

The Futility of Language as a Means of Communication in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Fam and Yam*, and *The Sandbox*

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Abstract—The three plays *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) *The Sandbox* (1959) and *Fam and Yam* (1959) all display the absurdist tendencies to dispel the traditional view of language as the rational means of communication amongst mankind. In absurdist drama the world is portrayed as one that is meaningless and incomprehensible to the human mind. Language, which is confined to faulty human perception and subjectivity, is inefficient in the face of an unfathomable universe. A gap persists between the meanings in language and the world it purports to describe. In addition, the lack of fit between what language permits man to say and what he actually wants to say leads to a breakdown in communication and ultimately to the alienation of the individual. In absurdist works this chaotic sphere of existence is reflected in the dispensing of traditional elements in drama as well as in the illogical usage of language by the characters. Thus, absurdist drama acts as a counter-discourse to the previously dominant, essentialist discourse of realist drama. In this article a brief overview of the absurdist depiction of language's insufficiency in communication is presented to serve as a backdrop for the analysis of certain segments in Albee's aforementioned plays in order to assess the extent to which Albee's plays demonstrate the absurdist's notion of language's deficiencies. Thus, the sections chosen for discussion are those that showcase language's apparent shortcomings in generating human contact.

Index Terms—Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Sandbox*, *Fam and Yam*, Absurd

I. INTRODUCTION

The three plays *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Fam and Yam* and *The Sandbox* by Edward Albee all portray the absurdist notion of language's futility in human communication. Instead of bringing individuals together, language in these plays divides the characters further apart. As is customary in absurdist drama, Albee's plays reflect the notion that, in a meaningless world where faith is practically non-existent, language falls short in the communicative process of human beings. There is no conventional progression of ideas; instead, the irrational and illogical speech of the characters leads to the ultimate conclusion, silence and the alienation of individuals. Nonsense in absurdist theatre is used to illustrate the confines of language and the loss of truth and meaning in a pointless universe. This article is an attempt to assess the instances that demonstrate the extent of language's ineffectuality in establishing human contact in the three plays mentioned above. First, however, a brief outline of the absurdist concept of language is presented to serve as a theoretical background for the analysis of the plays.

II. LANGUAGE IN THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD

The first person to use the term "theatre of the absurd" was Martin Esslin in his book *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). Esslin discusses language in the theatre of the absurd stating that "the theatre of the absurd has regained the freedom of using language as merely one – sometimes dominant, sometimes submerged – component of its multidimensional poetic imagery" (Esslin, p. 396). Esslin also quotes George Steiner as saying "It is no paradox that much of reality now

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begins outside language ...the world of the word has shrunk...Language here belongs to the realm of pure subjectivity, and is thus void of objective reality” (Esslin, 1961, p. 397). Earlier on Esslin explains that Ionesco affirms the notion that language is an impossible means of communication and that the language of society needs to be deconstructed because it “is nothing but clichés, empty formulas and slogans” (Esslin, 1961, pp. 126-7).

In an introduction to the book *Absurdist Drama* (1965) retrieved online, Esslin argues that the loss of meaning that people felt after World War II also put language under the microscope as it was the recognized instrument of communication. The Theatre of the Absurd examines the limitations of language, but more specifically the “fossilized forms of language which have become devoid of meaning”. Language has gone from being the most primary means of communication and has been reduced to a “kind of ballast filling empty spaces”. Esslin adds that in the meaningless universe all arguments that offer to make sense of this world in the arenas of philosophy and politics become “empty chatter”.

In the book *Theatre of Chaos* (2005), the writer William Demastes explains how Esslin distinguishes between existential theatre and absurdist theatre: “Whereas the existential theatre ...presents an illogical counterrational position by using essentially rational methods of construction and presentation, the absurdist drama...reflects a counterrational vision by using a nonrational form” (2005, p. 55). Seen in this light it is clear that the absurdist employ an illogical form in order to convey the meaninglessness of the world around them.

