AMERICAN DREAM

Edward Albee

Context

Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928, in Washington, DC. He was adopted in infancy by millionaire Reed Albee, the son of a famous vaudeville producer who introduced Edward to the theater at an early age. Albee battled with his stepmother throughout his childhood. She wanted to make him a respectable member of high society, while he wanted to keep company with artists, intellectuals, and homosexuals. Albee hated school. He left college at the age of twenty and moved to New York to pursue his writing career. There he met Thorton Wilder, who encouraged the then-poet and prose writer to begin writing for the stage. Albee lived in Greenwich Village and supported himself through number of menial jobs, working as a messenger boy and record salesman, among other jobs. In 1959, his play *The Zoo Story* premiered in Berlin together with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape.*

In the history of drama, Albee has been canonized as the primary American practitioner of what critic Martin Esslin has termed the "Theater of the Absurd". Encompassing the work of playwrights as disparate and divergent as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter, the term "absurdism" refers to a dramatic movement, strongly influenced by Existentialism, that emerged from Europe during the mid-twentieth century. Absurdist plays dispense with conventional notions of character, plot, action, and setting in favor of deliberately unrealistic methods. Plays of the absurdist movement examine the absurdity of the human condition and expose the experiences of alienation, insanity, and despair inherent in modernity. According to Esslin, Albee's *The American Dream* (1960) marks the beginning of American absurdist drama. Though the work was generally well-received, a number of critics attacked the play for its immorality, nihilism, and defeatism. Their attacks implicitly suggested that a good play must be morally uplifting, inspiring, and redemptive. Albee responded passionately to his critics in a preface to the play, defending *The American Dream* as "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen."

In 1962, Albee won international acclaim for his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a tale of sadistic wrangling between a failed academic and his wife. The play received a Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize nomination. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was particularly bold in returning explicitly socio-political criticism to the mainstream stage in a moment when the theatrical establishment had been reduced to silence by the McCarthy witch- hunts. Albee went on to win Pulitzers in 1966 and 1975 for *A Delicate Balance* and *Seascape* respectively. After a lull in the 1980s, Albee found more success in 1994 with *Three Tall Women,* which

won him his third Pulitzer as well as the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and Outer Circle Best Play Award.

Plot Overview

Mommy and Daddy sit in armchairs on either side of their living room. They complain that "they"—that is, their visitors—are late. People can get away with anything these days.

Mommy recounts her purchase of a hat. She was quite happy with her new beige hat until meeting the chairwoman of her woman's club, who insisted her hat was wheat. Mommy returned to the store and made a scene until given a new hat. She got "satisfaction".

Grandma then enters with a load of neatly wrapped boxes. She dumps them at Daddy's feet and laments that the old cannot talk with anyone because they snap at them. They go deaf to avoid people talking to them in that way; ultimately, the way people talk to them causes their death. Mommy recalls that Grandma has always wrapped boxes nicely. When she was a child and poor, Grandma used to wrap her a lunchbox every day for school, and Mommy would never have the heart to rip into it. Grandma always filled it the night before with her own un-eaten dinner. After school, Mommy would bring back her lunch for Grandma to eat.

Now, having married Daddy, Mommy is rich. She has earned the right to live off his money as she used to let him mount her and "bump [his] uglies". Grandma brings in more boxes. She calls Mommy a tramp: even when she was a girl, she schemed to marry a rich man.

The doorbell rings. Grandma asks who has come: is it the "van people"? The bell rings again, and Daddy wrings his hands in doubt—perhaps they should reconsider? Mommy insists that he made up his mind. At her prompting, he opens the door. "WHAT a masculine daddy! Isn't he a masculine Daddy?" Mommy jeers.

Mrs. Barker now enters. Daddy invites Mrs. Barker to sit; Mommy offers her a cigarette, a drink, and the opportunity to cross her legs. Being a professional woman, Mrs. Barker opts for the latter. Mommy invites her to remove her dress; she readily follows. Mrs. Barker asks if "they" can assume Mommy and Daddy have invited them over the boxes.

Silenced throughout the conversation, Grandma finally says her piece: the boxes have nothing to do with Mrs. Barker's visit. Mommy threatens to have Grandma taken away. The apartment has become over-crowded with her boxes. Grandma announces that she knows why Mrs. Barker has come to visit. Mommy calls her a liar and commands Daddy to break her television.

Mommy exits to fetch Mrs. Barker some water. Mrs. Barker implores Grandma to explain her visit. Grandma offers Mrs. Barker a hint. About twenty years ago, a man very much like Daddy and a

woman very much like Mommy lived in an apartment very much like theirs with an old woman very much like Grandma. They contacted an organization very much like the nearby Bye-Bye Adoption Service and an adoption agent very much like Mrs. Barker, purchasing a "bumble" of joy. Quickly they came upon trouble. The bumble cried its heart out. Then, it only had eyes for Daddy. Mommy gouged its eyes out, but then it kept its nose up in the air. Next, it developed an interest in its "you-know-what"—its parents cut it off. When the bumble continued to look for its you-know-what, they chopped those off as well. Its tongue went when it called its Mommy a dirty name. Finally it died. Wanting satisfaction, its parents called the adoption agent back to the apartment to demand their money back. Mrs. Barker does not understand the relevance of Grandma's tale. Mulling the matter over, she leaves to fetch her water.

The doorbell rings, and the Young Man enters. Grandma looks him over approvingly and compliments his looks: his face is "almost insultingly good- looking in a typically American way". Indeed, as he himself notes, he his a "type". Grandma announces the boy as the American Dream. The Young Man reveals that he has come for work; he will do anything for money. Grandma reveals that she has put some money away herself. This year Grandma won $25000 in a baking contest under the pseudonym Uncle Henry and a store-bought cake. She dubbed the recipe Uncle Henry's Day-Old Cake.

Grandma asks why he says he would do anything for money. The Young Man replies that as someone who is incomplete, he must compensate. His mother died at his birth; he never knew his father. However, though without parents, the Man was not alone in his womb, having an identical twin from whom he was separated from in their youth. In the passing years, he suffered countless losses: he lost his eyes and the ability to see with pity and affection. An agony in his groin left him unable to love anyone with his body. He has been left without feeling.

"Oh, my child", murmurs Grandma in pity. She suspects the Young Man is the solution of Mommy and Daddy's dilemma. Mrs. Barker emerges and, Grandma announces the Young Man as the van man. Upon her request, the Young Man takes her boxes outside. Grandma proposes the solution she has devised into Mrs. Barker's ear. The Young Man returns and reports that all the boxes are outside. Sadly, Grandma wonders why she bothers to take all the things she has accumulated over the years with her. They exit to the elevator.

Mrs. Barker, Mommy, and Daddy return, celebrating the resolution of their dilemma: they will get satisfaction after all. Suddenly Mommy exclaims that Grandma is missing. Mrs. Barker informs her that the van man claimed her. Near tears, Mommy replies that this is impossible: the van man is their invention. While Daddy comforts Mommy, Grandma emerges near the footlights. She hushes the audience, declaring that she wants to watch the events to ensue. Motioning to Mrs. Barker, she tiptoes to and opens the front door: the Young Man appears framed within. Pleased with her replacement, Mommy calls for a celebration.

Grandma then interrupts the celebration and addresses the audience: we should leave things as they are while everyone has what they think they want. She bids the audience good night.

Character List

Grandma - The ironic commentator of the play, Grandma stands in for the figure of the "absurdist" dramaturge: indeed she even ultimately exits the frame of the action to become its director. Her crossing between the spaces of the action and theater is prefigured by her marginal position in what Albee describes as the "American Scene". In her many sardonic epigrams, she will position herself—as an "old person"—at the margins of social intercourse. Grandma's marginality sets her apart from the spectacle before her. Notably, she is the only character to underline the fact that she is staging a masquerade, what she describes as her "act". Grandma also defends herself against the violence of social intercourse include through "absurdist" devices—for example: her apparent deafness, senility, memory lapses, epigrammatic wit, and general obscenity. This decidedly anti-social obscenity (*L. ob-scaenus, off- scene*) prefigures her departure from the household, Grandma literally becoming a commentator on the action from the outside who pointedly delivers the party up to the audience's judgment.

Mommy - An archetypal "bad mother", Mommy is the household's sadistic disciplinarian, dismissing Grandma and infantilizing Daddy. She recalls a number of other of Albee's female characters, most notably Martha from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.* Like Martha, Mommy's speech distinguishes itself as the most violent in the household in its strident tone, its exaggerated sarcasm, its shrillness, its scorn and derision. Her sadism runs almost entirely unchecked—certainly one of the most disturbing aspects of Albee's theater is its characters' violently infantile behavior. Thus she emasculates Daddy at every turn and of course also mutilates the couple's first child—the so- called "bumble of joy"—in the course of disciplining him.

Read an in-depth analysis of Mommy.

Daddy - Under Mommy's reign of terror, Daddy is a negative entity—indeed, early in the play Mommy reduces his speech to the echo of hers. Bent to Mommy's will, he relies on her entirely for the confirmation of his masculinity. Like Mommy, Daddy also displays a disturbing propensity for infantile behavior. Whereas Mommy becomes the tyrannical sadist in her regression, however, Daddy characteristically becomes the child needing punishment.

Read an in-depth analysis of Daddy.

The Young Man - A blond, Midwestern beauty, the Young Man describes himself as a "type"; upon their introduction, Grandma dubs him the "American Dream". He is the product of the murder of his lost identical twin who stands against him in his physical deformity—as Grandma notes, the party knows him as the "bumble". As he tells Grandma, he has suffered the progressive loss of all feeling and desire, losses that, unbeknownst to him, correspond to

the mutilations Mommy inflicted on his brother to punish his bodily excesses. These losses have left him a shell, physically perfect but a void within. Ironically, he ultimately becomes the child that Mommy believes will provide her with satisfaction, replacing the murdered bumble. Read an in-depth analysis of The Young Man.

Mrs. Barker - A caricature of the socially responsible American housewife, Mrs. Barker is the flighty and ingenuous volunteer from the Bye-Bye Adoption Service who delivered the "bumble" to Mommy and Daddy twenty years ago and has returned, upon their request, to provide them with the "satisfaction" they deserve. Of course, she remains steadfastly ignorant of the purpose of her visit even as she remains fully aware of her shared history with the household, thereby underscoring that history's traumatic nature. In many respects she plays a role similar to Honey's in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*—that of an outsider who cannot easily always follow the household's conversational games. Indeed, she almost faints as a result.

Analysis of Major Characters

Grandma

The ironic commentator of the play, Grandma stands in for the figure of the "absurdist" dramaturge, ultimately exiting the frame of the action to become its director. This surprising exit and her immediate crossing between the space of the action and the space of the theater is prefigured by her marginal position in the household, what Albee offers as an allegory for the "American Scene".

In her many sardonic epigrams, Grandma will position herself—as an "old person—at the margins of human intercourse, a figure considered "obscene" in the social theater. For example, social intercourse is violently fatal: old people die as a result of the way people talk to them. Grandma's marginality necessarily sets her apart from the spectacle before her. Notably, she is the only character to underline the fact that she is staging a masquerade, what she describes as her "act".

Grandma's defenses against the violence of social intercourse more precisely define many of what critics have vaguely touted as *The American Dream*'s most "absurdist" moments. These defenses are nevertheless "absurd" in the truest sense, involving her apparent deafness, senility, memory lapses, epigrammatic wit, and general obscenity. This decidedly anti-social obscenity (*L. ob- scaenus, off-scene*) prefigures her departure from the household and "American Scene", Grandma literally becoming a commentator on the action from the outside. Crossing the frame of the action, she directs the resolution of Mommy and Daddy's

dilemma and interrupts them to conclude the play, offering the audience a farewell that pointedly delivers the party up to its judgment.

Mommy

An archetypal "bad mother", Mommy is the household's sadistic disciplinarian, dismissing Grandma and infantilizing Daddy at every turn. She recalls a number of other of Albee's female characters, most notably Martha from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.* Like Martha, Mommy's speech distinguishes itself as the most violent in the household in its strident tone, its exaggerated sarcasm, its shrillness, its scorn and derision. As Grandma makes clear, Mommy is a deceitful gold-digger who has married Daddy for his money. Her sadism runs almost entirely unchecked—certainly one of the most disturbing aspects of Albee's theater is its characters' violently infantile behavior. At some level, the play leaves the spectator enthralled with Mommy's violence; the effect is generates is a masochistic submission to her rage.

As household disciplinarian, Mommy emasculates Daddy relentlessly, mocking his aspirations, ridiculing his manliness with her encouragement, prompting and repeating his speech in a patronizing fashion, terrorizing him into obedience, and onward. She also of course mutilates the couple's first child—the so- called "bumble of joy"—in the course of disciplining him.

In his preface, Albee poses *The American Dream* as a critique of emasculation on the "American Scene". With this critique in mind, the potential misogyny in the figure of Mommy and Albee's theater in general becomes clear. As Mrs. Barker unwittingly notes, the "village idiot" is the proponent of Woman Love. Neither Mommy nor Grandma appear to think highly of Woman Love either; notably Mommy's own relationship with Grandma is defined by bitter debts, rivalries, and resentment.

Daddy

Under Mommy's reign of terror, Daddy is a negative entity—indeed, early in the play Mommy reduces his speech to the echo of hers. Bent to Mommy's will, he relies on her entirely for the confirmation of his masculinity: thus the protracted scene at the door when Mrs. Barker rings, which Mommy poses as a test of his manliness. Like Mommy, Daddy also displays a disturbing propensity for infantile behavior. Thus when Mrs. Barker removes her dress, Daddy mumbles: "I just blushed and giggled and went sticky wet". Whereas Mommy becomes the tyrannical sadist in her regression, Daddy characteristically becomes the child needing punishment. Daddy's masochism also appears clearly in the opening of the door, in which he submits to the demonstration of manliness that Mommy demands. As a number of critics have noted, such rituals of demonstration, and the public humiliation that ensues, are typical of masochistic fantasy.

The Young Man

A blond, Midwestern beauty, the Young Man describes himself as a "type"; upon their introduction, Grandma dubs him the "American Dream". He is the product of the murder of his lost identical twin who stands against him in his physical deformity—as Grandma notes, the party knows him as the "bumble". Appearing toward the end of the play as the solution to Mommy and Daddy's dilemma, he introduces a hiatus into the household's violent intercourse with the story of his losses. This story recounts his progressive loss of feeling and desire, losses that, unbeknownst to him, correspond to the mutilations Mommy inflicted on his brother to punish his bodily excesses. These losses have left the Young Man a shell, physically perfect but a void within. Ironically, he ultimately becomes the child that Mommy believes will provide her with satisfaction, replacing the murdered bumble.

One possible reading of this admittedly strange allegory of the American Dream might focus on the notion of the mask. In some sense, the two twins stand in for the man and his mask: the perfect form of the American Dream requires the murder of the unruly body, the human bumble.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

The American Dream

As noted in its preface, *The American Dream* is an allegory of the "American Scene" gone awry, a Scene typified here by a sadistic Mommy, emasculated Daddy, and embittered Grandma. The play imagines what is left of the American Dream in their shared household.

The American Dream is personified by the Young Man, a clean-cut, Midwestern beauty, a self-described "type". Though physically perfect, he remains incomplete, having lost all feeling and desire in the murder of an identical twin from which he was separated as a child. This twin—Mommy and Daddy's first adopted son—stands against his brother as a consummate deformity. He lacks a head, spine, guts, feet of flesh, and onward. Moreover, he suffers a progressive disfigurement under Mommy's sadistic tortures, punishments specifically directed at each of his bodily excesses and infantile desires. Thus: an eye for only having eyes for Daddy, his "you-know-what" for masturbation, and onward.

In his unruliness, this child—the so-called "bumble of joy"—fails to provide Mommy and Daddy what the demand above all: "satisfaction". The result of these tortures is the Young Man, a man disemboweled, voided of interiority but perfect in form, a figure who cannot relate to others but accepts the "syntax" around him in knowing that others must relate to

him. Thus he becomes the son who provides Mommy and Daddy the satisfaction they believe that they have long desired. Doing anything for money, he is in some sense their perfect commodity, the merchandise they wanted all along.

Albee's allegory of the American Dream is certainly strange. The American Dream does not appear as that which one lives out or even as ideology, but as a person and possession. One possible reading of this allegory involves the all-important theatrical concept of the mask. Linked indissolubly, the twins are in some sense figures for the actor and his mask. The Young Man as American Dream is a mask without a man behind it, a personification without a person. As he tells Grandma, he is a type. The murder of his double is the murder of the man behind the mask, the elimination of the unruly body—indeed, the "bumble"—that can only mould itself into the perfect form through its mutilation. The product of this mutilation is the Young Man. Thus Albee offers a sinister account of the American Dream, imagining it as a mask disemboweled of man and his excesses.

Language and Violence

As the above discussion of the mask might suggest, *The American Dream* concerns itself intimately with the relationship between language and violence. This exploration involves both language's violent uses in social intercourse as well as violence performed on language itself—violence that more precisely describes many of what critics celebrate as the play's most "absurdist" moments. As for the former, Grandma certainly underlines the violence in social intercourse staged against old people; emasculation is another primary example of this violence as well. Language's capacity for violent effects often lies in its "performative" qualities. The concept of the "performative"—that is, language that does something—is crucial to the play.

Emasculation

One of the primary violence's the play stages is Mommy's assault on Daddy. As with many of Albee's female characters—Martha from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*perhaps being the most memorable—Mommy is the consummate "bad mother": sadistic, jealous, greedy, and onward. At some level, the play leaves the spectator enthralled with Mommy's sadism: the effect it generates is one of a masochistic submission to her violence. The victim of her violence above all is Daddy, whom she infantilizes at every turn. Thus, for example, she forces him to echo her story of the beige hat. She derides with her exaggerated encouragement when he moves to open the door, pathetically attempting to demonstrate his masculinity. As noted above, she mutilates the "bumble of joy" for his bodily excesses and infantile desires: the Young Man, a negative entity of sorts, is the result.

Disfiguration and Deformity

Images of disfigurement occur throughout the play; indeed, Grandma declares the age as one of deformity. Mommy had a banana-shaped head at birth. Grandma imagines old people as twisted into the shape of a complaint. Most notably, the "bumble of joy"—Mommy and Daddy's first adopted son—progressively loses body parts under Mommy's inhuman discipline and is discovered to lack a head, spine, guts, and feet of flesh. The accumulation of these monstrous births assumes almost prophetic dimensions, becoming omens in what Albee describes as the "slipping land" of America.

Often these corporeal disfigurements involve a disfigurement of language as well. Thus Mommy blinds the bumble, for example, upon discovering that it "only had eyes for Daddy". Mommy does not only violate the bumble's body; she disfigures language as well, violently literalizing a figure of speech and collapsing it onto the body. Importantly, the violence on the body follows this first disfigurement. Note that this violence Mommy performs on the figure of speech itself involves a violent linguistic mechanism—that of literalization. Such disfigurements are further examples of how the play explores the relationship between language and violence.

Old People and Grandma's epigrams

Throughout the play, Grandma offers a number of sardonic epigrams on the condition of the elderly. For example: old people cannot talk to anyone because people only snap at them; the speech of others causes their deaths. Deafness is their defense. Old people are reduced to whimpers, cries, belches, and the rumblings of their stomach. Old people are obscene, and onward. For Grandma, old people are decidedly marginalized within the American Scene, the victims of its violent social intercourse. In the social theater, they are truly "obscene" (*L. ob-scaenus, off-scene*). As an old person, Grandma will defend herself against social intercourse through the very "obscenity" of her deafness, crudity, senility, and, of course, biting epigrams. Her decidedly anti-social obscenity, often involving ironic commentary on the events before, prefigures her ultimate exit from the action and transformation into the action's director.

Defense

Psychically, the logic of much of *The American Dream*'s touted "absurdity" is that of defense. Defense is clearest with regard to the characters' attitude toward purpose of Mrs. Barker's visit. Daddy, for example, hesitates before answering her ring at the door. For most of the play, Mommy and Daddy appear to have forgotten their relation to Mrs. Barker while simultaneously seeming to torture her with their knowledge of their shared history. They

demand satisfaction from Mrs. Barker even when apparently ignorant of why she has come. When Grandma gives Mrs. Barker a "hint" and recounts that history, the flighty, titillated Mrs. Barker takes it under advisement but fails to apprehend its relevance to her immediate visit. These supposedly absurd dodges are due to the traumatic nature of the party's shared past, the memory of the "bumble of joy". Though no one has forgotten this past that provides the occasion, the characters keep it from immediate consciousness nevertheless.

The boxes

Cluttering the stage, Grandma's boxes number among its more enigmatic objects. For much of the play, Albee toys with the spectator's desire to discover the box's contents and function. Mommy and Daddy continually compliment the boxes' wrapping but do not consider its interior. When Grandma almost reveals the boxes' purpose, however, Mommy silences her. Ultimately the audience learns that the boxes contain the haphazard list of objects—the enema bottles, the blind Pekinese, and so on—that Grandma has accumulated over the course of her life. In a play where an outwardly perfect Young Man becomes the son who provides satisfaction, it is perhaps easiest to consider Mommy and Daddy's patronizing emphasis on the boxes' wrapping as indicative of their satisfaction with surfaces.

The boxes of course also serve as a diversion when the household attempts to ascertain the purpose of Mrs. Barker's visit. They perhaps then also allegorize the composition of the play, which largely consists of apparent and perpetually surprising diversions that keep the audience from the heart of the matter.

The American Dream does not particularly make use of symbols.

Important Quotations Explained

When you get old, you can't talk to people because people snap at you. That's why you become deaf, so you won't be able to hear people talking to you that way That's why old people die, eventually. People talk to them that way.

This passage is one of Grandma's many characteristic epigrams on "old people," epigrams as long-winded and senile as they are insightful. As an old person, Grandma occupies a privileged position in Albee's cast, figuring as a character marginalized by and posed to comment ironically on the violent spectacle before her. The epigram is thematically significant as it points out speech's capacity for violence—that old people die because of the speech of others. Grandma's own absurd conversational behavior, for example, her apparent senility or deafness, is a form of protection against this violence.

I no longer have the capacity to feel anything. I have no emotions. I have been drained, torn asunder disemboweled. I have, now, only my person, my body, my face. I use what I have I let people love me I accept the syntax around me, for while I know I cannot relate;I know I must be related to.

The Young Man recounts his history of losses to Grandma toward the end of the play. His tale, staged in a manner so solemn as to be sacred, opens a hiatus within the play's violent, careening conversational games. Bound indissolubly to his lost twin, the Young Man experiences losses complimentary to those his brother suffers. His brother's blindness ends his ability to see with pity. Recall that this brother assumedly suffers his disfigurement under a tyrannical Mommy, who turns the disciplining of his bodily excesses and infantile desires into a mutilation. The ultimate murder of the Young Man's twin disembowels him, robbing him of feeling and leaving him with his typically beautiful person, body, and face. As he tells Grandma, he is a type. Gutted of his interior life, he cannot relate to anyone but knows others must relate to him. He accepts the syntax of others. Indeed, perhaps his emptiness, and his being a type, allows him to fit into this syntax smoothly. Thus this incomplete Man will provide the Mommy and Daddy with the satisfaction that his unruly double could not.

GRANDMA: Then it turned out it only had eyes for Daddy. MRS. BARKER: For its Daddy! Why, any self-respecting woman would have gouged those eyes right out of its head. GRANDMA: Well, she did. That's exactly what she did.

Here Grandma recounts how Mommy progressively mutilated her "bumble of joy," the child they procured from the Bye-Bye Adoption Service twenty years ago. The epitome of the bad, terrorizing mother, Mommy will disfigure the bumble in the course of disciplining its infantile desires and bodily excesses. It is not for nothing here that an indignant or jealous Mommy blinds the child over its affection for its father. Mommy is partially terrifying because she disrupts the homosocial bonds, son-father, but, more explicitly, the fraternal relation as well, within the American family.

Notably the disfigurement of the child proceeds from a certain disfigurement of language. Mommy makes the figure of speech come true literally ("it only had eyes for Daddy"), turning to the body. The child's eyes are at fault here. Mommy literally exacts a "pound of flesh," so to speak. Her violence strikes both language and the body.

What I'll really have to do is to see if it applies to anything. I mean, after all, Ido do volunteer work if an adoption service, but it isn't very much like the Bye-Bye Adoption Service is the Bye-Bye Adoption Service and while I can remember Mommy and Daddy coming to see me, oh, about twenty years ago, about buying a bumble, I can't quite remember anyone very much likeMommy and Daddy coming to see me about buying a bundle.

When Mrs. Barker implores Grandma to reveal the purpose of her visit, Grandma rather sarcastically does so by recounting its history, saying that twenty years ago, there was a couple very much like Mommy and Daddy. Nevertheless, Mrs. Barker fails to grasp the relevance of her hint. Having admitted to not particularly liking similes a few moments earlier, Mrs. Barker denies Grandma's "very much like" and thus obliterates any similarity between the figures of Grandma's story and the players on-stage. The Bye-Bye Adoption Service is the Bye-Bye Adoption Service; anything like it is not it. For Mrs. Barker, the simile fails. Mrs. Barker's absurd failure to understand Grandma's story numbers among the many defenses the players erect against bringing the traumatic origin and purpose of Mrs. Barker's visit forward. Though she clearly remembers her past encounter with Mommy and Daddy, Mrs. Barker cannot bring herself to grasp why it matters today.

WHAT a masculine Daddy! Isn't he a masculine Daddy?

Mommy shares her approbation of Daddy when, having vacillated on whether they should carry through with the visit, he finally moves to open the door and allow Mrs. Barker into the apartment. This ostensible demonstration of Daddy's manliness under Mommy's pointedly exaggerated encouragement of course only serves to make him more into an infant. Notably, Grandma refuses to watch this vicious game. Mommy's exclamation is particularly significant in making apparent an aspect of Albee's drama potentially lost in its textual form: the violence of the actor's delivery. Mommy delivers her lines sadistically, her speech shaped by hyperbole, sarcasm, and the cruelest tone possible.

Part one

Note: *The American Dream* is a play in one, uninterrupted scene.

Summary

Mommy and Daddy sit in armchairs on either side of their living room, facing each other diagonally out toward the audience. They complain that they, that is, the visitors they expect, are late. Certainly they were quick to get them to sign the lease, but now it is impossible to get them to fix anything. People can get away with anything these days.

Mommy recounts her purchase of a hat the day before, chastising Daddy for his inattentive listening. She was quite happy with her new beige hat until meeting the chairwoman of her woman's club, a dreadful woman who insisted her hat was wheat. Mommy returned to the store and made a scene until given a new beige hat, which looked wheat in the store but became beige outside. Daddy remarks that it was probably the same hat and Mommy confirms his guess with a laugh. In any case, she got satisfaction.

Daddy complains that he has been trying to get the toilet fixed for two weeks, primarily for Grandma's sake. Now that it does not work, it makes her feel feeble-headed. They complain about their lateness anew. Grandma enters with a load of neatly wrapped boxes. She dumps them around Daddy's feet and complains that he should get the john fixed.

When Daddy replies that they can hear Grandma whimpering away for hours when she goes to the bathroom, Grandma and Mommy firmly reproach him. Grandma laments that when you age, people start talking to you that way. Daddy apologizes. Grandma observes that people begins sorry gives you a sense of dignity. If you do not have a sense of dignity, civilization is doomed.

Mommy and Daddy rebuke Grandma for reading Mommy's book club selections again. Grandma retorts that the old have to do something. The old cannot talk with anyone because they snap at them. They go deaf to avoid people talking to them in that way; ultimately, the way people talk to them causes their death. Grandma exits to fetch the rest of the boxes.

Daddy feels contrite. Mommy reassures him, saying that Grandma does not know what she means, and if she knows that she says, she will not know that soon either. Mommy recalls that Grandma has always wrapped boxes nicely. When she was a child, left poor with the death of Grandpa, Grandma used to wrap her a lunchbox every day for school. The other children would withdraw their chicken legs and chocolate cakes from their poorly wrapped boxes, and Mommy would not have the heart to rip into hers.

Daddy guesses that it was because her box was empty. Mommy protests, saying that Grandma always filled it the night before with her own un-eaten dinner. After school, Mommy would bring back her lunch for Grandma to eat. "I love day-old cake" she used to say. Mommy eat all the other children's food at school because they though her box was empty. They thought she suffered from the sin of pride. Since that made them superior to her, they were quite generous.

Analysis

As noted by Albee, *The American Dream* is a critique of the "American Scene", a scene allegorized here by a childless household. Its players are Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma, defined—as their names suggest—by their place within that household's structure and personifying the members of the American family. Their intercourse will continually ironize what Albee conceives of the bourgeois American lifestyle and its attendant values—thus Mommy's banal and seemingly pointless story about her hat—disconcertingly delivered in earnest—their laments that one just cannot get "satisfaction" these days, that these days people are poised take advantage of you, and so on. In this respect, Albee's debt to

Ionesco's*The Bald Soprano* is clear. Satire aside, *The American Dream* is especially interesting, however, in its exploration of the relations between violence and language on the American Scene.

One of the play's primary examples of how language is put to violent uses is Mommy's emasculation of Daddy. As in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* the the American Scene is dominated by a sadistic and terrorizing mother; as remarked later, only a village idiot on this stage could subscribe to Woman Love. Note here the violence in Mommy and Daddy's intercourse, the ways in which she uses speech to rule him. Throughout the play, Mommy's domination of Daddy appears prominently in the echo. Here in the story of the hat, Mommy reduces Daddy to the toneless repetition of her words to make sure he listens. Daddy voids himself as a listener, serving as an acoustic mirror, a sort of negative entity, to her tale. Later, she will repeat his apologies to Grandma ("Daddy said he was sorry"), as if its "communication" remains contingent on her mediation. This echoing of course recalls the relation of a parent to its child, Mommy infantilizing everyone in the household.

Two other salient motifs also appear in Mommy and Daddy's dialogue. The first conjures the club chairwoman's "absolutely adorable husband who sits in a wheel chair all the time". This image—along with others of crippling and mutilation—will crucially recur later. The second involves a synecdoche—a metonymical figure in which part stands in for whole. When Mommy asks if Daddy is listening, he replies "I'm all ears." Mommy giggles at the thought. Her giggle Daddy's expression collapses the synecdochal relation: Daddy is all ears. In doing so, it also refers the figure to Daddy's body: Daddy is not a good listener but, physically, "all ears". This turn to the body will importantly recur with reference to Mommy and Daddy's missing (and mutilated) child. Here the reader can note that Mommy's violence does not only make use of language but subjects language—and in particular figurative language—to violence as well.

Also marginalized within the American Scene, Grandma—the play's epigrammatic ironist—will comment explicitly on language's capacities for violence. Unlike Daddy, her marginalization lies in her age. For Grandma, what defines age is the way in which people talk to you; later she will remark that one can say little to old people that does not sound terrible. The address of others is terrorizing; it drives its listener under the bed and shakes the household. Ultimately its violence is fatal; old people die as a result of how others address them. Indeed, the old even become deaf to protect themselves.

In her capacity as an ironic commentator—one who in a sense observes the household events from the outside—Grandma readily stands in for the absurdist dramaturge. Indeed, her epigrammatic commentary prefigures her eventual transformation into a director. At the

end of the play, Grandma will come to cross between the spaces of the action and theater to stage the play's denouement and comment on the events literally from the outside.

Grandma also doubles the absurdist in that her defenses against the violence of others are absurd in the truest sense (L. *absurdus,* from *ab-* + *surdus*deaf, stupid). Her deafness and stupidity would remove her from the household's fatal intercourse. Tellingly, Mommy notes here Grandma never knows what she means. Though she may know what she says at the moment, she will not for long. Her "absurdity" thus uncouples knowledge or intention and the meaning of her speech and, eventually, intention and her utterance (what she says). As we will see throughout the play, these separations—interrupting the speech's communicative function—are some of Grandma's crucial defenses against violence.

Grandma also introduces the finely wrapped boxes, boxes that appear on-stage for most of the play. Here the boxes evoke the memory of a perverse circuit of exchange between an impoverished and widowed Grandma and young Mommy—note here Mommy's disconcerting regression to childish speech. This circuit involves relations of deprivation, debt, and deceit. Grandma denies herself dinner to provide her daughter with tomorrow's lunch. Mommy cannot bring herself to open Grandma's beautifully wrapped "gift" so to speak, Unspoken here is Mommy's debt to Grandma: her lunch means Grandma's deprivation. Thus she returns it to provide Grandma with a day-old meal. In turn, she plays the deprived child to her classmates, generous out of their sense of superiority.

Part two

Summary

Daddy reproaches Mommy for being such a deceitful girl. She protests that they were poor; now, having married Daddy, she is rich. Even Grandma feels rich, though she does not know Daddy wants her in a nursing home. Daddy protests that he would never send her away. Mommy would however: she cannot stand Grandma's constant housework. At the same time, one cannot simply live off of people.

She can, however, as she married Daddy and used to let him mount her and "bump [his] uglies"; she has earned the right to his money upon his death. Grandma enters with more boxes. When Daddy compliments her on the wrapping, she reproaches him anew for saying that she whimpered in the bathroom. Old people make all sorts of noises—whimpers, cries, belches, stomach rumblings, and so on. They wake up screaming in the middle of the night to discover they have not been sleeping and when asleep, they cannot wake for the longest time.

"Homilies!" Mommy cries. Grandma continues, calling Mommy a tramp, trollop, and trull. Even since she was a little girl, she schemed to marry a rich man: didn't she warn Daddy against marrying her? Mommy protests that Grandma is her mother, not Daddy's—Grandma has forgotten that detail. She complains that Mommy should have had Daddy set her up in the fur business or helped her become a singer. She has only kept her around to help protect herself whenever Daddy got fresh. But now Daddy would rather sleep with her than Mommy.

Daddy has been sick, however, and does not want anyone. "I just want to get everything over with" he sighs. Mommy agrees: why are they so late? "Who? Who?" hoots an owl-like Grandma. Mommy insists that Grandma knows who. She compliments the boxes again. Grandma replies that it hurt her fingers and frightened her to do it, but it had to be done. Mommy orders her to bed; Grandma responds that she wants to stay and watch.

The doorbell rings. Grandma asks who is it again: is it the "van people", finally come to take her away? Daddy assures her that it is not. The bell rings again, and Daddy wrings his hands in doubt—perhaps they should reconsider? Mommy insists that he made up his mind, that he was "masculine and decisive". At her prompting, he opens the door. "WHAT a masculine daddy! Isn't he a masculine Daddy?" Mommy explains. Grandma refuses to participate in the spectacle.

Mrs. Barker enters. Remarking on her lateness, Mommy reminds her that she was here once before. Grandma insists that she does not see "them". Barker assures her that they are here. Grandma does not remember her.

Analysis

Much like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* this sequence continues to demonstrate the violence of the American Scene by airing what should remain unspoken in social intercourse—the "obscene". In particular, Mommy and Grandma make the mercenary underpinnings of Mommy's marriage known. Mommy claims her right to live off of Daddy because she used to provide him with sex. Grandma mimics Mommy as a gold digging little girl; on her own part, her demand for "allowance" from Mommy and Daddy becomes a demand for "an allowance".

With these mercenary underpinnings in mind, note again the debts and rivalries between Mommy and Grandma. Grandma feels Mommy has cheated her of a career she could have had Daddy fund; Mommy only brought her into the house to flee Daddy's advances. Now Daddy does not want her, she taunts; indeed, he would rather sleep with her. Intergenerational loyalties are quickly forgotten here: Grandma forgets Mommy is her daughter. Later, Grandma will be unable to recall whether she put her own mother away;

Mommy will quickly forget Grandma's departure. Amidst Mommy and Grandma's wrangling, Daddy has been sick, not wanting to sleep in the apartment. "I just want to get everything over with" he remarks. A double entendre, this reference to "their" imminent visit is certainly a confession of suicidal yearnings as well.

As in the sequence previous, the household continues to wait for "them", a party that remains unidentified despite Grandma's comic hooting: "Who? Who?" These others for whom the household waits assume menacing proportions: perhaps they are the "van people", come to take Grandma away. "They" listen at the apartment door. Ultimately, when "they" arrive, however, Grandma insists that she cannot see them. Indeed, it would seem "they" are no one but Mrs. Barker. At times, it seems Mrs. Barker is their representative. At others, the inappropriate use of plural ("they", "them") despite Mrs. Barker's singularity proposes and makes their absence painfully obvious. Grandma does not recognize their guest-perhaps Mrs. Barker was younger when they had an occasion to meet. As we will see, the apparent uncertainty surrounding Mrs. Barker's and "their" identity lies in "their" relation to the household's most intimate trauma.

Grandma hooting ("Who? Who?") is also another elaboration of her "absurdism", Grandma appearing at once "senile", infantile, and owl-like nevertheless in her wisdom. Again prefiguring her ultimate move outside the action's frame, she establishes herself as a spectator, childishly insisting that Mommy and Daddy let her stay up and watch. Her insistence on watching notwithstanding, she will soon again appear in resistance to the violent spectacle before her. Thus she will refuse to watch Daddy's attempt, under Mommy's pointedly exaggerated encouragement, to open the door and demonstrate his masculinity, an attempt that only emasculates him further.

Grandma's ethical resistance to the spectacle's violence also includes her interruption of others' speech, speech that, as discussed earlier, torments her as an old person. Note here, for example, how Mommy and Daddy patronizingly compliment Grandma's boxes or how Mommy continually attempts to silence her. Thus old people find themselves reduced to noises, half of which are involuntary, even bestial-whimpers, cries, belches, and hollow rumblings, and screams, sounds that are largely "obscene". Indeed, Grandma insists that one cannot expect old people to speak precisely because they are obscene. Pitting her against what the Young Man will describe as the "syntax" of the American Scene, Grandma's obscenity (*L. ob-scaenus, off-scene*) also prefigures her break out of the action's frame.

Part three

Summary

Daddy invites Mrs. Barker to sit; Mommy offers her a cigarette, a drink, and the opportunity to cross her legs. Being a professional woman, Mrs. Barker only opts for the latter. Grandma asks if "they" are still here. Mrs. Barker comments cordially on their unattractive apartment. As she was listening outside—"they" must keep track of everything in their work—she knows of their maintenance problems.

Mommy and Daddy ask what Mrs. Barker does. She responds that she chairs Mommy's woman's club. After some hesitation, Mommy recognizes her, remarking that she wears a hat like the one she purchased yesterday. Mrs. Barker replies that hers is cream. Mommy invites her to remove her dress; she readily follows. "I just blushed and giggled and went sticky wet" chuckles Daddy. Mommy notes that Daddy is a "caution".

Mrs. Barker offers to smoke if that will help the situation, but Mommy violently forbids her. She asks why Mrs. Barker has come. As Mommy walks through the boxes, Grandma warns her against stepping on them: "The boxes…the boxes" she murmurs. Daddy asks if Grandma means Mrs. Barker has come over the boxes; Grandma does not know, though that is not what she thought she meant. Mrs. Barker asks if "they" can assume Mommy and Daddy have invited them over the boxes. Mommy asks she "they" are in the habit of receiving boxes. Mrs. Barker replies that it depends on the reason why "they" have come. One of her activities involves the receipt of baskets, though "more in a literary sense than really". They might receive boxes in special circumstances.

Her answer does not help. Daddy asks if it might help if he shares that he feels misgiving and definite qualms—right around where his stitches were. He had an operation: the doctors removed and inserted something. Mommy remarks that all his life he wanted to be a Senator but will now spend the rest wanting to become Governor—it would be closer to the apartment. Praising ambition, Mrs. Barker tells of her brother who runs *The Village Idiot*—indeed, he *is* the Village Idiot. He insists that everyone know he is married; he is the country's chief exponent of Woman Love.

Grandma begins to speak, and Mommy abruptly silences her. Miming Grandma's epigrams, she declares that old people have nothing to say; if they did, nobody would listen to them. Grandma admits that she has the rhythm but lacks the quality. Besides, Mommy is middle-aged. To illustrate, she intones: middle-aged people think they can do anything but cannot as well as they used to. They believe themselves special because they are like everybody else. "We live in an age of deformity". Daddy wishes that he were not surrounded by women.

Finally, Grandma says her piece: the boxes have nothing to do with Mrs. Barker's visit. She offers to explain the boxes' presence, but Daddy asks what that has to do with "what's-her-

name"'s visit. Mommy responds that "they" are here because they asked them. Grandma offers to explain the boxes again but Mommy silences her.

Analysis

Albee dedicates much of *The American Dream* to explicit reflections on language. Note, for example, here how Grandma again remarks that what she intends to say might not accord with what she means. This sequence in particular provides an opportunity to consider the work of the "performative" in Albee's dialogue, work crucial to how Albee conceives of language's capacity for violence.

What is of course most astonishing about this sequence is the characters' seeming ignorance of Mrs. Barker's work and the purpose of her visit. As noted above, Grandma does not recognize her; neither Mommy nor Daddy know what she does; late in the conversation, Daddy finds himself unable to remember Mrs. Barker's name. At other times, it appears just as likely here that Mommy and Daddy feign ignorance, staging these elaborate conversational games to torture their guest, a guest whom they hosted many years ago. Later it will become clear that a trauma in the household's history underpins these defensive and hostile feints, circumlocutions, and memory lapses around Mrs. Barker's visit.

At a linguistic level, these incoherencies serve to emphasize the "speech act" that underpins the visit. A speech act is speech that performs something, such as the phrase "I know pronounce you man and wife" that produces a married couple. In the case of the Mrs. Barker, the performative speech here is the request that she come, the demand for satisfaction. Despite all their possible uncertainties, Mommy and Daddy know that they have asked Mrs. Barker to their home—a request has been filed. The "contents" of this request are a mystery: what remains is the request itself. It establishes a contract that brings the party together. In this sense, Mommy explanation of her visit—that she has come because they asked—is not some "absurd" tautology but a reflection on how a linguistic act determines the action proper.

The performative capacity of speech appears more clearly when Mrs. Barker declares herself the chair of Mommy's women's club. Initially Mommy fails to recognize her. She then exclaims: "Why, so you are." Again, it seems that some repression has poked a hole in Mommy's memory, causing a momentary lapse. At another level, this exchange involves a speech act. Mrs. Barker becomes the chair of the woman's club upon Mommy's performative statement: Mommy confers recognition upon her within speech.

The speech act assumes paramount importance at the moments when Albee's figurative language involves a turn to the body. At these moments, language's performative capacity for violence becomes most obvious. Thus, for example, Daddy, like some hypochondriac,

complains that he has misgivings and definite qualms at the site of his operation. Grandma laments that people think old people only complain because old people are "gnarled and sagged and twisted into the shape of a complaint"—that is, the bodies mime their speech. Language manifests itself violently on the body.

Thus this sequence—as well as others in the play—lay bare how performatives structure social intercourse. At the same time, this sequence functions to undermine the social intercourse upon which speech acts are often at the same time dependent. As a number of theorists have noted, the speech act is often radically contingent on its context—for example, the contract depends on the social and cultural context within which it is intelligible. Here the rules of sociability that would determine Mrs. Barker's visit fly off their hinges. Mommy invites Mrs. Barker to remove her dress as she might her coat; she does so, and Daddy childishly ejaculates on himself. Mommy offers her the opportunity to cross her legs as if it was an aperitif; Mrs. Barker likens Daddy to an "old house", and he takes it as a compliment under Mommy's behest. In a particularly disconcerting fashion, the characters carry on as if following some invisible logic of sociability, the rules of some social theater—note how, despite their transgressions of etiquette, Mommy still maniacally insists that Mrs. Barker not smoke.

Part four

Summary

Mommy appeals to Daddy to have Grandma taken away. The apartment has become over-crowded with her enema bottles, Pekinese, the boxes, and everything else. Mrs. Barker remarks that she never heard of enema bottles. Grandma replies that Mommy means enema bags. She cannot help her ignorance; she comes from bad stock. Indeed, when she was born, she had a head shaped like a banana.

Mommy accuses Grandma of a capacity to just say anything. The other night she called Daddy a hedgehog—she probably picked up the word from television. She commands Daddy to shake her television's tubes loose. Daddy asks that she not mention tubes to him. Daddy has tubes now where he once had tracts. Grandma announces that she knows why Mrs. Barker has come to visit. Mrs. Barker begs her to give up the secret, but Mommy declares that a revelation would not be fair.

Mrs. Barker remains puzzled: she is such a busy girl with many committees and commitments. Mommy and Daddy mock her: they have not invited her to offer her help. If she need help, she could apply for a number of fellowships. Speaking as a representative of

the Ladies' Auxiliary Air Raid Committee, Mrs. Barker asks how the family feels about air raids. Mommy and Daddy reply that they are hostile.

When Mrs. Barker comments on the surfeit of hostility in the world, Grandma rejoins that a Department of Agriculture study reveals an excess of old people as well. Mommy calls her a liar, commanding Daddy to break her television. He rises; Mommy cautions him against stepping on Grandma's blind Pekinese. Once he leaves, she sarcastically muses on her good fortune in marriage: she could have had a husband who was poor, argumentative, or consigned to a wheel chair.

Apparently recalling Mrs. Barker's invalid husband, Mommy recoils in horror, Mrs. Barker forces a smile and tells her to not think about it. Mommy pauses and announces that she has forgotten her *faux pas.* As she invites her guest to some girl talk, Mrs. Barker replies that she is not sure that she would not care for some water. Mommy orders Grandma to the kitchen; having quit, Grandma refuses. Moreover, she has hidden everything. Mrs. Barker declares herself in a near-faint, and Mommy goes for water herself.

Mrs. Barker relates her disorientation to Grandma and implores her to give up the secret of her visit. Grandma relishes in being implored and asks her to beg again. After some resistance, Mrs. Barker beseeches her anew.

Analysis

"Yes, definitely; we're hostile" Daddy echoes when Mommy responds to Mrs. Barker's query about air raids, and here Mrs. Barker appears as the object of their joint hostility. In this sequence it seems most clear that Mommy is toying with Mrs. Barker. She forbids Grandma from revealing the visit's purpose; for whatever reason, she and Daddy sneer at Mrs. Barker's volunteer activities, activities that make her the caricature of the socially responsible American housewife. Note also the many double entendres: for example, when Mommy invites Mrs. Barker to fetch her own water, she notes that she should be able to put two and two together if clever enough.

In this light, Mommy's slip—in which she methodically lists husbands worst than her own—appears premeditated. Her panic upon realizing her "mistake"—peppered with her characteristic emphases, shrill exclamations, and violent imagery ("I could cut my tongue out!")—similarly seems aggressive in intent. At the same time, her willful forgetting of this *faux pas* also points out the other logic behind this bizarre visit—that of defense. Mommy will not think about it, forget she ever said it, and thus make everything all right. Thus she exiles a potentially traumatic idea from consciousness.

As we will see in the subsequent sequence, a traumatic memory shared by the party has similarly been defended against. Though remembered, it remains, for example, unspoken, temporarily forgotten, or, even worse, raised but without the characters' understanding its relevance to their situation. These defenses make up many of the play's dizzying, "absurdist" turns.

In this sense, Mommy and, to a lesser extent, Daddy's ignorance of Mrs. Barker's purpose here is less an intentionally devious game but an indication of their ambivalent struggle with a traumatic memory. This memory impels them to demand compensation, the "satisfaction" denied them: thus the invitation and violent treatment of Mrs. Barker. At the same time, this demand necessarily brings the memory against which they have defended themselves against to mind requiring further defenses, whether amnesiac, sophistical, or otherwise. Thus Mrs. Barker's visit can only occur on uncertain terms. Similarly do Mommy's attacks take place through, for example, the slip or the apparently unmotivated assault on Mrs. Barker's volunteer work, attacks that do not directly bring their trauma to consciousness.

As the audience increasingly senses the possibility that Mommy and Daddy have sprung a trap, Mrs. Barker comes to functions in a role perhaps analogous to Honey's in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*—that of the ingenuous outsider who cannot stay abreast of the household's games. Indeed, like Honey, she almost faints as a result. Note in this respect her telling confession to Grandma that she does not particularly like similes. This confession prefigures her ultimate failure to apprehend the purpose of her visit, a failure that will also number among the neurotic defenses the party erects against their shared traumatic memory.

Also of note in this sequence is Mommy's accusation that Grandma is a liar. The lie is a particularly important trope in Albee's theater. Lying is a matter of course here. Characters viciously stage fictions against each other in the course of their conversational battles—thus Grandma warns Mrs. Barker against trusting anyone in this household. Often they speak borrowed language—whether from television or book of the month club selections. The lie also refers to the theater: the actor and director figure as professional liars. As we will see, their fictions woven by these figures will ultimately intrude into the action with decidedly traumatic results.

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Part five

Summary

Grandma offers Mrs. Barker a hint. About twenty years ago, a man very much like Daddy and a woman very much like Mommy lived in an apartment very much like theirs with an old woman very much like Grandma. They contacted an organization very much like the nearby Bye-Bye Adoption Service, requesting a blessing very much like the "bumble of joy" they could never have on their own. The couple very much like Mommy and Daddy revealed their intimate lives to the adoption agent who was very much like Mrs. Barker and had something very much like a penchant for pornography.

Ultimately they bought their bumble but quickly came upon trouble. Grandma hastens her tale as she is preparing to leave soon. First the bumble cried its heart out. Then, it only had eyes for Daddy. The woman like Mommy gouged its eyes out, but then it kept its nose up in the air. Next, it developed an interest in its "you-know-what"—its parents promptly cut it off. When the bumble continued to look for its you-know-what with its hands, they chopped those off as well. Its tongue went as well when it called its Mommy a dirty name. Then, as it aged, its parents discovered it had no head, guts, or spine and had feet of clay. Finally it died. Throughout the anecdote, Mrs. Barker coos in delight and titillation, cheering on the child's mutilation enthusiastically.

Wanting satisfaction, its parents called the adoption agent back to the apartment to demand their money back. Suddenly Daddy cries from off-stage that he cannot find television, Pekinese, or Grandma's room; Mommy cannot find the water. Grandma has hidden things well indeed. Mommy sticks her head into the room and threatens Grandma with the van man. How can she be so old and smug at once? She has no sense of proportion. Grandma is unmoved. Mommy insists that the resistant Mrs. Barker join her in the kitchen.

Grandma asks that Mrs. Barker not divulge the hint she has provided. Of course, Mrs. Barker has already forgotten it. Moreover, she cannot understand its relevance. Though she volunteers for the Bye-Bye Adoption Service and remembers Mommy and Daddy visiting her

twenty years ago, she cannot recall anything like the Bye-Bye Adoption Service or a couple like Mommy and Daddy. Mulling the matter over, she leaves to fetch her glass of water.

Analysis

Finally Grandma reveals the traumatic cause of Mrs. Barker's visit: the purchase of a botched child—indeed, a "bumble". Here the discipline and prohibition of the child—assumedly for the most part at the hands of Mommy—becomes its mutilation. The child acts out on its desires and suffers a progressive disfigurement as its punishment.

Such images of disfigurement occur throughout the play; indeed, Grandma declares the age as one of deformity. Mommy had a banana-shaped head at birth. Grandma imagines old people as twisted into the shape of a complaint. The accumulation of these monstrous births assumes almost prophetic dimensions, becoming omens in what Albee describes as the "slipping land" of America.

In this case, however, corporeal disfigurements involve a disfigurement of language as well. Indeed, the violence perpetrated on the child follows a set of figures of speech. The child cries its heart out; it only has eyes for Daddy, and so Mommy gouges them. The child's dismemberment recalls Freud's notion of the hypochondriac's "organ speech", in which certain particularly vexing ideas are translated into bodily effects. However, Mommy does not only violate the bumble's body. She disfigures language as well, violently literalizing a figure of speech and collapsing it onto the body. Importantly, the violence on the body follows this first disfigurement. Disfigurement in the rhetorical sense becomes the occasion for disfigurement corporeally. The play disfigures language and the body in the same gesture. Such disfigurements are further examples of how the play explores the relationship between language and violence.

Though more a revelation than a hint, Grandma's story fails to produce any effect on its listener. Mrs. Barker provides the play's most explicit example of defense in her failure to apprehend Grandma's thinly veiled and brutally sarcastic chronicle. This defense involves another failed trope, one which Mrs. Barker confessed not particularly liking earlier: the simile. Here Mrs. Barker in a sense takes the trope too literally, emphasizing the difference established by the "very much like"—a modifier that in large part only refers to the fact that the characters have aged. She denies Grandma's "very much like" and thus obliterates any similarity between the figures of Grandma's story and the players on-stage. The Bye-Bye Adoption Service is the Bye-Bye Adoption Service; anything "like" it is not it. She cannot relate Grandma's hint to her visit; for her, the simile fails. Nevertheless, she clearly knows the traumatic occasion for her visit: her attempt at defense is decidedly absurd.

As we will see, the story of the dismembered child sets up the central allegory of the play. In the sequence to come, the bumble's lost twin, the Young Man, will appear to replace him as the new son of the household. He will rehearse the trajectory of Grandma's tale, recounting how he suffers losses parallel to the punishments meted out to his brother. His brother's disfigurement will leave him a perfect "type", a clean-cut and handsome icon who has been disemboweled, robbed of emotion and feeling, incomplete in spite of its beauty, its ideal form. As such a type, voided of interiority, the Young Man becomes the commodity that the "bumble of joy" could not in its unruliness, finally giving Mommy and Daddy the "satisfaction" that they paid for.

Part six

Summary

The doorbell rings, and the Young Man enters. Grandma looks him over approvingly and asks if he is the van man. He is not. Grandma compliments his looks—she could go for him if she was 150 years younger. He should go into the movies. The unenthused Young Man concurs and muses flatly on his face: "clean-cut, Midwest farm boy type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way". Grandma announces the boy as the American Dream.

Still off-stage, Mommy and Daddy ask who has rung; Grandma informs them the American Dream has arrived. The Young Man explains that he has come for work. He will do anything for money. Nervously keeping him at bay—it would look awful if they got too close—Grandma wonders if he can help with the household's dilemma. Daddy has much money; she has put some away herself as well. This year Grandma won $25000 in a baking contest under the pseudonym Uncle Henry (after all, she looks as much the old man as the old woman) and a store- bought cake. She dubbed the recipe Uncle Henry's Day-Old Cake.

Suddenly Grandma notes that the Young Man looks familiar. He replies that he is a type. She then asks why he says he would do anything for money. The Young Man replies that as someone who is incomplete, he must compensate—he can explain his lack to Grandma partially because she is so old.

The Young Man's mother died at his birth; he never knew his father. However, though without parents, the Man was not alone in his womb, having an identical twin with whom he shared an unfathomable kinship. They felt each other's breath, heartbeat, and hunger. Tragically, they were separated in their youth. In the passing years, the Young Man suffered losses: "A fall from grace a departure of innocence loss loss". He lost his heart and became

unable to love. He lost his eyes and the ability to see with pity and affection. An agony in his groin left him unable to love anyone with his body. He has been "drained, torn asunder, disemboweled", left without emotions or feeling. He lets others love him. As he confesses: "I accept the syntax around me, for while I know I cannot relate…I know I must be related *to.*

"Oh, my child", murmurs Grandma in pity. She remarks that she was mistaken when she thought she knew him: she once knew someone very much like him or perhaps like who he once was. The Young Man warns her that what he said may not be true. After all, in his profession—Grandma hushes him. The Young Man bows his head in acquiescence. To be more precise, Grandma notes that this someone she knew was one who might have become very much like him might have turned out to be. She suspects the Young Man has found himself as job.

The Young Man asks about his duties, and Mrs. Barker calls from off-stage. Grandma has to go into "her act" now—the Young Man will have to play it by ear unless they get a chance to speak again.

Analysis

Here the Young Man recounts the allegory of the American Dream. Certainly, facing characters named "Mommy" and "Daddy", the reader has been aware of the play's allegorical intentions from the outset. Here the play betrays a certain embarrassment around the potential heavy-handedness of allegory: note the Dream's self-conscious "joke" that he is a "type".

As Grandma notes, the Young Man is what his murdered double might have become—note the elegiac use of the conditional—had he been. Again, this double was a child who suffered progressive disfigurement under Mommy's discipline. A blond, iconic, Midwestern beauty, the Young Man's physiognomy stands in clear contrast with the bumble of joy, the spineless, clay-footed, and wholly disfigured specter of his twin brother. With the murder of his double, he is now nothing but a "type", externally perfect but disemboweled of his inner life. Note the homosociality of the Dream's tale: his first lost love is a male twin; that twin loses his heart upon the loss of this brother and his eyes when he proves to love Daddy alone. He does so of course at the hands of a terrorizing, phobic Mommy.

Robbed of his desire, the Young Man will do anything for money to compensate for his lack. Thus he becomes a serviceable object, unable to relate but necessarily related to. Certainly this adapts him to Mommy and Daddy's household, a place where children—and the dreams or fantasies they might embody for their parents—are utterly substitutable in the attempt to

trade up and get "satisfaction". Tellingly, Mrs. Barker will even suggest that they name the Young Man whatever they named the bumble.

At the same time, of course, the Young Man is not simply a prospective son, but the personification of the American Dream. Albee's allegory of the American Dream is certainly strange. The American Dream does not appear as that which one lives out or even as ideology, but as a person and possession. One possible reading of this allegory involves the all-important theatrical concept of the mask. Linked indissolubly, the twins are in some sense figures for the actor and his mask. The Young Man as American Dream is a mask without a man behind it, a personification without a person. The murder of his double is the murder of the man behind the mask, the elimination of the unruly body—indeed, the "bumble"—that can only mould itself into the perfect form through its mutilation. Thus Albee offers a sinister account of the American Dream, imagining it as a mask disemboweled of man and his excesses.

This scene introduces a certain hiatus into the play, radically altering its tone, dialogue, and action. The Dream's lament is almost lyrical, its ellipses more elegiac than menacing. The scene of its narration evokes an almost sacred solemnity: the Dream must be sure—in a play structured by misapprehension and misunderstanding—that Grandma is old enough to understand. The acerbic Grandma drops her "act", prefiguring her imminent exit from the spectacle of the household. Reduced to pity, she can only murmur "Oh my child"—this marks the only gesture of familial affection in the play.

Notably Grandma hushes the Dream when he warns that he may be lying out of professional habit. Does Albee then exclude the Dream's tale from the rest of the dialogue's deceits and defenses? Perhaps Grandma's gesture is an overture to the audience, asking that they suspend their disbelief before the allegory? Or does she warn the Dream that such an admission of artifice might threaten the allegory's credibility?

Part seven

Summary

Mrs. Barker emerges and, stunned by the new arrival, asks who the Young Man is. Grandma announces him as the van man; after a glance at Grandma, the Young Man plays along. Upon her request, he takes her boxes out to the "van". Mrs. Barker consoles Grandma: the man who carted off her own mother was not half as nice. When Grandma appears surprised that Mrs. Barker sent her mother away, Mrs. Barker cheerfully confesses she assumed she did as well. