” (87-88).

state of decay as the barren field and graveyard of the slain child. It is defined also as a taboo territory that Halie and Dodge avoid entering. For them the garden represents the sins they have committed, a reminder of the past that they are trying to repress.

This attempted repression constitutes the root of their blindness towards the multivocality of the symbol. The corn and carrots are telling phallic images of new fertility that, however, cannot be transported onto the ones who ignore them: as Vince bursts out, “The carrots aren’t going to help. The carrots have nothing to do with the situation here” (62), an early sign of his failure to redeem the family and move them to a new period of prosperity. Such ignorance, however, cannot be equated with that of innocence. The archetypal “Garden of Eden,” an image that lies at the basis of the perception of America as the “promised land,” is perceived as the locus of a new, pure beginning, but also as a place marked by the “lack of knowledge.”³³ The barren garden, however, suggests the loss of this innocence, the corruption of the land, the decay of the “lord” of the land, the infertility of the patriarch. And this garden also “gives birth” to death. The baby that should have been a symbol of rebirth carried within itself corruption as the “fruit of an incestuous love between Tilden and his mother” (Luedtke 152). Similarly to the backyard, the buried child becomes an effective symbol of the family’s liminality: of purity and sin, of corrupted salvation, symbolic Doppelgänger that may be interpreted in Lacanian terms as the destabilizing and disruptive eruption of the Imaginary into the Symbolic.

Through the murder of the child and its burial in the backyard the family that should have been saved from damnation was doomed. The sacrificial ritual did not save them and absolve them of the sins they have committed as the rite was not the appropriate one and was not carried out appropriately.³⁴ As Tilden tells Shelly: “We had a baby. . . . Just disappeared.

³³ Chaikin, Shepard’s long time collaborator and friend, wrote with reference to *The Serpent* (performed in 1968 by the Open Theatre): “None of us believe there is or ever was a real Garden of Eden, but it lives in the mind as certain as memory” (quoted in A. Wilson 264). Ann Wilson states that for Chaikin, and implicitly for Shepard, “the Garden of Eden is not a geographic location now lost but a lost place within each person” (264). It becomes—just like in *Buried Child*—the locus where a coherent and “real” self is supposed or imagined to exist, a symbol of lost entity and wholeness, of the “health” of the self, corrupted by the impossibility to “translate” it into language.

³⁴ The Shepardian family, as Sparr argues, “seems to be unable to provide its members with meaning and context for rites of passage” (568). Other such failed sacrificial rituals are also performed by the Tate family in *Curse of the Starving Class*, for example the butchering of the lamb, or Wesley’s symbolically putting on his father’s clothes, a ritual replacement of the patriarch, rituals about which Donald E. Morse affirms that “the clothes dug

We had no service. No hymn. Nobody came” (77). Both van Gennep and Turner emphasize that in the case of rituals connected to death, rites of separation constitute the major focus of the process as the dead need to be severed from the living with utmost care and caution. Therefore, such rituals consist of elaborate processes of acknowledging the deadness of the departed and their careful seclusion from the sphere of those alive. But such clear-cut separation would not be consistent with the family’s liminal state and behavior: their neither dead nor alive condition makes them disregard the culturally defined and prescribed rules of a burial ritual.

Dodge intended to separate the polluting element from the family, for—as he emphasizes while telling the story to Shelly—the baby had some mysterious and evil powers that needed to be destroyed. By slaying the child and burying it secretly in the backyard, however, he did not succeed in his attempt: this was a secretive and individual act that did not include either the family or the community. The death, therefore, was not acknowledged and accepted as a separation. Rather, Dodge polluted the land, and implicitly the people living on it. The sacrifice did not effect the displacement of violence. Dodge did not murder a genuine foreigner or stranger but a part of “[his] own flesh and blood” (33).

Sacrificial rites, Girard argues, re-instate order; they purify the violence that is inherent to human nature and erupts unavoidably in moments of crisis when the individual or the whole community senses a danger threatening its existence—be it an internal or external threat. Rituals are to channel this aggression against victims who carry no risk of being revenged. Sacrifice functions as a diversion of violence; thus there is no need for a divinity to exist to receive or reject it. The ritual process represents a transfer that fulfills a very real and immediate purpose: anger, envy, internal tensions, jealousy, rivalry, aggression are transferred from being directed against a valuable member of the community to something of little or no value, a stranger or intruder. But for this “deception of violence” to work, the victim needs to incarnate both a substitute for the one to be redeemed, and should also act as a displacement for all the transgressors’ sins.

In the sacrificial rite performed by Dodge, the victim is not the proper substitute, but a part of the family. The violence struck too close and thus, instead of cleansing, it polluted even more the already corrupted family and farm. The chosen scapegoat was perceived by Dodge as dangerous to their integrity and prosperity, but—and most importantly—threatening

out of the garbage pit remain too large, they do not fit him, and the refrigerator already overflows with food, so the butchering was as wasteful as it was unnecessary” (741).

his own power- and control position. Therefore, he eliminated the rival that was challenging his patriarchal authority. Having performed the rite in secret and without the necessary paraphernalia of such a process, this ritual was also doomed from the outset. William W. Demastes, analyzing Shepard's *States of Shock*, identifies the reason that lies at the basis of the failed rituals in *Buried Child* as well:

What is missing . . . is the idea that one must allow order to arise out of chaos—and allow the opposite to occur as well—rather than working to impose order upon chaos. The natural processes of a rising order have been superseded by an impulse to control, to be ‘gods’ dictating order to nature. The result of this impulse is to place nature in the role of ‘enemy’ and, ironically, to place ourselves in the path of self-destruction, destroying both nature and ourselves in our very attempts to redeem both. (270)

Dodge—and together with him the rest of the family—cannot come to terms with such an “unnamable” disruption subverting the patriarchal symbolic order. They must repress it and declare it a taboo. But the unimaginable by its very nature forces itself back to the surface resulting in failed rituals and perpetuated liminality rather than in a return to the utopian state of the Imaginary. Rituals always carry an imminent danger, Barbara Myerhoff argues, for a failed ritual may reveal its own constructed nature leading to the paralyzing realization that all structures and values are mere construct of the human mind (“Death” 170). Dodge’s unsuccessful sacrificial ritual (together with the incest that it was to undo and thus redeem) lies at the basis of the family’s plagued condition. It is surrounded by a deadly silence; while the ardent impulse and desire to externalize, to communicate, to exorcise the secret continuously clashes with the family member’s inability and unwillingness to talk about the taboo. If they did, they would disrupt “the law of the father” and undermine the only order within which they can still define themselves. Their silence, however, makes the rite inefficient. They seem to be petrified and stunned into dumbness for the void created by the “disappearance” of the baby turned out to be a monstrous mirror reflecting the horrendousness of their own hollowness. The violence that erupted and turned on the “intruder” backfired: experiencing the absence emerging from the destruction paralyzed the family, like the Biblical Lot’s wife’s vision of the destructive fire that turned her into a pillar of salt. They stared into the void and recognized themselves in it, they have become invisible. Thus, following the pattern of repetition defining their liminal existence, Vince’s re-integration into the family can

only take place when he recognizes the void within himself, when he identifies himself with the face of his ancestors “dissolving” in the windshield (118).

The moment they break their pact of silence they commit another mistake nullifying the validity and efficaciousness of the sacrifice once again. For, as Sophia S. Morgan asserts, “ritual cannot become meta-ritual, it cannot become the object of its own contemplation” (81), an idea also formulated by Myerhoff: “underlying all rituals is an ultimate danger . . . the possibility that we will encounter ourselves making up our conceptions of the world, society, our very selves” (*Secular* 22). By disclosing the truth about the baby, Dodge confesses to their own implication in the creation of the void in which they all exist. Their thirty-year silence invalidated the ritual casting it as something that never happened, but it also protected it from being discarded as nothing divine or devilish for that matter. Their secretiveness conferred upon the situation a veil of mystery that sustained their illusion of a “curse” having plagued their existence. Unveiling the secret could mean shattering that illusion and taking responsibility; however, it does not happen with the hope of redemption, but with the deference and resignation of the dying.

The play ends with the shocking visual image characteristic for Shepard’s plays: “*TILDEN appears from left, dripping with mud from the knees down. His arms and hands are covered with mud. In his hands he carries the corpse of a small child at chest level, staring down at it. The corpse mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth*” (120). The infant “born in the realm of the Imaginary” (Lacan 286) and slain before being “named” thus accepted within the patriarchal order, returns and, together with the lavishly flourishing garden, represents chaos, the repressed and subconscious, a multivocal dominant symbol of continuous uncertainty.

THE PLAY ABOUT THE BABY

The Play about the Baby, similarly to *Buried Child*, builds on such ritual elements as repetition, mirroring, and the ludic use of multivocal symbols to demonstrate the instability of any one structure based on binary oppositions. Gender roles, ethnic markers, social and familial relations, as well as language and theatrical conventions are scrutinized, deconstructed, and subverted by parody. In Albee’s 1998 four-hander *Boy and Girl*—similarly to Nick and Honey in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Vince in Shepard’s play—undergo a quite violent initiation ritual under the watchful eyes and with the active participation and guidance of their “ritual elders.” The instructors, Man and Woman—in

contrast with the older generation in *Buried Child* who play the role of “ritual elders” unconsciously and, as demonstrated earlier, only with partial success—force onto the younger couple the strain of conscious existence by compelling them to face loss.

While Dodge’s opening line sets the scene for a liminal sphere in between life and death appropriate for rituals of separation: “Catastrophic” (8) and later “Are we still in the land of the living?” (13); in Albee’s play the opening scene leaves the stage empty after just one line: “GIRL I’m going to have the baby now. (*BOY and GIRL exit.*)” (3). The audience/reader is thrown in medias res into a situation Turner defines as one of the main life-crisis rituals of human/female existence (*Forest* 53). Giving birth and breastfeeding (the baby, but also Boy) place Girl from the outset into a female ritual frame, foreshadowing a rite of initiation into parenthood to unfold. This expectation, also sustained by the explicit title, is subverted by the unexpected rite of separation that Man and Woman induce and conduct, while the baby also proves to “only exist in the play as something to be lost so its parents can be wounded” (Gross 123). The disappearance of the child as well as the effects of such a vanishing upon the parents and the means of coping with such a loss also link the two plays that both focus on their characters’ liminal state brought about by babies who cease to exist.

Boy and Girl—generalized allegorical representations of youth, innocence, but also of lack of insight and knowledge—inhabit a world of their own in blissful ignorance, separated from the rest of the world and chronological time, just like the family in *Buried Child*. They seem to be cut off from any social relations; the defining markers of their subjectivity may be identified as their age, gender (a category that throughout the play needs continuous re-affirmation as it proves shifting, changeable, defying fixation), and their bodily functions (sexual drive, need for nourishment). The baby thus becomes Boy’s and Girl’s symbolic extension and, at the same time, an objectified Other, the mirror image of their fundamental needs and desires, while the child buried in the Illinois backyard brought about and mirrors the decay of the family and their impossibility of separating themselves from that past trauma.

Boy and Girl’s seclusion, however, unlike the one the Sheperdian family find themselves trapped in, appears to be self-imposed. They live in a content isolated microcosm, while the outside world is connected to pain and physical transformation: Girl giving birth, and Boy’s memories of being attacked and his arm broken. And while Tilden, Halie, or even Vince seem to be unable to let go of the past filled with failure and loss, the young couple in Albee’s play argue that neither event has left any scars on them, as Girl emphatically announces: “They say you can’t remember pain” (3). They are situated in a quasi-preliminal sphere where familial, social, or economic considerations do not really concern them:

GIRL Do we have in-laws we don't know about?

BOY Not that I know of. (25)

GIRL Have we rented out rooms?

BOY I don't believe so. (25)

They are solely focused on each other, ignoring the outside that bears pain. Thus they do not venture into the hostile world, rather they remain within their own playing field defining their subjectivities in relation to each other. For Boy being “hard all the time” or getting aroused confers a sense of self, while Girl is entirely defined within the male gaze. She represents Boy’s “destination,” his “moon and sun,” his “goal” (17). He does not think of her in terms of subjectivity, but perceives her as a body and an ideal. His very first memory of Girl casts her in such an objectified position: she was unconscious, taken to the hospital where Boy had to lie that he was her brother to be allowed to stay with her, which introduces the theme of incest in the discussion of their relationship: “being your brother made it even more intense—made me hard” (20), Boy confesses, subverting the clear-cut normative system through entering the realm of taboo, a sphere so carefully guarded from intrusion in *Buried Child*. He “keeps wondering off the straight and narrow [procreation-oriented heterosexual path] into the side paths of perversion” (Gross 125) that problematizes the seemingly ruling phallic order in which they exist. Perversion thus proves something existing within the norm (Gross 126), an anti-model in opposition to which the “normal” can be defined and sustained, the grotesque and scandalous that, according to Turner, surfaces in liminal periods as the embodiment of what is to be avoided and eliminated from the structure. The incest that Tilden and Halie committed and the fruit of this deviant relationship, the child that Dodge slays suspends the family in the realm of liminality; but Boy and Girl remain within the normative system. Their perception of themselves and each other is limited by the laws of the “normal,” perversion surfacing as imagined and fancied but not acted upon. Though Girl objects, “I don’t think I *like* being thought of as a destination, by the way” (emphasis in the orig., 19), she accepts this position because the only sense of self she has is provided by her being the object of desire and the source of nourishment.

Their delimited view is also projected upon others. Throughout the first act, Man and Woman slip out of their field of interest. As they intrude into the young couple’s microcosm, Girl—due to her position as the “archetypal mother”—displays a subconscious sense of threat and danger: “Who is that *man*! Why are there so many strange people around here?”

(emphasis in the orig., 24); “[They have come] [t]o *hurt* us? To injure us beyond salvation?” (emphasis in the orig., 26). But through this she only creates for Boy the opportunity to put on yet another stereotypically male mask, that of the protector. “I’ll guard you; I’ll guard the baby” (26), he promises, but proves a naïve guardian when he disregards any danger with the confidence and ignorance of the young: “Aren’t we too young?” (26).

Boy and Girl, however, are prone to enter a more conscious state of existence. Albee’s works always emphasize “the importance of being open to a full consciousness of life” (MacFauhen 74), and in *The Play about the Baby* the appearance of the older couple—“milder versions of George and Martha” (Brustein 28)—brings about the beginning of the youngsters’ psychological, intellectual, and emotional torments and initiation. Man and Woman openly confess at the end of the first act that “We’ve come to take the baby” (33), and force the younger couple to face the instability of any cultural construct, including identity, gender-roles, language, the entire phallic symbolic order they have taken for granted and unquestionable so far. They need to become aware of the permanent presence of absence, like the family in *Buried Child* have been for the last thirty years, they need to experience loss and develop a nostalgic desire and melancholy for a centered and wholesome order, the Imaginary.

The play combines and confuses tenses and time, it merges past and present. While the characters in *Buried Child* all seem to be haunted by a past that they either idealize or are trying to repress, Man’s rhetoric question, “If you have no wounds, how can you know you’re alive? How can you know who you are?” (57) reads as an ironic trick. In Shepard’s play the “wounds” of the past continuously push themselves into the foreground and define the present of their bearers as eternal liminality, the ritual Man and Woman initiate is meant to educate their initiands about “what we cannot do; what we cannot be” (50), about the utter resistance of the subject to be fixed. For these ritual elders create their identities through unreliable and openly questioned narratives, just as Halie, the monstrous Other does. They function as storytellers and entertainers, acting out one of the most common of tricks: the disappearance act, symbolically mirroring the vanishing of Boy’s and Girl’s illusions of an anchored self. The play builds on the conventions of vaudeville routines “in which a male magician and his comely female assistant continue a running dialogue” of “obfuscations, digressions, dead-end stories, rapid questioning” (Ben-Zvi 192, 194) with the youngsters as well as with each other.

They seem grotesque duplicates of George and Martha, and older versions of Boy and Girl.³⁵ Their appearance propels the young couple out of the comfort of an unquestioned order in which they have isolated themselves. Until they face the explicit threat of losing the baby, however, they remain “blind and deaf” towards the “ritual elders’” instructions. Even though occasionally they ask Man and Woman who they are, they stay uninterested, never waiting for or even expecting an answer. They locate Man and Woman within the sphere of the Other, like the errant Gypsies “associated with role-playing, sexual license, and . . . the criminal subculture” (Gross 130).

Gypsies belong to the outside world, they would “scam people out of their money” and steal babies either to sell or to “eat” them (24), a reference to mythic stories of the offspring sacrificed for the prosperity of the older generation, a ritual that proves inefficient in the case of the family in *Buried Child*. This realm of mythic chaos is to be feared and avoided, for Boy and Girl Gypsies represent the deviant from what they perceive as “normal.” Such groups Turner defines as “outsiders,” a term that refers to “the condition of being either permanently and by ascription set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system, or being situationally or temporarily set apart, or voluntarily setting oneself apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of that system” (*Dramas* 232). Donald Weber draws attention to the problematic nature of Turner’s definition of “outsiders,” in today’s terminology referred to as “border” groups, claiming that such entities and their resistance to incorporation startled Turner and make his work today seem utopian (530). Weber, however, also emphasizes that American cultural studies, and on a larger scale, “border” studies are much indebted to Turner’s legacy for the border—similarly to liminality—is characterized by ambiguity and multiplied selves where identity incorporates both aspects of being the observer and the observed at once.³⁶

In *The Play about the Baby*, Gypsies display this kind of “border” or “outsider” nature, they are described by Boy and Girl as strange, different, eluding and defying the symbolic order, embodying the realm of the Imaginary always threatening the normative with eruption and chaos. They are keen observers of those who stare at them (they are able to

³⁵ The “trick” of having differently aged versions of one character on stage is also employed by Albee in *Three Tall Women*, where in the second act B and C—yet again characters identified in generic terms, and also involved in the ritual process of A’s dying—become younger embodiments of A.

³⁶ Dodge proves a good example of such a border figure for, throughout the play, he functions as the object of all the other characters’ attention but also as a keen observer and ironic commentator of those around him and of himself.

predict the future and trick others out of their possessions). The awareness of being observed and thus “read” confers upon Boy and Girl a sense of discomfort and terror for being exposed to the will and whims of those in control of the gaze, a condition identified by Turner as key feature of the neophyte position. Being the object of observation and of the scams Gypsies would play upon “assholes” (22) terrifies the youngsters. For Gypsies elude categorization, they inhabit a world beyond perceptual and conceptional categories, a sphere that materializes in the intruding Man and Woman.

They barge into the un contemplated acceptance of the status quo as an eruption of a subversive power meant to showcase the constructed nature and modus operandi of Boy and Girl’s symbolic system and its lack of inherent and self-contained reality. They keep delivering liminal “lectures” and instructions, cautioning the young: “Don’t just stand there with your mouths open! Learn something” (30, 51). Man immediately assumes the role of the master of ceremonies to whom Woman turns for instructions and validation, theatrically directing the others and transforming the performance into a quasi-imitation of itself as if it were a rehearsal. And when none of these seem to work, he shocks Boy and Girl into paying attention by threatening to dispossess them of their external objectified mirror image, the baby. Boy and Girl are gradually stripped of the roles and masks they have been putting on, made to listen and to become silent: they lose language, they “narrow down to monosyllables (except for the word ‘baby’)” (Cohn 227). Symbolically this deconstruction of their discourse represents the inappropriacy and incapacity of language—the depository and carrier of the symbolic order—to confer meaning in a world devoid of the illusion of a fixed center and clear-cut divisions between the imaginary and the real.³⁷ It also becomes suggestive of their liminal status: within the liminal process, neophytes are to listen to the instructions delivered in a sphere where language is perceived as a means of symbolic actions, therefore dangerous and threatening as well.

The major trick, Linda Ben-Zvi suggests, is not the disappearance of the baby, but Man and Woman making Boy and Girl deny that they ever had a baby (194). Achieving this is essential for the youngsters’ liminal instruction. To really make them able to absorb the lessons Man and Woman are about to teach them, they need to be divested of all their insignia, prior knowledge, convictions, and earlier senses of self. The older couple gradually displace the other, a reverse process in comparison to *Buried Child* where the attempted

³⁷ Ruby Cohn’s study offers an insightful analysis of the repetitious and metatheatrical character of *The Play about the Baby* with a focus on its linguistic and metalinguistic features.

rituals of separation take place with the younger generation taking on the roles and positions of the older. Man and Woman force their neophytes to stare into a Lacanian symbolic mirror turned flesh in this sarcastic pair of ritual elders. Boy and Girl can now perceive and observe themselves from an external position as their older counterparts re-enact their former conversations, appropriate their words, stories, memories, even their baby. The initiands themselves are equated thus with the feared group of outsiders, the Gypsies.

Man and Woman prove strict and severe instructors, and at the same time, hilariously funny and sarcastic observers of themselves, the young couple, and their condition, while also commenting on the observation process itself. They educate Boy and Girl—and the audience—in a new way of seeing and observing and the possibilities offered by their liminal position that incorporates, according to Turner, both the state of being observed and the one who observes. As neophytes in a ritual process, the youngsters lose all their differentiating marks. Boy's power and control position—assumed within and guaranteed by the phallic order he has imposed upon the “household”—proves too weak to withstand Man and Woman's torturous instructions. He even lacks the physical force to play the role of the “father” as “protector,” thus as neophytes are expected to, he becomes a passive sufferer of the tortures—physical, emotional, and spiritual—that he is subjected to. He is also stripped of his sexuality and masculinity: the symbolic emasculation that threatened him in the past is transformed into actuality. Both Man and Woman turn his own attitude of objectifying the desired body upon and against him.³⁸ His final defeat comes, however, from Girl who is pushed to such a level of confusion and terror that she becomes the one to actually “castrate” Boy through her words: “He doesn't have one [penis]! She [Woman] couldn't have seen it because he doesn't have one! So there!” (48). Such a turn in the attitude of the object of his desire, of his “destination,” shatters the normative system already problematized by the outsiders, from the inside, robbing it of its symbolic center—the “phallus”—and of the illusion of its fixity and consistency. Girl thus becomes the representation of the female subversive power that Halie and Shelly embody in *Buried Child*, and Woman, the grand master of parody, demonstrates through her continuous role-reversals and transformations.

Consistent with Turner's description of liminality as the sphere of ludic experimentation with roles and demonstrations of grotesque combinations in order to flesh out

³⁸ Woman identifies Boy with the young polo player who “was a splendid lover, though . . . slow, patient, thoughtful, but always in command and driving” (47), but whom she did not love, only desired (48); Man also refers to Boy as his lover accusing him of sending a letter telling about the marriage to Girl as only “a show” (47).

both the limitations and the possibilities inherent to the normative structure, Man and Woman's fast-paced and confusing role-swaps and the games they play aim to push out of balance the youngsters' universe. These all build into a lesson on loss and on the instability of any and all human constructs, "[e]verything being relative . . ." (32, 36) as Man ironically stresses. They demonstrate how easily and rapidly one can shift identities, even gender or skin-color, all being matters of perception and interpretation rather than permanent markers. Boy and Girl are to grasp, acknowledge, and testify to the fact so difficult to comprehend, therefore ritualized, and so easily denied through the comfort of illusions: that everything surrounding them and within them originates in the mind, and consists of social and cultural models manifest in language that can itself be misused, misinterpreted, deconstructed, and/or lost. Man and Woman's linguistic tour de force of juggling sentences and speeches, fiddling with pronouns and adjectives, shifting styles and moods, correcting each other and commenting on each other's performances, or musing about the origin of words and expressions, questions both the origin of language and the workings of signification:

MAN . . . Goodness, I'm saying "good" a lot, *aren't* I?

WOMAN (*Shrugs*) It *sounds* right.

MAN Good! (*to BOY and GIRL*) So! No more shenanigans. (*Out.*) Is that Irish?

Shenanigans? (*If anyone answers, handle it; in any event, go on with this.*) I looked it up once in the dictionary and it didn't say; it said "informal," which I don't believe is a genesis. Though maybe it is . . . the island of informality? The city of shenanigans? I meant to look it up somewhere else, but I . . . lost interest, I guess. (ellipsis and emphasis in the orig., 41)

Man and Woman as "the masters of linguistic torture" who use "language as a weapon of assault" (Gross 124) introduce the young couple into the use of Turner's "special liminal vocabulary" ("Variations" 37) that in *The Play about the Baby* manifests in a dismembering of normative linguistic units. Boy and Girl are forced to reassess the truth-value of any one story, the meaning and signifying power of words, and ownership as well as authorship of the narratives about their personal pasts as the elders' "repetitions take the statements we were given by Boy and Girl . . . and work so many variations on them that they are progressively drained of their pretensions to sense" (Gross 127). The questioning of memories and their validity that also characterizes the recollections of Halie, Tilden, Vince, and even Dodge, in the case of Boy and Girl means that all their stories are right out contradicted, stopped, and

reduced to lines, words, until even their solely uttered “Yes”-es gradually transform into “No”-s, only Girl’s howled birthing sound and their pauses remaining unchallenged.

Throughout the play the highly articulate “ritual elders” remain self-conscious and consistent in their roles of “instructors,” who perfectly fit Turner’s description of liminal personae meant to deliver the “sacred knowledge.” They pick up composing elements of different cultural, social, and familial subject positions and recompose them into strange and shocking images, split from the “normal” or normative context. They manifest themselves as true transformation artists, while beneath the masks they represent the void, the symbolic mirror that reflects everybody thus nobody in particular. “She [Woman] looks like a lot of people” (15), Boy asserts. The difficulty of categorizing or defining Man and Woman lies in their elusiveness within a system and language they are continuously deconstructing and within conventions and stereotypes they are consistently undermining and subverting. In this liminal sphere “[a]ctuality . . . gives way to possibility” (Turner, “Variations” 40), the ludic opportunities of which Halie and Shelly exploit to the full, while Man and Woman utilize them to piece together all possible configurations of subjectivity as well as their opposites, as with them everything turns into its negative, into absence. They define themselves in every role as the “being not.” Their behavior, attitude, discourse inscribe them in the realm of liminality and the Imaginary: a sphere of work that is also characterized by the playful, by experimentation, that Turner calls “an orchestration of many genres, styles, moods, atmospheres” (“Variations” 40). They move from “prescribed, formal, stereotyped action to free play of inventiveness including symbols in all the sensory codes” (Turner, “Variations” 40), as the play turns into a rollercoaster ride of emotions and atmospheres with a wide variation of genres from ironic lecturing to lyric romanticizing mixed with down-to-earth neutral prose, harsh sarcasm, even singing. Man and Woman shift through different moods and styles of speech from the humor of vaudeville to the theatrically tragic and melodramatic, to the hilariously comic, just like Halie does when her changes of costume also bring about changes in her discourse and attitude.

Prior to this initiation process, Boy and Girl’s senses are numbed towards things external to their limited universe, unable to “play,” to experiment in this ludic sense, as the family in *Buried Child* are towards the multivocality and polarization of the dominant symbols such as the garden, the crops, or the buried child deemed a taboo. According to Grimes, however, “rites are repositories of knowledge—on a sensory level as well” (344), and Man and Woman prove efficacious instructors also in this area. They are conscious of the importance of perceiving oneself and one’s surroundings through all the senses. Man’s

entrance line, “Ah . . . young smell” (7), his story of having played blind in the museum, Woman’s recollections of “The Painter,” all emphasize the fine details of sensory perception. Taste is also involved in the creation of a full experience. The several references to mother’s milk and the youngsters’ descriptions of their sexual encounters are built on the recollection of such sensuous and sensory experiences: “GIRL When you let me lick your armpits I almost faint, I really do” (4); “BOY (*Recalling, eyes closed, perhaps?*) It’s all jungle as you approach—well, as you imagine it: warm, warmer, moist” (10); “BOY . . . lovely, curving slopes, almost twins. You go between them; there’s moisture there; you breath; you press your ears gently between them and it’s the sound of giant seashells” (11). Now they need to learn how to extend this type of sensual receptivity toward the world around them, a “reality” constructed from sensual impulses and their mental abstractions flashed out as such in phases of liminality.

Within the liminal process initiands are also considered to be neither dead nor alive, and both dead and alive at the same time. In *The Play about the Baby Girl* embodies this feature of the neophyte for we are told that she was drawn into the relationship with Boy and his phallic order while being unconscious, not dead, but neither alive in the sense of Man’s insistence of “keep[ing] awake” (34). She has remained in this in-between position being perceived as an object rather than an active agent in shaping her own path. Additionally, neophytes are also often referred to as newborns or sucklings. The description fits Boy who relies on Girl for comfort and reassurance of his manliness. He thus becomes a duplicate, a reversed mirror image of the baby, himself subverting “the law of the father.” Such a bipolar perception of liminal personae is also embodied in the male characters of Shepard’s play, Dodge being situated between life and death, while all the men being reduced to the helplessness of children when in company of the domineering mother, a role alternately picked up by Halie and Shelly.

Initiands, Turner asserts, are subjected to tests and faced with riddles which they necessarily fail at (a liminal process that Dodge conducts and Vince submits to); therefore, they are ridiculed and made fun of. Man and Woman’s presence already poses a question and problem impossible to answer or solve. Their existence is made up of bits and pieces of appropriated roles, personalities, stolen memories and non-sense word-play that just barely cover up the absence beneath these masks. Their purpose, like that of Gypsies who “valorize the wounds inflicted by loss as foundation of self . . . [thus becoming] benefactors” (Gross 131), consists in making Boy and Girl aware of this void and to prepare them to acknowledge it within themselves, without disappearing.

Overlapping with the deconstruction of normative subject positions, liminality is also characterized by an emphatic process of instruction and preparation of the initiands for the future status they are to fill, through verbal and non-verbal symbolic means. The riddles that Boy and Girl face constitute part of this educational process. In answering the first on Man's and Woman's identity they fail as they misinterpret the riddle itself—just like Vince misinterprets the dominant symbols shown to him, and misses the role-demonstrations the other males in the family unconsciously deliver. They try to decode it in conformity with the dichotomies and laws of the phallic order they accept as the unique referential frame. When faced with the same question turned upon them, they lose the confidence that they seemed to possess while still convinced of the stability of their subject positions and of the rules governing their world. The loss of such a centered and seemingly fixed order makes Boy and Girl unable to answer questions such as “who are you” because identity has revealed itself as a process in continuous renewal, something Vince faces once in the attitude of his relatives towards him, and later in his own face “dissolving in the windshield.”

The non-verbal means of education, the modes of behavior of Man and Woman and the “sacred objects” shown to the initiands, monstrous and sacred at the same time, function as dominant symbols cumulating several layers of meaning, and as Lacanian mirrors reflecting the constructed and perishable nature of the young couple's whole microcosm. They all nullify Boy and Girl's earlier sensations, beliefs, convictions; they are symbolic items that “cease to exist” or are symbolically displaced and discarded like the corn and carrots Tilden carries on stage in *Buried Child*.

The “golden dick” Man boasts of having touched twice, represents manliness, virility, and fertility, in conformity with the laws of the phallic order, wholeness, centrality, and stability. This engendered symbolic object, the “famous bronze sculpture of the wild boar” (18) is subverted through doubling: the “original” in Florence, a copy in London, problematic itself as it can be found in an exhibit set up for the blind. At the same time, its validity and authenticity as the center are questioned by Man himself who wonders whether women also “touch it? Have touched it for centuries, at night, perhaps, in the dark” (18). The dominant symbol of the masculine rule annihilates itself: it symbolizes women's subversive desire to gain power and control stereotypically associated with the male subject, as well as women's ability to escape and go “under the radar” of such a phallic system.

The female's deconstructive power also becomes evident in the instructions Man and Woman direct towards Girl. All her stories and experiences are taken over by the elders and re-told with fine twists in content and ironic overtones. She needs to step out of her comfort

zone, the objectifying male gaze, and Woman's stories about the polo player (elements of which later are transformed and transposed onto Boy) and "The Painter" deliver the lessons to be learned. They illustrate how the female desire can and does also objectify the male, proving that the objectifying gaze does not solely and necessarily belong to men. The story about the painter demonstrates the weakness, even inability of the male to exist without the object of his desire that would mirror his image and validate his existence.

Girl's instructions also incorporate lessons on parenting. She is the "mother," a role that spills over onto her relationship with Boy as well. Through the baby she gains another external gaze and desire (a duplicate and also duplicated by Boy) that contour her. By taking away the baby and making her repudiate its ever having existed, she is forced to acknowledge the lack of any means of anchoring her identity. Having children cannot and should not define who one is, and children do not function as repositories of one's sense of self, a thesis also demonstrated by Man's story of his six multi-colored children.

The old Gypsy woman foretelling her future has induced in Girl an initial feeling of danger and a subconscious sense of the existence of the void, of "non-existence," that make her less resistant and more receptive to the liminal instructions than Boy is. Boy's recollections of his past also confer an allusive sense of fear of being emasculated: "what was he going to do . . . piss on me? . . . Maybe he wasn't going to piss on me; maybe he was going to . . ." (ellipsis in the orig., 6). This fleeting sense, however, is marginalized by his own control position and the continuous reassurance he receives from Girl. Through every story Man and Woman tell and/or re-tell more and more of his power and confidence is lost. Boy—similarly to Girl, and Vince in *Buried Child*—is forced to stair into the void uncovered after all his illusions are shattered and every symbolic mirror reflecting his desires and needs is transformed into a monstrous looking glass into nothing, like for example the baby, double of Boy and Girl's union and an "absent presence . . . endowed with a powerful symbolic valence" (Drukman 16).

Terry Eagleton claims that "there are times when something must be dismembered in order to be renewed . . . [f]or change to take root we must divest ourselves to our current identities staked as they are on a false situation, and this demands a painful process of self-abandonment" (275). Initiation into a new state of existence then requires the sacrifice of something that so far has been considered a defining element of one's imagined self. *The Play*

about the Baby—similarly to *Buried Child*—operates with the baby as the sacrificial victim.³⁹ The idea first surfaces in Boy and Girl’s discussion about Gypsies, just to be transformed into an actuality with the appearance of the older couple. Man and Woman rid the young couple of their routine of identifying themselves within the limitations of the prototypical, normative nuclear family. Man himself appropriates the role of being the baby’s parent, describing it—like all the other roles he plays—in the negative, stating what he did not do:

MAN . . . When I took my baby to the Gypsies, *I* was smart; when they told me to put the baby in a big paper bag, I didn’t *do* it.

GIRL (*weeping*) No! I *didn’t*!

WOMAN (*to MAN*) Of *course* you didn’t!

MAN (*still to GIRL*) I didn’t put it on the table, between me and the Gypsy . . . I didn’t see the lights go all funny, and hear the music . . . And I didn’t take the bag and bury it in the back yard for three weeks, so the baby could double or whatever.

WOMAN (*out*) Twins! (emphasis in the orig., 55)

The idea of doubling and twins stresses the exchangeability of identities, the fact that not even biological or bodily features anchor the self into an unquestionable reality.⁴⁰

Although Man emphatically denies having buried the child—unlike Dodge—the babies in both plays become key symbols of their parents’ states. Boy begs Man: “I can take pain and loss and all the rest *later*; I *think* I can—we can—when it comes as natural as . . . sleep? But . . . now? Not now. We’re happy; we love each other; I’m hard all the time; we have a baby; we don’t even understand each other yet. So give us some time. (*Pause.*) Please” (ellipsis and emphasis in the orig., 56). But Man—echoing the Gypsy woman in Girl’s earlier recollection—declares prophetically that “Time’s up” (56). Loss should be considered something natural and inherent to life like sleep, but lived through consciously. And while the

³⁹ The child as victim appears as a recurring theme in Albee’s plays. Nesteruk, discussing the interfaces of ritual and drama, looks at *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, arguing that “the sacrificial other in the text is the imaginary child” (46). George’s violent provocation of Martha taking on “a sacralized ritual form intended to ‘cleanse’ Martha of her reliance upon delusion or masks” (Nesteruk 45) represents a process that in Roudané’s reading takes on the aspects of Girard’s “sacrificial crisis” in which unity and order is reasserted by the destruction of a scapegoat, a “designated other” (Nesteruk 45).

⁴⁰ The motif of twins is another reoccurring image in Albee’s works: *The American Dream*; *Me, Myself, and I* where even the names of the twins are identical: otto and OTTO.

family in *Buried Child* all ignore the horrible mirror image that the re-surfacing of the buried child creates, Boy and Girl are forced to start “understanding” that the vanishing of their child mirrors and symbolically embodies in the negative their own “present absence.”

LIMINAL ABSENCE VERSUS LIMINOID PRESENCE

If the baby/babies become the sacrificial Other in the analyzed plays, for audiences the Illinois family and Boy and Girl themselves constitute the mirror images displaying both sacred and monstrous sides of the human condition, the ones who “fall prey to scapegoating” (Girard, *Double* viii). For one more layer may be added to the complex structure of doubling and mirroring shown as characteristic to the plays. Both *Buried Child* and *The Play about the Baby* continuously build up spectator expectations just to subvert them with the next scene, sentence, or word. While demonstrating how rituals can go wrong and liminality can become a perpetual state of existence, Shepard also subverts illusions and presuppositions about the theatrical tradition of realist domestic drama. In *Buried Child* at every turn something happens that defies the real and “normal,” while the observer and interrogator Shelly—the outsider, and alter ego of the audience—is thrown into this situation forced to cope and come to terms with it. Albee explicitly extends the playing field to include the audience. Man’s and Woman’s questions, often addressed to the audience, are not meant to be rhetorical, but direct questions that might prompt a verbal reaction and urge active participation from the spectators.⁴¹ Man and Woman as “living question marks” (Kellaway 41) with their interrogative and subversive presence seem to be “keepers of answers” (Kellaway 41): the messengers of loss, while Dodge and his family appear as embodiments of absence. They do not function as role models, but agents of the two-fold ritual processes created in the plays and by the plays as performances. The youngsters’ (Vince, Shelly, Boy and Girl) initiations are enacted with special emphasis on the liminal phase of the ritual; while acknowledging that the spectator is to “decode the symbolic action” displayed on stage (Amankulor 52), the plays combine self-reflexivity with ironic and sarcastic subversions of realistic/naturalistic drama’s theatrical conventions. The initiation into loss and an awareness of how reality and

⁴¹ This type of direct collaboration and involvement prompted from the audience to be understood not only metaphorically but explicitly also characterizes Albee’s 2008 *Me, Myself, and I* where the spectators are addressed directly, instructed and educated in cultural references implicit and explicit from T. S. Eliot to William Blake, reminded of theatre conventions that are played out, sarcastically examined, and scrutinized on stage, to make the audience realize how automatic their reactions have become.

subjectivity constitute mental and cultural constructs is doubled. It mirrors the process that is meant to engage the audience: a recognition of how, in the theatre, meaning is created as both reality and illusion. The plays shift focus from the liminal state displayed on stage to the liminoid sphere created between performance and spectators changing perspectives in the true ludic manner of such ritual processes.

Woman's frustration about "those creative types" (12) in *The Play about the Baby*, as well as Shelly's desperate attempts to piece together and decode the often non-sense bits of information she is given, may also be interpreted as the frustration of the interpreter trying to approach a work from the traditional perspective of the author, of how "you move your words from your mind to the page" (*Play* 14). Woman's story about the author's unwillingness to reveal himself in the process of writing reads as instructions on an appropriate attitude to reading: focus on the work itself for its "reality" depends on and is created through the perceiver. But in conformity with the plays' playfulness, Shelly's every interpretation of the situation she finds herself in is subverted by the appearance and grotesque behavior of another family member, while Man's response, "Reality determined by our experience of it? Or our sense of experiencing it?" (7) immediately questions and problematizes Woman's interpretative strategy.

"We invent and then we reinvent" (9), slogans Man. The plays set up universes within which the imaginative does not stand in opposition with the real, where "[i]magining is a way of transforming and renewing the real" (Grimes 4). The repetitious patterns characteristic of both plays also further strengthen the ritualistic nature of their actions: for rites to be efficacious, they need to be "driven deeply into the marrow" by "repeated practice and performance" (Grimes 5). At the same time, in concordance with the statement that "ritual knowledge is rendered unforgettable only if it makes serious demands on individuals and communities" (Grimes 6), both plays demand from their audiences and readers active participation not only emotionally, but intellectually, and continuously undermine the possibility of identification, promoting insight rather than empathy.

Theatre, like the ritual process, constitutes a safe frame within which alternatives are temporarily actualized, where opinions and possibilities can be "tried out and carried to extremes" (Schechner, *By Means* xv) without the danger of cancelling out the ordinary. "Reality" is multiplied, different layers are superimposed without invalidating or nullifying each other. Liminality, and by association the liminoid, Turnbull asserts, is not a transitory, in-between state, but rather parallel and superimposed to what man perceives as "normal," and different communities have always developed techniques and methods of moving in and

out of such states, and possibilities of invoking them (80). The theatre—as the liminoid experimentation of *Buried Child* and *The Play about the Baby* demonstrates—makes visible what is invisible, marked by “ludic play and our awareness of it” (Myerhoff, “Transformation” 246). In these literary universes the subjunctive becomes the dominant mood, that of hypothesizing, of fantasy, and desire. “Rituals,” Turner argues, “portray and symbolically resolve archetypal conflicts in abstraction” (“Are There” 10), and the continuous flow of shifting identities of Shepard’s and Albee’s characters subverts the paradigm of one authentic or “real” self, and initiates the audience into an awareness of the processual nature of subjectivity, reality, and any normative structure, even language, the medium of existence of the plays themselves.

As I have shown, the baby in *Buried Child*, multiplied and mirrored by all members of the doomed Illinois family, constitutes a taboo impossible to talk about, it belongs to a realm beyond language, and therefore it necessarily turns flesh. The vanishing of the baby in Albee’s play is similarly inevitable, as by Lacanian definition, it belongs to the Imaginary, unfit for the phallic order of Boy and Girl’s microcosm. Its disappearance becomes the symbolic mirror that reflects the patriarchal symbolic system not as an unchangeable given but as a construct of the creative human mind.⁴² Through its reflexive and continuously self-reflexive process, the play demonstrates loss embodied in Boy and Girl. But it also becomes “speech . . . itself a corporeality” (Gross 129), showcasing the structure and mode of operation of the symbolic order built on passive acceptance of the “phallus”—“golden dick”—that stands for “whole” but disguises the “hole.” Both plays as lectures on and initiations into loss become thus empowering: they instruct their audiences in techniques of transcending the limits of such restrictive orders and demonstrate the workings of subversion turned flesh in both Man/men and Woman/women.

⁴² Gross enlists Albee among such poststructuralist thinkers as Derrida and Lacan for “undermining presence and fetishizing absence” (127).

**TRANSGRESSING THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION:
EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE GOAT, OR WHO IS SYLVIA?*
(NOTES TOWARD A DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY)**

Terry Eagleton's claim that "[t]he sacrificial victim that matters is not a goat or a foreigner, but ourselves" (275) resonates with Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (2002), whose title already suggests the play's use of the figure of the scapegoat while also metalinguistically referring to drama itself, tragedy as a "goat-song." The subtitle added to the printed version, *Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*, explicitly and ironically directs our attention towards this classical genre and sets up a field of expectation based on our prior knowledge of elements and conventions of the tragic that *The Goat* not only displays but also scrutinizes, analyzes, and subverts.⁴³ I propose a reading of Albee's play as a text that, on the level of both content and form, re-actualizes the conventions of ritual and tragedy with the aim of testing them within the context of twenty-first century theatre through the playwright's ludic manner of confronting and ironically de-masking social, political, and moral concepts as mere constructs built through language that itself has proven an elusive and subversive means to communicate meaning. I analyze the Grays' unfolding drama—of transgressing taboos, marital infidelity, father-son confrontation, and betrayed loyalties—as an effacement of their subject positions as processes rather than fixed and stable entities within which "lies the possibility [and threat] of transformation" (Belsey 65), as each of them stand at the precipice of their lives changing forever. I utilize as backgrounds of my interpretation Turner's and Girard's anthropological theories of ritual and drama, merging them with terms, concepts, and assertions of subject theories to show how the protagonists experience liminality as a loss of their positions within the discursive practices of the familial, social, and linguistic structures they belong to. At the same time, my analysis remains conscious of the fact that Albee's innovative, experimental treatment of such building blocks of drama in general and tragedy in particular as the Aristotelian hubris, hamartia, peripeteia, anagnosis, and catharsis, of

⁴³ This subtitle also resonates with T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) that presents quite an elitist and conservative definition of culture as "being, essentially, the incarnation . . . of the religion of a people" (30). But he also speaks of culture as developing organically through "[the] constellation of cultures, the constituents of which, benefiting each other, benefit the whole" (58). The "largely unconscious" (51) cultural unity that results from the "useful diversity" Eliot propagates, suggests his opposition to limitations and rigidly imposed structures that could constitute a further link between his lengthy essay and Albee's text and could serve as fertile ground for further interpretation.

structures resembling rites of passage and initiation, his sharp attack on any prejudices and preconceptions that would limit one's tolerance and openness towards new experiences, as well as his playful and often shocking undercutting and exposure of rigid expectations and automatic reactions move the text beyond the interpretative field framed by these theories.

The three-fold title pre-signals the ludic and metatheatrical mode of the text to follow: While *The Goat* alludes to the text's connection or re-connection with its own past, with the beginnings of tragedy, *Who Is Sylvia?* raises both ontological and epistemological questions to be dealt with in the text. The line's referential status—as a quote from Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (a play that is further quoted in the Albee text)—stresses the previously established connection to the history of drama as a genre and sets the intertextual tone that widens the interpretative field. At the same time, Sylvia as the classic demigoddess of nature, of the forest, involves yet another paradigm to be considered and another set of conventions: the bucolic (a term Stevie, the wife uses in the text) mode and elegiac tone of romantic nature poetry.

The second subtitle, *Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*, enlarges the sphere once more, apparently resisting those “[p]ostmodern critics [who] have sought to do without genre theory” (Cohen 295). As J. Ellen Gainor contends, “Albee has . . . provided, through his three nested titles, clear indicators of greater engagement with the traditions of comedy, tragedy, and the pastoral” (205), arguing that even though this third title might suggest Aristotle's *Poetics* as reference, Albee is less concerned with the structure than with the meaning of the genre (205). She reads the text in light of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, as a play “participating in the ongoing theoretization of tragedy” (206) and interprets Martin, the Ibsenesque “master builder,” as an embodiment of “the Nietzschean dualities of creativity and decadence” (206).

Martin Gray—whose family name already alludes to Turnerian liminality, a betwixt-and-between state, neither black nor white—is a successful architect and husband who has just received the Pritzker Prize, the most valuable award in his profession. He also has a multi-billion dollar contract to design a supermodern city in the wheat fields of Kansas—a project that already signals one of the major themes to be developed: the clash of nature and culture and the dominance of man over his environment. Martin's persona proves torn between the two spheres, his “epiphany,” his affair with Sylvia connecting him with his natural and instinctual self, the animal within him, and the consequences of this same “epiphany” that destroy his social and familial personae and the people around him.

Both Martin and Stevie, his wife, are drawn towards the natural: at the Ibsenesque opening of the play, Stevie is arranging flowers “to brighten up the corner” (8) of the living room where Martin is due to give an interview to the TV show of his best friend Ross. Earlier Martin went to the countryside to look for their own “Utopia,” a spot for their future country house of “greens and steel” as Stevie requested. They share, according to Gainor, “an Edenic reverie of the American pastoral ideal,” while Martin is marked by “a departure from his urban center toward a rural vista that his own professional vision soon thereafter fuses into the ‘dream city’ design” (206).

Martin is about to turn fifty. He notices the first encroaching signs of age: forgetfulness, the loss of his senses—his smell, sight, hearing, inattentiveness, he even worries about having Alzheimer’s (12) and that he is losing his mind. At this point he does not realize that his distress is due to his liminal position. Stevie sets him at ease saying that he forgets things because he has too many things to remember and reassuring him that he is too young for Alzheimer’s. The image of the absent-minded fifty-year old husband and the reassuring, helpful, and housewifey Stevie sets the scene for a comedy of manners, while his seeming confusion and his concern regarding his age as well as a woman’s business card he finds in his pocket and claims not to know who she was point towards a play re-enacting one of the major themes of realist drawing-room comedy: marital infidelity.

Martin’s professional success and the intelligence, wit, and articulateness of both him and Stevie alongside the loving, attentive, and humorous manner they interact with each other seem to preclude the reasons why he should enter a midlife crisis. He phrases his feelings towards Stevie as “[y]ou’re the love of my life, the mother of my handsome and worrisome son, my playmate, my cook, my bottlewasher” (11). But this statement is made as an answer to Stevie’s—in itself a sexually ambiguous name—question referring to her identity: “What’s my name? . . . Who am I? Who am I?” (11)—echoing “Who is Sylvia?”—that pinpoints from the outset of the play the problematic nature of identity, of female identity in particular, as well as the male’s controversial relationship to the female Other and his reliance on it for nourishment, comfort, and propagation, thus survival. Their interactions are governed by their need to continuously construct and maintain the impression of their selves, subjectivity being a function and product of discursive practices that define certain positions one has to occupy in order to be able to affirm one’s identity (Kiss 143).

The couple’s seventeen-year old son Billy, who has told his parents that he is gay, is going through a rough period of sexual self-discovery, but this does not disturb the bliss of the family, the parents being wonderfully liberal about the whole issue of their son’s sexual

orientation. As Elyse Sommer phrases it in her review of the play's New York performance, "Stevie and Martin's twenty-two happy, loving years together differentiate them sharply from Agnes and Tobias [the protagonists of Albee's earlier *A Delicate Balance*] and George and Martha [*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*]. They have a good relationship with their gay son Billy. . . . But they too are crisis prone" ("Edward Albee's *The Goat*" 2).

Martin brings himself and his family to the edge of destruction, testing the limits of their tolerance and love for each other when he confesses his love affair to the family friend, Ross Tuttle, who has come to interview him "at the pinnacle of [his] success" (26). Martin's reaction to this compliment signals an imminent sense of danger and of crisis in the process of erupting and changing the course or direction of the story: "You mean it's all downhill from here" (26). This underlying or lurking sense of doom—as in classical tragedy—has already entered the dialogue when Stevie, listening to Martin's concerns regarding his forgetting things, describes his condition as being "[t]he old foreboding . . . The sense that everything going right is a sure sign that everything's going wrong, of all the awful to come" (10). Their half-mocking, half-serious comments subvert the tone of comedy with which the play begins.

Ross feels compelled and obliged to reveal Martin's secret to Stevie by writing her a letter—a common theatrical device used to intercalate in the dramatic plot a narrative containing pertinent information for motivating further events—disclosing to her the whole shocking affair. Martin has fallen in love and has been having an affair with Sylvia, a goat, an animal whom he saw when searching for a site for the family's future country house. According to Martin, Sylvia has such innocent, pure, and understanding eyes, and looked at him with such an expression that he immediately "melted" (85) and knew they "were going to go to bed together" (85). He cannot and does not want to control his emotions. As he tells Stevie, he went to a self-help group for people in love or having sexual relations with animals, but he left and never went back again because all the others there felt that there was something wrong with them and they needed to be cured. They were unhappy and that made Martin feel unhappy for he was seeking understanding and not help or a cure. The people in the therapy group felt that having sex with animals "was a problem to be overcome, a sickness to be cured of, and he [Martin] realized he didn't feel like that. He felt *great* about Sylvia" (emphasis in the orig., Steyn 57). He expects understanding and acceptance from Stevie and also from Billy. He does not even realize how deeply he has hurt them and how he has irrevocably displaced them from their former subject positions until the point Billy, in a scene of total bewilderment and confusion, tells his father that he loves him despite the "pit" Martin has dug "so deep!, so wide!, so . . . HUGE! . . . we'll all fall in and (*crying now*) and never . . .

be . . . able . . . to . . . climb . . . out . . . again” (ellipsis in the orig., 101), then kisses him on the mouth.

The situation confronting this family pushes them into verbal altercations where words are meant to hurt and into physical violence as Stevie trashes the living room then storms out of the house to return, at the end of the play, covered in blood with the corpse of Sylvia. Ross’s letter that sets in motion the destructive process and unfolds the drama within the family, the cause and physical embodiment of their *peripeteia*, becomes a text of reference read out twice and extensively commented upon. It can be interpreted as a Turnerian ritual object, monstrous and sacred at the same time, shown to neophytes within the liminal phase in order to instruct, the disclosure of Martin’s indiscretion that represents the first stage of Turner’s model of social dramas (resembling in their structure rituals of affliction), the breach that, once the transgression of the taboo is unveiled, erupts into crisis.

Turner’s definition of the liminal phase of rituals that corresponds to the redressive stage of social dramas, concepts that I use in their problem-solving capacities for the specific purpose of interpreting this complex, multivocal, and metatheatrical play, can be linked to the dialectic of creation and deconstruction that permeates the play from Martin’s profession to the different family members’ desperate attempts to define themselves as subjects—“the site of contradiction, and . . . consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis” (Belsey 65). Studying social conflict and the different mechanisms employed in order to avoid, reduce, or resolve conflict, Turner developed and introduced into anthropological terminology the notion of social drama, that exhibits a processual form following a pattern of four stages: (1) a breach that can extend into a (2) crisis followed by (3) different redressive strategies and mechanisms that may lead (4) either to the reintegration of the disturbed group into the social structure or to the recognition of irreparable schism. Parallel to his social theory, Turner also presented a new approach to ritual as symbolic action that is marked by a threefold progression of successive phases.

Martin’s confrontation with Stevie and his dispute with Billy set off by Ross’s incriminating letter—the redressive phase of the Grays’ drama—display features that are defined by Turner as specific for the liminal phase: the stripping of the liminal personae of all their prior roles, masks, or identities. Martin, who enters liminal indefinability once he tells Ross “I have no ego” (34), gradually turns into the unknown Other for both his wife and his son, and Billy’s kiss, that just for a second turns sexual, also emphasizes Martin’s loss of earlier roles as he is perceived by Billy as just another man and no longer as parent.

Both Martin and Stevie dislocate Billy from his so far stable age position, diminishing him into a kid whom they send to his room or out to play. This “shrinking” is later also reproduced by Martin himself who after being referred to by Billy as “great old Dad” (101) and “a big guy” (99)—denominations that allude to Martin’s privileged position within their familial matrix of power relation—describes the transformative process they are undergoing as “I am diminished” (99).⁴⁴

Stevie, who has been defined so far by and within Martin’s gaze and desire, confesses to have been happy within this objectifying position. As she states, she has followed her mother’s advice and has fallen in love carefully, marrying accordingly the one man she has ever wanted. She proves to be a mature, intelligent, and witty woman (similar to several of Albee’s female protagonists like Martha, Agnes, Woman in *The Play about the Baby*, Ann in *Peter and Jerry*, or the Louise Nevelson of the biographical play *Occupant*) who knows her own and Martin’s worth and place in the world and in each other’s lives. She is also aware of the possible “awful to come” (10), of things “that [are] outside the rules” (59), such as premature death, a stroke, falling out of love with each other, or marital infidelity. But she is not prepared for and has never considered bestiality. All of Martin’s attempts to make her understand his feelings and experiences with Sylvia are doomed to failure because these feelings and experiences are outside the norms, therefore there exists no appropriate vocabulary for their description. Also, Martin’s explanations are directed towards the woman he himself perceives merely as the object of his desires rather than a person in her own right, and exactly within this explanatory communicative process he is “diminishing” her into “something so much less,” as Stevie puts it (52). She feels reduced to a level unworthy of her, subhuman. She identifies herself through Martin’s love and desire for her, and the fact that this same male love and desire doubles her with a goat destroys her and “brings her down.”

She is subject to total defenselessness and finds herself in the wholly disempowered position of liminals. Trying to gain some control over the situation through violence, she first realizes that her verbal games and imitations used earlier as expressions and proof of their highly intelligent and loving coexistence have tragically misled her. Her hamartia consists of blind fate in her husband’s loyalty, in the truth-value of language and different types of discourses, and ignorance: when Martin confessed to her that he was having an affair with

⁴⁴ Attila Kiss’ reading of *Cloud 9* in the light of the post-semiotics of the subject and post-colonialism defines as the privileged pole the “Big White Father,” an identity model and subject position that is also dispersed through linguistic clichés (145-46).

Sylvia who is a goat in their Noël Coward imitation, she dismissed it as a joke and laughed about it. She even let her senses be silenced by language: within the linguistic context of a joke, she did not pay any further attention to the funny smell she sensed on Martin's clothes. Therefore, once she reaches the moment of anagnosis by receiving and reading Ross' letter, she transforms her wit and intelligence as well as her articulate and culturally well-informed speech into a weapon, ironically commenting upon Martin's confessions. This proving inefficient, gradually her violence turns physical: she systematically trashes the room hurling pieces of furniture around, remaining totally lucid and eloquent throughout. Her final tragic victory materializes—as in classical tragedies—in the corpse of Sylvia she drags onto stage at the end of scene three. But by this time she herself is destroyed, as Martin answers to Billy's question "What did you do . . . kill her?," "Yes, I think so . . . I think we've killed each other" (ellipsis in the orig., 92). By killing Sylvia, Stevie has destroyed not only a rival but also a mirror image of herself, for as she herself puts it: "She loved you . . . you say. As much as I do" (ellipsis in the orig., 110).

The allusions to death and killing resurface several times and in multiple ways throughout the second and third scenes, emphasizing the Grays' liminal state that posits neophytes as both dead and alive at the same time. Martin's assertion that he and Stevie have "killed each other" also emerges in the metaphor Billy uses to describe their situation that suggests that they are "neither dead nor alive": Martin digging the pit underneath the house from where they will not be able to climb out ever again (101). The image of being buried can also be found in Stevie's desperate speech: "Finish it! Vomit it all up! Puke it 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!" (ellipsis in the orig., 77). Albee in this extraordinarily condensed image of Stevie exposed to male force and malevolence that can and will violate the female and injure her fatally, adds one more layer to the already complex image of the constructed liminal persona. This passage echoes the figure of Rhea Silvia from Roman mythology. According to the legend, Rhea Silvia was a Vestal Virgin to whom Mars, the god of war, was attracted, and who raped her in the forest where she later was buried alive as a standard punishment for Vestal Virgins who transgressed the sexual taboo. Stevie thus becomes a double of Sylvia not only within Martin's desiring gaze but also as equivalent of Rhea Silvia, the woman sacrificed due to the powerful male's breaking of the norms. At the same time, her amazingly plastic plea reads as abjection of her body. Being pushed out of her stable subject position as the unique object of Martin's desire, the image of her body doubled by that of a goat needs to be profaned, mutilated, and destroyed. She now perceives her own

body as a grotesque abject that she must surpass and distance herself from in order to be able to turn herself into a subject again—a state also characteristic of initiands whose bodies are often stripped or masked with grotesque costumes, hidden from sight, tortured, sometimes even mutilated within the process of their liminal training and trials.

The personal disintegration of the three Grays and their liminal position is also mirrored scenically by the destruction of the space they inhabit, which may be interpreted—beyond the re-directioning of Stevie’s erupting violence—as a transformation of their everyday surroundings into a liminal space separated from the area they have known so far as their home. Billy symbolically saves the vase he had given his mother as a gift and later he and Martin do attempt to piece it all together again, but they soon give up. They are aware of the fact that “nothing can ever be put back together! Ever!” (106) and of their solitude. As Martin affirms: “I am alone . . . all . . . alone” (ellipsis in the orig., 108). Something has been lost and broken forever, something or somebody has been sacrificed in their desperate attempts to redeem the transgression.

Liminality also characterizes the play’s linguistic and discursive levels. Ross, for example, functions as a mere dramatic device rather than a fully rounded character. Still, in the Grays’ drama he fulfills the narrative and moralizing role of the classic chorus, structurally a liminal element of tragedy, a betwixt-and-between position, not entirely part of the plot and neither entirely outside of it. His linguistic practices are also saturated with the pseudo-validity of the media and of public opinion. He comes to interview Martin on his professional success, and he is also said to be a friend of both Martin and Stevie’s, who shares with Martin memories of their college years and past infidelities.⁴⁵ During their ultimately failed interview (for Martin proves too absentminded and uninterested to be a good subject for the TV show “People Who Matter”) they recall the reunion where the two of them solicited the services of two girls and Ross cheated on his wife, but Martin—though not married yet, just “seeing” Stevie—was unable to perform. The girl he was supposed to be with was called Alice and they refer to her as “Large Alice”—an obvious intertextual reference to Albee’s *Tiny Alice*. The qualitative adjective added to the name can be interpreted as a cause for

⁴⁵ Gainer contends that the Grays’ long-standing friendship and honest, open relationship with Ross is poorly founded, and she renders Ross as “the embodiment of the superficiality and hypocrisy of a mediatized identity” (211) concerned only for what people would think and how Martin’s career, public image, as well as his reputation would be ruined once the horrible secret was disclosed, the structural device Albee employs to set “the wheels of tragedy in motion” (211).

Martin's sexual misperformance with the girl: "large" implies power and control over the man who thus becomes unable to function being cast in a role inferior to that of the woman and subservient to the female who traditionally, and as shown earlier, even in Martin's concepts, should be serving and nourishing the male ego. The recalled event marks Martin's first "epiphany" when he realized that he loved Stevie and could not be unfaithful to her—a term he uses to describe his meeting with Sylvia (82) thus blurring the division between the two female lovers and consequently displacing Stevie from her former subject position through the mere use of this term.

Martin's decades-long friendship makes Ross position himself as a valid authority to question Martin and insist on hearing about his indiscretion, fixing himself as confidant and later betraying this position. His letter that Stevie reads out loud twice at the beginning of the second scene is commented upon and analyzed not only in its content but also regarding its style: "Let's review Ross's letter, shall we?" (49) Stevie suggests after which she reads the letter stopping from time to time at Martin's sarcastic and ironic remarks: "BULLSHIT" (50), "Tidings? . . . Jesus! Of comfort and joy?" (ellipsis in the orig., 51). The attention they pay to the letter as text shows Albee's deep concern with textuality, with language, and with how people's use of language defines (or perverts) their perception of reality and themselves within a world that proves a construct of words and semantics. For the letter functions as the device of peripeteia and also the strategic element the authoritative Ross uses to exert his power and, according to the logic and morals of the public he represents, undermine Martin's and Stevie's subject positions as nonconformist.

To Martin, Ross's letter represents the ultimate betrayal. He reluctantly confesses his affair to the person he believes is his trustworthy and understanding friend. And as long as the identity of Sylvia is not revealed, Ross proves a keen and inquisitive listener sustaining an air of teasing gaiety and comradeship in their conversation. But once he sees the picture, he is appalled and horrified, and immediately threatens Martin with exposure:

ROSS You have to tell Stevie.

MARTIN I can't! I couldn't do that!

ROSS You have to . . . and if you don't, I will. (ellipsis in the orig., 45)

Martin is deeply offended and feels betrayed by Ross because, disregarding the unwritten rules of friendship and loyalty, Ross has done the unimaginable and sent the letter to Stevie, and because he is conscious of the fact that what he feels for Sylvia and the way he

perceives their relationship cannot be explained or transposed into language. He is first faced with the rejection and unacceptance on the part of Ross who bursts out dismissively when seeing the picture: “(*Huge*) THIS IS A GOAT! YOU’RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT! YOU’RE FUCKING A GOAT!” (emphasis in the orig., 46).⁴⁶ Martin knows that language fails to provide the means to communicate his experiences and that no matter how hard he tried to explain to Stevie who urges him to tell her about his affair and make her understand, his words will not be adequate: “(*Heavy sigh*) Of course, though you won’t understand” (58).

Thus, the second scene—Martin’s confrontation with Stevie and Billy after they have received and read the letter—proves a veritable tour de force of discourses, a process in which the intention to communicate intelligibly as well as the desire to comprehend make the transmitter Martin and the receiver Stevie possible, efficacious, and suitable endpoints of a dialogue. The channel, however, falls short as inappropriate and unsuitable to carry meaning across from one to the other. Several different genres and modes of communication are tested: the written letter, its oral reproduction, the matter-of-fact retelling of the events, emotionally charged recollections in a highly poetical style, all spotted with Stevie’s comments, outbursts, and the rhythmic sounds of breaking decorative objects and turning over furniture.

The development of a special vocabulary—alongside the extensive use of multivocal and polarized symbolism—marks liminality. The Grays’ continuous metalinguistic commentaries, their correcting each other’s speeches or congratulating each other for a good image, metaphor, or appropriate and sophisticated choice of words, like Martin complimenting Billy for calling him a “semanticist” (94), illustrate Turner’s thesis on liminal language.⁴⁷ Martin and Stevie, though at a certain point both wishing the other were “stupid” (84), prove to be highly intelligent and articulate, who even in such a “time of crisis” (49) remain true to their linguistic behavior and eloquence. Stevie cannot bear Martin touching her or even coming close to her, therefore language remains the only sphere where they might still connect. Thus, she demands from Martin that he use a different register than the one he employed when telling the story to Ross: “(*Broad parody*) ‘As I said to Ross . . .’ No! Not ‘As I said to Ross.’ To me! As you say to me!” (ellipsis in the orig., 56).

⁴⁶ Martin’s “But Ross, you don’t under . . .” (ellipsis in the orig., 46) calls to mind *The Zoo Story* where Jerry is confronted with Peter’s “I don’t understand”-s.

⁴⁷ Martin to Billy: “You’re mixing your metaphors” (94); Stevie: “Women in deep woe often mix their metaphors” (77); both Ross and Stevie correct Martin’s recollection of stopping “at the top of the hill” to “crest” (41, 79).

So Martin is struggling to convey a sense of the “epiphany” he has experienced with Sylvia. But his attempts only result in deeper and deeper affliction. Though he tries to sustain his conviction that his actions did not hurt anyone, he proves unaware of the consequences. As John Kuhn suggests, “Martin is the naïve initiate into a religious-sexual mystery well beyond his own understanding” (4). What for the others represents bestiality and the breaking of the one taboo that one is not prepared for, as Stevie complains (58-59), for him means entrance into a powerful mystical dimension. He emphasizes the strange and still natural, unimaginable but still familiar nature of the event. Transgressing the taboo, however, he has stepped into an area abjected by society as radically different, untouchable, and delimited as the sphere of the Other in relation to which the members of the social structure can firmly position themselves as subjects (Kiss 146). No passage and no transition may be allowed because that would destabilize and subvert the existent matrix of power relations and subject positions. This zone enclosed by taboos represents the grotesque, the polluted, the unnatural, a Turnerian liminal space where none of the customary and conventional norms apply. Martin fails in his explanations because, as he himself tells Billy later, they posited themselves “beyond all the rules” (98), thus neither do the rules of communication remain intact. Billy’s concern about how he would now describe their “conventional life” to his schoolmates (101) has become their common worry: they experience the loss of meaningful language, the disintegration of their basic or root narratives. They find themselves in a position where words have lost or shifted significance and where texts only operate in invalidating former ones. The letter that Ross sent in the name of love, though scrutinized and mocked for its pompous and hypocritical tragic style, subverts all the earlier narratives the Grays have been constructing about themselves and the relationships they have with each other (as the tolerant father towards the gay son, the loving couple who know and understand each other perfectly).

Language also demonstrates the ambiguity of the Grays’ liminal state, their bewilderment due to the loss of their former subject positions. Throughout the play, Albee includes slang expressions into the characters’ emotionally charged and highly sophisticated discourse: Martin—referring back to Ross’ calling him “old man” as “a term of endearment” (18)—first asks his friend “How’s old *Todd*!?” (emphasis in the orig., 20), Todd being Ross’ eighteen-year-old son, and then boasts about his own seventeen-year-old “[r]eal cute kid, Billy, bright as you’d ever want, gay as the nineties” (21). Ross’ flowery style also often turns less ambitious when discussing Martin’s indiscretion: “amazing theory: the heart rules the dick” (38), “how did you fuck it up?” (39), and then bursting out with indignation, “YOU’RE FUCKING A GOAT!” (emphasis in the orig., 46). Stevie, while quoting Ross’ letter,

continuously comments upon it with sarcasm: “He does get flowery, doesn’t he!” (50), “You will of course be shocked and greatly distressed . . .’ No kidding” (ellipsis in the orig., 51), “. . . as I’m sure you’d rather hear it all from a dear friend . . .’ As opposed to what! The ASPCA?!”; while Martin calls the letter right out “BULLSHIT!” (ellipsis and emphasis in the orig., 50). The father-son relationship is also permeated with verbal attacks and name-calling: Billy’s outburst “goat fucker” (48) is met by Martin’s calling his “kid” son a “fucking faggot” (48), this tapestry of mixed registers leading to the realization that language has become useless and devoid of sense, ironically illustrated by Stevie’s reaction to Martin’s confession of his love for her: “La-di-da; la-di-fuckin’-da!” (75).

The juxtaposition of the high English of this well-educated circle of people (with their intertextual references and allusions to central texts and modes of Western civilization such as Stevie’s sarcastic remark to Martin’s description of his meeting with Sylvia “a regular bucolic” [79], her quoting Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and her ironic answer to Billy’s question whether Martin is beating her, “[w]e’re redecorating, honey” [83]) with their morphologic and syntactic enquiries into the very language they are using (like, for example, the discussion on the plural form of the word “ranunculus” [18]) shot through with slang serves a double function. First, this mixing of registers—vulgar and even pornographic with the highly sophisticated style and manner in which they normally would converse, with cultural and literary references included cleverly for the sake of entertaining each other but also of proving their refinement and intelligence—illustrates their emotional and spiritual distress and breakdown, a departure from the institutionalized and normative discursive practices of their society. Second, it subverts reader anticipation for a “readerly” text (as per Barthes) that—as seems to be suggested in the subtitle, *Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*—would re-actualize the high literariness of this ancient genre.

The Grays’ shift away from possible cultural and familial identities and from the range of meaningful discourses leads to their contradictory and perplexing state: the immediate and vital need to communicate when language has failed them. Action, movement, gesture will not do either for their physical relationship is irrevocably compromised once Stevie realizes that her husband has been “bedding” both her and the goat. Thus she leaves. Albee here also reaches back to a classical element of tragedy: death off-stage, allowing Stevie to bring the remains of Sylvia, her rival on stage as a trophy.

So who then is Sylvia?—a question posed again and again in *The Goat*. Is the sacrificial victim the goat Stevie drags onto the stage, does it, or rather she, represent the twenty-first century version of the traditional scapegoat defined as the symbolic bearer of the

sins of the people, the one blamed and punished for the mistakes of the others in several myths as in the Bible where it is a live goat over whose head Aaron confessed all the sins of the children of Israel on the day of Atonement, who then was sent into the wilderness? Does the killing of Sylvia embody the sacrificial ritual that so often constitutes a defining structural element and a transformative device in Albee's work—from *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to *The Play about the Baby*; *Me, Myself, and I*; and *Peter and Jerry*?

Eagleton points out that the scapegoat that can perform this function efficaciously “is not a goat . . . but ourselves” (275), while Albee in an interview published around the time of *The Goat*'s opening on Broadway insisted that Sylvia, the goat in the play is not a scapegoat: “I chose the title . . . because I wanted a double goat. There's a real goat and also a person [or persons] who becomes a scapegoat” (Drukman 110). It seems obvious and logical to have Sylvia, the goat, play the role of the sacrificial victim who would take upon itself all the sins and thus transpose the previously so fragmented and tormented human characters into a new state, a new sense of identity, and offer them the possibility of experiencing the transcendental. But Albee does not let audiences or readers off the hook so easily. In that same interview he also contends, “[*The Goat*] is a play that seems to be one thing at the beginning, but the chasm opens as we go further into it” (Drukman 110), whereas in a later interview he remarks that some audience members felt offended by the play and walked out during the performance. The playwright confessed that “[i]t's kind of thrilling when that happens (and in the United States it's usually with older white couples) but we authors do not intentionally provoke it. We desire to engage, to upset, to trouble, but we want people to stay around till the end—to see if they were right in wanting to leave” (*Stretching* 262). Albee wants to affect so that even if the sacrifice made on stage does not impress the gods, even if Sylvia cannot perform the role of the scapegoat, catharsis may still be achieved. *The Goat* deprives its audiences and readers of their traditional comfortable “readerly” positions (Barthes) and may bring about in those willing to be provoked and to put in the effort a metamorphosed catharsis that, Albee argues, has been moved out of the immediate theatrical experience (*Stretching* 80).

Tragedy in general, and Albee's play in particular, creates a crisis, a boundary situation, a “moment of rupture” (Maffesoli 133) when characters come up against limits and are trapped in a tragic circle the transcendence of which becomes only possible through the recreation and re-enactment of certain rituals. Drama as a rite of passage could create the possibility for both characters and audiences to witness and experience such situations, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual states, and to participate in such processes that in

everyday life, outside the liminoid sphere of the theatre, in our post-ritual age seem outdated, perhaps, but prove to be indispensable for re-establishing a sense of subjectivity and for the avoidance of violence.

Rituals always presuppose some kind of offering. According to Girard, rites reinstate order and redirect violence towards victims who do not pose the danger of being revenged. These figures designed to perform the role of the scapegoat are infiltrated between the erupting violence and a still valuable member of society (vii-xvi), saving thus the community from both the endless circle of revenge and loss. In *The Goat* Stevie tells her husband several times: "I will kill you" (61, 65, 74). But she does not and will not. She storms out of the house, and kills the goat, Martin's lover. In a sense, Sylvia does fulfill the role of the scapegoat by redirecting violence and serving as a substitute for the much more devastating act of killing Martin. But her sacrificial killing proves insufficient for a return to order. Stevie's last words demonstrate that she has not killed a scapegoat, but a rival. She has performed a ritual but an act of revenge rather than a right of passage. She accuses Martin in the second scene, "you've broken something and it can't be fixed!" (88), uttering the verdict on all of them: "You have brought me down to nothing! (*Accusatory finger right at him [Martin]*) You have brought me down, and, Christ!, I'll bring you down with me!" (89). Their family and marriage, as well as their former sense of self have been damaged beyond repair. Killing Sylvia had a very immediate and acute objective: to destroy the threat, the rival who caused Stevie's loss of subject position due to being identified by Martin with this grotesque and monstrous abject. By eliminating the Other, however, Stevie has also deprived herself of a basis for the construction of a new subjectivity based upon such differentiation.

Albee defined the scapegoat as a real person. In my reading, *The Grays* both as a family and also as individuals embody the tragic victim. Through the external figure of Ross as the representative of social hypocrisy who posits himself in a subject position from where he can speak with the claim of authority, Albee transforms this family drama into fierce social criticism, commenting upon the intolerance and superficiality inherent in society's attitude towards any behavior that is outside its self-constructed and then sanctified rules and norms.

At the same time all three family members carry within themselves elements that cast them in the role of the victim. Martin is singled out for expulsion for transgressing the taboo. For him Sylvia represents purity, innocence, nature incarnate, a divinity. But what for him means the utmost union of man and nature (in an obsessive form that the social system has labeled perverted and damnable, destructive for the community), is perceived by the others as sick, dirty, and disgusting. He is symbolically bearing the burdens for all the acts of love

stamped unnatural—as, for example, homosexuality used to be. Martin represents the ideal and the object of the desires of all those around him: Stevie longs for his love and loyalty, Billy wants his affection and acceptance, even Ross demands his undivided attention. But by falling in love with Sylvia, Martin steps out of the position defined by these desires. More than that, he subverts these desires and acts outside the structure that is familiar and accepted as “normal.” He becomes the dangerous Other capable of destroying this “normalcy.”

Billy may be read as one of Albee’s “sacrificed youths” that so often surface in his plays. He represents the innocent one who is doomed to suffer for the sins of the father. At the same time, he also becomes the protagonist of a perverted Oedipal plot: the kiss that Martin tries to defend as something that could happen to anyone, as an accident, can be interpreted as a subconscious attempt on Billy’s part to displace Martin from his control position, a tentative takeover of power from the patriarch who has become inefficient and dangerous for his people. Billy earlier has also threatened to kill the “pervert” (53), the “goatfucker” (48) if he hurt his mother. But he proves too young and weak, and far too dependent on parental love to be able to replace Martin. As his name—resonating to billy goat—suggests, he also constitutes a side of the figure doomed to fall victim to the Girardian “scapegoating.” Stevie, Albee’s version of Rhea Silvia (the mother of Romulus and Remus, who later were brought up by a she-wolf), in her diminished state of being doubled by an animal, thus deprived of the uniqueness of her subject position with no secured identity outside the individualization matrix by expulsion, reads as a further, third image of the scapegoat Albee creates in the play that grows into a multivocal and complex representation of its title.

The literary characters Albee has written into existence, their narrative of ritual passage and liminal trials, and the conflicts of discourses that unfold within this family challenge our concepts about private and social roles and how these interact in order to determine subjectivity. The play also questions the validity of any knowledge and self-knowledge as well as of any value-system (moral, ethical, or even aesthetic) that would confer upon the shifting modes of perception and existence experienced by the Grays a sense of permanence and certainty. Similarly, both the cultural framework of the family’s universe—one built on the Western heritage, on such dualities as the private and the public, male versus female, nature versus civilization—and the generic framework within which their story is presented are subjected to sharp scrutiny, tested, and found in need of renewal and reassessment.

Albee’s dramatic characters confront the limits of a culture where the individual is torn between the desire of belonging and that of control and independence, both fundamental

human drives leading to the fatal clash, dismissal of illusions, and the loss of a sense of an anchored identity. Their struggle to sustain these illusions also breaks the mold of the genre, transposing this paradigm of transgression onto the metatheatrical level. Elements of classical tragedy merge here with the playfully ironic mode of comedy, the “epistolary” passage and the scholarly close-reading of the letter’s text, the sharp sarcasm of satire, and the heightened lyricism of dramatic soliloquy, ironically undercutting reader expectations.

The transgression of frameworks also characterizes the interpretative level I have presented. Any attempt to fit Albee’s play into a templet runs the risk of being frustrated by the text’s experimental and ludic mode of existence and operation. The Turnerian and Girardian theoretical concepts employed here have proven useful in uncovering different structural levels that manifest features of liminality (the level of the plot, characters, scenic, special, linguistic) and different angles from where the figure of the scapegoat may be grasped within the highly complex and elusive network of relationships and individualization strategies presented by the play, all of which drive the text toward the limits of tragedy and ritual. Albee, however, moves the play beyond the pre-established boundaries that theory offers, forcing the reader, spectator, or analyst to abandon or rethink his/her preconceptions and reassess the concepts resorted to when decoding the text. Turner’s three-fold structure of ritual—that Turner himself considered to be appropriate for describing theatrical processes—appears to be adequate for construing the schism and shift in the characters’ existence. But the open-endedness and lack of dénouement transcends the three-pillar structure leaving the Grays in a permanent state of liminality. Similarly, Girard’s concept of a single scapegoat, the foreigner who is sacrificed in order to save the still indispensable member of the community, appears to serve as a starting point of analysis rather than a comprehensive and exhaustive explanatory tool. *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*) turns into a playful mockery of its own subtitle, subverting the idea of a single scapegoat and dispersing the role of the tragic victim onto all three of the Grays. Albee’s text, thus, destabilizes not only traditional genres but also any interpretation that would try to force this elusive work within the limits of a set theoretical system.

The final phase of an efficacious ritual—or a successfully settled social drama; in Turner’s terms, the reaggregation or reintegration—is replaced in *The Goat* by the acknowledgment of irremediable schism with the Grays suspended in a tableau with shambles of broken furniture, discarded roles, masks, and identities and the corpse of Sylvia. Within this scene, Billy’s “Mom? Dad?” (110), this final feeble attempt to restate the familiar order, echoes into the void.

**GHOST RESISTANT TO BEING LAID:
SAM SHEPARD'S *THE LATE HENRY MOSS***

It's an amazing dilemma when one begins to discover that you are living your life as a somnambulist . . . that you're living your life in a trance, in a dream. When that occurs, there are amazing things that take place. One is despair, and the other is a sudden awakening. There's another way of seeing and Henry Moss realizes that he's in fact dead although he's walking around. But there's nothing you can do about it, there's no alternative, he's a walking deadman, and that's the tragedy.

(Shepard interview in *This So-Called Disaster*)

Trauma and the complex and distorted ways in which the past haunts and defines the present constitute the central issues of Sam Shepard's 2000 *The Late Henry Moss*. By definition, trauma "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). Such a repetitive pattern characterizes Shepard's work: his open-ended and non-linear narratives re-fashion and re-organize central themes, symbols, and archetypes that make up the quintessential landscape of his plays, film-scripts, and short stories: an American West, the frontier—physical, geographical, social, and mental, populated by traumatized males searching for and trying to come to terms with the numbing legacy of their dysfunctional and violent fathers. Shepard's "Indian country," "a foreign and frightening mental and emotional terrain" (deRose 58) seems to have trapped these characters in a Freudian state of "repetition compulsion" (269), unable to assimilate, conceptualize, and lay these "ghosts" of the past.

"That is what great playwrights do," Larry Eilenberg, artistic director of Magic Theatre emphasizes, "they revisit their themes" (Winn E1).⁴⁸ Several critics and reviewers perceived *The Late Henry Moss* merely as a less powerful re-write of many of Shepard's earlier and stronger works such as *True West*, but lacking the intensity of the earlier play's

⁴⁸ San Francisco University professor of theatre Larry Eilenberg was the artistic director of Magic Theatre at the time of *The Late Henry Moss*'s all-star-cast world premier with James Gammon as Henry, Nick Nolte as Earl, Sean Penn as Ray, Woody Harrelson as Taxi, Cheech Marin as Esteban, Sheila Tousey as Conchalla, and Shepard as director. Scenes from the production and rehearsal process as well as interviews with the author-director and cast are available on DVD, *This So-Called Disaster*.

imagery and suspense building.⁴⁹ Undeniably, Shepard revives several hallmarks found in his earlier works, he revisits many of his themes—some autobiographical—and the mythic geography of the American West with its outdated, anachronistic myths of fertile and virile male figures and of fruitful land and its dysfunctional family structures, drunken and violent fathers, and absent mothers.

The Late Henry Moss proves, however, much more than a simple repetition of Shepard's earlier plays. It builds on his 1970 *The Holy Ghostly*'s central character, a ghost named at that time Stanley Moss, and on his short story "See You in My Dreams,"⁵⁰ as well as on Frank O'Connor's story "The Late Henry Conran" (1931).⁵¹ Through this rich intertextual and metatextual tapestry and the "subtly ritualistic nature of the play's action" that mingles the "use of grotesque, mythic archetype[s] with that of ritual and of domestic psychological realism" (Kuharski 502), Shepard creates a Turnerian liminoid and ludic sphere among his own plays and stories as well as other literary works, legends, and myths. He experiments with this highly sophisticated material in order to achieve what he hopes will be "the last play about that [his father's death and, more generally, father-son relationships]" (Shepard interview in *This So-Called*).

⁴⁹ Nina deVinci argues that in *True West*, and implicitly in *The Late Henry Moss* "the two brothers have become abstracts of themselves," and she links these plays to the end-seventies *Buried Child* and *Curse of the Starving Class* through their use of food metaphors. Shewey in an article about Shepard's silence during the 1990s, "Hidden in Plain Sight" affirms that Shepard "could be and was accused of merely recycling familiar obsessions and autobiographical fragments to the point of self-parody" (79) in his 2000 play. Ben Brantley's review of the play's 2001 New York production argues that *The Late Henry Moss* "is crowded with echoes from stronger Shepard works" ("No-Good Dad" E1) while in "Giving Up the Ghost" John Lahr asserts: "At its best, Shepard's work is a kind of verbal and visual jazz which surprises you with its penetrating leaps of associations and its startling voices" (108), but that *The Late Henry Moss* lacks this kind of intensity and novelty both in its images and dialogue. A similar argument appears in Brendan Lemon's 2001 review: "In a great Shepard piece images hit you full on" (13), but this play falls short of expectations.

⁵⁰ The short story, originally written in 1989, published in the 1996 collection of stories *Cruising Paradise*, is set in the same small town as *The Late Henry Moss* and operates with a similar cast of characters and narrative structure.

⁵¹ In O'Connor's short story Henry Conran, the protagonist, after having been locked out of his house by his wife because of his drunkenness, leaves for Chicago where he lives for twenty-five years. From the marriage announcement of one of his sons he learns that he has been pronounced dead, so he returns to Ireland ready to charge his wife with a law suit for "[t]he character ye [Nellie, the wife] took from me [Henry]" (13). The O'Connor story ends with the wife overcome by "pure relief" (19) accepting Henry back into her life and thus back among the living.

Together with critic Paul Taylor, I also hope that “Shepard will persist in his fertile failure to lay his father’s ghost” (12), as his plays continue to reveal and focus on deeper and deeper layers and aspects of archetypal themes. Among these there resurface “the most common of all mythical conflicts” (Vernon 138), the struggle between brothers; the father-son conflict; the question of how past and present fuse into one another in the workings of the human mind. Shepard has always been deeply interested in the ways people construct reality and identity through narratives that seem to have lost any firm and stable foundation except that of the traumas of the past and the tragic violence that results from them—the curse and doom of Shepard’s male characters.⁵² *The Late Henry Moss* picks up the figure of the war-traumatized father incapable of re-integrating into and fitting in the family, re-enacting the violence and brutality he saw and inflicted upon strangers within the home. The non-linear and retrospective plot broken up by flashbacks and doubling continuously shifts focus between the two layers of traumas re-manifested. Earl and Ray Moss try to work through the death of their father and their un-assimilated and un-accounted-for family tragedy twenty-five years earlier. The flashback scenes dramatize the narratives about Henry’s last days before his death and his struggle to invalidate Conchalla’s declaring him dead and his own more and more conscious realization of having lived his life as a walking dead-man.

The play brings both its characters and audiences/readers face to face with “perceptions only half-acknowledged like death” (Gelb 2) through its ritualistic nature that manifests on several levels, prominently focusing on the liminal aspects of the transitory processes represented. Henry Moss’s journeys from being a “Living Man to Ghost Man to Dead Man” (Roudané, “Sam Shepard” 288), a progression of transfigurations that also encompasses another central phase that I will call “Liminal Man.” His sons are subjected to and trapped in an extended liminality facing the difficulty and ultimately their incapacity to

⁵² This fascination with identity-construction is also demonstrated by Shepard’s more than five-decade career throughout which he has been re-inventing and re-shaping his image and personality from being the rebellious teenager who ran away to New York City in the early sixties to become a rock-and-roll star to discovering himself as a playwright and actor to becoming a director and later film star and short story writer. Several books have been published on Shepard’s “identity dance” (Don Shewey’s term) such as Leslie A. Wade’s *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre* (1997), Martin Tucker’s *Sam Shepard* (1992), and Don Shewey’s *Sam Shepard* (1997). The playwright has proven elusive and ambiguous when interviewed as well, trying to sustain an extremely private and secretive existence as a writer and private person, but also being one of the most successful stars of the powerfully image- and publicity-oriented Hollywood film-making industry. In one of the few interviews he has granted, he declared that the idea, the need, and the pressure of coming up with an identity is just as puzzling as it is terrifying (Roudané, “Sam Shepard” 290).

understand and master the past, undergoing the frustrating process of a failed rite of separation and passage with the “ritual elder” lying dead on his bed.

The three Moss males inhabit a liminal space set apart from society and from each other. They are drifters, always on the move and at the extremes. The temporal and spatial universe of the play is defined by a haunting past, dramatically cut off from any future dimension, situated at the margin of the human and natural environment. The older son, Earl comes to Bernalillo, New Mexico from New York where he is “in the packaging business” (25). He makes boxes, a product that in itself has no content, no usefulness, its emptiness epitomizing the life Earl is leading—without a family or any other connections. Ray, the younger brother, arrives from California, the other extreme of the country. Whatever is revealed about him appears in the form of negation: he does not have a family, he does not even own a car, and he has given up “working with his hands” (11). Therefore, he does not take their father’s old tools that Earl offers him as an inheritance, symbolically refusing to take up the legacy.

The two brothers arrive at Henry’s home on the outskirts of Bernalillo, a trailer at the margin of the desert. They embark “on a symbolic homecoming of sorts” (Roudané, “Sam Shepard” 289) that—as usually happens in Shepard’s plays—fails to become a joyful reunion.⁵³ They enter classic Shepard territory, “the wide empty country of the dead father and the absent mother” (daVinci 3). Henry’s trailer represents a doubly liminal setting. It is situated at the edge of a little South-Western town, by the desert. It constitutes Henry Moss’s self-imposed Turnerian “seclusion camp” where he stopped after having beaten his wife to near-death and having left his family, his “personal exile and asylum” (Kuharski 501). His long drive with the car windows open when he gradually lost connection with everything surrounding him meant his isolation from family, society, and natural environment. As he recalls in the flashback scenes, he drove with the wind in his eyes and face, with “no map,” “[n]o destination” (112) till he ran out of gas—an ironic remark as “he ran out on everything” (Roudané, “Sam Shepard” 288): on all his human relationships and contacts. He isolated himself in a trailer with “barred windows,” “like a jail cell” (5). This kind of spatial seclusion is consistent with Henry’s in-between state: dead but not yet buried, within the flashbacks “walking and talking,” “yelling and breathing” (77) but having been declared dead by Conchalla, he becomes caught up in a futile struggle to prove his existence.

⁵³ See, for example, Vince’s homecoming in *Buried Child*, both brothers’ arrival to the mother’s house in LA in *True West*, Eddie’s eternal returns in *Fool for Love*.

His trailer also becomes a liminal space within which the brothers' rite of passage and their mimetic rivalry unfolds. The desert and Henry's hideaway within it become for them—just like the mother's home forty miles from Los Angeles for Lee and Austin in *True West*—the scene of their final confrontation with their father and with each other. It constitutes the site of their struggle to lay to rest not only the ghost of the parent but also the ghost of the past trauma that haunts them and seems to be shaping their lives and their behavior like a kind of *Fatum* or *Hubris* determining the destiny of heroes in ancient Greek tragedy.

For Henry, the desert functions as a seclusion place where he is, at least for a while, spared the pressure of having to validate his existence. The only person he has some kind of relationship with, Esteban, the former drunk perceives the desert with the sound of coyotes and soft music from deep Mexico as the space of peace. Both Henry and Esteban have proven unable to cope with human society and they have chosen to live on the margin only occasionally communicating even with each other. Language has lost its functionality here for the desert “is indifferent and inhuman” (Baudrillard, *America* 6). It is located outside the limits of the human gaze and sound, “outside the sphere and circumference of desire” (Baudrillard, *America* 63).

Esteban flees the desire to belong and experiences a purification from any sense of humanness and temporality. As the “beautiful women” vanished from his life when he was a drunk more than thirty years earlier, back in his “pueblo,” he has now disappeared from society to this place which proves “a natural extension of the inner silence of the body” (Baudrillard, *America* 68) and of time. Esteban represents the materialization of absence: he does not deny his past like Henry Moss does, but his past does not haunt him with a sense of doom that defines Henry's present. He exists in a void and embodies non-presence characterized by imitation, the Baudrillardian “simulacrum”: the imitation of drinking, a pretend-drunkenness that he puts on for Henry's sake, the imitation of womanly care and providing of nourishment in the form of the bowls of soup that he keeps balancing across the stage.⁵⁴

The dramatic quality of the desert, however, surfaces exactly within the Mosses' sensation of a failed existence. In their case, this geography of endless nothingness turns into

⁵⁴ Baudrillard asserts that America itself has been a simulacrum from the beginning as it is the “sudden and unprecedented materialization” of the utopian thoughts of Europe (*America* 79), it builds the real out of ideas and materializes concepts as opposed to the European way of thinking that functions vice versa, conceptualizing reality and drawing ideas from the material environment. Thus, according to Baudrillard, America is the paradox of the “realized utopia” (*America* 79).

a Turnerian liminal space: cut off from familial and social relations, suspended between past and future, that holds both the possibility and the danger of permanently trapping them in its own schema of absence with its lurking sense of non-existence and of identity turning into something fluid and elusive. Baudrillard asserts that “you always have to bring something into the desert to sacrifice, and offer it to the desert as a victim” (*America* 63). The Mosses are forced to sacrifice their sense of self and the secure illusion of an autonomous and stable subjectivity.

The West and the desert for the Shepardian male characters always represent a utopian place of endless and limitless possibilities for drifting and movement rather than for settling down and creativity. Like the sons in *Buried Child* who run towards some undefined westward destination only to realize that changing geographical locations does not automatically sever them from their biologically and genetically determined fate; or the members of the Tate family in *Curse of the Starving Class* who all fantasize about escaping to some exotic land; the brothers in both *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss* prove to be doomed to “wind up on the same desert” (53) as their fathers, as the mother in *True West*, returning from a seclusion of her own, from Alaska, phrases it with sarcastic resignation.

In *True West*, Austin and Lee struggle with each other in their vicious attempts to appropriate each other’s roles, and then against each other for a spot on the endless desert that holds their father and functions as the setting of the “true-to-life Western” of Lee’s script. The 1980 play ends with the haunting image of the two brothers facing each other as if eternally suspended in a postmodern simulacrum of a Western gunfight, clinging to and reciprocally destroying each other like the eagle and cat in the parable concluding *Curse of the Starving Class*. Earl and Ray Moss come to their father’s trailer to bury the dead Henry, and thus they enter both the liminal space of their deceased parent and start a rite of passage of their own. By forcing his brother to “[go] back through the whole story [of Henry’s last days] . . . one more time” (22), and by making him confront and face the long-ago events that led to both Henry’s and Earl’s departure from the family home, Ray opens up the process that could lead to either their redemption and final laying of their ghosts or their inescapable damnation.

The brothers “are stuck in boyhood, dysfunctional in the current jargon” (daVinci 3) for they never grew up to become lovers, husbands, or fathers. Earl declares in the opening line of the play that “I was never one to live in the past” (6) calling to mind Cathy Caruth’s argument regarding the necessary forgetting of all traumatic events: “it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it [trauma] is experienced at all” (17). This rejection of the past is reproduced verbatim in Ray’s closing line: “Well, you know me Earl—I was never one to live

in the past. That never was my deal. You know—You remember how I was” (113), continuing the pattern of repetition. The brothers mirror each other—like the twin brothers in Albee’s 2008 *Me, Myself, and I*—demonstrating a crisis of memory: what they have experienced and what kind of role model Henry proved to be are too awful to contemplate, or even remember. But they also double their parents, thus enacting the exact opposite of their own words. As Abbott argues, “Shepard’s wanton sons transform themselves and their environment in ways that isolate and protect them from the world and, just as important, from their fathers” (198). They are terrified of becoming their father. Still, both Earl’s and Ray’s violence and drunken stupor are reminiscent of the late Henry Moss’s behavior. They seem to be compulsively repeating the brutalities that Henry committed and re-enacting their childhood trauma of family violence that for them comes into existence and is acknowledged in its reproduction. Though Earl repeatedly rejects being equated with Henry, first warning Ray not to confuse him with their father, then cautioning Esteban that he “[is] nothing like the old man” (83), he does behave exactly like Henry both in his drinking and in his violent outbursts.

Earl is also forced into a doubling of his mother: the story of the terrible “blowout” of the night when Henry beat his wife and then fled the scene, is not only recreated verbally in Ray’s and Henry’s recollections, but also replicated on stage with Earl cast in the role of the victim, thus experiencing the traumatic event not only through appropriating the persona of the victimizer, but also becoming the protagonist of the victimized mother’s narrative. For the brothers are forced to come to terms with the memories of their mother’s beating by their father that they witnessed, a trauma that in Shoshana Felman’s words “[has] not settled into understanding or remembrance, [an act] that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, [an event] in excess of [their] frames of reference” (5). They now witness a crisis of representation for language and story-telling prove inadequate in reporting what has happened. Therefore, they subconsciously are driven to role-playing in order to “testify.” Felman differentiates testimony from the mere reporting of events arguing that “what constitutes the specificity of the innovative figure of the witness is . . . not the mere telling, not the mere fact of *reporting* of the accident, but the witness’s [sic!] readiness to become himself a *medium of testimony*—and a *medium of the accident*” (emphasis in the orig., 24). Pre-existing categories and forms of narrative fail to convey the emotional charge of the events of that night. Being involved, unable to remain detached and objective, the sons fail in all their attempts to bear witness and thus transform the trauma into something

comprehensible. They compulsively re-enact the night inscribing the trauma onto each other's bodies, transforming the narrative of family violence into a shocking dramatization.

Accordingly, once familiarized with the events of Henry's last days, as he becomes aware of the discrepancies among the different versions of the story, Ray decides to appropriate not only the role of the "detective" and storyteller he has been playing so far, but also a role within the story he has been trying to piece together: that of the violent "master" of the house. The role model was Henry Moss himself. He forces Earl onto his hands and knees and makes him clean the floor—like their mother used to scrub the yellow floor of their childhood kitchen—kicking and hitting him until he flees under the sink, just as their mother did trying to escape Henry's blows. Ray verbally and physically bullies Earl in the same vicious and brutal, and at the same time, unmotivated and inexplicable manner as his model, their father treated his wife. He assumes the role of the perpetrator whose "brutalities appear to be partly mitigated by his own trauma, which he is acting out again and again" (Buse 178). He decides to take possession of the trailer symbolically filling the so-far empty refrigerator with groceries.⁵⁵ As soon as he declares that he is going to stay, Ray is transformed into a double of his father who needs a victim to brutalize, and finds one in Earl, reduced to the state of the surrogate victim.

The liminal space Ray and Earl enter has a transformative effect upon them in the sense and to the degree that the place itself is transformed: it changes into an earlier version of itself through the flashbacks, a space haunted by the ghost of the still-living Henry and the mysterious powers of giving and taking life emanating from Conchalla, and into a metaphoric representation of the setting of the whole family's traumatizing night decades earlier. This "fluidity" of the play's liminal space also characterizes the dimension of time. The events comprise two days which the brothers spend trying to reconstruct the story of their father's last days and fighting over the validity of their memories. Their reunion occasioned by such a culturally deeply ritualized event as the death of a parent should be a time of mourning and grief, of saying good-bye as Esteban suggests they should do so that the dead will not come back to haunt them. The departing of the father should involve rituals of separation, but the brothers only ironically refer to such rites. Ray comes up with the idea of burying their father themselves as they would do in the case of a dog (16-17)—echoing Albee's *The Sandbox* with

⁵⁵ The refrigerator also fulfills a symbolic function in *Curse of the Starving Class* where it is systematically opened and closed by the Tates and becomes a "member" of the family, functioning as the silent interlocutor and faithful listener to the soliloquies and monologues the characters deliver as failed attempts at communication.

the not-yet-dead Grandma placed in the sand to die. Earl does state that they should feel honored that they “have this small time alone with him [Henry]” (19) and that they should “treasure” that time before the morticians come, but his sarcastic comment of Henry being “processed into the funeral business” (15) undercuts the sincerity of his earlier remarks. He also firmly refutes the accusation of having spoken to his father while he was alone with the corpse for three days (15). Thus, his saying good-bye to the dead has negative connotations since only crazy people would act like that. Neither does he see any point in Esteban’s lament when the neighbor complains that they were not present when “Mr. Henry” was finally taken away.

For Earl the time spent with the corpse is defined by Conchalla’s instructions that nobody should touch the body for three days, which he obeys. His activity is reduced to retelling the story of Henry’s last days, a narrative subverted by Ray’s insistent investigations. For Earl’s distorted version omits Henry accusing him of non-action in the family crisis. And again, the older son can be blamed for his passivity as in the present he is caught up in a perverse and paralyzing necrophilic voyeurism.

Ray perceives the time in the trailer as the occasion for a possible passage. He wants to see “the whole picture” (42), to understand what really happened to his father on the mysterious fishing trip he took before he died. He also wants to come to terms with his father’s passing and with the family’s past that led to the patriarch’s “abdication” of his role as husband and father. For the past haunts them all, the Moss males seem to be trapped in time capsules where the passage of time has been suspended and the dimension of the future obliterated, a condition that Ray tries to break away from by inquiring into the family history. His mode of engagement with the situation demonstrates his willingness to work through the traumas they have suffered. So he questions Earl and Esteban about Henry’s last days and even tracks down Taxi and interrogates him about the events preceding and following the fishing trip. All these reports, however, fail to transform into comprehensible and believable knowledge. The only conclusion Ray can draw from his inquiries is that stories are nothing but “fabrications” (68), family histories constitute the constructs of “a pack of liars” (68), and that he could find nothing to confirm the validity of one or the other version of the past. The “reporters” all prove unable to bear witness adequately, paradoxically due to their attempted objectivity and detachment.

Ray makes a conscious and determined effort to “get at the heart of things” for “[s]omebody, somewhere along the line has to try to get at the heart of things” (68). But trauma by its very nature resists being represented directly. So Ray himself becomes a

mitigator of “fabrications” as he offers Henry’s “irreplaceable” (91) 1931 childhood pictures to Taxi to be used as the base of a new family history that would rely on more than words for its truth value. He realizes that everything—memories, the stories people tell, even identity and origins—are mere constructs fashioned and re-fashioned according to one’s state of mind and circumstances, and that neither the photos nor the details he forced out of Taxi about his father’s strange trip and even stranger passing brought him any closer to a truthful testimony about their past and present condition.

Through Taxi’s recollections the story of Henry’s last days comes to life on stage in the form of flashbacks. Shepard ingeniously uses the theatrical convention of changing light-effects to merge present and past, and alternate between different layers of time, so that the father—a corpse in the present of the events, placed on the bed in the alcove—can come to life within the play not only as a verbal but as a physical actuality to testify “in the flesh” to his last days alive.⁵⁶ In these flashback scenes the title character is allowed to act out the story different versions of which have been presented by Earl, Esteban, and Taxi. He becomes the protagonist of the dramatized narrative, while Ray turns into an outsider, on the margin, “invisible” to the ones re-enacting past events. During the flashbacks—separated from the linear, chronological unfolding of the story—Ray seems to shift into a trance-like state, a traditional theatre convention that fulfills a double function here: It suggests that the scene displayed on stage is a dramatization of memory that Ray later scrutinizes and questions. The seemingly unconscious state in which he slips symbolically also refers to his inability to “see,” understand, and master the trauma, while suggesting his liminal separation as well.

The younger son plays the role of the neophyte who, together with his older brother, are forced into the ritual of Henry’s death where they both try to cope. Earl attempts to deal with the situation by following the instructions of the self-appointed ritual elder Conchalla, and later by adopting and re-enacting Henry’s habitual behavior: he makes Esteban take him to all the bars his father used to visit, gets drunk, and similarly to what Henry himself would do, abuses the helpful neighbor both verbally and physically. He proves to be the type of neophyte who learns, or rather should learn by re-enactment and role-playing.

Ray attempts to cope with his father’s death by ways that can be interpreted as what Turner calls “ritual instruction.” He summons all who possess information—Earl, Esteban,

⁵⁶ Shepard also uses the technique of “reviving” the dead father in *Fool for Love* where the father sits in a chair throughout the action of the play and comments on his children’s acts and statements, but remains an inactive observer and reviewer of the unfolding story.

Taxi—to tell him the story of Henry’s life and death. And once this type of instruction proves inefficient all stories having been denounced as “fabrications,” he changes strategies: he steps into the story himself appropriating Henry’s role and re-enacting the traumatizing night that destroyed their family. This way he hopes to gain some control by fashioning the course of the story according to his own understanding of it. He first tries to recreate the past on a narrative level, but by act three he steps onto the level of action and into the center of events that set all of them into the liminal phase they have been unable to transcend and that has suspended time.

Earl still attempts to keep the past invisible, and thus as if nonexistent, and to continue to live in the present that is not destined to progress towards any future goal. He, however, is forced by his brother, and as it is revealed in the final flashback, by his father, to face up to the accusation of having run instead of trying to stop the violent attack on his mother. Henry charges his older son with inaction, making it impossible for him to entirely turn his back on the recollected events. Ray, who has been cast in the role of the victim as the abandoned younger son, decides to fight his brother and take control over not only the present but also the past forcing it into the foreground. And he also fails in this attempt. Although liminality could offer the ludic possibility of rearranging and recreating “reality,” Ray—instead of taking control of the present by transforming the past into something onto which a future could be constructed—is overwhelmed by it. The past becomes an alternate reality that invades the present and changes it into a horrifying doubling of a narrative of violence and death. Instead of exorcising “the dead father’s toxic grip” (Kuharski 500) and finding Turnerian “communitas” with Earl that could protect them by turning their violence against something or somebody other, their mimetic desire to own control over the past transforms them into enemies. Being unable to turn against their father or find a surrogate victim, a scapegoat, they remain suspended in the liminal state of fighting each other and duplicating their violent role model, the late Henry Moss.

Through mirroring Ray brings about this doubling. In the third act flashback Henry himself retells the story of the night he left his family, a recollection that leads to his understanding of his liminality, rather than to an absolution. He finally recognizes and admits, first of all to himself, that on the night he beat his wife he “killed himself” (112) emotionally and spiritually, a recognition that sets him free from suspended time and makes his physical death possible that “twenty-five years later is a mere formality” (Roudané, “Sam Shepard” 282). He acknowledges that both the grief he saw in his beaten wife’s eyes and Conchalla’s pronouncing him dead were accurate assessments of his state. His “deaths”—the physical one

as well as the emotional and spiritual ones a quarter of a century earlier—were only stages in his liminality launched by some trauma in the past that is untraceable and impossible to pinpoint in time, the “curse” that so often befalls Shepard’s characters.

Henry Moss exemplifies those father figures in Shepard’s body of work who have been afflicted by their participation in the Second World War. Henry, irritated by both the fact that Conchalla pronounced him dead in front of the whole jail community and thus everybody now thinks he is, and by Taxi’s obvious inability to understand him, bursts out in a soliloquy of fragmented and elliptical sentences rapidly thrown one after the other concomitantly revealing and concealing information about his past:

What did I ever do to deserve this [Conchalla repeatedly emphasizing that he was dead]? I’ve led an honorable life for the most part. I’ve served my country. I’ve dropped bombs on total strangers! I’ve worked my ass off for idiots. Paid my taxes. There’s never once been any question of my—existence! Never once. It’s humiliating! A man my age—to be forced into this kind of position. I’m too old to having [sic!] to prove I’m alive! (79)

It is not revealed what or for whom Henry worked, it can only be deduced from such outbursts that he served in the armed force and fought in the Second World War. Similarly to Weston Tate in *Curse of the Starving Class*, for Henry Moss the war represents that traumatizing event in the past that displaced him and made him unable to communicate or make contact with his family and the world around him. He “is crippled emotionally” (Weiss 7); the only thing that still connects him to his family is the fact that they are the ones whom he uses to externalize his rage and violence. After the war he is unable to fit into a culture and society that expects from him so radically different behavior than the destruction he witnessed and inflicted upon others. He is marginalized, the outsider, forever longing to belong and wishing for a central position. His wife’s decision to lock him out of the house becomes the physical materialization of his emotional and spiritual state, thus it leads to such a devastating outburst of rage and violence on Henry’s part.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ The same act of locking the war-traumatized father out of the house and the destructive consequences constitute the opening scene of *Curse of the Starving Class*: Wesley, the teenage son of the family is gathering the debris scattered on stage and he is trying to fix the door that Weston, the father broke the previous night, describing, in one of the most poetic soliloquies in Shepard’s oeuvre, the event as an invasion not merely of the house but also of his spirit and mind.

The language describing that night of crisis as the “big blowout” with “explosions” and “windows breaking” (8) creates an imagery reminiscent of war-zone descriptions suggestive of the fact that Henry did not only “drop bombs on total strangers” (79) but also on his family. For him—caught up in the liminality inflicted upon him by the war—the family members were just as different and strange as the “Japs” (79) he had killed. In conformity with the pattern of doubling that characterizes the whole play, that tragic night is also presented in two versions and two different time-frames, by two characters and from their different points of view: First, by Ray, he himself being already a “copy” of his father, and by Henry in the last flashback. Ray is in control of the “present” time on stage, but Henry dominates the flashbacks. The play thus turns into a dialectic of the two narrative levels, a fight to determine who owns the past based on the delusive hope that whoever wins, that will control the present.

With his physical death, Henry’s suspended time is terminated but not transcended. His liminality has been extended to incorporate his sons: time has stopped still for them and they have been propelled into the permanent “state of shock” (Shepard’s term) to which Henry’s death does not bring any closure. The illusion of the end, that Baudrillard defines as part of the fantasy of a linear history now moving in reverse and wiping out all the traces of the twentieth century (*Illusion* 5), deconstructing the illusion of well-defined and stable identities as possible “end products,” is annihilated by doubling: Earl and Ray have become mirror images of their parents, alternatively taking on the role of the victimizer and that of the victim. They are “doomed” (Henry’s favorite word to describe his own state, a term he wants to monopolize—33) to live within a perpetuated liminality they have inherited, without the guidance of a “ritual elder.”

The ritualistic structure of the play is made even more complex by the characters who function as the “mysterious Other,” who participate in the recreation of the past and alternately fulfill the role of “ritual elders.” Esteban, the friendly and caring neighbor functions as a surrogate wife to both “Mr. Henry” and his sons: balancing bowls of soup from his trailer to Henry’s and cooking menudo to heal the hangover of the Moss males. He also takes on the role of the story-teller revealing different aspects of Henry’s life. Their conversations seem to have been made up of the stories Esteban told about his former life, as Henry denied having had a past. Besides being a surrogate caretaker, Esteban also possesses certain knowledge and skills that make him an appropriate guide in the process the Moss sons are undergoing with the death of their father. He cautions them to say good-bye to the dead appropriately. He also seems to be in possession of the accurate data about Henry’s life in

Bernalillo and his death for he is the only one whose vision and perception is not blurred and corrupted by alcohol. He says he always just pretended to drink together with Henry, never actually drank, a confession that for Ray makes Esteban a “pretender” and a fake, invalidating him as a source of information or guidance.

He is perceived and used both by Henry and then by Earl and Ray not only as a substitute wife in the sense that he feeds them and cares for them when they are drunk, but also as a testing ground and object of their erupting violence. They abuse him verbally with their ironic remarks and vicious attacks as well as physically, trying to cast him in the role of a scapegoat. Esteban, however, defies these attempts by being aware of the position he is cast in as the object of the Mosses’ violence and objectifying gaze, and thus nullifying their efficiency. Henry and implicitly his sons need him: he relates the story of how Henry used to stand by the window and wait for him to come. Esteban also creates the most ironic image of that type of male whose existence depends on whether the object of his gaze accepts being caught in this position and thus sustains the observer or rejects it thus depriving the observer of his “food”:

EARL What satisfaction could you possibly get outta serving a man who was so damn ungrateful!

ESTEBAN It is like—feeding livestock—. . . Birds. . . . They do nothing. They—live, that is all. They are just there. But they need you. They look to you. They wait for you by the fence. They know you bring them something. Every day they are there at the same time—waiting. They know the hour you will appear. Mr. Henry, he use [sic!] to wait for me like that. (85)

He consciously accepts and subjects himself to the Mosses’ abuses, therefore becoming an “inefficient” victim.

Taxi, the other strange male in the Mosses’ story, appears in both the present of the narrative on stage and the recollective flashback scenes. He is a clown-like carnivalesque figure summoned by Ray to tell the story of the fishing trip; act two is dedicated exclusively to Taxi’s interrogation by Ray. But any story he tells or recalls is finally dismissed as a lie or a “fabrication,” as Taxi is weak and empty. He does not even have a name, he is only identified by his job as a taxi driver; the Mosses occasionally refer to him sarcastically and ironically as “Taxi-man.” He possesses neither the intelligence nor the understanding to make him able to sustain the validity of his stories—whether they are about Henry or Taxi himself.

He is terrified of Ray and ready to deny anything, even his origins, once Ray questions them. He even moves according to Ray's commands, who seems to be playing upon Taxi as a playwright or a director would play upon the actors playing different roles on stage. Taxi is a true clown; a puppet moving and talking according to the wishes of the Mosses who become the puppet-masters using Taxi as a "substitute speaker" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 286). And when he fails to convince them of the truth of the words they themselves force him to utter, they turn him into a punching bag and he becomes the victim of their vicious mockery.

"Henry, immobilized because of his ghost-status" needs Taxi "to take up the question of his essence" (Roudané, "Sam Shepard" 286) and argue the case of his being alive with Conchalla. But Taxi fails because he does not understand the essence and point of Henry's request. For him, being alive means walking and talking, yelling and breathing; his only ambition is to leave the taxi-driving business and become a pizza delivery man so that he can take pineapple combos to girls' dormitories at night. He also fails as a veritable storyteller: when Ray questions his identity, he tries to prove himself as a Texan through the fact that, according to their family history, Comanches slaughtered his great-great-grandmother. Shepard himself ironically remarks in *This So-Called Disaster* that Comanches did not slaughter anybody, just as Ray reacts to the story of the murdered ancestor: "Sounds like a story to me. . . . A fabrication, passed down from one generation to another . . . there's really no way to verify this little story of yours, is there? This little history?" (67-68). Instead of providing Ray with a narrative to which he could relate, Taxi's stories are transformed into a platform and example for the development of a thesis of narratology: stories are fabrications and even our reality is created through the constructs we build without practically any factual basis. Taxi, the displaced Texan, who cannot fit in even though his aspirations are less than down-to-earth they are so instinctual and basic, becomes the showcase of what Roudané calls "the rupture between the signifier and the signified" ("Sam Shepard" 281) where the authority and validity of texts becomes negotiable. This questionable quality of Taxi's stories spreads and problematizes the entire narrative presented on stage, functioning as a metatextual comment emphasizing the all-defining importance of interpretation and point of view.

Conchalla Lupina, the one female character in the play, only appears in recollected time, in the flashback scenes as if she were not entirely real, not even in the constructed universe on stage, but rather a "fabrication" of Henry's imagination, endowed with supernatural powers and superhuman insight into matters of life and death. She is doubly the mysterious and dangerous Other: she is the epitomized female with mythic powers of both giving and taking life and, at the same time, her ethnicity (Native American) sets her apart

from the other characters as somebody different, with a closer and still authentic relation to nature, to life, and to death, a “knower,” “doer,” and “revealer.” If Henry Moss goes through the transition of Living Man to Ghost Man to Dead Man, as Roudané argues, the second two phases being aspects of his Liminal Man state, Conchalla functions as the “ritual elder” in this process of passage.

Conchalla becomes the enhanced representation of how the Moss males perceive women: as sexual objects, strong opponents, mysterious and teasing, therefore desired and feared at the same time. In her presence, all the men are overcome by primitive fears and “a postmodern discomfort” due to “a sense of profound isolation from one’s past, one’s environment, and one’s spiritual self” (deRose 67) that she has the power to make them conscious of. She pronounces Henry dead and forces him into a deeply troubling existential crisis of either fighting her to prove he is alive or accepting her authority and surrendering to her powers. And Henry, having fought this kind of battle with his wife twenty-five years earlier, finally recognizes his defeat and subjects himself to the mysterious Native female.

“Doubly other and doubly desirable” and feared, just like the female characters in Shepard’s *Silent Tongue* “by virtue of their gender and their exotic race” (deRose 69), Conchalla possesses powers that make the men around her confess to their being active agents of their own destinies and acknowledge their denial and ignorance. She is able to link their past to their present. In the case of the Moss males, however, she does not project a future even though she has proven capable of giving life: she has brought the fish back to life, but only to gulp it down immediately afterwards, displaying a somewhat clichéd image of the enchanting female cannibalizing the male who falls into her trap.

The two mysterious Others, Esteban and Conchalla also “handle” the liminal symbols of the play. Esteban is in charge of feeding the patriarch and his sons, while Conchalla proves to be the grand master of movement, of cleansing ceremonies, and of death. The food offerings that Esteban makes and Henry as well as his sons refuse over and over again—similarly to Dodge who in *Buried Child* refuses to eat the bouillon prepared by the “surrogate” wife Shelly—are unable to re-empower and fortify the fallen patriarch exactly because of their source. Esteban is himself a simulacrum, a substitute, not the veritable “giver of life.”

Conchalla controls Henry’s life and death, and also the narratives referring to Henry’s last days: she remains the only one whom Ray does not interrogate, her version is never heard, thus a mystery impossible to verify or to refute. She empowers Henry to be able to recall the events of the traumatizing night when he “died,” and she offers him the opportunity

to take a new perspective upon his life. And she appears to put the play itself into motion: the first two acts start with Henry and Conchalla dancing across the stage to the sounds of a “very sultry Mexican rumba” (5) and then “a more spirited mariachi piece” (47). She also controls movement in the flashback scenes: she bounces Esteban and hums Henry to death. She remains outside Henry’s “toxic grip.” She is the master of ceremonies of Henry’s process of dying but she is protected from its contaminating field: she performs the ritual cleansing necessary to separate herself from the dead by submerging in the hot water of the bathtub, the female and life-giving element that empowers her.

Cleansing the trailer that “stinks” and providing food appear to be Ray’s preoccupations as well. But once again, he is doomed to failure. In his case the scrubbing of the floor does not lead to purification but to a reproduction of the family’s tragic night, just as the colors of the blanket covering Henry’s corpse—red and yellow—reproduce the colors associated with that traumatizing event: the yellow scrubbed floor tiles with the mother’s red blood smeared all over them.

The liminal symbols used within this shifting and multi-layered narrative involve all the senses. The smell of the menudo cooked by Esteban on stage fills the auditorium.⁵⁸ Ray refers several times to the fact that the corpse stinks—just like Halie sarcastically notices in *Buried Child* that Dodge “is smelling up the house with [his] putrid body” (32), and that the whole place should be cleaned, or better yet, torn down, symbolically alluding to the fact that the legacy of the father cannot be mastered, and neither can the traumas that he inflicted upon his sons, therefore they should be wiped out of memory without a trace.

Sight and the eyes play a central role in setting apart the dead from those alive—a symbol that also constitutes the focal point of *Eyes for Consuella*. Henry asking Taxi to look into his eyes and check whether he can discover any traces of life parallels the scene when Ray checks Earl’s eyes at the end of act two, the only time he steps out of the trance-like state he is placed in during the flashbacks, stating: “I see you Earl. I see you now!” (81). Sight here also means understanding: by experiencing the flashback, Ray learns that—contrary to what his brother told him earlier—Earl arrived to the trailer before their father’s death. In this context, however, “I see you” suggesting insight turns into an ironic statement, proving that eyes can be deceiving and the picture one perceives is conditioned by one’s mental, emotional, and spiritual state. Touching appears with a negative connotation as well: there exists a severe interdiction in relation to the corpse. Even the funeral attendants dealing with

⁵⁸ Shepard specifies in the stage directions that the cooking should be real.

Henry's body, struggle with the task, dropping the corpse on the floor before they are able to take it out of the trailer. Henry's body seems to be clinging to his surroundings just like his violence clings to and is resurrected in the next generation.

The ritualistic structure of the play with its juxtaposed and intermingled multiple layers of narrative mixing present and past, shifting the focal point from one generation's rite of passage to the older generation's ritual death and back again, functions as a mirror for Shepard's own attempts to exorcise the ghost of his own life, the memory of his father. At the same time, it also sheds new light—in the true sense of T.S. Eliot's thesis that every new work of art re-interprets each previous one—the large variety of intertextually evoked texts from ancient Greek tragedies to King Lear's lament: "Let it not be madness!," tragically and ironically contradicted by the Mosses' story; to the corpse on stage reminiscent of the final image of *Buried Child*: the dead patriarch lying on stage and the corpse of the baby in Tilden's arms. It lures audiences into a liminoid sphere and forces them to take a new look at the rearranged and "de-familiarized" image of the American family disrupted by implosion and trauma, and feeding on itself in a cannibalistic and self-destructive manner; and the old myths upon which American culture has been constructed. The Mosses' life story is turned into information to be gathered and subjected to endless speculations, the site of total uncertainty. Shepard discloses a liminal culture where this ritual phase is only perceived as marginality and alienation rather than as a possibility for reconstruction and the achieving of a new perspective. It draws us into the ludic and ironic sphere of Shepard's works that have the power—like Conchalla's gift of breathing life into the dead—to reshape the whole literary universe, a heredity Shepard—unlike the Mosses theirs—accepts and reinterprets.

**THE RITUAL OF VANISHING:
EDWARD ALBEE'S *PETER AND JERRY***

[T]he only ritual we still have [is] the ritual of transparency.

(Baudrillard, *Conspiracy* 108)

Identity today is found through rejection; it hardly has any
positive base any more. All that remains now is self-anti-
determination, more through the expulsion of the other than
by relation or affective dialectic. (Baudrillard, *Conspiracy* 148)

The Zoo Story, Albee's 1959 one-act that brought him worldwide fame, has been put on stage and has engaged audiences through its dark ritualistic story numerous times in the last fifty years. It was first paired with Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and later with other Albee shorts, such as like *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*. This one-hour play that the playwright often refers to as a one-and-a-half rather than a two-character work has become a modern classic even though Peter may be regarded as nothing more than a silent man on the bench.

Peter and Jerry (2004) was written as the fulfillment of a commission from the Hartford Theater Company who wanted to celebrate their fortieth anniversary with the production of a full-evening Albee performance. This commission created the opportunity for the playwright to add a first act to *The Zoo Story* that presents "the Peter I had always known—a full three-dimensional person" (Albee, *Playbill Peter* 18). Thus "Homelife" came into being and the new two-act play premiered in Hartford in 2004, with a New York opening at Second Stage Theatre in the fall of 2007.

The reception of this semi-new play was mixed, as so often happens with Albee's work. Some reviewers dismissed the necessity of adding anything to the already worldwide acclaimed former play; while others argued on behalf of "Homelife."⁵⁹ In my reading, by

⁵⁹ Reviewing the 2004 Hartford production, Jane Gordon notes that *The Zoo Story* was marvelous to begin with, while "'Homelife' comes off as a vestigial limb" (1). Sandy MacDonald goes as far as to snidely observe: "We're all entitled to an occasional lapse of judgment" and that Albee's decision to add a "foreplay" to the classic *Zoo Story* "is a misstep" (1). On the other hand, Karen Bovard's review published in the *Performance Review* argues that Albee has crafted two distinct pieces which interlock in ways that are subtle, thematically linked, psychologically persuasive and satisfying (693), but Norman Berlin suggests that Albee's "conversation

adding a prequel to the classic one-act, Albee has created a dramatization of two separate initiation rituals, similar in their core and purpose: rites of passage that aim to introduce Peter into a new type of existence and new kinds of relationships. Both processes attempt to fulfill their goal through what Turner identifies as characteristic for the liminal sphere: seclusion; stripping of earlier roles, masks, and positions; the deconstruction of established patterns of behavior and social constructs, and the recombination of their elements into new and shocking matrices, in Baudrillardian words, the site of simulation.

The two acts complement each other showing Peter in interaction with two strong characters, Ann and Jerry, who both function as catalysts of the crisis or the ritual process and as ritual elders presiding over the events, offering guidance and directing Peter within his passage. While Ann assumes the role of initiator into gender relations and familial patterns, Jerry can be interpreted as the “director” of a well-orchestrated assisted suicide that is meant to initiate Peter into passions such as love and violence combined. Jerry considers this to be “the teaching emotion” (82) in a world governed by mimetic desire and animalistic drives, where establishing connections outside the familiar routines of marriage and the workplace, outside the network of models, narratives, and images the endless proliferation of which, according to Baudrillard, has made such terms as “the truth” or “the real” devoid of meaning, seems impossible.

with his 32-year-old self” is a failure as the playwright “seems to be coloring in what has already been shaped” (777).

The 2007 New York production of the play also led to the publication of a large amount of contradictory reviews. Martin Denton writes in his nytheatre.com review that *Peter and Jerry* “offers solid proof, if any were needed, that a work of art should not be tempered with” arguing that “Homelife” diminishes the effect the earlier seminal piece has by itself as nothing that we learn about Peter in Act I ultimately matters to “The Zoo Story.” Victor Gluck is somewhat kinder, stating that even though it is a mature and placid work, “Homelife” could not stand alone as *The Zoo Story* has done for the last 49 years. Contrary to this, Simon Saltzman suggests that the question whether or not “Homelife” could stand alone “is a moot point” as it was not meant to do so and that the new Act I certainly helps the audience understand Peter and his response to Jerry, with Elyse Sommer adding to the review that “Homelife” “is not just another short play to team up with *The Zoo Story*, but an integral part of what is now a full-fledged two-act play.” David Cote also feels that the two pieces resonate with and reinforce one another; while Leonard Jacobs asserts that “Homelife” “while clarifying somewhat the events of ‘The Zoo Story,’ isn’t the earlier one-act’s equal.” Matthew Murray agrees that “Homelife” tackles issues within Peter’s life that “we’re better off not knowing,” contrary to David Rooney who suggests as title for the new two-act play “An Indelicate Balance” as “Homelife” illuminates Peter “making a passive figure into one no less pained in his isolation than Jerry.”

“[H]uman desire really is mimetic,” asserts Girard (*Double* ix), and relationships “conform to the complex process of strategies and conflicts, misunderstandings and delusions that stem from [this] mimetic nature” (*Double* vii) that will unmistakably lead to rivalry and the eruption of violence. Turner uses the term “social breaches” for such rivalries and conflicts that must be addressed and resolved so that order can be re-established or a new order attained. Thus, as a final solution, scapegoating, sacrificial victimization is employed to terminate and overcome such disruptive mimetic crises. The sacrificial victim incarnates what Freud described as the “uncanny,” monstrous and sacred at the same time: monstrous, for it must bear responsibility for the chaos disrupting the community; sacred as through its death, order is reinstated and conflicts are overcome.⁶⁰

In *Peter and Jerry* Act I, Peter and Ann imagine their “chaos” and bring it into existence through their narrative of disorder and cannibalism. Their simulacrum of both breach and sacrifice proves self-conscious and consciously artificially induced. Therefore, lacking the “scapegoat delusion” (Girard, *Double* xiii), their sacrifice can only lead to a recognition of their irremediable status within the “good” and the “symmetry” that Ann despises, the endless repetition of images and narratives that eternally generate the “smooth passage” (43) they had agreed upon not knowing what they bargained for. In Act II, Jerry orchestrates and stages both the conflict and the rivalry. But lacking an appropriate scapegoat, he takes on yet another role beyond that of the storyteller, director, dramatist, playwright, choreographer, lead, troublemaker, and ritual elder: that of the victim. He conforms to and defies the role at the same time. He is similar to others and still separated and different; but he is also profoundly aware of his position and inflicts victimization upon himself self-consciously, undermining thus the basic predicaments of an efficient sacrificial ritual.

Through his performances and interrogation of Peter, Jerry attempts to gain power. Peter’s reluctance, however, his unwillingness to listen to or conform to the rules of Jerry’s narratives, and his rejection, “I DON’T UNDERSTAND! . . . I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANYMORE!” (emphasis and ellipsis in the orig., 83), similarly to his indignation at Ann’s touching upon things they only “think about thinking about” (13), undermine the validity of

⁶⁰ “The victim must be transfigured ‘for the worse’ because of its alleged responsibility in the mimetic disorders and ‘for the better’ because of the reconciliation brought about by its death, a reconciliation that will be imbued to the victim’s omnipotence, beyond a certain level of scapegoat delusion. Through such delusion, therefore, the strange combination of transcendental power for both war and peace, disorder and order, or good and evil that is found all over the world in the notion of the sacred and in similar notions can be generated” (Girard, *Double* xiii).

the narrators' (Ann's and Jerry's) power, subverting their control position and dislocating them from the role of ritual leader.

Both "Homelife" and "The Zoo Story" open with a call for communication: "ANN We should talk" (1); "JERRY I've been to the zoo. (*Peter doesn't notice.*) I said, I've been to the zoo. MISTER! I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!" (emphasis in the orig., 59). Whoever attains and can keep the role of the talker, interrogator, and storyteller, also directs and controls the course of events, determines the terms and frame of reference, and decides upon the range of narratives to be re-enacted. Peter's seemingly involuntary disregard toward both Ann and Jerry when they address him reads as a subversion of the others' power over him. Ann and Jerry aspire and strive for this control position "not necessarily" (15), as Ann's favorite terms goes, over Peter, but first of all over their own narratives and life-stories. They are, however, themselves under the control of even larger practices and patterns of power based on repetition, mimicking, and simulation. Ann desires the instinctual, passionate, rough, "only sex" one-night-stand thrill, that "something less" (46) that she is not even able to pinpoint or define but she heard of and knows about from the movies. The media as recorders of history also control Jerry's decisions in dramatizing "hi(s)-story." He wants to inscribe himself as an authorial and authoritative figure among the news and into *Reader's Digest* as "the most unforgettable character" (83). He exists only within these stories, and his existence—for him—would only gain validity once it is turned into an image. The two picture frames he owns are empty because his parents are dead and he only meets the "lovely little ladies" once and only for an hour, and also because he has not yet inscribed himself into pictures, into a media report—the socially accepted sole source of valid knowledge, creator and disseminator of "true" and "real" events—and thus public history.

"Homelife" opens with a "still-life" of Peter sitting alone in the living room of his pleasant East seventies New York City apartment. Peter, whom Albee describes as "*pleasant if uninteresting looking. Tidy; circumspect*" (0) is a middle-aged executive who works for a small publishing house—the enterprise of multiplication of stories. The setting and position we find him in appear to be habitual, repetitious. He is so absorbed in his reading that he does not even notice his "*unexceptional*" (0) wife, Ann, come into the room and does not hear her talking to him. Ann's opening line, "We should talk" (1), a cliché expression usually signaling a discussion tackling topics difficult to talk about, functions as a sudden push into liminality, the origin of a breach and of a possible crisis that might disrupt the comfortable eventless texture of the couple's life. Peter's resistance to notice or even hear Ann, therefore, proves a subconscious protection against such a disruption. He explains his inattentiveness

with his reading: he goes into a state that he calls “deepening concentration” (2) when his “ears turn off—out rather” (2), a trance-like state. “This way,” he claims, “I don’t get to think ‘This is so boring I can’t do it’” (4). He is talking about the “most boring” and “most important” textbook they have ever published that he is reading for his work, but the description also fits his life. His reading-induced “trance” and deafness recur several times during this conversation with Ann, and as we are to learn, parts of his life do not even “take place” due to his reluctance to participate in them: “ANN (*Recalling*) Once I talked to you for... it seemed minutes... about—oh, what?—the fireplace, I think, and didn’t hear a word. You were reading... we never had the conversation; you never heard me; we never talked about it” (ellipsis in the orig., 2-3). Accordingly, something comes into existence once it is talked about, once it finds its place in the narrative flow, and Peter’s resistance to entering and participating in the creation of the story makes him an outsider, secluded from the main course of history. Throughout the play, he tries to resist being drawn into the center, and this constitutes the challenge both Ann and Jerry face as “directors” and ritual elders: to involve Peter in a ritual passage they hope will change their own marginal positions into a central status.

Despite Peter’s resistance and several retreats into “not hearing,” in spite of his reluctance with regard to discussing topics such as “sex stuff” (27) or things so terrible “that there’s nothing to be done about [them]... in any real sense” (ellipsis in the orig., 40), Ann persists in trying to create that breach, to push Peter into a liminal sphere that could bring about the change to the worse that she desires. She is not waiting for salvation, for Godot to come, but the unimaginable and unthinkable terrific thing that she dare not even call by name. She imagines herself on nights when she has trouble sleeping, instead of going to the kitchen for a cup of tea and “thinking about thinking about” (13) things, going out to the streets and opening herself up to the night: “ANN (*Not accusatory*) For all you know I could go out in my night dress, down in the elevator, out the door, down seventy-fourth street, to the corner; stand there; scream. . . . [O]r get there, strip off completely, lie down, spread my legs to the night—the pre-dawn” (ellipsis in the orig., 10-11). Her imagined venture into the night streets threatens with a rebellion against what Baudrillard defines as the impression of having an intimate knowledge of the world without having access to or any contact with it.⁶¹ But both

⁶¹ In *The Transparency of Evil* Baudrillard asserts: “Already, in any case, the filter of screens, photographs, video images and news reporting allows us access only to that which has already been seen by others. We are indeed incapable of apprehending anything that has not already been seen” (167).

she and Peter admit that though she could, she would not; for such a desertion of her familiar environment would mean facing the unthinkable, the outside world, darkness and death from which the inside isolates but also seems to protect her. Like neophytes in seclusion, she is separated from the community and apparently shielded from the menace of the unknown.

She also tells the story of the night when she sat in the kitchen for an hour imagining having her breasts cut off. As she has heard about the fact that over twenty percent of women get breast cancer, and over fifty percent of these eventually die of it, she contemplates the idea of having to face such a problem: "Once you hear of an idea you never know where it will lodge itself, when it will move from something learned to something... considerable, something you might think about, which is not far from being thought about, if you wanted to, or needed to" (ellipsis in the orig., 13). And even though she agrees with Peter's sad affirmation, "[w]e all die of something" (13), she cannot help but entertain the thought. Fear of dying, of disappearance, of pain, of losing control over her body and her life (or death, for that matter) makes her reason: "What better way to avoid it [cancer] if you're young enough" (12). In her rebelling against vanishing, her body becomes her medium in the sense that Marshall McLuhan coined and Baudrillard picked up: "The medium IS the message." By dismembering, mutilating her body, by opening herself up to the night, Ann imagines a coming into contact with the "real," with that which is "present." At the same time, the cutting off of breasts metonymically models, simulates the disappearance of the whole, thus rendering death repetitious, robbing it of its uniqueness and evading its real occurrence. Rejection and mutilation of the body with the purpose of tricking and escaping its final destruction appear to Ann as an option worth considering as opposed to "dying of not doing something" (14).

The idea of the mutilation of the body also resurfaces in the discussion about circumcision and girls' "initiation" within African tribes that "cuts down on infidelity" (31), as it "kills all the sensation—all the pleasure" (32), as Ann phrases it. Denial of pleasure and sensation equals rejection of the body. Sensuality and passion are uncontrollable, outside the reach of the conscious mind, therefore similar to death. Thus, mutilation to eliminate the uncontrollable, the reduction of women to a nonentity read as an attempt to gain power over the fear of loss and death.

Ann's problems with sleeping also result from this fear of loss of control over her body. As she describes it, while sleeping the body is paralyzed, unconscious, and "lost to the world" (19) with only the automatic breathing and beating of the heart still in motion and "[j]ust a fraction of one ear, so you can hear doom sneaking up" (19). This sense of threat

Ann perceives recalls Stevie's prediction in *The Goat*: "The old foreboding . . . , the sense that everything going right is a sure sign that everything's going wrong, of all the awful to come" (10). The "doom" that she hears sneaking up on her materializes in her feeling of being paralyzed, incapable of doing anything against and unable to control the decay of her body, and the decay of her life. She interprets this as a betrayal both on the part of her physicality and on the part of fate, or even Peter, and it outrages her and turns her against both herself and her husband. She imagines and desires destruction, chaos, that something less, a cannibalistic image of death and rage where they "eat ourselves—all up" (57) in order to avoid a narrative of death upon which she cannot exercise any control.

Ann is fascinated with enactments and re-enactments, simulacra of happenings and deeds. As she puts it when Peter asks her to go out to the kitchen and come back again replaying the opening scene so as to jog her memory and recall the topic she wanted to talk about, "[w]ell, it had a kind of fascination—pretending to be doing something for the first time" (35). They seem to be rehearsing for a show that happens to be their own life, caught up in an eternal repetition. They both are mesmerized with simulation, with "imagining that they imagine" terrible things, echoing Stevie (*The Goat*) again: "What I cannot imagine myself imagining" (57). But Ann is also terrified of missing out on life, on "the real." She fears remaining forever in this rehearsal process with time passing and her body deserting her, paralyzed and unconscious, and never facing those terrible things that they "don't have" (44). As an alter ego of the formerly quoted Albee protagonist, Stevie, Ann summarizes their life: "That's what we've both wanted: stay away from icebergs; avoid the Bermuda Triangle; remember where the lifeboats are, knowing, of course, that most of them don't work—no need. Yes; that's what we've wanted... and that's what we've had—for the most part. And isn't it frightening" (ellipsis in the orig., 44).⁶² She is terrified of not being able to control the "awful to come" (*Goat* 10), the "worse stuff—the real killers that nothing can be done about" (*Peter* 42).

With this narrative of fear she forces Peter to embark with her on a less "smooth voyage" (43), an imagined and verbally constructed world where she creates a liminal sphere within which she is able to deconstruct their "safe ship" and "pleasant journey" (43). She assumes different voices: that of the PR representative and marketing specialist of Peter's publishing company, that of her mother and of her former self, of Peter's parents and Peter as

⁶² In *The Goat*, Stevie affirms: "We have a straight line through life, right all the way to dying, but that's OK because it's a good line... so long as we don't screw up" (43).

a child, and the doctor who would ask them whether they wanted their hypothetical son to be circumcised. Through the personae she takes on and the narratives she creates she dismembers the familiar patterns and routines of their life starting from such trivial things as cooking spinach or cleaning the andirons to having an affair or a more animalistic sex-life to a tornado hitting them, setting the birds free to be eaten by the cats, the cats to be eaten by the girls, the girls gobbled up by Ann and Peter. She re-assembles the pieces into an “orderly disorder” where the unimaginable and the unthinkable push themselves into the foreground, so that by imagining she will gain control over death: “ANN . . . And we’ll never die. PETER No? ANN No; we’ll just vanish” (44). She thus rebels against her life in which everything comes to her through mediation—mostly Peter’s—and creates an original narrative of destruction that through its repetitious spectacle of “gobbling up” birds, cats, girls, and themselves (just like the dog gobbled up Jerry’s hamburgers) subverts and aims at systematically destroying the symmetry of their simulated “presence” in their own lives.

Peter’s narratives are also destructive, stories of loss and vanishing. One of the reviewers, arguing with Albee’s assertion that by adding “Homelife” to *The Zoo Story* we gain a more complete picture of Peter as a full three-dimensional character, claims that “[b]land, conventional Peter is by his very nature an underwritten person, and we don’t need his home life to confirm Jerry’s view of his domesticated, emasculated situation” (Berlin 773). But such criticism ignores the prequel as it demonstrates Peter’s fascination with disappearance, something that constitutes the core that differentiates him both from Ann and Jerry. He does not attempt to avoid slipping into oblivion; rather he represents the magician practicing his vanishing tricks. Like Man and Woman in *The Play about the Baby* who wither behind the masks and roles they put on, he transforms himself into a non-presence retreating into the trance-like state of reading, feigning deep sleep when Ann leaves the bed at night in the small hours, never following her, not even noticing or hearing her till she bursts out with indignation: “I’m not a generality. I’m a person” (37). Peter embodies what Baudrillard identifies as the “third phase” of the image that “marks the absence of a profound reality” (*Simulacra* 6).⁶³

Peter’s confession that his foreskin seems to be reappearing, and his circumcision appears to be going away also leads to an affirmation of disappearance: “My penis seems to

⁶³ Baudrillard identifies four such phases and summarizes them as follows: the first “is the reflection of a profound reality,” the second “masks and denatures a profound reality,” the third “masks the absence of a profound reality,” while the fourth, simulation itself “has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (*Simulacra* 6).

be retreating” (23). He is gradually withdrawing from his sexuality, a fading away that started with his fraternity initiation during his college years. As he tells Ann, they were forced to drink till they threw up; they were thrown into the street naked; and all these incidents seem to have taught him how to deny the most animalistic urges and pleasures of the body. His sexual encounter with the girl who wanted him to hurt her and whose blood “infected” him with the fear of ever again “being bad” also initiated him into the process of vanishing: “And she never told anyone who I was” (51).

The couple create themselves through language and inscribe themselves in the stories they tell. Bovard asserts that

[L]ike other Albee protagonists, both Peter and Ann are concerned with precision and accuracy; they try to pin things down with words. And while they are far more civil in dissecting the existential ennui of their marriage than earlier Albee couples . . . , their conversation is a dangerous one, particularly because it addresses their physical insecurities in frank terms. (691)

The reason and purpose of their narratives, however, are utterly different. Ann creates herself through language, she tries to anchor herself within the stories she tells and the voices she assumes. For her, talking gains an existential importance, thus she urges communication. “As a provocateur tactfully attempting to peel away the complacency of years, [Ann] . . . probes deeper and deeper without ever destroying the civilized veneer that they have lived with for almost all of their married life” (Gluck 2). She is constantly preoccupied with narrative techniques and style, correcting Peter whenever he uses an inappropriate word.⁶⁴ For her language and verbal images still represent the link to reality, Baudrillard’s first phase image. She needs Peter, and she needs him to listen. Narratives only really come into existence if they have a listener; thus Ann only really exists if she has an audience and a spectator to witness and validate her stories.

Peter is suspicious of language; as he tells Jerry later trying to make a joke about himself, he has trouble expressing himself sometimes as he is involved in publishing, not in writing (68). He has developed verbal routines that he repeats time after time like his party joke that Ann considers “a good one,” “a keeper” (9); and he often questions expressions: to Ann’s “bouncing baby boy” routine his reaction consists in “I’ve never understood

⁶⁴ “ANN (*Oddly angry*) No! Not your penis! Your dick! Your cock! That’s what was bloody!” (51).

‘bouncing.’ They don’t... bounce it, do they?” (ellipsis in the orig., 30). His wishes and subjunctives are easily turned into negative indicatives with no resistance on his part:

PETER (*Wishful*) I want a dog.

ANN (*Fact*) No you don’t.

PETER (*Fact*) No I don’t. (6)

He is reluctant with respect to talking and also to becoming an audience, as there are topics and things he does not feel comfortable either talking about or listening to. According to Ann the issue of sex, for example, does not constitute Peter’s subject (27), and neither do the really terrible things that might happen. Once Ann touches upon the question of their sex life, his reluctance turns into direct rejection of the role of the listener.⁶⁵

His resistance and attempts at vanishing drive Ann to question his identity, his existence, and even his humanity.⁶⁶ Finally, she resorts to slapping Peter’s face and then kissing him, expressions of violence and love, in order to “astonish” him, to re-conquer the “learned away” (53) beast within him. But Peter is pledged to the familiarity of this simulacrum of a life that never existed before but he imagined and now turns this image into a copy of the mental picture he had once constructed:

PETER (*Engaged, but rational*) I thought we both made a decision—when we decided to be together, or even before we knew each other—I thought we made a decision, must have made one, that what we wanted was a smooth voyage on a safe ship, a view of porpoises now and then, a gentle swell, bright clouds way off, a sense that it was a... familiar voyage, though we’d never taken it before—a pleasant journey, all the way through. And that’s what we’re having. (ellipsis in the orig., 43)

He proves the committed master of simulation. He lures Ann into replaying the scene of her entrance, a repetition that will allow him once again to retreat into his trance-like state; and he urges her to continue imagining—“*as if recalling*” (56), Albee specifies—the image of their

⁶⁵ “ANN there’s no one here Who’s to hear? PETER (*Quietly*) Me?” (45).

⁶⁶ ANN “Where do you live? Have you ever been in the kitchen?” (5); “Who are you?” (19); “You’re bound to wonder who is this?” (23).

final destruction, a chaos imbued with Blake's "fearful symmetry" and the staccato rhythm of unthinkable images like the fast-paced cut-after-cut climax scene of a horror-movie about cannibalism and self-destructive uncontrollable madness. His assertion, "Symmetry! God, I love symmetry" (18) can function also as the epigraph of his life, balanced on the vanishing point, a betwixt-and-between state (Turner's term) of existence and non-existence at the same time. The clash of Ann's and Peter's contradictory efforts turns the routine and ordinary Sunday afternoon conversation into a tour-de-force of desires, a ritual of self-affirmation that is never brought to an end, but abandoned with Peter's vanishing from the scene.

In Act Two, "The Zoo Story," Jerry appears as a much more self-conscious producer of the ritual process than Ann did in Act One. He first interrogates Peter, conducting an "audition" for the part he is supposed to play, that of the neophyte.⁶⁷ He uses his quite aggressive questioning technique that Peter tries to rebel against by several initial attempts to retreat into reading, and then by rejecting the idea of a conversation stating: "you don't really carry on a conversation; you just ask questions" (67). Jerry aims to subvert Peter's earlier positions and status as publisher, husband, and father, owner of two cats and two parakeets, upper-middle-class resident of East Seventy-Fourth Street. Names are rendered unimportant at first, as Jerry only asks for Peter's first name halfway into their discussion. Through his questioning, sarcastic comments, his stories, and tickling, he succeeds in stripping away all of Peter's structural roles and masks to the point where Peter himself creates his "own little personal zoo" (85), denying his whole previous existence:

PETER (*As Jerry tickles*) Oh, hee, hee, hee. I must go. I... hee, hee, hee. After all, the parakeets will be getting dinner ready soon. Hee, hee. And the cats are setting the table. (ellipsis in the orig., 84)

PETER Ah, ha, ha. The what? Oh, yes; the zoo. Oh, ho, ho. Well, I had my own zoo there for a moment with... hee, hee, the parakeets getting dinner ready, and the... ha, ha, whatever it was, the... (ellipsis in the orig., 85)

Having stripped away Peter's pre-liminal identity, Jerry begins his ritual instructions, first resorting to story-telling as the method of conveying liminal knowledge. He cleverly uses "teasers" to keep Peter's (and the audience's) attention and raise suspense with catch-phrases that sound like a once-upon-a-time newsboy's calls in the streets or the newsvendors in

⁶⁷ For a discussion of *The Zoo Story* as Jerry directing and staging his own drama, see Bailey.

Brenton and Hare's *Pravda* shouting out headlines to advertise exceptional and unique events. Jerry's typewriter that would only print capital letters would function perfectly for the creation of such headings that later prove to introduce nothing exceptional and out of the ordinary, non-events rather than unique happenings. Jerry's stories prove banalities of everyday cosmopolitan existence that only become worth mentioning if the media decided to fish them out of the multitude of similar images of city-life and showcase them as exceptional for a day or so. His narratives dramatize different aspects of living, other than those encountered or contemplated by Peter, but they are all the same and told with the same purpose effectively disguised as exceptional in Jerry's convincingly lively rendering. Tautologically, they all refer back to an internal core that has nothing to do with any external reality: human loneliness and Jerry's need to surpass his "invisibility."

The imagery Jerry employs and the symbols he turns to reveal the controversial and highly unstable nature of human relationships, man's loneliness in a world deserted by God that according to Jerry functions as "a humiliating excuse for a jail" (82). The stories about the inhabitants of the rooms—simulacra, phantoms rather than real human beings—as well as Jerry's "catalogue inventory of his things" (Roudané, *Understanding* 27) of pornographic playing cards that illustrate "the theme of disparity between idea and experience" (Wasserman 4), the rocks in the box without a lock weighing down the please- and when-letters, the typewriter function as dominant symbols in the ritual process aimed at deconstructing Peter's preconceptions and prejudices. They present him with another aspect of the trick he has been so anxious to perfect: vanishing but this time involuntarily and mourned, the pain and sense of loss, of invisibility.

As Peter's reactions are reluctant, protesting, and disapproving, Jerry goes "a very long distance out of his way" (69) in trying to explain. He wants to establish contact, to teach Peter how to avoid vanishing despite the difficulties one encounters in such a venture. Paradoxically, Jerry is also the one to erase all the traces of Peter's presence in the park and of their interaction. For their encounter needs to be rendered as the story about Jerry's presence, Jerry's existence, the marks he leaves behind, and Peter is meant to take away with him the memory and the cathartic effect of their meeting.

The stories and symbols only represent one part of the liminal instruction process. Therefore, Jerry bases his dramatization of the "teaching emotion" (82) on what Girard describes as the mimetic nature of desire and rivalry. The bench—Peter's secluded liminoid setting—stands in for the object of desire. Lucina P. Gabbard argues that "Jerry throws hamburgers at Peter in the form of conversational gambits designed to make contact" (17), but

when these fail to guarantee Peter's presence, Jerry resorts to appropriation. He needs Peter to live, to be present, to exist and absorb his story, and the only and final way to achieve such an active listening on the part of the vanishing-artist Peter is by calling into action the most basic human instinct: the hunger to possess and dominate. Similarly to what Ann imagined, Jerry wants Peter to give up trying "to make sense out of things . . . , [b]ring order" (69) and exist, be present, act at the most rudimentary level possible.

Jerry seems to have the power to make people relive what never happened—like his story of the "mock courting ritual between [he] and the landlady" (Sullivan 26), a simulacrum that he refers back to every time she makes an attempt to corner him. And even though he asserts that "fact is better left to fiction" (76), he has embarked on a mission to turn his own narrative into fact. He dramatizes and stages a variation of his story with the dog, this time with both characters as human. His meeting with the dog and his telling of the story seem to be—just like in Ann's case—rehearsals for his tragic showdown that he enacts with the hope of transcribing it into images and into Peter's memory so that it may go on forever through repetition.

Jerry is "full of stories" (77), as Peter states with irony, but he needs to remind Peter that he does not have to listen. He needs to sustain in Peter the illusion of voluntary and willing participation. When faced with "the real killers" (Ann's phrase, 42), Peter becomes reluctant and evasive again. The camouflage, however, is stripped away once Jerry starts moving around Peter circling and closing in upon him hypnotizing him both with his movement and his speech. He invades more and more the liminoid space Peter created for himself. Reading in the park on Sunday afternoons represents for Peter "play" versus the "work" of reading textbooks. The work that he also brings home and uses as an escape from having to respond to Ann's needs to communicate and connect differs drastically from the leisure time he spends on "his" bench: a space and period where and when he cuts himself off from all the routines of quotidian life, becomes structurally "invisible" and submerges entirely into the "readable" (57), that is, intelligible and involving world of a text.

The marginal Jerry ambushes Peter scrutinizing and subverting his roles and positions. He manages to transpose Peter into a trance-like state somewhat similar to the trances Peter finds himself in while reading the textbooks his company publishes. Mary E. Cobb points out that throughout his long speech Jerry uses Peter's name "repeatedly, almost as a hypnotic technique" (18). This repetitive name-calling also functions as a preventive measure against Peter's "disappearance": denominating something or somebody means individualizing and bringing it/him into existence and presence, like an evocation. Peter is soon shocked out of

the hypnotic paralysis by Jerry who transforms his attacks from verbal to physical to finally reach the final bloody climax.

Laughter can induce a cathartic experience, thus Jerry resorts to tickling that, according to Rose Zimbardo, “being a pleasure-pain experience, perfectly implements Jerry’s theory that the teaching emotion involves cruelty and kindness combined” (49). He wants to exercise his control not only over Peter’s brain but also over his body. Throughout their conversation Peter remains “physically passive” (Cobb 10), thus Jerry decides to stimulate him by activating his instinctual reactions, on a level where his rejection of the stories he has been exposed to can be broken through and overcome. But laughter also proves just another prelude. Jerry continues to attack Peter on his most vulnerable spots transforming the bench—the stand-in object of desire—into a symbol of honor, manhood, and fertility. He recombines all the elements of Peter’s disassembled existence into patterns to be ridiculed, and pushes him into a monstrous and grotesque battle that is meant to inscribe both of them, but primarily Jerry, into history.

Jerry’s creativity in this respect has been impaired so far: he did not have a genuine audience. The typewriter only prints capital letters, and his increasing frustration could have led to a scene similar to the one we encounter in Shepard’s *True West* where Lee, frustrated by his inability to put his “true to life western” into words and onto paper, smashes the typewriter to pieces. With the landlady, Jerry always and eternally puts on the same mask and plays the same trick over and over again; he meets the “little ladies” only once; the letters beneath the rocks are records of expectations and requests rather than valid narratives.

Even Jerry’s homosexuality lasted only for eleven days leaving him with the memory of yet another marginal position that separates him from the center he desires to belong to. Looking for orientation and guidance, Jerry finds these in another liminal sphere: homosexuality in the disguise of pederasty. The park superintendent’s son stands in as the surrogate ritual elder, the modern equivalent of the “erastes” of Ancient Greece.⁶⁸ According to the traditions of “Greek love,” he is invested with the role of not only introducing and initiating the youngster into homoerotic experiences, but also bearing responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of the neophyte.

⁶⁸ According to Kenneth J. Dover’s *Greek Homosexuality*, in Ancient Greece the *erastes* and the *eramenos*, the adult and the youth, represented the two poles of male bonding, and the term *Greek love* refers to this intimate relation between males of different generations. It can loosely be applied to homosexuality. Pederasty denotes the erotic relation between an adult male and an adolescent boy that was a cultural and social phenomenon associated with educational practices as well (Dover 16).

The recollection of this short affair that seems to pop into Jerry's memory almost accidentally, posits him in the state of the initiand. He remembers it primarily not as an intellectual or physical, but emotional, enthusiastic experience with "bells ringing and banners snapping in the wind" (72). The image is built on intense sensory sensations, maybe only conceptualized, intellectualized, and verbalized within this recollective moment: of auditive, sensual memory and musical atmosphere. "But that was the jazz of a very special hotel" (73), Jerry recalls, echoing Tennessee Williams' Blanche Dubois, that kind of melancholy nostalgia for youth and the innocence of first love that is inevitably lost. But what pushes Blanche's young husband to commit suicide for Jerry proves yet another experiment with physicality and bodily pleasure. The whole relationship functions within this sphere of experimental liminality. Jerry's age corresponds with the time appropriate for him to step from the status of boy to that of man, and his transition under the guidance of the Greek boy leading into homosexuality marks him as a liminal person. The time frame of merely one-and-a-half weeks suggests a period separated from the normal flow of time, punctuated by the twice daily meetings and Jerry's emotional state: he was in love, as he confesses, "maybe just with sex" (73).

Jerry's detail-lacking, almost generalized memory of the experience can be read as a parable for his whole life. He invests himself emotionally, intellectually, and physically into events, always trying to force himself into the center. He emphatically states: "I was a h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l" (72), repeating the word "queer" four times within the one-paragraph long story, stressing that he appropriated the role in its entirety. He is what he experiences. He represents the ultimate "Liminal Man" shifting from one identity to another, from one sexual orientation to another whenever one role proves insufficient for gaining and sustaining control. His relationships with women also illustrate his striving to sustain power in all areas of his life. Passions and emotions, such as being in love, are equal with death. Submitting to the demands of the body means relinquishing control to instinct. Douglas, discussing African tribal rites of death, affirms that the elders of the tribe "by their free, deliberate decision . . . rob death of the uncertainty of its time and place of coming" (178) thus retaining control over the body and its natural, uncontrollable processes. Similarly, Jerry's decision to avoid emotional attachment to anyone demonstrates his attempt to purge himself of anything that could rob him of this position. His eleven-day homosexual relationship proved to be the testing ground and learning period where he was instructed about sexual drives.

Society is built on delimited and fixed subject positions its members are to occupy. Liminality highlights these positions and constitutes a sphere of experimentation, of games

and learning. Neophytes are instructed about the elements of social existence and the roles they can assume within this social structure that are broken up to their constituents and reassembled into grotesque and shocking combinations. Thus the initiands learn about the limitations inherent to social conformity. They are also shown the possibilities of rebelling against such structures and value systems. Jerry's shifts from role to role or from story to story represent his ongoing experiment with possible structural positions. Ultimately, he finds none of them satisfying. Like his story about the zoo that "acts like a refrain in a musical score, for at every turn in the conversation Jerry refers to the zoo, promising to describe what took place there but always leaving the telling suspended" (Mitra 31), his life-story remains floating and fluctuating among possibilities. He is incapable of committing to one position because all prove to render him into the realm of repetition, of simulacrum, of originality and uniqueness denied. He thus remains in an eternal search for the one subject position that would install him in the center of the social matrix. Therefore, in Jerry's case, every status—including homosexuality—turns into a liminal one: he longs for a center in a world he fails to recognize as one that has lost its stability and its center has proliferated into countless constellations. A faint sense of this lost centrality emerges at the climax of his speech about the necessity of making contact:

JERRY . . . with God. WITH GOD WHO IS A BLACK QUEEN WHO WEARS A KIMONO AND PLUCKS HIS EYEBROWS, WHO IS A WOMAN WHO CRIES WITH DETERMINATION BEHIND HER CLOSED DOOR... with God who, I'm told, turned his back on the whole thing some time ago. (emphasis in the orig., 81-82)

His ego-centric drive for self-affirmation reads as a rebellion against subject positions that are built on repetitive images. He desires active participation and say in matters of his own fate, freedom and a purpose outside "the cages of the zoo." Such a rebellion differentiates him largely from the masses—and Peter—who, in Baudrillardian terms, refuse to participate and "scandalously resist [the] imperative of rational communication. They are given meaning: they want spectacle. No effort has been able to convert them to the seriousness of the content, nor even to the seriousness of the code" (*In the Shadow* 10). Jerry still believes in meaning and referentiality, with "incredible naïvety" he

always looks for a good usage of the image, that is to say a moral, meaningful, pedagogic or informational usage, without seeing that the image in a sense revolts against this good usage, that it is the conductor neither of meaning nor good intentions, but on the contrary of an implosion, a denegation of meaning. (Baudrillard, *The Evil* 23)

His belief launches him forward almost as inertia, a process that Jerry only recognizes and therefore fights in its reversed format: Peter's weightless fall into simulation, into nothingness.

Jerry's relationship with the dog functioned as a trigger and testing ground of his theory of love and violence combined representing the one possible way of achieving connection and a meaningful position within the social structure. Now that this experimental period has reached its closure, Jerry needs a listener to whom he may tell the story of his ventures, so that those picture frames he owns that are empty because they have no reference to any external reality and stand in as embodiments of his loneliness, might finally frame a still meaningful, original, and focused image. In Peter he has found an appropriate audience and disciple, therefore he puts great efforts into rendering the story with accuracy and precision. He avoids simplifying things, as this always makes people suspicious of his truthfulness (79), he searches for the most suitable phrases and expressions, and even alters a proverbial saying to fit his aims: "Man is a dog's best friend" (82). He needs to reenact the story in order to find a way to inscribe himself into existence in a world where God surfaces in so many possible and disturbing faces, a world where "what is gained is loss" (82), echoing Ann's affirmation: "It's not pain I want, or loss" (54).

The "transient" Jerry shifts from one reenactment of his narrative to another until the final struggle over the bench that he turns into a simulated fight for honor and manhood. He is forced to charge the trivial object in the park with such symbolic valences in order to be able to transform Peter's childish behavior, calling for "fairy-chasing policemen," into the brutal and deadly serious fight his purpose requires. This must be a feigned murder, an assisted suicide where Jerry is given the chance to test himself in the other role of his story: that of the victim. Therefore, Jerry does away with categories of good and evil for he aims not to moralize but to affirm his presence. In this balancing act above the void of sheer simulacra no normative value system holds, thus neither of Jerry's stories makes any distinction of value. Being reproductions of the same narrative core and created with the same aim (to posit Jerry

in a meaningful center and control position); no concern for their origin and no attribution of value characterize them.

Peter's frustrated and bewildered cry, "I DON'T UNDERSTAND" (emphasis in the orig., 83) and his refusal to listen any longer, "I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ANYMORE" (emphasis in the orig., 83) subvert Jerry's control as the storyteller and ritual elder empowered to subjugate, humiliate, and transform his neophyte. So, for him to regain such control necessitates a shift into another persona.

Both "Homelife" and "The Zoo Story" end with Peter exiting the scene while his interlocutors are still talking to him. The denouement of the crisis/ritual materializes neither in a post-liminal reintegration of a now genuinely present and existent Peter into a community, nor in an acknowledgement of irremediable differences, but in disappearance. While Ann imagines a chaos where "[w]e eat ourselves—all up" (57), Jerry impales himself on the knife "sacrificing" himself in order to reappear as an image on the news, in Peter's recollections, or maybe—as he sarcastically suggests—as "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Ever Met" (83) on the pages of *Reader's Digest*, something fictitious and imagined, a Baudrillardian fourth phase image that "has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (*Simulacra* 6). Realizing that he cannot subvert the system from without, Jerry submerges into it and tries to dislocate it from the center delivering a shocking demonstration of the workings of such a system: the disappearance of the original and the proliferation of the image clad and parading in the disguise of the real.

Earlier analysts of *The Zoo Story* pointed out its Christian imagery reading it as a morality play (for example, Zimbardo); others have based their readings on the play's intertextual connections like Spielberg's interpretation of the relations between Albee's play and Coleridge's ballad, "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," correlating Jerry with the Mariner, Peter with the Wedding Guest, and the dog in Jerry's parable with the Albatross; while Roudané finds in *The Zoo Story* "the potential for regeneration, a source of optimism which underlies the overtly aggressive text and performance" (*Existentialist* 42-43). I argue that *Peter and Jerry* presents a double ritual of self-assertion subverted by Peter's vanishing acts. It dramatizes attempts at rites of passage into what Ann and Jerry consider a more genuine existence that ultimately is revealed to be yet another disappearance, the destruction of the body in the hope of escaping death, and with the desire to reproduce oneself in new images, simulacra that by their very nature require the elimination of the original. Through its frank, honest, and violent imagery and its verbally sophisticated use of puns, doubling, repetition, fast-past ping-pong dialogue, and emotionally overcharged hypnotic monologues, the dog's

story, Ann's and Jerry's story, the play inscribes itself into the memory of audiences, cautioned thus not to vanish together with their alter-ego on stage, the reluctant initiand, Peter.

In a 2008 article on Albee and Stoppard, Ben Brantley affirms: "There's a sense with Albee . . . that [his] characters keep talking . . . because otherwise they would sink into silence and all the terrifying questions that lie within. . . . [H]e see[s] the cosmic joke within the limitations of language and revels in it" ("Albee" 8). And still, Albee has kept writing plays for the last half century, forbidding his audiences to sink into silence, to vanish into oblivion, confronting them with a most terrifying sentence: "We should talk!"

**EFFACING MYTHS AND MYSTIFICATION OF POWER:
SAM SHEPARD'S *THE GOD OF HELL***

Hell is empty,
All the devils are here.
(Shakespeare. *The Tempest*)

Sarah Palin, the Republican nominee for the vice-presidency in the 2008 elections, used as a slogan of her campaign speeches an intended return to the “true, normal America.” She defined the veritable American as the farmer, populating the backlands, living according to the values and among the circumstances of small-scale family farms. She built her political discourse on an image of the United States and of its citizens that has long disappeared, if it ever existed at all.⁶⁹ Family farms have been replaced by “agribusiness,” and the farmer—just as the iconic cowboy—has survived only in MGM and Warner Brothers productions, on the silver screen, and—apparently—in Ms. Palin’s propagandistic rhetoric.

Her speeches opened up the Pandora-box of scrutiny and satire on all fronts. In the twenty-first century, when cable TV and cyber-media have taken over the job of the satirist, and people’s lives are saturated with the media’s continuous focus on politics, politicians, and their every word, it has become problematic for authors other than journalists to find effective means to tackle political issues in their respective arts. Shepard, however, found the appropriate tools and format to bring political satire back onto the stage without sounding propagandistic by transplanting wide-ranging global issues and international conflict onto an idealized and myth-imbued surrounding. America’s Dairy-land becomes an anachronistic pastoral landscape which big-time politics invades and destroys.

The God of Hell opened in New York in October 2004 just before the presidential election. Most reviewers and critics dismissed the play for its obvious political commitment and immediate aims.⁷⁰ Shepard, however, calls it a comedy and uses within its naturalistic set

⁶⁹ For an insightful discussion of how the United States transformed from a rural into a mostly suburban and urban society and from European-style small-scale farming to large enterprise agriculture, see for example Ronald Takaki’s *A Different Mirror. A History of Multicultural America*.

⁷⁰ Several reviewers of both the original production at the Actors Studio Drama School Theater in New York and its subsequent premieres in San Francisco and London have criticized Shepard for his political commitment explicit in the play that transforms it, according to his critics, into propaganda. They reject the play for its abundant symbols relating to the current political climate (Connema), reading it as “a curious throwback to

and character development elements of Beckettian farce that together with vaudeville and dark humor, and the complex way he effaces the mechanisms and strategies of a power that subjugates individuals into servitude by the most horrendous means of objectification, keep the play from turning into simplistic agitprop.

The playwright has also referred to *The God of Hell* as a satire on Republican fascism. One of the play's central issues evolves around the Iraq War and its effects on American culture and mentality. But Shepard manages to re-create the genre of the satirical play by mocking both the advertisement-driven overt patriotism and paranoia dominating the American mind since 9/11, and the entirely unrealistic image of an innocent and uncorrupted rural America that—according to leading politicians of the day—the country must and shall return to once the “enemy” is destroyed. Johan Callens mockingly asserts that “it is as if Shepard had set *States of Shock* in the living room of *Buried Child* and brushed aside his earlier caution concerning political didacticism” (33). In contrast, I argue that Shepard has always been a politically involved playwright responding to both the country's involvement in international affairs, and its internal social and economic changes that transformed the “metanarratives” (Lyotard's term) of the American dream, of endless frontiers, and of the unalienable rights of any individual to freedom and happiness, into mere anachronistic illusions. His plays focus on the possibilities of identity construction, imposed or chosen subjectivity, and human interaction in a society and culture built upon violence and the false ideal of a Manifest Destiny of invasion and subjugation.

The God of Hell abounds in historic and political references and its ideological mindset is powerfully emphatic. Rather than recreate a historic reading, I will focus in this chapter on how the characters of the play are forced to transit from their isolated, eventless, and ignorant rural existence to a subject position imposed upon them by the invading “culture

Brechtian times when theatre tried to browbeat or terrify audiences into a new political awareness” (Hodgins), stating that Shepard only manages to create a cartoonish hell (Fisher). They argue that even though politically committed, art has to be great and has to “make everything more beautiful in order to fulfill its most essential function, that of seizing and holding the viewer's attention” (Teachout) and that Shepard failed to do so in his new play. The 2007 collection of essays edited by Johan Callens on Shepard's body of work phrases a harshly critical paragraph on the play, asserting that “*The God of Hell* (2004) comes across as a somewhat disappointing combination of earlier ventures . . . Every Bush may deserve his Gulf War, but Shepard's riposte to the second one pales in comparison to his first, despite the added urgency of the nation's paranoid war on terror, following the attacks on New York's World Trade Center in September 2001. True, Shepard now parodies the icons used before in a more nostalgic fashion (the flag, the farm, the sturdiness of the American heartland, etc.), but his dystopian fantasy on both sides of the Atlantic was perceived as preaching to the choir” (33).

of war.”⁷¹ In this process the myths of this culture are called into question and proven deficient by Shepard’s exaggerating and parodying some of their elements. Power is exercised through violent mechanisms and strategies in order to force its subjects into the positions adequate to accept and sustain the status quo.

In analyzing this transition from the “never-never land” of “open-door-policy” rural Wisconsin idyll to its scarification on the alter of manifest patriotism, and the farmers’ “subjection”—in the Foucauldian sense—into positions of servitude alien to them so far, I resort to Turner’s concepts of liminality and neophyte status. I also rely on Foucault’s discussion of the interplay of power and freedom in order to illuminate better how Shepard employs this horrific rite of passage to show the danger inherent in obscure power relations: A society where power is impossible to locate or even name, and where forms of resistance have been numbed by passivity, credulity, and ignorance, the manifestations of power can and will easily turn into strategies of domination and physical determination.

The God of Hell returns to the familiar Shepard territory of the American Midwest where Frank and Emma lead a seemingly perfect bucolic life on their dairy farm. This almost flawless embodiment of what Senator Palin later calls “the normal America” is exposed as a grandiose anachronism: the only family enterprise left after the invasion of the rural landscape by big corporations and government intervention. The farmer’s subject position as small-scale producer has been abolished by state-grants for non-production. The shift from an economy of production to one of commerce and monetary interaction has long ago taken place, now everything needs to be advertised, bargained for, and sold, even the land—metonymy of country.

Shepard has always been the nostalgic dramatist of the disappearing rural America, finding and dramatizing the fantastic in farming families’ lives and mourning the tragic decay of the myth of the self-sustaining, nature-bound, truly manly American.⁷² *The God of Hell*

⁷¹ Katherine Weiss argues that for Shepard war plays a crucial role in the making of America, and in the process the American male is sacrificed. In “Cultural Memory and War Trauma in Sam Shepard’s *A Lie of the Mind*, *States of Shock*, and *The Late Henry Moss*,” she discusses Shepard’s three plays as fundamentally different works that embody a discourse which reveals the playwright’s concerns regarding an American culture deeply infested with a rage and violence that manifest in all of his male characters and that are rooted in a trauma of war that men cannot overcome. Thus these male figures become unable to connect and communicate with their families and communities. This incommunicable trauma and the violence fuelled by this frustration destroy the community and the culture in which the consciousness of war goes back as far as the frontier days.

⁷² Such Shepardian farming families are, for example, the Tates in *Curse of the Starving Class* whose avocado farm is threatened by the “zombie invasion” of developers; or the traumatized family in *Buried Child* on their

laments the decay of old myths and traditional life-style; but, at the same time, it mocks the ignorance of those who fall prey to manipulative subjection into non-existent stereotypical positions as that of the old-time farmer, the cowboy, the Patriot.

The familiar archetypes of rural life are destroyed by the new myths and new perceptions of a culture of fear and paranoia, looking for an enemy that here is elusive and obscure. The lack of a viable future for traditional farm-existence is also symbolized by the protagonist couple's childlessness.⁷³ By act three Frank has been persuaded to sell his cows that "are going to contribute to the future security of this nation" (36), and as lights start to dim at the end of the play, Emma's plants illuminate the stage. They emanate increasingly intense blue flashes—just as Haynes and Frank—becoming thus symbols of the radical contamination of this rural environment and the lethal transformation that the invasion results in.

The play opens in medias res, the morning after Haynes' arrival. Like Agnes and Tobias who in Albee's *A Delicate Balance* received their panicking friends into their home, the couple in *The God of Hell* offers shelter to Frank's fugitive old friend even though Emma has a deep-rooted sense of danger that makes her question the identity and affiliations of their guest.⁷⁴

Frank and Emma perform their morning routines while discoursing about the uninvited, long-lost friend they had put up in their basement.⁷⁵ The set as envisioned by Shepard creates a comfortable but somewhat outdated atmosphere of old-timey farm world

land left barren for decades hiding the corpse of the murdered child; the image of the debilitated—once virile and capable—traumatized male appears also in the figure of Eddie in *Fool for Love* who only fantasizes about buying a farm and settling down, or the either deadly violent or utterly "impotent" male characters in *A Lie of the Mind*.

⁷³ Sophie Watkins interprets the houseplants that Emma obsessively overwaters and Frank's heifers as substitute children.

⁷⁴ This inexplicable sense of danger appears as a specifically feminine trait in both Shepard's and Albee's works—see, for example, Ann in *Peter and Jerry*. Their female characters instinctively identify menacing situations, or when they fail to do so or ignore their feeling—as Stevie does in *The Goat*—their destruction is inevitable. This subconscious female knowledge, just as Conchalla's mysterious goddess-like features in *The Late Henry Moss*, or Woman's wise insights into human behavior and interactions in *The Play about the Baby*—posit women in the two playwrights' works in the subject position of the Other.

⁷⁵ Frank is oiling his boots before going out to feed his "replacement heifers" and Emma is watering her plants methodically crossing the stage from the kitchen sink to the plants lined along the walls—as Shepard specifies—"arranged without any sense of design or order" (5) that are already dripping from overwatering.

and a sense of isolation and distance from society. The modest living room with an exterior door leading to a small mudroom and porch that separates the interior from the “*distant vague, snowbound pastures*” (5) and the small kitchen with “*usual . . . appliances, cupboards, and sink—all dating from the fifties*” (5) remind one of the “not-exactly Norman Rockwell” home in *Buried Child*. Linda Ayres-Frederick in her review asserts that Shepard must like kitchens as they constitute the focal point of almost all of his family plays’ sets. The reviewer reasons that “maybe they [kitchens] represent the heart and hearth of America where people can express their true hungers and needs and get those hungers fulfilled and needs met” (1). On the contrary: kitchens in the Shepard’s sets become the site of frustration—often equipped with the Shepardian iconic empty refrigerator—and the sites of erupting violence. They function as stages upon which characters play out their envisioned, invoked, or wished-for subjectivities and where they witness and suffer the destruction of these illusory identities.

In *The God of Hell* the shabby living room and kitchen with its smell of burnt bacon and coffee represent a way of life that seems to have been ripped out of the chronological flow of time.⁷⁶ Emma’s family has lived here for generations, she was born and raised in the house that has looked the same for decades (as the kitchen appliances dating from the fifties suggest). The old-fashioned and worn-down set mirrors and symbolizes the owners’ life that reproduces the lives of generations before them. This—ideally warm and cozy—shelter becomes part of Shepard’s satire: the lack of alteration gives birth to decay rather than nostalgia, while in a Turnerian reading, the house turns into the “segregation site” where neophytes undergo their liminal trials.

Frank and Emma live out of touch with the world, as if stranded on an island in the middle of the icy landscape, frozen in time and space; fossils of an earlier lifestyle and culture prone to be lethally wounded once the outside world comes knocking and invades their territory. The set becomes the locus of Frank’s forced rite of passage with the representative of power Welch in the role of the ritual elder, Haynes used as an aid for instruction along with Welch’s patriotic paraphernalia as dominant symbols, while the heifers and plants are sacrificed as remnants of the left-behind state of existence. In Foucaultian terms, on the stage of *The God of Hell* we witness the necessary conflict of power and freedom, the strategies Welch employs “to structure the [other characters’] possible field of action” (221), and the

⁷⁶ Involving the audience’s sense of smell in the theatrical experience is a hallmark feature of Shepard’s work resurfacing in several of his plays: the toast popping out of the stolen toasters in *True West*; Esteban’s menudo cooked on stage so that its smell fills the auditorium in *The Late Henry Moss*.

“modes of objectification” (208) that transform Welch’s neophytes into a new type of subservient and weakened subject.

Turner defines liminality as a period meant to offer neophytes the space, time, and means to acquire all the knowledge and skills necessary for them to function efficaciously in the community they are about to enter and to fulfill the new subject position(s) they are to appropriate within the power relations of their society. Within the three-fold ritual structure, liminality cannot be described in terms of power-relations due to the fact that in this phase of any rite, the initiands are stripped of any insignia and all their affiliations that would connect them to their earlier status or community. They are deprived of their will and freedom to act, and are perceived by the social structure as being ritually unclean, polluting, in a sense dead. Among such conditions, according to Foucault, one cannot talk about power relations because if there is no freedom, “power [is] equivalent to physical determination” (221) for “power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (221). Power always implies freedom, and thus, different forms of resistance.

Accordingly, Emma remains the one character who manifests resistance and thus evades liminal subjection and the horrid rite of passage. From the start, she takes on the role of the interrogator: in her first scene with Frank, when she keeps asking questions regarding Haynes’ identity, occupation, origin, and reasons for fleeing, in the hopes of getting “a kernel of information that will later prove to be essential to the plot” (Ayres-Frederick 1).

Her instinctual feminine sense of danger proves to have been right with the arrival of Welch, for whom her ambience represents effortlessly conquerable territory. For, despite her presentiment, Emma and her husband live according to the open-door policy of America’s Dairyland: “EMMA The door was open because this is Wisconsin and we all leave our doors open in Wisconsin! It’s the open-door policy” (27-28). Welch ironically acknowledges this as a “charming custom” (28), a statement that pushes Emma onto the defensive and awakens her resistance towards the intruder who would make fun of the traditions that define her: “It’s not a custom, it’s a trust” (28). Whether it is a custom or a trust, further events prove that a subject position built on unaltered heritage and outdated traditions has become unsustainable. Their ignorance about the workings of the world outside their isolation, their lack of strategic knowledge and forms of resistance, make Frank and Emma vulnerable and guilty in their own downfall. For—as Foucault phrases it—“the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence” (222). The “fundamental phenomena of ‘domination’” (Foucault 226) surface simultaneously with ignorance and passivity. Emma and Frank’s apparent naïvety and

dutiful polite hospitality opens up their hermetic little universe to the violence and fear-fuelled anger of a power that—without the control mechanism of resistance—will subjugate and destroy anything different, that does not march to the common rhythm.

Emma, however, remains the rather simple-minded, but lucid and down-to-earth voice of reason throughout Haynes' re-initiation and Frank's "conversion" under the violent guidance of the demonic ritual elder Welch. She tries to remain in control of her space, the kitchen—traditionally a feminine area—and follow her routines. She ritualizes ordinary events and secular elements of her eventless life in order to add an emotional and spiritual intensity and dimension to it that the frozen winter Wisconsin existence does not possess. Through overwatering the flowers and burning the bacon she proves to herself that she is in control and has the freedom to choose among a set of activities as well as among a variety of methods of performing these. In her seclusion from the world she cannot help but develop such habits, for winters "cause behavior like this. . . You get into these habits. These trains of thought. If I—if I didn't water like this, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. There would be a horrible gap. I might fall in" (23). Her routines help her hold on to a sense of self. She thus endures being cut off from social interaction. But the basic human need to communicate still resides in her with a force that makes her open up even to the stranger Haynes who emanates "blue flashes."

She "comes to her senses" only when facing Welch's sly intimidating techniques. Once she leaves the kitchen to ring the bell and call for Frank, Welch immediately invades her space stapling strings of American flags all over her cupboards. Emma, however, trained through routines in exercising her freedom against the numbing void of the frozen and lifeless Dairyland, resists.⁷⁷ She remains suspicious of the vicious menacing power that Welch represents, confused and frightened by the ability of this devilish force to infiltrate and transform her husband and their lives in such a radical manner.

She stays outside the liminal area created by Welch, as Frank suggests, "lost in the ocean of ice and snow" (35). As a woman, she is left out of the military patriotic preparation of the males around her for which she is supposed to create and ensure the appropriately manifest patriotic ambiance. Her inherent sense of danger alarms her and raises her resistance, even though her change of policy from the tradition of the "open door" to her assertion that

⁷⁷ Scene three opens with her standing on the kitchen counter taking down the strings of flags; she even tries to convince Frank to confront Welch and get the heifers back, thus appearing as the defender of their traditional rural lifestyle, mentality, and morality.

“[w]e are closing our doors to the outside world” (36) comes too late. Her world has been contaminated as the light-emanating plants demonstrate. The final scene of Emma ringing the bell in distress like a tocsin and calling out her husband’s name into the wide frozen landscape recalls the final image of *A Lie of the Mind*: the visual metaphor of the fire in the snow, set by women as a warning and a symbol of their resistance to and apparent “liberation” from the grip of the violent males, echoed here by the bell’s aural call of warning and the houseplants’ ghostly light creating a hallmark Shepardian collage of theatrical effects.

Emma thus evades Welch’s brainwashing technique; her resistance is not crushed by the power scheming to force its subjects into mindless servitude. Frank, on the other hand, falls victim to the new, mechanized, and horrific ritual of initiation that uses such accessories as remote-controlled electric teasers to recruit new adapts. The archetypal farmer Frank, involved in real physical work and representing a traditional attitude and way of thinking, undergoes a process of mental and physical transformation. His new blue suit, tie, and attaché case make him seem oddly out-of-place in his own home and within his own environment. His funny walk betrays the fact that his “initiation” involved not only friendly persuasion and bargaining on the price of heifers, but torture as well that literally “got him by the balls,” a method of “conversion” that apparently makes initiands emanate blue flashes of light. For—as Welch declares—people have become vulnerable to such drastic processes of conditioning because they have lost their memory of the past, they have no connection with their history that still demanded people’s involvement in the shaping of their personal and national fate: “There’s no memory any more. That’s the problem. No memory at all. Pearl Harbor. The Alamo. The Bataan Death March. All gone. Vanished like they never even happened” (32). People have lost, or rather given up their freedom or what Foucault calls their “duty” of analyzing and questioning the power relations of their society. They are involved solely with their immediate interests, such as the heifers in Frank’s case, and their social sensitivity has withered away and has been reduced to a concern for such cultural icons as Krispy Kremes, Mallomars, and comic books, the items Haynes hopes to still retain after his re-initiation. People subject themselves to voluntary servitude to a power they do not see and do not understand, as the resistant Emma’s desperate words demonstrate:

FRANK He’s [Welch] from the government!

EMMA What government?

FRANK Our government.

EMMA I don't know what our government is anymore. Do you? What does that mean, "our government"? (35)

As a veritable subject/neophyte of such a subjugating power, the fugitive Haynes displays the features of a Turnerian initiand. Throughout the play he remains the terrified victim of a power he is running from and feels closing in on him. Even though Emma tries to calm him down reassuring him that "Wisconsin is the perfect getaway" (22) where nothing ever happens, his very presence along with Welch's appearance imbue the atmosphere with a tension and mysterious menace that justify Emma's suspicions.

Haynes, the first messenger of this threat, appears somewhat cartoonish and robotic jumping up and reacting in violent terror every time his hosts question him about his affiliations or the blue flashes his fingers emanate whenever he touches something. He refuses the doctor Emma suggests should check the blue flashes that "are not normal" (24), thus categorizing her guest as the "Other," different, implicitly dangerous. Haynes, however, refutes such a categorization and subjection: he resorts to scientific explanation and—as "normally" people do—appeals to Emma's trust: "Why don't you believe me?" (24).⁷⁸

He reacts similarly terrified whenever the name Rocky Buttes is mentioned, as Welch discloses later, the site of a "minor nuclear leakage" that Haynes was hired to mend. The name also pinpoints a feature of the power Haynes is running from: by alluding to Rocky Flats, the nuclear power site near Denver, Shepard posits power in secret military activities, a politics and economics that is not deterred even from using mechanisms and materials that could cause total annihilation. The fear of possible pollution or destruction that already the name induces is intensified by the strange blue flashes and the "lecture" Haynes delivers on plutonium, after swearing Frank to secrecy.⁷⁹ From the question of replacement heifers and

⁷⁸ He accounts for the blue flashes as being nothing but "static shock" (24).

⁷⁹ HA YNES Do you know what plutonium is named after, Frank?

FRA NK What? Plutonium?

HA YNES Yes.

FRA NK No—what?

HA YNES Pluto—the god of hell.

FRA NK Oh—I thought he was a cartoon.

HA YNES Do you know how long it remains radioactive and biologically dangerous once it's released into the atmosphere?

FRA NK Plutonium?

HA YNES Yes.

breeding, Haynes jumps to the topic that has been terrifying the American conscience for decades and has kept the country in paranoiac despair: nuclear power. His presentation on plutonium's carcinogenic nature and its effects on the genes of the reproductive cells causing mutations, in other words, "abnormalities," its ability to spread through space and time as a "tasteless, odorless, and invisible" (20) deadly substance can also be read as a symbolic description of the power he is trying to escape: polluting, undetectable, and indefinable, infiltrating everything right down to the genes and destroying them from inside out. At the same time, this "lecture" also offers a possible interpretation of the play's title: the Latin mythological god of hell, Pluto represents the mysterious power whose workings are meant to achieve not the redemption but the destruction of mankind. Frank and Haynes' discussion takes on an atmosphere of universal threat and crisis where personal and world issues become undistinguishable: "FRANK Are we talking about a world situation or something personal, Graig? HAYNES What's the difference?" (19).

Haynes' secretiveness, his involvement with some secret state organization with undecodable abbreviations as its name, and his affiliation to such dangerous and polluting materials as plutonium, his strange physical and mental state differentiate him radically from his hosts. He represents the "mysterious Other" who imposes upon those whose world he invades an imminent and deadly threat. Both Frank and Emma recognize him as the depository of knowledge that they lack but towards which they also seem to be ignorant. They only start thinking of him as the "carrier" of pollution after Welch describes him as such:

FRANK No, I don't know anything about it.

HAYNES Five hundred thousand years.

FRANK That's a long time.

HAYNES It is. The most carcinogenic substance known to man. It causes mutations in the genes of the reproductive cells. The eggs and the sperm. Major mutations. A kind of random compulsory genetic engineering that goes on and on and on and on.

FRANK That would probably affect my heifers then, wouldn't it?

HAYNES Yes, it would, Frank. It definitely would affect your heifers. It would affect every heifer within six hundred miles of here. It would penetrate the food chain and bio-accumulate thousands of times over, lasting generation after generation. Tasteless, odorless, and invisible. (20).

The question of genetic engineering that in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* appeared as the desired height of scientific achievements that Nick the young biologist wanted to claim as his own, here appears as the accidental consequence of imprudent human action that will affect the environment and future generations (not only of cows) beyond our limited imagination.

You're contaminated. You're a carrier. What're we going to do about that? We can't have you free-ranging all over the American countryside like some kind of headless chicken, can we? You've already endangered the lives of your friends here, not to mention the Midwest at large. Now, that was pretty selfish of you, wasn't it? Poisoning the Heartland? (30)

Thus, in Frank's perception, Haynes is transformed into the "dangerous Other" who is initiated into some secret knowledge and skills that he is able to conceal in order to mislead and contaminate the innocent. In Frank's mind, his friend turns into the disciple of some horrific powerful god, sent on a mission to exploit his confidence and loyalty, deceive him and "contaminate" him beyond salvation: "He's [Haynes] a carrier. He was sent here to do us in. . . . He's a traitor! He's betrayed us all. A pretender. They look like us. They act like us. But underneath they're deadly" (ellipsis in the orig., 36).

Turner defines liminal personae as necessarily ambiguous since they elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions within social and cultural settings. Frank and Emma's inability and ultimately their disinterest in fixing Haynes in a subject position, locates Haynes as liminal, different, and thus dangerous. He himself verbalizes his betwixt-and-between state, emerging from the dead—as Frank believed he was—when, almost crazed by fear, he denies his own existence, snapping out at Emma: "You don't know me. I don't exist" (27). His "abnormal" status also materializes in the staging of the play: he is put up in the basement, underneath and separate from the "normal" living area from where he rises from time to time as ghost.

Initiands are also perceived by the social structure as ritually unclean and polluting; therefore, the necessity of their seclusion possesses an immediate urgency.⁸⁰ Still, the idea of Haynes as the carrier of contamination—versus the mysterious power represented by Welch—is underscored and ironically scrutinized by the banality of the scene that dramatizes this "contamination" and need for cleansing: "EMMA [talking about the sofa Haynes has stained with coffee] Oh, don't worry about that. It's beyond ruin. It's seen way worse than coffee spills. Premature calves. Afterbirth. Blood all over the place. You can't wreck it" (22-23). Accordingly, Haynes proves to be everything but the horrible source of contamination and embodiment of evil as Welch describes him. In Emma's down-to-earth and logic-

⁸⁰ See Douglas's discussion of the theme of ritual pollution and cleansing in *Purity and Danger*.

dominated perception, Haynes appears basically incapable of wrecking even a sofa, much less a whole country and way of life.

Destructive power does, however, reside in the second intruder, Welch. As the agents in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Welch appears at the house and invites himself in. He barges into Frank and Emma's mid-American ambiance like the "zombie invasion" Wesley talks about in *Curse of the Starving Class*. And while in the earlier play the violence that erupts within the family makes them vulnerable to the danger coming from the outside, Emma's "open-door policy" and their inability to resist efficaciously turns this farmhouse into an easy target for any intruding power.⁸¹

Welch arrives as the familiar not-too-welcome know-it-all and persuasive salesman with an arrogant can-do attitude that quickly turns into a violent routine of interrogation. As a modern-day representation of the anachronistic door-to-door salesperson, he invades the house with an abundance of patriotic paraphernalia selling them—with an apostolic air and discourse—like the latest must-have commodity. But he soon proves to be totally different from a more successful version of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. With his pathetic and disapproving rhetoric he reproaches Emma for her lack of any manifestation of loyalty and devotion to the country:

WELCH Well, Emma, this is Wisconsin, isn't it? I'm not in Bulgaria or Turkistan or somewhere lost in the Balkans. I'm in Wisconsin. Taxidermy and cheese! Part of the U.S. of A. You told me that yourself.

EMMA What are you driving at?

WELCH You'd think there would be a flag up or something to that effect. Some sign. Some indication of loyalty and pride.

EMMA Loyalty? To Wisconsin? (12)

Welch manifests himself as the agent of a power that is effaced here as demanding total and manifest approval and devotion from its subjects, the Foucauldian "new form of pastoral power" (208) that invades the "pastoral" landscape of Wisconsin and imposes on people a "matrix of individualization" (Foucault 215) within which one gains subjectivity if one

⁸¹ In *Curse of the Starving Class* the door broken down by the father that the son tries in vain to mend symbolizes their vulnerability caused by the "curse" of violence ("nitroglycerin in the blood") that they carry within.

parades his/her adherence to the group, otherwise risking confrontation, expulsion, even annihilation. And the shrewd Welch is selling the ultimate patriotic armor necessary for showcasing this adherence: the “starter kit” of flags and cookies from which the buyer can move up to the “Proud Patriot package”—an alliterative play on words Shepard uses to sharpen the irony in saleable patriotism.

Welch is also selling his image as the twenty-first century equivalent of Lewis and Clark, this time travelling across the country from West to East. The ritualistic journey of Shepard’s male characters to an ideal West—that ultimately always proves an illusion—is transformed into its opposite. This trip backwards, to origins, however, also implies a reinvigoration of a culture of conquering and violence, of confrontations with and destruction of people (Natives) and nature that would oppose such an expansion. Thus Welch is unmasked as the menacing executive “hand” demonstrating the force of a power that cannot be pinpointed: “the department” that “keeps [him] on [his] toes” (9).

Charles Donelan affirms that “Welch incarnates the devil himself, or at least a contemporary flag-waving version of the title’s god of hell” (1), while Paul Hodgins argues that Welch can only be seen as the simple instrument of evil, a flat caricature-like character the workings of whose mind remain hidden. In my reading, Welch needs to be a robotic, emotionless, highly intelligent, detached, and sarcastic character in order to be a believable representative and a terrifying model of a power and culture of dominance that denies individuality except that of militant patriotism, that fascistically rejects anything and anybody other or different. He stands in for a power that aims and is able to manipulate and deceive its subjects into accepting and thus sustaining its unquestioned and incontestable authority.

This power authorizes Welch, the robotic parody of a salesman/secret agent/warrior patriot to recruit new subjects and to function as ritual elder in their initiation. He possesses knowledge and skills, as well as the right information to give him the upper hand in the situation and locate him as initiator. He holds and handles the necessary symbolic objects (his “Patriot package” and money) with which to “instruct” new recruits; the grotesque “abnormality” of Haynes to demonstrate the workings of the power structure and the consequences of resisting the exercise of this power; as well as the technological insight and equipment to capture, efface, and punish such treason. Within the world of the frozen Wisconsin landscape, this technology and what it is capable of appear as something menacing and destructive, abused by a power that assumes no responsibility for the effects of its actions (for example, the “minor nuclear leakage”) and feels absolutely no obligation towards its

subjects. Welch defines this power position in a well-articulated and terrifying image that conveys the parameters of a totalitarian regime:

We can do whatever we want, boddy-boy. That should be clear by now. We're in the driver's seat. Haven't you noticed? There's no more of that nonsense of checks and balances. All that red tape. All that hanging around in limbo, waiting for decisions from committees and tired-out lobbies. We're in absolute command now. We don't have to answer to a soul, least of all a couple of Wisconsin dairy farmers. (31)

The *modus operandi* of this power involves sly interrogation, persuasive branding and self-marketing, and technology-assisted physical torture. As Welch ironically puts it, those uninitiated into these technological marvels are unable even to see the danger: "It's extraordinary how blind the naked eye is. No wonder people have so much trouble accepting the truth these days" (30). His sarcastic remark doubles in meaning: while Frank is unable to detect the danger he brings upon himself and Emma by accepting Haynes into their house, he is also blinded by Welch, not noticing how he himself is drawn into the horrific military and patriotic conversion and initiation process conducted by the intruder. He is mesmerized by Welch's powerful discourse, the embodiment of the ideal of a masculine power and of the capable fertile male. In his looks—thus, first in his appearance—he becomes the mirror image of this demonic initiator.

In a media- and image-dominated world where immediate and first-hand observation has been replaced by images of a technologically and virtually created reality, and where inter-personal conversation has been replaced by the flood of discourses that are always and necessarily ideological and propagandistic, the truth has become elusive and deceptive. People are being blinded by the multitude of images, facets, and perspectives of reality and interpretations of the world that they are exposed to and that are imposed upon their own thinking. Pinpointing the enemy and identifying the source of contamination has become problematic; thus in such a world of elusive truths, shifting images, and simulacra, and in a culture of disbelief and suspicion, the one who knows the enemy holds control. Playing upon the paranoia and fear that he himself awakens in Frank and that epidemically takes hold of the new victim, Welch depicts Haynes as the embodiment of evil that infiltrates and infests America.

The persuasive Welch, as the depository of all truths, beyond being able to identify the source of pollution, appears to be selling also the means of ritual cleansing. His militant

patriotism, his arrogant and sly interrogation techniques and torture methods, however, prove to carry another, more destructive type of contamination threat. He recruits his new adapts by literally “gripping them by the balls,” he subjects them to a physical and mental “training” that seems to be a reinvented version of Pavlovian conditioning and brainwashing that transforms men into zombie-like automatons. He pre-signals the violent nature of his initiation methods when he mockingly plays around with picking words that would rhyme with Haynes’ name such as pains, shames, and blames, words that seem to have been chosen from the register of subjugation, totalitarianism, enslavement:

Well, well, well—Mr. ‘Haynes,’ is that it? Mr. Haynes? Very inventive. Deceptively simple. Almost poetic. ‘Haynes’—rhymes with ‘pains,’ or is it ‘shames’? Possibly. Could even be ‘blames.’ The choices are endless. Well, not exactly endless. Everything has its limits, I suppose. Everything runs into a brick wall sooner or later. Even the most heroic ideas . . . sooner or later it would come down to just a finite number of possibilities, wouldn’t it, Haynes? Brains, maims, flames, chains. Which is it? What’s it going to be? (29-30)

By scene three the verbal mockery turns into deadly serious methods of convincing, threateningly mentioned at the end of the previous scene: “What would happen to your body now if you had to undergo the same ordeal? The same stress to your appendages? . . . The pain to your penis, for instance?” (32). The aural image of the torture going on in the basement created by the sounds of yelling, of “piercing,” and “sharp screams” (37), materializes in the horrifying picture of Welch dragging onto stage the heavily breathing and yelling Haynes pulled by an electrical cord that “*runs directly into the fly of Haynes’s pants*” (39). The button on the other end of the cord enables Welch to deliver remote-controlled electric shocks to his captive. This visual metaphor echoes Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* with Pozzo tugging Lucky as the ultimate image of humanity trapped in an eternal battle fighting for positions of dominance, an image a variation of which Shepard has already created in *A Lie of the Mind*.⁸² In *The God of Hell* Shepard pushes the boundaries of menace further to achieve the effect of a vaudeville nightmare with Welch in the role of the “demon clown” (Shepard quoted in Shewey, “Hidden” 75). The torture is explicit and cruel, and the

⁸² In the earlier Shepard play, Mike drags onto stage the bound Jake who is holding an American flag between his teeth, another element linking the two works.

grotesque events represented on stage dramatize effectively how fragile power relations are and how power once escaped from its interplay with and continuous provocation by freedom will at any moment turn into totalitarianism.

Shepard's harsh criticism is directed against any totalitarian regime and against any kind of torture.⁸³ At the same time, he also criticizes the ignorance with which people accept the status quo and fall captive to serving a power that denies their right to freedom and which ultimately destroys them. He attacks that lazy passivity with which Americans rest and hope "to get a free ride on the back of Democracy" (42). Controversially, the playwright puts these words into the mouth of the most devilish character, Welch, representative of a power that gains its force from the passivity, ignorance, and servitude of citizens. The air of sarcasm and irony that Welch adds to the words "[w]hat have you done to deserve such rampant freedom? Such total lack of responsibility . . . Sooner or later the price has to be paid" (42) suggests a power that is aware of how easily people can be manipulated and is consciously exploiting its subjects' inability or unwillingness to act or resist in any form.

The final scene of the play presents the transformation process of Frank into a brainwashed slave of Welch's cause. He and Emma are expected to display a show-your-colors mentality and total transparency towards the invading power. Together with Welch images and simulacra of a rampant patriotism flood the house which turns into a battleground where the forces of a fear-driven warrior patriotism that has nothing to do with the land any longer and that treats the country itself as a commodity, collide with and easily extinguish resistance weakened by passivity, ignorance, and isolation.

Frank and Haynes subjugated and subjected into the position of neophytes, also face a liminal challenge. They are sent on a journey towards the west with the heifers, an ironic doubling of the old time cowboy movies with Haynes and Frank heading back west "[a]t night. By train. Across the Great Plains" (41), towards Rocky Buttes that Welch depicts as a "[w]hole different landscape. Wide open. Just like the Wild, Wild West. Not a tree in sight. Endlessly flat and lifeless" (42). This reads like a set description from the script of an old Hollywood western. Frank's task of reaching the desert and taking his beloved heifers to their destruction at the contaminated site of Rocky Buttes represents a test of loyalty. At the same time, in the universe of Shepard's plays the desert represents the site of eternal liminality and

⁸³ "EMMA You're not torturing him, are you? What're you doing? WELCH Torturing? Torturing! We're not in a Third World nation here, Emma. This isn't some dark corner of the Congo" (38). "EMMA . . . This is absolute torture! I don't care what country we're in" (39).

marginalization, cut off from human contact, outside chronological time and social structure. Welch ironically defines the test as being “delivered to your Manifest Destiny” (42): a destiny of being eternally trapped in the hold of the power that deprives its subjects of freedom and thrives as there exist no strategies of resistance. Emma remains the sole free individual protected by her femininity. But her escape also means her dismissal from the community of men. She becomes now the dangerous Other, the enemy, who resists the subject positions offered by the network of domination. Meanwhile, she has also been deprived of all the myths, traditions, customs, in her own words “trust[s]” that she defined herself by. Therefore, she also is forced into the betwixt-and-between liminal position of ambiguity and neither dead nor alive state where the possibility of resistance is eliminated.

Terrified by physical torture and the idea of an invisible enemy closing up on them from every direction, left in ambiguity after all their beliefs and grand narratives have been discarded as nonsense or sacrificed for the sake of the “cause,” Frank and Emma are subjugated and subjected to a power that operates through concealment and mystification. They are truly blinded and fail to recognize the threat coming from within, and to resist an imploding structure that feeds on itself in a cannibalistic and self-destructive manner, a culture of schizophrenic paranoia and of insatiable hunger for dominance.

The initiation process dramatized in *The God of Hell* leaves the domain of the personal and familial and widens into a national rite of passage within which a nation is forced to leave behind the illusory cultural myth of Ms. Palin’s “normal, rural America” and recognize a culture of war whose violence—confronted by an unidentifiable enemy—will turn upon itself and destroy its own. Such a horrific picture makes Frank deliver one of Shepard’s hallmark poetic soliloquies culminating in a bitterly ironic punch line:

FRANK (*Out to audience again.*) It’s times like this you remember the world was perfect once. Absolutely perfect. Powder blue skies. Hawks circling over the bottom fields. The rich smell of fresh-cut alfalfa laying in lazy wind rows. The gentle bawling of spring calves calling to their mothers. I miss the cold War so much. (39-40)

**DANSE MACABRE: EDWARD ALBEE'S *OCCUPANT* AND
SAM SHEPARD'S *KICKING A DEAD HORSE***

Narrativity stands at the heart of every
human effort to communicate knowledge.

Umberto Eco

In this last chapter I return to the comparative and contrastive approach employed in the first, with a focus on Albee's *Occupant* (2002) and Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007), two plays that so far have been mostly ignored by scholarship. While, to my knowledge, there have been no scholarly papers published on *Occupant*, Gabriella Varró's on *Kicking a Dead Horse* remains the only one emphasizing the play's meta- and intertextual links and its divisive role in the playwright's oeuvre.

Occupant, that had a failed start in 2002 at New York's Signature Theatre finally opened in June 2008 with Mercedes Ruehl in the lead. *Kicking a Dead Horse*, written and dedicated to Irish actor Stephen Rea, had its world premier in Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 2007, being brought to New York's Public Theatre in June 2008. Both plays opened to mixed reviews dividing connoisseurs of the two authors' body of work. Both generated debates on whether their "non-dramatic" formats and their re-visitation of themes and topics typical of the two playwrights (in Albee's case: the workings of memory, the fact—illusion divide, the truth-value of stories that make up identity, art and the artist, and the question of language as an adequate and efficacious tool of expression; in Shepard's case: the American West, a failed sense of male identity, the quest for an authentic existence, American politics and history, the possibilities of theatre to represent both external and internal conflict in a dramatic form that still speaks to audiences) are mere—necessarily weaker—reproductions of the authors' earlier works in altered and less affective forms, or whether they can be viewed as innovative and commendable instances that shed new light upon and add further value to earlier works, the theatrical world, and American realities that both authors have been critically and analytically representing for the last half century.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Among the critical voices: Joy Goodwin's review of *Occupant* published in *The Sun* argues that the play seems to be "a two-hander without much of a second hand," a "monologue with occasional interruptions" from the "amateur biographer" who "march[es] her [Nevelson] down memory lane in predictable cradle to grave fashion"; while Elyse Sommer laments the fact that "this is more a lecture than a play." Shepard's reviewers criticize *Kicking a Dead Horse* for being didactic and political. Adam R. Perlman argues that "matters grow

I propose a comparative reading of these two plays as dramatic representations of their protagonists' (and implicitly, their authors') personal rites of separation enacted through storytelling, and their movement towards a recognition of the "space" they are to occupy in gaining a sense of self with an understanding of identity's shifting and processual nature. According to Turner, separation "comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a 'state')" (*Forest* 94) in order to enter a liminal sphere within which a transition is to be achieved from the previous condition to a new—seemingly stable—structurally prescribed state. Arguing along these lines and transgressing the limits of Turner's processual model, I interpret the plays as dramatizing individual rites of separation not merely or primarily from social roles and cultural states and attributes, but from the previously inhabited subject positions of the ritual personae through their self-imposed retrospections, paralleling their authors' own recounting and re-evaluation of their dramatic careers and artistic paths.

Turner defines as one of the main goals of liminal periods the "communication of the sacra" within which "what is said," storytelling serves as a major tool of instruction (*Forest* 102). Myths, legends, stories teach ritual subjects about the community's value system, the history of society and cults, they instruct in ethical and social obligations, laws, and skills, without deconstructing or demystifying the sacred. This transitional phase is enacted as a time of reflection, evaluation/re-evaluation, and insight through the construction of narratives that both sustain and scrutinize the master-narratives of the given social structure.

The protagonists of the two plays analyzed here are involved in a retrospective re-telling of their own "his/her-stories" from the stance of having been separated from their own imagined and structurally defined subjectivities. Through these processes of re-telling they distance themselves from what so far has been perceived as stable and coherent identity, storytelling acting here as a kind of Brechtian "Verfremdung" device that allows them to adopt an external and objective perspective. The events of their lives are built thus into structures that necessarily interpret and assess events and shed new light upon them with the

uncomfortable when the playwright attempts to place his and Hobart's story into a greater context of an American culture that rewards rapists and ransackers"; Eric Grade reads the play as "Shepard's inert and occasionally inept exercise in Beckettian absurdism"; Charles Isherwood, on the other hand, argues that "Hobart never really acquires the kind of psychological substance or emotional specificity" that characterized Shepard's earlier, "greatest characters."

purpose of constructing a meaningful narrative that may lead to a grasping and acceptance of life's and identity's flexibility.

Occupant and *Kicking a Dead Horse* create dramatic situations in which their protagonists find themselves in a position of self-analysis and contemplation. While both playwrights have been accused of adopting such non-traditional formats as the interview (in Albee's play) and an extended monologue (in Shepard's play) that offer little room for conflict, crisis, or denouement, in my reading these narrative-centered forms adequately foreground the ritual process of separation and re-evaluation of their characters' (and authors') earlier fashioned identities and artistic credos. Through storytelling they go through a process of introspection and externalization of their own drives, aims, desires, and feelings of lack and loss that within the richly meta- and intertextual and parodic tapestry of the plays is extended to encompass art, the artist, society, politics, and the human condition in general. For, as Michael Wilson argues, storytelling functions as "a tool for cultural empowerment, education, social regeneration, therapy, reconciliation, raising of political awareness" (119) as the purpose of a story does not consist in a presentation of reality but rather in "the enhancement of our understanding of it" (122).

Stories constitute building blocks of any rite of passage. Rituals are described by Turner as fulfilling a double goal: on the one hand, they are "storehouses of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed . . . dealing with the crucial values of the community" (*Drums* 2), a process within which by the manipulation of powerful and multivocal symbols, ritual subjects are instructed and transformed in order to make them able to step into their new assigned roles in their community; on the other, they provide a sphere for the analysis and evaluation of the community's values and structure. Drawing a parallel between rituals and art, in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* Turner asserts that "[s]ometimes art expresses or replicates institutionalized structure to legitimate [it]" (255) while, at the same time, it also criticizes that very structure. By the creation of unusual, unexpected, even paradoxical, shocking, or illogical combinations out of the components of the given culture, it poses problems, stimulates thought, and urges the development of resistance and/or control strategies towards the system itself. "Each society," he argues, "requires of its mature members not only adherence to rules and patterns, but at least a certain level of skepticism and initiative" (*Dramas* 256). Thus rituals, and by association art, should rouse resistance and urge transformation to the extent that they produce conformity and strengthen the structure.

Similarly to Turner's concepts of ritual, liminality, and art, Jack Zipes defines storytelling as an activity fulfilling two basic functions: "first and foremost, to communicate

the relevant values, norms, and customary practices of a group of people—to conserve them and pass them on,” while “[t]he second function is to question, change, and overthrow the dominant value system—to transform what has been preserved so that the values, norms and customs enable a group of people not only to survive but to improve their lives and make the distribution of power and wealth more just” (xv-xvi). Rituals, rites, and stories, therefore, may be viewed as a means of conservation and of transformation both on an individual and on a social level. They operate with “prescribed formal behavior” (Turner, *Forest* 19), “stereotyped sequences of activities involving gestures, words, and objects” (Turner, “Symbols” 183) as well as codified speech that sanctifies power (Zipes xvi), but they also transgress the limits of such restrictions through parody and their non-conforming and non-corroborating re-combinations and shocking associations of the constitutive elements of culture and structure, defying censorship and urging free thought and speech.

Albee and Shepard cast the stories of their central characters in forms that go against and beyond established norms of narration, codified language, and genre. Through word-play, parody, continuous self-references and intertextual associations, they create literary universes in which their characters exorcise from their lives/stories/histories the encoded social and cultural positions and manners and “endeavor to play with words to resist the censorship and training, and, through resistance, forge [their] own identities” (Zipes xvii). They do not conform to the master narratives of their social, historical, or cultural contexts, just as the playwrights themselves defy generic expectations and parody the illusion of originality and uniqueness. Through storytelling both characters and playwrights strive to find their “authentic” voices—a term that is ironically echoed in *Kicking a Dead Horse* throughout Hobart Struther’s failed quest and tiresome efforts, as an emptied slogan, that once again is filled with meaning in Albee’s and Shepard’s conscious use and innovative application of storytelling and liminal experimentation.

Occupant and *Kicking a Dead Horse* are driven by narrative rather than character even though their protagonists seem larger-than-life—Louise Nevelson in her talent (both artistic and for survival) and her self-confidence and faith in her own specialty and her destiny meant for greatness; Hobart Struther in his almost clownish, absurd struggle to surpass his circumstances, and in his scornful and angry snapping at the failure of all the myths and legends (ancient and urban) upon which he has built his whole existence as well as his hoped-for redemption. The plays subvert character-based, anti-narrative naturalist forms and modes of drama, mocking, parodying, and thus also renewing their medium, signaling in the direction of contemporary storytelling as a genre of performance. At the same time, they also

reach back to tradition and history: to the ancient chroniclers and storytellers whose role as performers has always been to interpret events, gather them in meaningful structures and thus “cast the world in a new light” (M. Wilson 135); but also to such theatrical forefathers as Shakespeare, Beckett, O’Neill, and Miller. I also add to this list—not on the level of content, but rather that of dramaturgical format and intended effect—Brecht and his followers who saw theatre as an instance of “collective storytelling” (Eddershaw 255), that should not deny or mask its own artificiality but should rather showcase and analyze its own structures, with “the epic actor who presents a character objectively for critical analysis, rather than identifying with it subjectively” (M. Wilson 123). Albee and Shepard build onto this Brechtian tradition merging it with contemporary performance techniques, also pushing beyond the limitations of such theatrical experiments: their main characters are not only “objectively presented” by the actors playing them, but they also become objectivized extensions, parodic alter egos of their authors, exhibiting undeniable autobiographical inspiration and similarities in their perception of art, life, the creative process, and contemporary realities with those of the playwrights’. Parallel, there is a division, in Brechtian terms, “*Verfremdung*” taking place also within the characters themselves: throughout the plays they remain aware of the split in their personae that is brought about by narration. They function both as lead characters and as critically detached narrators. They are shifting between these narratological/dramaturgical roles while also becoming *Doppelgänger*s of the authors. Albee even adds a further layer to this multivocal game with the genre by choosing to dedicate his play not to a generic artist figure, but the grand diva of twentieth century American sculpture, Louise Nevelson.

OCCUPANT

This biographical play’s protagonist, “the great American sculptor” (626) as her interlocutor, the Man introduces her to audiences, lived her life self-consciously and uncompromisingly striving to “occupy that space” (683) she was destined for, even though it took her half a lifetime to find the form of artistic expression that truly suited her talent and personality. Albee’s *Occupant* was also subject to a long waiting period until it could finally occupy the stage at Signature Theatre, New York. Signature’s first attempt at staging the play in 2002 was cut short when Anne Bancroft fell ill during previews, so the production never officially opened and the play did not have its world premier till six years later. The second time around, Signature closed its 2007-2008 season with a new production in their Legacy

Series with Albee's bio-play, starring Mercedes Ruehl and Larry Bryggman, and under the directorial guidance of Pam MacKinnon (who also directed the 2005 production of *The Goat* and the 2007 New York premier of *Peter and Jerry* at Second Stage Theatre).

"[I]f you're going to be a playwright, it's very important to know everything about classical music and everything about the visual arts" (2), Albee argues in an interview published in the *Signature Edition Playbill*. His play illustrates the truth of his statement as well as Albee's profound understanding of art and of the workings of an artist's mind, his innovative and ever surprising approach to his own genre and his interrogative and subversive attitude towards all rules and conventions of literature, language, as well as identity.

Albee had known Nevelson for over twenty-five years before her death in 1988, and found her to be an intensely dramatic personality. The play, as the author argues, "is about her and how she survived the various vicissitudes and got to turn into her work" ("Signature" 2) rather than her sculptures or working method as an artist. At the same time, it is imbued with a deep respect for the works Nevelson created, their quality, inventiveness, and concentration on form. Albee based his play on his own conversations with the sculptor, others' interviews with her, and the play throughout sustains a deep-rooted loyalty and truthfulness towards the persona Nevelson appeared to be: "I knew her well enough to know that's how she would have responded" (Albee, "Signature" 2).

Occupant presents Louise Nevelson being interviewed by the Man. The format was deemed non-dramatic by several reviewers. In my reading, however, this interview form is entirely adequate and efficacious for the aim of the play that seeks to push beyond the restrictions of conventional dramatic structures, where situations and stages of an artist's life take precedence over character. *Occupant* does not evolve as a series of dramatic scenes that would lead to the growth and transformation of its protagonist as the psychological insight that it offers is retrospective. It subverts the expectation for conflict, climax, or resolution by the introduction of the supernatural and mysterious: at the time of the interview the interviewee is dead. The reproduced model of an on-stage conversation between Nevelson and a middle-aged, refined, highly intelligent, and well-documented journalist or would-be biographer takes place in the year 2008 or "*whatever it is at performance*" (629), twenty years after Nevelson's death. Albee found the idea of a conversation with the dead sculptor to possess "dramatic possibilities" ("Signature" 3). Such a perspective creates the distance needed for Nevelson to have a more objective view on her life necessary for her self-revealing comments and confessions, a detachment from her constructed personae that now, within this

ritual of separation and exorcism, she can scrutinize and ironically discard or mythologize, a tendency the artist displayed in her lifetime as well.

The retrospective view upon a life so controversial and complex as Nevelson's also provides her interlocutor with the position of a knowledgeable and well-informed researcher. He has thorough knowledge of all the "scholarship" on the subject of his interest and he also has the appropriate critical mindset and inclination to try to differentiate between fact and fiction. He is striving to make the difference, questioning the truth value of the texts he has read about the sculptor:

It's just that she's a very complicated woman. What's the old joke . . . true if interesting? And what did Blanche say . . . I tell what ought to be true? Or is it she forgets? Or maybe she doesn't care? I think it's a little bit of each, and maybe true isn't what we're after, or maybe true is what applies. As I say, she's a very complicated woman. But . . . life is pretty complicated, too. You know, there's a lot written about her. There were a lot of stories and interviews stretching over a long time, and things shifted: a lot of contradictions, a lot of evasions, a lot of . . . careful misrememberings, a lot of scores being settled, and a lot of . . . well . . . outright lies. (ellipsis in the orig., 638)

His aspiration to get to the core of things and dig out fact from under sensational urban legends and a mythologized past turns into a metatextual commentary on the possibilities of biographic documentation merged with anecdotes circulating and the gossip- and media-image-dominated controversial portrait that society—interested more in the extravagancies of the Louise Nevelson persona rather than in her art—has generated about the "diva." The intertextual reference to Tennessee Williams's Blanche Dubois already undermines the possibility of a clear-cut distinction between real and imagined, while also signaling toward a narratological stance described by Umberto Eco who argues that, by definition, fiction presupposes the suspension of disbelief, where propositions are never called into question and the text functions as a musical score with characters sometimes leaving the original score and popping up in others, setting up a universe "where these characters live and shape our lives and perceptions," where they become "cultural habits" that we are to internalize and accept as indisputable and eternally valid (4 May 2008).

Thus the Man finds himself in the unsettling position of interviewing the dead Nevelson who scrutinizes his questions and quotations, comments on and continuously subverts his authority:

MAN Do facts mean anything to you?

NEVELSON They can be useful. (631)

NEVELSON Ignore him! (633)

NEVELSON You don't know anything. (*Out*) He doesn't know anything. (636)

She is determined to be true to herself and to be loyal to her own perception of herself, to build a narrative of her life that "was destined for greatness" (643). Her whole ritual of re-incarnation and re-evaluation of her life focuses on superimposing an artificial structure upon the seemingly random events of her past in order to interpret and transform them into a coherent series leading to the discovery of her "special self":

MAN *Be* somebody?

NEVELSON (*In*) *Yourself!* Be your special *self!* OK?

MAN OK.

NEVELSON (*Out*) You've known this from the beginning; you're very special; you're going to *be* somebody. No! You're going to be *yourself*. You're going to find out who that "you" is—what that "you" is—and you're going to . . . *occupy* that *space* . . . if it kills you. (emphasis and ellipsis in the orig., 682-83)

M. Wilson argues that imposing narrative upon events will necessarily "distort 'truth' to some extent in the process. In this sense all narratives are fiction" (121). Thus the Man's struggle to separate facts from fictitious elements and exaggerations that he feels distort the truthful image of Louise Nevelson is entirely futile. The Nevelson summoned in Albee's "Künstlerdrama" (Bertha) defies the real—false/imagined divide, she has stepped into the realm of fiction where such categories do not hold.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ In "Interart Representation in the Künstlerdrama. Word, Image, and Music in Contemporary Irish Plays," Csilla Bertha coins the term "künstlerdrama" as an analogy to "künstlerroman" constructed around an artist protagonist that "naturally leads to the thematization of essential questions and dilemmas of the existence of art and the artist, the nature of artistic creation, the relations between art and life, the subject and "objective" reality, the individual and the community, the differences between artistic and non-artistic value systems, and the role

In the Signature Theatre production lights come up on the protagonist Nevelson walking onto stage and positioning herself in front of one of the “sculptures” that proves to be also a piece of her costume, ingeniously designed by Jane Greenwood. She folds the two “wings” of the bird-like artwork in front of herself that now wraps her like a black coat and transforms the actress into part of the sculpture. As a Turnerian multivocal and polarized symbol, the person-artwork combination looks like a coffin while also functioning as an allusion to immortality through art. Such an “entrance” immediately propels Nevelson into the anti-structural mysterious sphere of ritual.

As Turner argues,

separation clearly demarcates sacred space and time from profane or secular space and time (it is more than just a matter of entering a temple—there must be in addition a rite which changes the quality of time also, or constructs a cultural realm which is defined as ‘out of time,’ i.e., beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines). It includes symbolic behavior—especially symbols of reversal or inversion of things, relationships, and processes secular—which represents the detachment of the ritual subject . . . from their previous social statuses. (*Forest* 24)

The set designed by Christine Jones for Signature creates the enigmatic and at the same time revelatory atmosphere of ritual: all painted black, black background, cubist-style furniture made of differently sized and shaped wooden boxes symbolically alluding to Nevelson’s art installations. The “out-of-time” quality of the play’s temporal universe—despite the fact that the Man openly declares which exact year it is—is obvious from the outset given the fact that it is twenty years after Nevelson’s death. Thus the interview that imitates the contemporary so fashionable on-stage-discussions with celebrities and is generally viewed as a genre of fact rather than fiction is placed in a time-frame out of the chronological flow of events and beyond “normal” human experience, when “everyday mundane life is invaded by the unusual, the inexplicable, and the ‘weird’” (M. Wilson 130).

In such a “betwixt-and-between” liminal sphere, in storytelling—as Ken Campbell argues with reference to his autobiographically inspired one-man-show—“[i]t is irrelevant whether [statements are] true or not. It’s just whether [they] add up in the story sense.”

and function of the artist in the contemporary world.” She examines how different art forms interact with each other transgressing borders and amplifying each others’ voices.

Separated from all of her previous subject positions and all the personae she had created for herself, here as a liminal subject Nevelson is allowed to play with, exaggerate, parody the seemingly random and chaotic events of her life that the Man is trying to “factualize” and list in a neat chronological order. She diverges into several unrelated directions “only for all the strands to be miraculously tied together” (M. Wilson 131) in a narrative of her own, a liminal anti-structure marked by ambiguity, parody, the emergence of the monstrous and sacred figure of the sculptor, withdrawn from normal modes of existence and action, constantly involved in the “scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture” (Turner, *Ritual Process* 167) she belonged to.

Albee creates the most appropriate dramatic playing field for the extravagant and eccentric Nevelson, marked by a playful merger of genres, a parodic mode, and liminal experimentation. The Man enters stage left and, like a grand master of ceremonies, announces, with total disregard to such conventions of the naturalist theatre tradition as sustaining the fourth-wall illusion: “Ladies and gentlemen . . . the great American sculptor . . . Louise Nevelson!” (ellipsis in the orig., 626), summoning her to life and immediately propelling both of them into a debate on identity and the multiple layers of possible interpretations that even such an apparently clichéd and simple “the great American sculptor, Louise Nevelson” may produce. Within the codified language and speech patterns of the social and cultural power structure that the Man clearly represents, such a statement contains a large number of demarcations that subjects can/are to identify themselves by (nationality, profession, name, gender). In Louise Nevelson’s liminal state, however, anything that would link her to her previous status will be parodied, in other words scrutinized, analyzed, and re-evaluated. For, as Linda Hutcheon argues, “parody . . . is not the ridiculing imitation of the standard . . . [but] repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (26). Accordingly, Nevelson agrees to the partial validity of such an introduction, but immediately also draws attention to the shifting and flexible nature of such denominators: born in 1899 in Kiev as the daughter of a Russian Jewish family, who immigrated to Maine in 1905, her name only then was changed from Leah to Louise. In 1920 she married the shipping magnate Charles Nevelson, taking on the name she later became famous by, and only then becoming an American citizen. “Greatness,” she proves, is also debatable, depending on whose perspective we adopt, simultaneously mocking thus her critics and her interviewer. As she announces, “I’m a lot of people, honey and I shift all the time” (634), summarizing thus her liminal state of being neither-nor, in-between states and positions and playfully re-organizing the traces of her past selves. Throughout, *Occupant* is

characterized by what Hutcheon denotes as the “postmodern paradox” according to which “[t]o parody is not to destroy the past, in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it” (126). The humanist notion of man/woman as a continuous and coherent subject is replaced within this ritual of separation and construction of a life narrative by an autobiography of fragments and fractured digressions loosely held together by the narrator’s awareness of her destiny of greatness and her self-consciously critical, often clownish attitude as the always unreliable storyteller. For her, the question of identity proves futile, even nonsensical if not addressing her sense of being special and her quest for realizing “greatness” in her life and art. It is more a matter of becoming than existence:

With any luck you turn into whoever you want to *be*, and with even better luck you turn into whoever you *should* be. No, you got somebody in you right from the start, and if you’re lucky you figure out who it is and you *become* it. People who don’t *become* are . . . well, look around you. So, don’t talk to me about facts. (emphasis and ellipsis in the orig., 639)

“I’m the total of everything I do” (637), she declares not denying subjectivity but “challenging the traditional notion of its unity and its function” (Hutcheon 164). Her narrative builds into a personal history of a constant battle to defy being possessed and held back by convention, custom, or tradition. The feeling of never fitting in, of not belonging results in a struggle to make the world fit her: “You don’t fit in—so you make everything fit to you” (632). Albee’s play sets up a sphere of ludic experimentation that offers Nevelson the opportunity to “reset the stage of her life” in a manner that fits her.

This posthumous interview turns into a series of recollections and lectures prompted by the Man’s questions with reference to the data and stories he has collected about the sculptor. But “setting the record straight” on what really happened proves an enterprise that Nevelson’s mythologizing and larger-than-life (or death) personality and her present supernatural, liminal state undermines. Gender and engendered roles are also scrutinized and subverted by the grand lady who conforms to traditions and rules and then to take the roles forced upon her to the extremes in order to build a persona that attests to her feeling of non-belonging and specialty. Being pretty in her teenage years with clear and smooth dark skin results in her always attempting to be the prettiest she can be: dressing extravagantly in conformity only with her own taste, wearing double sable eyelashes—another symbolic expression of Louise Nevelson constructing her own “mask”—draws attention to the

artificiality of her public image and the impenetrable inner self that hides within not only from the world but also from her own consciousness:

NEVELSON The eyes are . . . what? the entry to the soul? Well, I don't know about that, but they sure do call attention to themselves—the eyes—if you've got two sets of sable eyelashes on 'em.

MAN Did you ever try three sets?

NEVELSON (*In*) Yes; of course. I couldn't keep my eyes open. (*They both chuckle*) Everybody thought I was asleep—standing up, walking around and talking, dead asleep. (ellipsis in the orig., 666)

Taking on a secretary's job and then entering an arranged marriage cast Nevelson into further subject positions defined, prescribed, and delimited by her heritage and her gender. The very fact, however, that she proves so self-conscious and—from the very outset—realistically objective about such major shifts of status in her life as a young woman defy the roles and subvert them into “masks” that she willingly puts on with an acute awareness of destiny being laid out for her and holding something “great” in store that she must strive to accomplish. Still, the attentive interpreter must wonder whether this detachment—emotional and spiritual—is not merely the result of her present status: being dead, therefore bodily, spacially, and temporally separated from the Louise Nevelson she used to be. It reads rather as an element of her ritual of refashioning her life into a more organic myth of her growing into an artist. The brutal honesty with which she addresses her failure in the role that conventionally defines a woman's position within society, motherhood, her reluctance to give in or surrender to this major rite of passage of female existence and transform herself accordingly illustrate yet another ritual that in the life of the non-conformist and creative artist called up resistance and separation strategies rather than a strengthening and re-affirmation of the existent social and familial structure. The narrative she is constructing about her life continuously emphasizes the fact that she either rejected the positions imposed upon her or played them to the extremes where they became self-destructive caricatures: her over-expenditure, her alleged promiscuity, the relentless pursuit of pleasure and fulfillment, her heavy drinking and long stays in bed, her refusal to talk to her child, and her stubborn search for the most adequate means of self-expression, all are de-masked as strategies of resistance to the structure and conventions that would try to delimit and prevent her from attaining “that space” that she feels she is destined to occupy.

Whenever her narrative turns to moments of artistic revelation, in Joycean terms “epiphanies,” her inclination towards the fictionalized and mysterious strengthens and overwrites even the illusion of factual autobiographic recollection. Despite the Man’s insistence and demand for reliable proof, the image of the huge black horse she says she saw running when she was a teenager and with which she tried to keep up, is transformed here into the liminal symbol of Nevelson’s life, strength, and talent. But at the same time, in concordance with Turner’s concepts of liminal dominant symbols being multivocal and polarized (*Revelation* 152), the uncatchable horse may also be interpreted as the representation of desires, a symbol of perfection, freedom, wholeness, an externalization of the creative imagination of an artist as well as of the impossibility of locating that one “special ‘you’” that Nevelson both promotes and subverts through her “split” stage presence as interviewee, protagonist, and narrator.

Nevelson as storyteller proves talented and knowledgeable; she employs all the tricks of good storytelling not only by dividing her time between addressing her interlocutor and the audience, simultaneously keeping both involved and interested, but also by only gradually disclosing secrets and by keeping her listeners in doubt about the validity and truthfulness of what she tells them. With her story about the horse, for example, she heightens the suspense and builds up expectations through intertextually alluding to mythology and fairytales with mysterious horses as helpers of the young quester, just to evade proving whether the event really took place: “What does it matter? It’s a good story” (642). She occasionally also poses as the observer and analyst of twentieth century history and art, all interwoven with her sarcastic reminiscences and ironic subversion of her social and familial roles and her epic struggle to develop into the artist she felt destined to be. She transforms the rather non-dramatic genre of the interview into high drama that climaxes in the disclosure on stage of her abstract “assemblages” and installations of found wood arranged in wooden boxes painted black, white, or gold, huge abstract sculptures that often fill entire exhibition rooms. Her works seem externalized images of her personality: tough, complex, intriguing, pushing outside and beyond the “boxes” into which social, cultural, and artistic conventions have tried and still try to classify and restrict her.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ The 2008 Signature Theatre production made the parallel materialize on stage: while the artist Nevelson occupies her “special space” in her recollections, the background lights gradually lit up illuminating the huge installation of her works behind the black curtain that to the motion of her hand drops to the floor revealing the black, white, and gold “assemblages” in their entire grandeur.

The narrative that she constructs subverting the conventions of autobiography, interview, or codified storytelling, may also be read as the *ars poetica* of the playwright who—also an artist who tends to mythologize his own creative development and method of writing—confesses to have gone through several stages of experimentation with painting, composing music, writing poetry and prose, before finally putting onto paper his first play he has been “carrying inside” that “felt individual . . . creative . . . talented” (Albee, “Signature” 3). He also shares Nevelson’s fascination with the “so-called primitive art” of African tribes, “utilitarian” and/but “pure power; pure art” (681). In a public conversation with Marian Seldes organized by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts on the 17 April 2008, as a somewhat “uncanny” mirroring of the dramatic situation of *Occupant*, connoisseurs of his body of work could catch Albee in playfully quoting his own character when asserting his fascination with tribal art that is “utilitarian and ceremonial” and becomes art “through its usefulness in the transformation of the world.” Through this bio-play he certainly pays homage to the friend and creative artist he knew in Nevelson, while also expanding her dramatic persona into an alter ego of the author and an idealized image of the artist in general whose subversive, innovative, and ironic mode of creating will refashion the world without denying or eliminating the past.

Recalling an anecdote circulating about her re-incarnation as a Native American, another fascination of Nevelson’s, she firmly declares: “I would come back as Louise Nevelson” (697). In Albee’s *Occupant* she does.

KICKING A DEAD HORSE

Similarly to Albee’s *Occupant*, Shepard’s *Kicking a Dead Horse* also subverts the dramaturgical format of naturalist theatre, while also revising hallmarks of the playwright’s oeuvre reorganizing them in a ritualistic narrative of separation and re-evaluation. We step into classic Shepard-country, the legendary West, but already the opening scene destabilizes our preconceptions. The realistic minimalism of sky and endless prairie is broken by “a dark pit downstage center with mounds of fresh earth on either side of it” and “a dead horse laid out on its side . . . as realistic as possible with no attempt to stylize or cartoon it in any way” (9). As the author bluntly explains, “[i]n fact, it should actually be a dead horse” (9). The relatively simple stage-space is thus transformed into a complex setting for a ritual. The single character—invisible at first, hidden in the pit he is digging—immediately calls to mind Shakespeare’s clownish gravediggers, creating an intertextual network of expectations that the

play later sustains and subverts at the same time. Hutcheon, discussing postmodernist architecture, argues that artists revisit the past and revitalize its elements setting them into contemporary contexts but also challenging the “symmetry,” the expected similarity that is broken in order for “the eye . . . to complete the form for itself,” a “counter-expectation [that] urges us to be active, not passive viewers” (32). Accordingly, the Shepardian gravedigger stands alone in the seclusion of his—as we later learn—self-imposed liminoid quest for “authenticity.” He reminisces about his past and ruminates over his present situation. Without an interlocutor, the confrontation between self and other (the quintessential conflict of Shepard’s plays between siblings, fathers and sons, or mentalities) is transposed onto an internal battle-field and, by the end of the play, it is enlarged into a deconstruction of not only personal but also social and cultural myths as well as of canonical history.

Reviewers and analysts of the play have emphasized its intertextual references, highlighting the homage that Shepard pays to Beckett with this one-man-show that revives and relocates into an American setting the absurdity of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* as well as the existential angst, despair, and disillusionment over unrealized desires and dreams of *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Varró’s study identifies links to Miller’s plays and Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (and *Hamlet*), while also registering “the extent to which Shepard rewrites in *Dead Horse* his previous oeuvre with a change” (46). My analysis, therefore, focuses rather on generic aspects of *Kicking a Dead Horse* and on the ritual of separation that Hobart Struther enacts—a separation from his horse, his past, his imagined future, and the illusion of “cowboy authenticity,” a gesture of parody on the part of a playwright who has been dislocating, scrutinizing, and rewriting the myths and archetypal images of rural American and of the western frontier for over half a century now.

Hobart Struther, the successful New York art dealer is going through a somewhat belated mid-life crisis (he is in his mid-sixties, just like Shepard), and, as he feels compelled to leave behind his dishonest business and his marriage that has cooled down, he decides to go on a “quest for ‘AUTHENTICITY’ . . . some kind of holy mission in itself” (12). Similarly to Albee’s character—though less creatively—he embarks on a voyage that is meant to liberate him from “a life in which, daily, I was convinced I was not intended to be living” (14). His sacred journey, however, is ironically cut short on the very first day when his horse dies out from beneath of him leaving him stranded in the middle of nowhere and with a compelling sense of duty to bury the dead animal.

The setup thus becomes doubly liminal: Struther’s rite of passage is superimposed upon a burial ceremony and transformed by it into a ritual of separation from the past and the

imagined/hoped future as well. The horse, that in Albee's play functions as the multivocal symbol of vitality, strength, beauty, as well as of the elusive nature of both desires and identity, materializes here as the polarized dominant symbol of futility and failure. On the "sensory or orectic pole" it represents natural, physical death—something that Struther, chasing "authenticity," needs to face and come to terms with, while the cluster of meanings that it bears on the "ideological or normative pole" ironically undercuts all those moral values and ideals that are conventionally associated with the traditional image of the West and frontier lifestyle.⁸⁷ As a dominant symbol within the liminal communication of the sacra, it reads as a means of teaching Struther "how to think with some degree of abstraction about [his] cultural milieu and give [him] ultimate standards of reference" as well as "to change [his] nature, transform [him] from one kind of human being into another" (Turner, *Forest* 108). He is forced to re-evaluate not merely his former life and the subject positions he assumed within the structure he was so anxious to leave behind, but also to face up to the fact that his "escape" and rejection of conformity led him to another structurally defined, delimited, and prescribed illusion. Like several of Shepard's male characters, he is driven towards a West that does not exist, towards a media-generated image that has been haunting the American male, luring him with the promise of freedom and "authenticity."

Struther's rite of passage turned ritual of separation, conform traditions, must be "performed in a sequestered place" (Turner, "Symbols" 183) with the ritual subject secluded and isolated from everyday life, in "a moment in and out of time" (Turner, *Ritual Process* 96). The manipulation of stereotyped gestures, words, objects, and codified speech foregrounds the parody that dominates the play. For, as Hutcheon argues, "[p]arody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it" (35). Accordingly, the fact that Shepard once again revisits the West and the cowboy mentality with all its anachronistic myths, legends and its allure of freedom and heroism—that led several reviewers to condemn the play as a mere weak recycling of Shepardian themes and topics—functions as a method of raising the issue of "authenticity" and of the validity of such myths today, deconstructing them from within and symbolically signaling towards parody itself as the efficacious mood of re-telling the past that "[l]ike Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, . . . works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity" (Hutcheon 35).

⁸⁷ For a detailed discussion of dominant symbols and their characteristics, see Turner's *The Forest of Symbols*.

In enacting the burial ceremony, and throughout the unfolding ritual of separation, Hobart Struther resorts to the all too familiar cowboy gear and attitude, parallel to the way Shepard also operates with conventional dramaturgical tricks, modes, and structures to recombine them into shocking and involving constructs. *Kicking a Dead Horse*, similarly to *Occupant*, reads as a narrative- rather than character-driven play whose one-man-show format and the seemingly non-dramatic situation appear to nullify “drama.” The internal battle that unfolds on stage through Struther’s shifts among the voices of his earlier and present selves, permeated with such metatheatrical comments as “I’m not exactly sure what ‘voice’ to use” (14), “[c]an the melodrama, please” (29), or “Gazing down in dismay at this little sad display’! Have you got no shame! Who the fuck are you supposed to be now? William Butler Yeats or something?” (20-21), does not build into the iconic confrontation scenes of Shepard’s earlier plays (like *True West*, *Fool for Love*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *The Late Henry Moss*, *Simpatico*, etc.). Neither does Struther’s physical struggle with pulling and pushing the corpse of the dead horse into the pit amount to heightened suspense or the dramatic crisis of the tragic hero. Dramatic tension comes from the form Shepard employs. Albee’s protagonist from beyond the grave transforms the interview into a series of stories that she eventually builds into a master narrative of her own, defying and subverting the truth-value that we customarily attach to biography or historiographic documentation: “I’ll *tell* it! I’ll tell it. . . . I’ll tell it my way” (emphasis and ellipsis in the orig., 648). Shepard’s fictional character launches himself into a monologue that builds from the personal towards the national and mythical. The reader/audience is not so much interested in the psychology of the character as in how Struther as storyteller will transform this liminal situation into an all-encompassing narrative.

Writer and storyteller John McGrath argues:

the theatre must tell a story, even if it is most slender, it must be a story not an amorphous collection of disparate experiences . . . we must turn to the storytellers of the past and ransack their collections for outlines that bear meaning to us now. And from these, and from our own deeper narrative springs, we must create new stories that speak clearly and truly. (4)

Shepard’s character shifts from “voice to voice,” from being the protagonist of his own stories to the role of narrator, until the actor even steps out of character to deliver one of the major political messages the play so didactically forefronts: “*He moves to extreme downstage*

centre. The actor drops all pretence of character and speaks from himself, directly to audience, very simply) Don't you think there ought to be a National Day of Rest for someone like that [Crazy Horse]? A true American hero!" (31). Subverting traditional dramatic forms, Shepard breaks the monologue up with dialogic passages with the self, metatheatrical commentaries addressed directly to the audience, direct and implicit intertextual references, lecture-like passages on American history and contemporary politics, singing, even an ironic death-announcement that seems to be taken directly from the New York Times: "So this is it, I guess, huh? 'Prominent New York Art Dealer Found Dead in Badlands with Dead Horse. There were no apparent signs of a struggle'" (44). By fracturing the form and bringing it into dialogue with such a multitude of other literary and non-literary texts, Shepard involves the audience into an active process of decoding, combining, and constructing Struther's story, that also reads as an ironic view upon Shepard's own creative history. As Varró argues, "*Dead Horse* is Shepard's version of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, where Shepard allows himself an honest look into his aspirations and accomplishments, the dreams he once dreamt and the realities amidst which he ended up" (53). Similarly to Albee's play wherein Nevelson's narrative adds up to a "portrait of the artist" as sculptor and alter ego of the author, Hobart Struther's monologue may be read as a ceremonial, ritualistic summary and re-evaluation of all the thematic, autobiographical, mythological, and theatrical elements that have been shaping Shepard's career as a playwright.

But parody does lurk behind every word and gesture within this play, and the interpreter has to caution his/herself immediately when phrasing a statement with such finality. For "literature is not an exercise in freedom," as Eco asserts, and interpretation, though indefinite, must remain faithful to the text (4 May 2008). Struther/Rea/Shepard commemorates as the "true American hero" the Native American leader named Crazy Horse in a play entitled *Kicking a Dead Horse* with a set design built to foreground the carcass of a dead horse and a protagonist literally kicking the dead horse, a pun that in the case of such a self-conscious writer as Shepard is surely not accidental. The play also attacks American foreign and internal policies that have not changed that much since 2007; while the final image reads as the materialization of yet another proverbial saying: Struther seems to have been digging his own grave, buried within the pit under the body of his horse, singing a song that parodies both the melancholy image of the Western Rambler and the rambling monologue delivered on stage:

Oh, didn't he ramble
 Oh, didn't he ramble
 Rambled all around
 In and out of town.

Oh, didn't he ramble
 Oh, didn't he ramble
 He rambled till those butchers
 Cut him down. (46)

Another element that has been attacked by the majority of reviewers for being incongruent with the rest of the play and that seems to “show cloven hoof” is the second character, the naked Young Woman who mysteriously appears from the grave to hand Struther his discarded hat back just to disappear unnoticed by Hobart and without a word.⁸⁸ She may be interpreted as yet another multivocal symbol of the ritual process that within the liminal transformation/instruction period is manipulated in order to reveal the working of the structure the ritual subject has been and is to become part of, without disclosing its artificiality and sustaining the air of mysticism and sacredness of the given order. In discussing rituals, Turner also argues that the liminal process is designed in such a manner as to “influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actor’s goals and interests” (“Symbols” 183). In this sense, the Young Woman emerging from the grave reclaiming and redeeming the formerly literally buried symbols of the West becomes that mysterious entity that upholds and sustains a value-system that within the dreams and desires of the males in the Shepardian universe is usually posited as an ideal, as the counterpoint of the structure that for them remains forever desired but unattainable and un-decodable. At the same time, Shepard’s female characters always represent the subversive power that undermines the patriarchal system from within, often the depositories of sacred knowledge and the manipulators of both life and death (for example, Conchalla in *The Late Henry Moss*, or the Ghost and Velada in *Silent Tongue*).

⁸⁸ John Simon, for example, sarcastically interprets the scene as “a bit of surrealism emerging from the hole . . . a woman, symbolizing . . . what?” (ellipsis in the orig.).

In *Kicking a Dead Horse*, however, Shepard is ritually coming to terms with and ironically rewriting historical and literary traditions and his own oeuvre. The use of the mysterious and elusive Young Woman, therefore, signals towards his earlier female characters as well as to that marginalized but ever-present female voice and force in the American canon (both historical and literary) that traditionally is neglected and ignored by patriarchal articulations of American-ness. According to Hutcheon, “[p]ostmodernism signals its dependence by its *use* of the canon [of a dominant white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Euro-centric culture], but reveals its rebellion through its ironic *abuse* of it” (130). The naked, voiceless Young Woman through her very presence defies and subverts the unquestionable validity and efficiency of any ritual of separation or narrative of “AUTHENTICITY” that Struther might construct. His attempted detachment from his past subject positions as well as his undertaking to rid himself of the illusion of escape into the romanticized ideal of the West prove manifestations of the Beckettian absurd, further illusions echoing Willy Loman as well as O’Neill’s doomed characters in *The Iceman Cometh*. *Kicking a Dead Horse* thus becomes the dramatic representation of a double ritual of separation—Hobart Struther’s and Shepard’s—from a past that necessarily invades the present and refuses to be buried. Just like the dead horse that Hobart struggles in vain to push into the pit, the “ghosts” of history, theatre, myth, and legend (both ancient and contemporary) subvert any attempt on the part of the creative artist to separate and free himself of them.

Occupant and *Kicking a Dead Horse* build and present situations, rather than actions. Dramatic situations, according to Béla Bíró, encompass the internalization or conceptualization of external transformations brought about by action. Bíró argues that in modern/postmodern drama external action gradually becomes internal, while characters are presented in situations that precede or follow actions. Every situation also involves a decision to be made, while in absurd drama this decision making process becomes a dilemma that the characters are unable to surpass. The protagonists of the two plays analyzed here remain in a basic situation throughout; the transformations that occur within the micro-situations set up by the Man’s replicas or the new topics of discussion he initiates, or Hobart Struther’s renewed efforts to bury the hose and all the symbols of the West with it, make their situation more intense. The confronting elements—Nevelson and the Man, the old and the present selves of Struther, the identities presented on stage and the audience, the playwrights and the theatrical/cultural heritage—get closer and closer, with suspense gradually building without action being taken, or situation-altering decisions being made. Thus, *Occupant* and *Kicking a Dead Horse* parodically subvert the expectations of audiences (and reviewers) with reference

to external conflict and action, but not by eliminating conflict or confrontation. Albee creates dramatic suspense through the clash of two types of narrators: Man poses as the objective and factual biographer while Nevelson undermines his intentions from the outset, relying on creativity and imagination in telling her life story. Man's questions open up micro-situations within which the single decision to be made proves a narratological one: how to tell the story. *Kicking a Dead Horse* dramatizes the consequences of past decisions and events that lead to an inescapable dilemma: caught between a life built on selling illusions and an imagined future based on yet another illusion, Struther's internal conflict makes his struggle to render his life and present situation into a meaningful narrative ironically turn on him: he does not close the story, the story closes down on him.

Every story has been told, in the Lyotardian "pagan vision" every narrative is always already a retelling of earlier ones (78). Albee's *Occupant* and Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse* operate on all levels with intertextual parody of European and American theatrical tradition, popular culture, film, history, politics, as well as the genre and their own body of work. The two playwrights resort to storytelling as a means of building the narratives of their protagonists—alter egos of the authors—into dramatic structures that highlight the possibilities rather than the limitations inherent in such a parodic interrogation and excavation of the past.

CONCLUSION

[F]act is better left to fiction.

(Albee, *Peter and Jerry* 76)

The conceptual framework of my analysis of Albee's and Shepard's recent plays has been built on Turner's and Girard's anthropological ideas, read together with post-structuralist subject theories. A focus on the ritual process runs through the preceding chapters as a theoretical thread linking the plays to each other as representing the human condition within the liminal sphere of rites of passage.

The two playwrights present characters caught up in a liminal struggle to attain power and control, striving for the ideal of belonging to a community, for a stable value-system, self-affirmation, and an anchored identity. They attempt to occupy a central role and power position in shaping their destinies. As seen in the discussion of the various plays, characters are constantly denied this ideal by forces they either do not understand or cannot control due to their misconceptions regarding their own condition or their blind march toward a goal they can never achieve.

As I have shown in previous chapters, Albee's and Shepard's texts invite an interpretation that moves towards and beyond the boundaries of classical theories of ritual and the tradition of domestic drama. The eight analyzed plays invoke and transcend ritual structures, breaking the mold of Turner's and Girard's theories. The plays illustrate and transcend such complex concepts as Turner's liminality and the liminoid, and Girard's theory of mimetic desire and the scapegoating effect. The texts, however, also lend themselves to a reading based on subject theories that—as I have proven—complement and invigorate an interpretation within the frame set out by liminality and sacrificial victimization.

“Symbol Turned Flesh” focuses on foregrounding the ritual structure of Shepard's *Buried Child* and Albee's *The Play about the Baby* where the dominant symbols employed in instructing the returning neophyte Vince lead him to recognize the insurmountable inheritance of eternal liminality. By comparing and contrasting this liminal process to the one Boy and Girl experience and are subjected to in their self-imposed seclusion invaded by the “ritual elders” Man and Woman, I conclude that they, like Vince, experience the loss of illusions and the instability of identity construction played out against the overt centrality of the audience within these metatheatrical plays.

In *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*) Albee ironically undercuts his own subtitle as the play subverts the idea of a single scapegoat by dispersing the role of the tragic victim onto all three members of the Gray family, leading to a rethinking of the Girardian model. In presenting the characters' liminal trials in the familial crisis, Albee destabilizes traditional preconceptions related to tragedy and domestic drama. My reading highlights parody as a means of subverting traditional dramatic and ritual structures, reorganizing them in such a manner as to overthrow audience expectations and rigid interpretative methods and attitudes, urging liminoid experimentation in the reception of the play as well.

In Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss* the traumas of the past haunt the present of the Moss males and the father's death leaves behind an intense awareness of his legacy of violence. Shepard's renewed look at sibling rivalry presents the Moss brothers in their attempt to reconstruct the past and its traumas in order to gain control over the present and to discard the destiny-defining ghost of the patriarch. I show how the Mosses' story becomes the site of endless speculation and utter uncertainty with the brothers suspended in a failed ritual of separation that also reads as the playwright's own attempt to distance himself from the memory of his own father and dramatize the "thematic ghosts" that have been haunting his oeuvre.

Albee's *Peter and Jerry* dramatizes the clash of the seemingly contradictory rituals of self-affirmation and disappearance, both of which ultimately are exposed as attempts to trick and avoid death. Ann and Jerry enact rituals aiming to position themselves in the center, thus in control over their own and others' destinies and over the decaying human body. Peter, however, tries to trick death through hiding behind the guise of conventionality and routinized language, a discourse based on empty formulas, commonplaces, and repetition. My analysis reveals liminality as a space of the Baudrillardian process of simulation, and theatre as the sphere where such processes may be acknowledged, conceptualized, and tested. I conclude that the liminal trials on stage and the liminoid interpretative process the audience participates in create the opportunity for the spectators to juxtapose different images, narratives, dramatizations of man's loneliness and mortality thus rendering them into cognition.

In "Effacing Myths and Mystification of Power" discussing Shepard's *The God of Hell* I interpret liminality as a sphere within which normative power-relations are suspended and replaced by a totalitarian structure sustained by the passivity and lack of resistance strategies of those subjugated. I demonstrate how, through the implicit rite of passage presented on stage with sarcasm and irony, Shepard recreates political satire in postmodern n

theatre with a twist: he parodies both the normative power structure built on a culture of war and violence and the uncritical acceptance of this power by its naïve and passive subjects.

By comparing and contrasting Albee's *Occupant* with Shepard's *Kicking a Dead Horse* in "Danse Macabre" I highlight the parallel mechanisms and effects of parody, storytelling, and liminality. Parody transforms the enacted rituals of separation of the two protagonists into processes of detachment and critical analysis not only of their retrospectively uncovered lives but also, implicitly, into attempts on the part of the two playwrights to distance themselves and their audiences from preconceptions about the genre, theatre tradition, theatrical experience, and earlier themes and motifs. Through parody they shed new light upon the past and re-shape it into a meaningful narrative that may serve as basis for a future built on an awareness of identity's (like any structure's, be it individual, social, or literary) flexible and ever-changing nature.

These narratives of ritual passage and liminal trials challenge pre-existent concepts on subjectivity, moral and cultural values, and power structures. They defy and transcend the limits of both ritual and dramatic tradition. As Albee emphasized, "I want to influence people, and if possible, do some damage" (12 May 2008). His and Shepard's plays subvert the status quo and urge their audiences to confront the world outside the limits of the theatre with a consciousness altered by the inner liminoid experience. In my reading of their recent plays, these two playwrights appear as keen observers of the human condition, as harsh social critics, and re-invigorators of dramatic forms. Their works, imbued with irony and humor, create a carnivalesque and playful ambiance foregrounding the regenerative and renewing powers of the liminoid rather than the reinforcing character of the liminal.

Through their liminal experimentation, Albee and Shepard devise dramatic structures that stage identity and model communal processes. The elimination the closure, that in a reading within the framework of Turnerian concepts and terminology equals reintegration, transforms the structure in order to adapt it to the contemporary sense of identity as a fluid, fractured, processual item rather than a fixed and coherent entity, as well as of a community in constant transformation. Thus, necessarily, their plays remain open-ended and invite multiple interpretations. They create literary universes that respond to their context, sketching radical images of the different aspects of American culture. They continuously posit into the foreground of their preoccupations the problem most pertinent to "cultural performances"—a dramatization of individual and communal identity and the attainable subject positions within the social, historical, and cultural normative system that their works critically present, doing

this in a style and manner that does not stabilize this discourse but amplifies and expands it through fresh perspectives.

It may seem paradoxical how this primary concern for the staging of American identity and culture and for the close scrutiny of values and myths believed to form the basis of this identity and culture can result in such disparate works. For the literary worlds created by Albee are always urban, rural America surfacing—if at all—as a lost ideal, an idyllic dream-land that has/will be destroyed by the intrusion of urban culture. His style is witty, often abstract, moving towards a generalization of the issues presented, towards fable, without ever becoming didactic or propagandistic. Shepard, on the other hand, is the poet-dramatist of rural America. His style is rough and sometime even bumpkin-like, concrete. He draws up stories firmly grounded in the American geography of the West that are gradually transformed into parables of the human condition. He dares to be willingly and overtly propagandistic and didactic, and exactly by the exaggerated and self-conscious use of propaganda and didacticism, that have been banned and discarded from high literary canonical drama, he sneaks them back into the theatre in a form controversial enough to stir discussion—an aspect that links him again to Albee who has never failed to divide critics and incite debate.

An analysis of Albee's and Shepard's plays reveals how Turnerian concepts regarding ritual structures and social drama may be fruitfully read together with, broadened, refined, and made even more complex by post-structuralist subject theory, theory of parody and storytelling. Such correlations offer further paths towards theoretical elaborations that may result in designing interpretative tools for interdisciplinary research. One such direction that I wish to outline consists in parody, doubling, and intertextuality.

Linda Hutcheon and Dana Puiu, amongst others, have shown that parody is never merely the critical imitation of an object, a text, or structure, but also its critical revival and reinterpretation. When Albee and Shepard continuously draw on sources from the history and theory of drama, they go back to ancient structures of drama/tragedy built on the dynamics of conflicting desires and intentions, while they also subvert and reshape them. They often transform conflict into an internal one materialized on stage either in a character entering a situation where s/he is forced to confront her/himself and face up to the impossibility of once and for all occupying a fixed and stable subject position, or in characters who appear to embody two sides of a fractured whole, becoming thus conflicting doubles of each other, a recurring motif in both playwrights' oeuvres.

The Doppelgänger and the motif of role reversals open up the realm of the carnivalesque, monstrous, or supernatural as it suggests expropriation of identity. In both

Albee's and Shepard's works this trope surfaces with overt frequency.⁸⁹ On 26 March 2008, at the After-Show Discussion with Albee organized by Cherry Lane Theatre following the opening of the revival of *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, I had the opportunity to ask the playwright about his use of the motif of twins, referring to both *The American Dream* and his 2008 *Me, Myself, and I*. He replied that he thought it was a strong dramatic device and that there obviously was some relation between the two plays, but also that he had not thought about it, and added with a wink that he did not think it was worth writing a dissertation about. Despite his admonition, I do believe that a more detailed look at the issue of doubling in his plays, as well as Shepard's, could represent a fruitful path for future analysis.

The Doppelgänger in folklore and literature is often viewed as the evil duplicate, the materialization of the split in identity. It may represent the omen of death, a destructive force, thus frequently used in drama/fiction to develop conflict based on mistaken identity.⁹⁰ Sometimes doubling involves the supernatural, the double being the embodiment of evil set out to destroy the original, in this sense inviting a Baudrillardian reading as simulation. To see oneself in the flesh as an other has always been viewed as uncanny. But as thus, it can also be linked to what Fischer-Lichte identifies as "the basic anthropological condition [which is] a fundamentally theatrical one" (*History 1*): man's need to view himself as an other reflected in the gaze of another. Accordingly, identities staged in the theatrical space or demonstrated in the liminal phase of rituals function as doubles for the spectator, "magical mirrors" (Fischer-Lichte, *History 2*) into which one peers and may be dramatically transformed. As Albee phrased it during the Cherry Lane discussion, a good performance always calls out to the audience: "This is the way you are acting. You don't like it? Good! Change it!"

Through his use of twins or his trick of multiplying a character by staging its different versions at different ages (the couple George and Martha seem older versions of Nick and Honey, Man and Woman of Boy and Girl after the Fall, while A, B, and C in *Three Tall Women* are unmasked by Act Two as one and the same woman at different stages in her life) Albee doubles this inherent doubling of the theatrical experience. His latest play, *Me, Myself, and I* proves a shrewd and frenetically funny game of doubling of identities, images, and texts, a play in whose ontologically unstable universe we meet a pair of identical twins, both named Otto (one capital, one lower-case) who cannot be told apart by anyone (not even their

⁸⁹ Literature has always been fascinated with the question of doubling, twins, role appropriations and reversals, from Shakespeare to Dostoyevsky, Edgar Allen Poe, Oscar Wilde, etc. Jorge Luis Borges includes a chapter on the Double in his *Book of Imaginary Beings*.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* or Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.

mother). The space, reminiscent of Beckett in its simplicity and barrenness houses an absurd conflict: OTTO has decided to exchange his brother to a new one, his true identical twin, his mirror image, and has the intention of becoming Chinese.⁹¹ This existential farce with its vaudeville elements, direct or implicit intertextual references, built on the twists and turns of the palindrome name, reads as the dramatization of a doomed quest to delineate and anchor identity in a world that lacks the conventional footholds of familial relations, racial definition, social or geographical positioning, or even the defining power of one's name—issues also brought up and scrutinized by the protagonist of *Occupant*, Louise Nevelson, alias Leah Berliawsky.

Shepard's Doppelgänger appear in pairs of brothers who seem to be two sides of the same entity caught up in the "brother-against-brother archetype" (Morse 746), and who usually become duplicates of their fathers who leave behind a legacy of violence and self-destruction. They are confined to the margins of social existence, unable to separate themselves either from each other or from the grip of the doomed patriarch. Lee and Austin in *True West*, Earl and Ray in *The Late Henry Moss*, similarly to the earlier pairing of Hoss and Crow in *The Tooth of Crime*, double each other and remain suspended in their eternal liminal confrontation staged in the emblematic final visual image of *True West*: the two brothers facing each other, parodying the Hollywood representation of confronting gunfighters of the old West. Doubling also manifests as internal struggle, as one's confrontation with oneself in *Kicking a Dead Horse*, and in most cases it functions as the omen of decay and inescapable genetic and cultural determinism: the butchered lamb may be interpreted as the symbolic double of Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, similarly to the unearthed corpse of the buried child becoming the metaphoric representation of Vince's fate, who has himself already become the mirror image of the by then dead patriarch, Dodge. An instance of doubling as uncanny multiplication is also staged in *The God of Hell* where initiands Haynes and Frank are ground down through physical and mental torture and manipulation and then dressed and conditioned to duplicate the devilish Welsh, becoming automaton-like, robotic, thus clownish puppets of a power they cannot identify, that remains invisible, mysterious, and menacing.

A detailed study of these processes of doubling and how they contribute to the staging of American identity in the works of Albee and Shepard, would contribute to present scholarship by uncovering further instances where these two playwrights re-actualize and

⁹¹ The mirror image as authentic but difficult, therefore better to avoid confrontation with oneself also appears as motif in Jerry's contemplations in *Peter and Jerry*.

reinvigorate traditional dramatic/literary devices and reinterpret them endowing them with further functions and symbolic valences. The doubling on stage becomes a parody of the audience's identification with staged identities and may act as a distancing device that results in a more conscious theatrical experience.

Albee's and Shepard's plays also move from the dynamic conflict of doubles towards confrontational situations (as in O'Neill's and Miller's plots) that bear change and are filled with deconstructive energies. Following in the footsteps of Beckett and his staging of the absurdity of life, of man's seemingly purposeless role and position in the universe, these two American playwrights create dramatic universes that apparently eliminate both conflict and confrontation, when the meaning of life and possibility of change escape the characters. In these instances confrontation is transposed, it transgresses the borders of the stage and unfolds between staged identity and the perceiver of the performance. The passive and indeterminate condition of the characters trapped in liminal in-between states (should) engage audiences, (should) initiate transformation by heightening awareness and resulting in commitment.

Albee and Shepard draw on this Beckettian stance, and transform the European absurd into a specifically American one. In the dramatic universes of Albee's plays this existentialist mindset is softened by the playwright's humanist perspective. Like Miller's sympathy, Albee's concern for all the lost souls of urban America, the intention to assist them in coming to terms with the absurdity they come to recognize and give into passively, manifests in his empathetic portrayal of not only Jerry but also Ann and Peter in *Peter and Jerry*, or all the conflicted Grays in *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* Despite the fact that they realize the absurdity of their situation and are aware of their impossibility to do anything about it beyond staying conscious, Albee's characters always remain witty, eloquent, and humorous. They are brilliantly intelligent and have a sharp sense of language, using it as a tool for amusement as well as a weapon. Just like in Beckett's plays, dialogue, language takes precedence over action, but Albee's characters deliver speeches and are involved in verbal exchanges that strike one as causative, with the force of action. For example, Man's announcement "We've come to take the baby" (33) in *The Play about the Baby* resonates with a finality and unquestionable determination that immediately shocks one into a sense of loss. They always display a sense of humor and a vein for irony and self-irony that propels them above the level of the passive sufferers of the absurd condition. Also, Albee's goal to engage audiences and involve them actively in the creation of meaning takes the ritual-theatre analogy one step further: participants of a ritual are to take active part by observation, legitimation, and if

needed, intervention, something that traditional theatre conventions ban, while Albee's plays prompt and promote.

Shepard's links to the theatre of the absurd are also overt and unmistakable. Varró's study highlights several aspects in *Kicking a Dead Horse* that read as homage to the Irish playwright, while my chapter on *The God of Hell* also suggests correlations with Beckett's works. Like Beckett, Shepard rarely dramatizes the event that brings about the transformation in the state of the characters, rather the consequences of such transformations (the decaying state of the Illinois family in *Buried Child*, the Moss brothers' reunification at the corpse of their dead father in *The Late Henry Moss*, Hobart Struther being stranded in the middle of the Western prairie with a dead horse to be buried in *Kicking a Dead Horse*). He transposes European absurd into the American West and rural backlands. His stage spaces evoke Beckettian barrenness and isolation (the sequestered house in *Buried Child*, the only family farm remaining in Wisconsin in *The God of Hell*) and the empty stage with the one object bearing multiple symbolic valences: the corpse of the horse in *Kicking a Dead Horse* evokes the tree in *Waiting for Godot*, while the image is also ironically subverted by replacing the living plant with a dead animal. These places, however, are always firmly grounded in the American landscape and echo the myths of the U.S. as the space of frontiers to be transgressed and of endless possibilities, images that Shepard's plays systematically subvert and deconstruct.

As these brief notes already may suggest, Albee's and Shepard's versions of and diversions from European absurd and the Beckettian legacy represent another issue worth investigating from the perspective of parody in the Hutcheonian sense. Parody also manifests in the way the playwrights merge the structure of absurd drama with elements of tragedy, comedy, melodrama, their American heritage of naturalist domestic drama, as well as devices appropriated from film, performance art, vaudeville, and farce. They melt these disparate elements into forms that reinvigorate not only the theatrical scene but might have fruitful effects on other forms of artistic expression as well.⁹² In my reading of Albee's *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* I outline its links to drawing room comedy as well as revenge tragedy, while one could also analyze *The Play about the Baby* as a postmodern version of the comedy of humors, the comedy of ideas, or farce. Shepard's plays operate with models and modes of naturalist domestic drama that he mixes with the grotesque, the supernatural, the American

⁹² This interaction and cross-fertilization manifests more evidently in Shepard's case who has had successful careers in music, film writing and acting as well.

Gothic tradition, as well as devices of agit-prop, didactic morality plays, and popular culture. Thus, their plays cannot be viewed as finite objects, but rather as plurality of voices and texts echoed. The ironic tone and mode of parodying adopted by both playwrights in their revision of the past and dramatization of the contemporary social and cultural sphere and identity result in shading new light onto tradition and utilizing it in innovative ways to depict and re-evaluate the present.

Parody, as Puiu argues, has its eyes always focused on the “receiver” (16). It involves two superimposed and juxtaposed planes: the field of expectations set up in the audience by the recognized “text” that is parodied, while on the second plane these expectations are violated, criticized, and subverted.⁹³ This shattering of expectations distances the viewer from the aesthetic object, it destroys the illusion of identification, and stimulates thought, critical reflection, it opens up the text(s) to further, alternative interpretations.

Doubling of effects also characterizes parody: it does not only create critical distance and re-evaluative attitude towards the contemplated object but it also scrutinizes the audience itself, our own modes of interaction, the way our preconceptions and prior knowledge delimit our expectations and set up an interpretative field based on our concepts about the genre, author, myths, motifs, themes, etc. that parody undermines. It does not only question the object of our gaze but the gaze itself as well, the “aesthetic action and reaction” (Puiu 17), which results in ambiguity, enigma, openness, resistance to closure.

In Albee’s and Shepard’s plays ghosts of the past and ghosts of the present—illusions, myths, doctrines, theses—are brought onto the stage and in their ludic interplay audiences are invited to “pretend you are at the first play you have ever seen” (Albee, *Playbill Me, Myself, and I 2*), to be “willing to take in any experience the play is offering” (Albee 26 March 2010), abandon preconceptions and prejudices, and observe, dissect, analyze and re-evaluate not only the play/texts unfolding in front of their eyes but, distancing themselves from themselves, also the gaze that stares at its own uncanny Doppelgänger on stage. Parody thus effects a “catharsis of the surprise” (Puiu 17) not only arising from the recognition of references and the observation of deviations, but the surprise of catching oneself in the process of interpretation. It induces a level of awareness and self-awareness that is characteristic of liminal states.

In the secluded space of rituals—and the liminoid sphere of theatre—ritual subjects/audiences are confronted with grotesque, monstrous combinations of elements that

⁹³ Hutcheon identifies this effect as “counter-expectations” (32).

constitute the subject positions attainable within the social structure; simplified, striking representations of social and familial relations; the constructed, artificial nature of any one identity, order, or system. They provoke audiences to contemplate, observe, try out and test these constituents of their culture as well as their own attitude towards them. Liminality—like parody—distances participants from the object of observation and from themselves and urges initiative, decision, and action either to reinforce the structure and one's subject position(s) within it or change, transformation, the transgression of limits.

Having shown that the archetypal ritual structure resurfaces in Albee's and Shepard's plays in a "mutilated" form, with the third, reintegration stage being moved out of the body of the play and transposed onto the plane of audience—performance interaction, in the context of the analogy I have outlined between liminality and parody—both of which initiate and open up a sphere of reflection and self-reflection—I further argue that the type of elliptical structure that I have observed in Albee's and Shepard's works does not only arise due to the fact that their dramatic characters are always situated at the margins, removed from society or any community they might be re-entering, these concepts being themselves undermined and their coherence and stability overthrown. Such open-endedness results also on account of the hermeneutic circle set up within this liminal sphere of parody: the plays parody and ludically deconstruct themes, motifs, structures, value systems, identity, they scrutinize audience expectations, while they also continuously undermine their own effects keeping the audience in a state of liminoid experimentation and constant re-evaluation of what they see and how they see it.

Together with Shepard, I mistrust endings as they seem artificially imposed upon processes that do not stop "at curtain." In this Conclusion I have aimed at pointing out some directions towards which—I hope—my dissertation may serve as a vantage point for further research, formulating questions rather than answers, mainly in the field of theatrical reception and audience participation, a topic that has gradually become a major interest during my "liminal trials" of writing this study. Accordingly, I conclude with Albee's "Letter to an Audience" in which he, in his uniquely witty style, half seriously, half jokingly argues:

I tend to become uncooperative—and occasionally downright hostile—when people ask me what my plays "are about," especially the new ones, about which I've usually not assembled a provocative yet vague enough short paragraph to avoid answering the question, yet seeming to.

What is *Me, Myself, and I* about? Oh, about two hours, including intermission. Will that do? No; I guess not, though I do like it as an answer, for any play that can be explained (or properly described) in the desired sentence or two should be no longer than its description. A play is, after all, about everything that happens to the characters from the beginning of the play to the end and (unless the author has killed them all off by curtain) the characters' lives before the play begins and after it ends.

This means, as I see it, that a play is fully described (or explained) by the experience of seeing it. (*Playbill Me, Myself, and I* 2)

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