William Oliver expresses a similar idea pertaining to the absurdist’s utilization of form to reflect content. He posits that the absurdist does not shy away from “obscurity in art since they employ it as a direct symbol of the obscurity they find in life” (1956, p. 7). In addition, Oliver elaborates on the absurdist’s lack of trust in language due to man’s limited capabilities in the areas of perception, expression and self identification. Accordingly, the absurdist try to come to terms with “the gulf of our misunderstanding that exists between our desire and our definition of it, between our expression of ourselves and its apprehension by others” (Oliver, 1965, p. 8).

Due to the severe limitations of verbal language as a source of communication, some theater directors have dabbled in the use of non-verbal language, specifically sign language to express the primordial state of the human condition. In a review of the 2017 Deaf production of Albee’s *At Home at the Zoo*, Stephanie Lim posits that the double-casting of the characters into both deaf and hearing (“Voice of”) actors serves to further emphasize the “play’s theme of miscommunication and the ambiguous relationship between man and beast exploring the imperfect nature of human interactions in heightened visual and physical ways” (2017, pp. 98-99). To escape the banality of Esslin’s “clichés, empty formulas and slogans” (Esslin, 1961, pp. 126-7), theater directors have resorted to alternative means of communication in their ceaseless endeavor to capture the basic reality of the human condition.

III. LANGUAGE IN *WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*

In the play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the lack of communication in the traditional sense of the words between characters is established right from the start. Martha and George seem to be having two separate conversations at the same time. Martha tries to imitate Bette Davis in some Warner Brothers film when she repeats Davis’ line in the movie “What a dump!” (Albee, 1962, p. 11). She assumes that George will catch on to her role play instantly; she does not realize that George has no idea what she is talking about and this angers her. Her subjectivity creates a barrier between her and her husband; she feels that her husband should easily interpret what is going on in her mind, but this initial scene reveals the limitations of language when a character tries to communicate an inner fantasy to another. The dialogue consists of several unfinished sentences as both characters do not give the other a chance to clarify his / her ideas.

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

GEORGE: ...Martha...

MARTHA: WHAT’S IT FROM, FOR CHRIST’S SAKE!

GEORGE [*wearily*]: What’s what from? (Albee, 1962, p. 11)

According to David Debruge in a review of the 2022 production of the play starring Calista Flockhart and Zachary Quinto, Martha and George most likely spend every evening engaging in “the same form of flagellations” and it is the “competitive spirit” of these linguistic battles that may paradoxically bring them together as much as drive them apart. In a short exchange within the opening scene, George makes a “balding joke” which Martha appreciates; she “raises her glass – a toast to a fresh barb, as if this were a tennis match and George had just scored a point. ‘Swampy’ she calls him – an innovation of her own” (Debruge, 2022). Their sport of words fluctuates, at times solidifying their bond, while at other times, tearing them apart. A major source of anguish within this marriage is the fictional narrative of their imaginary child. Unable to conceive, this couple has created a child from words to compensate for their lack of children. This illusory child constitutes the epitome of their linguistics resourcefulness, but as George warns Martha ahead of the guests’ arrival, such a narrative must remain within their private sphere or else it will dissipate into nothingness.

As the doorbell chimes announcing the arrival of Nick and Honey, George warns Martha not to mention their imaginary child. Once again language presents an obstacle; Martha cannot comprehend the message that George is trying to get across. First George speaks in code, calling the kid “the bit”, thinking that Martha will decode his statement immediately. He also does not want her to discuss their fictional son in front of others, but she gets angry, thinking that George is trying to control her and to take possession of the child.

GEORGE: ...Just don't start over on the bit, that's all.

MARTHA: The bit? The bit? What kind of language is that? What are you talking about?

GEORGE: The bit. Just don't start in on the bit.

MARTHA: You trying to imitate, one of your students, for God's sake? What are you trying to do? WHAT BIT?

...GEORGE: Just leave the kid out of this.

MARTHA: [*threatening*]: He's mine as much as he is yours. I'll talk about him if I want to.

(Albee, 1962, pp. 18-19)

Here there is a clear breakdown in communication; Martha is at a total loss as to what George is talking about and she directly criticizes his language as the primary cause of her confusion. George does not want their private fantasy revealed in front of outsiders lest it fades in the blaring light of cold reality, but Martha cannot grasp that; she gets defensive and vows to do and say whatever she pleases. At the same time, George cannot comprehend Martha's desperate need to take full possession of the imaginary child narrative for her own self-preservation.

The couple's childless status comes under scrutiny by Mary Anne Barfield in her article "A Body of One's Own: Martha's Performative Physicality in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" in which she explores gendered spatiality in this play. Barfield focuses mainly of Martha's use of her body as a source of agency rather than inadequacy in opposition to the subordinate status quo of an infertile woman in 1960s society. Therefore, "Martha's body surfaces as a textual spacing all her own, by which she persistently negotiates gendered power, countering the pronatalist narrative which her infertility ought to have rendered her body powerless" (2018, p. 90). Martha feels possessive towards her fictional child since it shields her from the dominant, patriarchal, pronatalist discourse that surrounds her. The struggle that Martha faces in this patriarchal society manifests itself as a type of structural violence, or "Institutionalized violence supported by the dominant culture and system" (Qutami, 2022, p. 225). Language as a social determinant becomes a source of anguish for her, so she counters the monolithic pronatalist discourse by utilizing her words to reinforce the fantasy of her imaginary child.

Language as a means of misperception and vexation surfaces on numerous occasions in this play. In a later scene within the first act, George tries to provoke Nick by confusing him with a lot of empty chatter. At one point Nick gets frustrated because he does not know how to respond to one of George's questions:

NICK: [*snapping it out*]: All right...what do you want me to say? Do you want me to say it's funny, so you can contradict me and say it's sad? Or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say no it's funny. You can play that damn little game any way you want to you know! (Albee, 1962, p. 26)

The 'little game' that Nick refers to is a language game; George employs language not to establish communication with another human being but rather to confuse and humiliate his guest. In fact the whole first act or 'Fun and Games' is all about using language to tease and even hurt others through seemingly harmless games, or what George refers to as "exercising our wits" (Albee, 1962, p. 27).

On more than one occasion characters disagree over words, further reinforcing the limitations of language in general. When Martha praises Nick's specialization in biology instead of math saying that biology is "less abstruse" (Albee, 1962, p. 44), George tries to correct her into saying "abstract". Martha defends her diction and attacks George telling him "Don't tell me words" (Albee, 1962, p. 44). In another situation George and Nick cannot agree on whether one should say a 'bunch', 'gangle' or 'gaggle' of geese (Albee, 1962, p. 72). There is another dispute between Martha and George about whether one should say "I've got" or "I've gotten" (Albee, 1962, p. 100). Such indeterminacy of language springs from the barrier between characters' thoughts and the articulation of such musings.

In Act Two George expresses his desire to make some contact with Nick but to no avail. George tries to give Nick some advice about the future; he even tries to shout his words at him. However, Nick is too irritated with George to listen, and gives him a sarcastic answer then shouts out an obscenity at him.

GEORGE [after a silence]: I've tried to ...tried to reach you...to...

NICK [contemptuously]: ...make contact?

GEORGE: Yes.

NICK [still]: ...communicate?

GEORGE: Yes. Exactly.

NICK: Aw...that is touching... (Albee, 1962, p. 73)

Here George and Nick touch upon the main theme in absurdist drama: man's inability to make contact through words. In a later exchange within the same scene George refers directly to man's fruitless effort to make some sense of the chaotic world around him by turning to art, music, government and morality:

GEORGE: ...you endeavor to make communicable sense out of natural order, morality out of the unnatural disorder of man's mind...you make government and art and realize they are, must be both the same... (Albee, 1962, p. 73)

This 'unnatural disorder' of man's subjectivity is exactly what prevents humanity from coming to terms with the natural world that surrounds them, even if there is some semblance of natural order in the universe.

In the book *Edward Albee*, Gerry McCarthy takes up the issue of story-telling in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* McCarthy argues that Albee utilizes the various narrations of the characters to "challenge the way an audience makes

meanings and its prejudice in favor of everyday reality” (1987, p. 61). McCarthy continues to point out that Albee uses alcohol to create shifts in the characters’ perspectives and in their narratives. For example the image of Nick and Honey as a golden American couple is shattered after an intoxicated Nick reveals that he married Honey because of a false pregnancy and because her father had a lot of money. Later on Nick and George turn the events of this story into a “burlesque fairytale” when they call Honey’s father a church mouse (1987, p. 61).

McCarthy resumes his point about the flux nature of the characters’ stories in this play, specifically George’s story about the young man who accidentally killed his mother with a shot gun and his father in a road accident. This story surfaces several times in alternating forms during the course of the play’s events. First it is the novel that Martha’s father had prevented George from publishing. Then George claims that it is actually his life story, and later on this narrative reappears in the account that George provides of how the fictional child has died. McCarthy concludes by stating that “the reappearance of ...this story as novel, then ‘truth’ then manifest invention, indicates how consciously Albee is aiming at undermining the illusion of fact” (1987, pp. 72-3).

However, it is worth pointing out that George’s obsession with this story could bring to light the demons that have been eating away at him for so many years. He could be hiding a secret so horrendous that he cannot bring it to the surface in straightforward language. Therefore, he resorts to the words of fiction, but even that is insufficient in expressing George’s innermost fears, regrets and apprehensions. At some stage in the play George draws attention to the blurred line between fantasy and reality when he tells Nick “Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference...?” (Albee, 1962, p. 119).

The submergence of reality and fantasy is a major theme in this play and it is portrayed through the mingling of fairy tales, nursery rhymes and real-life stories. The title of the play is itself an allusion to the nursery rhyme about the three little pigs and the Big Bad Wolf. Frank Ardolino traces the use of the line “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” in the play and explains its metaphorical, sarcastic and ironic uses. It is first used by Martha when she and George return from the party in reference to a joke that Martha had made earlier that night. George cannot seem to appreciate the line and this upsets Martha as she blames him for his lack of sense of humor. After Martha confronts George about his successions of failures, George sings it “in a mocking way as if warding off her accusations” (Ardolino, 2003, pp. 113-114). He also chants it once again as Martha and Nick prepare to “consummate their lust, using it as a protective device against her blatant sexuality”. The line appears at the end as Martha answers George that she is afraid of Virginia Woolf, the Big Bad Wolf, or “life without illusion” (Ardolino, 2003, pp. 113-114).

This line which is almost like a refrain takes on various meanings in this play. At the beginning Martha might be using it as an extension of role play. She assumes the part of Bette Davis and had performed this line at the party in an effort to win George’s attention. However, she cannot get George to see her need for his external validation because of the breakdown in their communication. That is why the two of them end up using language to hurt the other and create more distance between them, rather than to express themselves in a manner that would bring them to a more harmonious understanding.

George sings this line in an effort to shield himself from the venom of Martha’s verbal attacks. At the end of Act One George is almost crying as he begs Martha to stop spewing out all his failures; he even breaks a bottle against the portable bar after she screams that he is a big “flop” (Albee, 1962, p. 56). In a final desperate attempt to silence her he starts to sing “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf” loudly to drown her voice out. They have a battle of voices which culminates in a short silence which is only broken by Honey’s announcement that she is going to be sick, thus bringing the first act to a tumultuous ending. Language in this riotous scene is a tool to cause pain and to try to stop it. Instead of a dialogue wherein there is a rational exchange of voices, here the voices rise against one another in a show of disorderliness that truly depicts a chaotic world as well as the human alienation that accompanies it. The only brief moment of tranquility in this scene is the split second of silence before Honey’s speedy exit. The absence of words appears to be more favorable than the role words play in bolstering the blockade between this enraged couple.

In Act Two George mentions a second novel, what he refers to as an allegory or a bucolic, which actually turns out to be the story of Honey and Nick put within the framework of a fictional work. Once again story-telling takes an indeterminate form; George takes Nick’s words and creates a sort of fairy tale which is meant to humiliate his guests in his game “Get the Guests”. The characters in his ‘novel’ are Blondie and his wife Mousie; interestingly enough, Honey feels the story is familiar but it does not dawn upon her that it is about her until George comes to the part about the hysterical pregnancy:

GEORGE: ...The Mouse got all puffed up one day, and she went over to Blondie’s house, and she stuck out her puff, and she said...look at me.

HONEY [*hysteria*]: WHAT? ...and then, WHAT?

GEORGE [*as if to a baby*]: ...and then the puff went away...like magic...pouf! (Albee, 1962, p. 89)

Narrative here is shown to be a mercurial unreliable entity; George takes real events and puts them into a fictional form that causes Honey to have a breakdown. George here is using this narrative to practice a type of emotional abuse which involves “manipulating and humiliating victims’ emotions” (Al-Ghammaz, 2022, p. 219). Ultimately, Honey gets sick and resorts to more drinks later on to escape the brunt of this humiliating experience and ends up pathetically lying on the bathroom floor in the house of these strangers, alienated from the rest of the party, including her husband. Even

though Honey is depicted as somewhat of a featherhead, the fact that she cannot distinguish that the fairytale is about her and Nick further underpins the intermingling of fact and fiction, and accordingly, reality and fantasy.

The fickle form of narrative surfaces within the same act when George expresses some concern that Martha has completely lost sight of the flimsy line that separates fantasy from reality, especially after she mentions the imaginary child in front of strangers. Language poses a problem for George; he tries to articulate his concerns delicately and indirectly but Martha accuses him of using vague language and is insulted at his insinuation that she might be losing her mind:

GEORGE: ...but you've moved bag and baggage into your own fantasy world now, and you've started playing variations on your own distortions, and as a result...

MARTHA: Nuts!

GEORGE: Yes...you have!

...MARTHA: Have you ever listened to your sentences George? ...You're so frigging...convoluted...that's what you are. You talk like you were writing one of your stupid papers. (Albee, 1962, pp. 93-4)

Language is the obstacle that prevents George and Martha from fulfilling some breakthrough in their mutual understanding of one another. It increases the tension in their marriage and they end up declaring total war against one another. In addition, Martha's comment about George's papers is a hint about the allusive words of academics as well as philosophers. The universe is beyond being put into the words of scholars, philosophers and academics; consequently, man is left to his own devices, trying to come to terms with his alienation and to comprehend an incomprehensible world.

A scene that truly illustrates humanity's alienation is Martha's monologue at the beginning of Act Three. Here the silence is of no comfort to Martha who keeps calling out to the others and is horrified because she does not get a response from anyone. She is outraged and shouts out that she has been "Deserted! Abandon-ed! Left out in the cold like an old pussy cat!" (Albee, 1962, p. 109). Being alone she is faced with her own thoughts and she cannot confront them. As she describes her sadness and George's sorrow, she keeps interrupting herself with outbursts beckoning the other characters to appear before her and save her from facing her deepest reflections on her life. At one point she regresses to an infantile state of mind as she begins to address her absentee father in baby talk: "Daddy? Daddy? Martha is abandon-ed...Daddy White Mouse; do you really have red eyes? Daddy you have red eyes because you cry all the time" (Albee, 1962, p. 109). She then muses that she and George also cry all the time and put their tears in ice trays and then put them in their drinks. The frozen tears are just like the frozen words that never make it to the surface to melt the ice berg that has formed over many years in the midst of this marriage.

At some point in this Final Act Martha expresses her love for George, not to George, however, but to Nick. She tells a perplexed Nick that George is the only man who has ever made her happy. There is a tone of regret in her words as she expresses the sad situation of their marriage: "George and Martha: sad, sad, sad" (Albee, 1962, p. 113). She feels pity for George who made the mistake of loving her and must be punished for that. She then uses a series of illogical contradictions to express the ambivalent nature of their relationship. She describes George as someone "...who tolerates which is intolerable; who is kind, which is cruel; who understands, which is beyond comprehension" (Albee, 1962, p. 113). This chain of parallel paradoxes brings home yet another human mystery: the love that certain individuals share can so easily, but not completely transform into hatred. It pains Martha that George is so loving even though she keeps hurting him. She feels guilty about the way she treats him; it is beyond her comprehension why he is so understanding and patient with her despite her maltreatment of him.

David Debruge describes Martha and George as one of those couples who "feed on conflict" but adds that Albee also "insured that the audiences leave the theater with the assurance that...George and Martha really are in love" (2022). A substantial element that keeps them connected is, ironically enough, the same element that seems to divide them, namely language. Their twenty-year linguistic game of word sparring and dueling has safeguarded this couple against the cruel reality of their childless, and in terms of 1960s culture, meaningless existence. The language game is of a fluid, ever-shifting quality; in a sense Martha expresses that George's love for her comes to light for the most part in his ability to "keep learning the games we play as quickly as I can change them" (Albee, 1962, p. 113).

Therefore, this play may display what Matthew Roudane has termed "verbal insults" and "physical attacks," but in the final act it also features "a series of epiphanic moments" wherein the characters' "fundamental conditions are laid bare" (2017, p. 57). Accordingly, in wake of the exorcism scene in Act Three, as George and Martha find themselves alone without the protection of their fictional child narrative, their dialogue here consists of "thirteen brief questions...The questions are first tactical, then personal, and finally metaphysical" (2017, p. 57). In a sense, questions are language's method of embodying the unknown, meaningless aspects of existence. Questions are paradoxically the window that opens up into the shortcomings of language as well as the means to discover the truth whether it be ontological, dialogic or existential.

Since language, with all the complexities that the word battles played out in the previous scenes, has been exposed and its limitations have been laid bare, the dialogue at the end of this play becomes more simplified signifying the characters' attempts to transcend the clichés and stagnantly exhausted word play that creates barriers between individuals. As Roudane asserts, the language in the final segment "privileges a grammar of new beginning, however uncertain such new beginnings may prove to be" (2017, p. 58). In order for George and Martha to truly become

grounded in reality they must not just sacrifice their illusory son, but also the “kind of language that so animates this evening’s actions” (2017, p. 61). Consequently, the overall language in the final lines indicate “their willingness not to return to sanity or happiness, but to begin the complex process of confronting their essential selves honestly” (2017, p.61).

From the passages highlighted in the preceding pages it becomes quite evident that the play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* underlines the constraints of traditional, verbal language in establishing genuine human contact in an unfathomable world. There is clearly a lack of fit between characters’ desires and the words they utter, between inner reality and the outwardly expressed reality. Such a discrepancy results in an overall failure in communication and in the terrifying isolation that individuals experience.

IV. LANGUAGE IN *THE SANDBOX* AND *FAM AND YAM*

Albee’s one act plays, *The Sandbox* and *Fam and Yam* also expound the theme of humanity’s incapacity in initiating solid interaction through the power of words. According to Stephen James Bottoms in *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*, these two plays “attack hollow rituals, obstacles to communication and the theater of realism” (2005, p. 24). The main hurdle that stands in the way of communication is language, especially the vacant phrases so often used in social encounters. These two one acts do not even give definable names to the characters, an indication of the universal significance of these figures in capturing the human condition as a whole.

In his discussion of *The Sandbox* Bottoms explains that the couple or Mommy and Daddy are unable to get in touch with one another because they have nothing substantial to say. Their exchanges are full of “banalities, clichés, and deflated words, emptied of real meaning” (2005, p. 26). As Zsanett Barna claims in an online article, “Mommy is a very commanding person, who has a peremptory tone of voice. This is one reason why there is no and there can be no genuine conversation between the couple” (2010). In the following exchange between Mommy and Daddy as they wait for Grandma to die, their lack of communication is quite apparent:

Daddy: (*After a pause*): Shall we talk to each other?

Mommy (*with that little laugh; picking something off her dress*): Well you can talk if you want to...if you can think of anything to say...if you can think of anything new.

Daddy (*thinks*): No...I suppose not.

Mommy: (*With a triumphant laugh*): Of course not! (Albee, 1959, p. 12)

After years of being subdued into just repeating “Whatever you say, Mommy” Daddy is incapable of coming up with anything meaningful to say. Mommy seems to be rather satisfied with this arrangement; she gets pleasure from Daddy’s helpless inexpressibility. This couple does not really engage in any genuine conversation; they just exchange phrases that are devoid of any emotional significance. They are like robots programmed to utter certain words without giving them any consideration, thus emphasizing the absurdist notion of social language as being simply empty chatter. Even the Holy Bible is reduced to meaningless nonsense when Mommy “unfeelingly parrots the sacred sincerity of psalm 30, 11-12” (Bottoms, 2005, p. 26) when she thinks that Grandma has died. Such prayers have become empty rituals performed without sentiment for the sake of social conventions.

In his article entitled “The Absurdity of Mimesis: A History of Absurdist Criticism Related to the Plays of Edward Albee,” David Marcia refers to Paul M. Cubeta who focuses on this play’s “metatheatrics...as well as its use of ritual and devalued language” (2017, p. 23). By dispensing with the traditional elements of the theater Albee succeeds in exposing the hollowness of conventional drama and, in turn, with the dominant human discourse in general, thereby showcasing the “use of clichés to embody not only the character’s need to conceal and dominate with language, but also the impossibility of communication itself” (2017, p. 23). The utter debasement of language here into both empty chatter and meaningless noises reduces humanity to its basest form; such a reduction serves to dismantle the fragile façade of modern human civilization.

The devaluation of language comes to light most noticeably in Grandma’s lines. The character Grandma is only permitted to make noises without uttering any actual words. Bottoms argues that as Grandma come closer to her death, “she is infantilized shouting nonsense syllables and throwing sand at Mommy and Daddy” (2005, p. 27). Of course Grandma only makes meaningless sounds like “Ahhhh! Ah-haaaa! Graaaaa!” when she tries to make some contact with her daughter and son-in-law; however, when she directly addresses the audience, she is quite articulate as she recounts the details of her life story and the suffering she has endured under the hands of Mommy and Daddy. She has got so used to speaking and not being heard that she has practically lost her faculty of speaking with others; nevertheless, the audience offers her the chance to find her voice once again and speak out against the injustices that have befallen her. At one juncture she has a friendly chat with Young Man then resumes her story to the audience as she tells Young Man “Well...uh, I’ve got to talk some more...don’t you go away” (Albee, 1959, p. 15). She has this urge to tell her story before her death; her speech to the audience is almost like a monologue. Just like Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Grandma can only find the words to express her inner thoughts when she is alone.

After there is a rumbling sound off stage, Mommy acts as though she is saddened by Grandma’s imminent demise. Daddy feigns support, but Grandma mocks her daughter’s pretentious attempts to appear grief-stricken:

MOMMY (*Barely able to talk*): It means the time has come for poor Grandma...and I can’t bear it!

DADDY (*vacantly*): I...I suppose you’ve got to be brave.

GRANDMA (*Mocking*): That's right kid; be brave. You'll bear up; you'll get over it. (Albee, 1959, p. 18)

Mommy cannot hear Grandma's mocking nor can she hear Grandma as she shouts that she is not dead yet; the arrangement in this relationship is one in which Grandma's words never reach the ears of her daughter. Mommy has a miraculous recovery from her "mourning" when the lights come on again bringing in daylight. She mutters the previously mentioned prayer which Grandma mimics, gets up with Daddy and they both leave to "face the future" (Albee, 1959, p. 18).

Ironically enough Grandma, who is in least control of her mental capabilities and verbal faculties is the only character who exhibits any actual emotions. At the end of the play she tries to boost Young Man's confidence after he announces himself as the Angel of Death telling him he did his line well. The reality of the situation is that Young Man does not announce himself in an impressive manner:

YOUNG MAN (Prepares; delivers the line like a real amateur): I am the Angel of Death. I am ...uh...I am come for you.

...GRANDMA (Her eyes closed, her hands folded on her breast again, the shovel between her hands, a sweet smile on her face): Well...that was very nice dear... (Albee, 1959, p. 19)

Albee takes advantage of this play to discredit the theater of realism. Bottoms points out some of the lines in the play which help Albee as he challenges the principles of the realistic theater and "dismantles its conventions, deftly and comically". Amongst such lines are when Grandma says "Don't put up the lights yet" when she is not ready to die and when she directly addresses the audience. Another example is when Young Man tells Grandma "I have a line here" which exposes the "artificiality of role-playing in the theater of realism" (Bottoms, 2005, p. 27).

Fam and Yam is also entitled "An Interview"; ironically enough, Fam the famous author in the play does not realize that he is being interviewed by Yam, the new young playwright. Only at the end of the play and after Yam phones from the lobby to thank Fam for the interview does the latter realize what has happened. The devaluation of language here acts to further express "the lack of a common language" which "can also be fostered in order to create an impassable gulf between characters" (Wasserman, qtd. In Marcia, 2017, p. 23).

When Yam first arrives at Fam's apartment, he claims he is there to write an article about Fam entitled "In Search of a Hero". However, Yam uses this fake interview to launch an attack on the theater industry under the false pretense of Fam's support. Yam severely criticizes prominent figures of the theater establishment, and Fam who is under the influence of one sherry after another "agrees cordially responding with trite phrases such as 'Oh my,' 'Oh yes...wonderful, wonderful' to Yam's rapid-fire accusations" (Bottoms, 2005, p. 25). Bottoms points out that the irony of the situation is that Fam hardly says anything at all but he still has entrapped himself. What he thought was simply an exchange of pleasantries with Yam was the interview and "what he jocularly agreed to with each sherry was his own undoing by criticizing the establishment of which he was a part" (Bottoms, 2005, p. 26).

Language is used here by Yam to mislead and trap Fam into backing up the charges that the young playwright is aiming at the theater institution. Yam distracts Fam with words of flattery and praise and keeps digressing from the article he is supposedly writing, or what Fam refers to as "an indefinite article" (Albee, 1959, p. 87). Fam is very cautious at first as Yam begins to blast the theater industry; eventually however, after Fam's succession of sherries, Yam is able to reel Fam in slowly and the experienced playwright agrees with Yam's attacks. At no point in their discussion does Yam mention that Fam's remarks are not off the record; he cleverly creates the illusion that the two are simply having a private amiable conversation that will not implicate anybody. At the end after Fam is shocked by Yam's off-stage revelation that everything that was exchanged between them is part of an interview that will be published; Fam shouts "THE INTERVIEW! THE INTERVIEW!" (Albee, 1959, p. 96) and according to the stage directions "His face turns ashen...his mouth drops" (Albee, 1959, p. 96).

From the preceding discussion of Albee's two one-act plays, it becomes apparent that Albee turns both traditional language as well as the conventions of realist drama against themselves. He utilizes the mercurial fluidity of Absurdism to both expose the limitations of essentialist discourse and exhausted theatrics and to challenge the hindrances of conventional narrative and drama in exploring the complexities of human subjectivity and interactivity. Grandma's sharp, lucid elaboration of her narrative which she projects to the audience contrasts deeply with the hollow cliché-like expressions of sentiment robotically imparted by her daughter and son in law. In *Fam and Yam*, on the other hand, Yam's seemingly conventional interview actually unleashes nuances of a shrill counter-discourse which deconstructs the dominant discourse of realistic theater as well as the speech repertoire of its literary critics.

V. CONCLUSION

The three plays *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Sandbox* and *Fam and Yam* by Albee all exhibit the same tendency towards diffusing language's function as the traditionally acknowledged means of communication amongst human beings. These plays are truly composed in the absurdist fashion wherein dramatic form, specifically the disconnected dialogues that ensue between characters reflects the emptiness of a world devoid of meaning and the harsh state of alienation that has befallen mankind.

Albee's three plays demonstrate the extent to which the theater of the Absurd becomes a whole polyphonic counter-discourse of its own, dismantling the dominant, monolithic essentialist discourse of realist drama. Its carnivalesque-like

attributes tap into the normally silenced avenues of human existence, thereby bringing to the fore humanity's inner struggles to come to terms with its tragic condition.

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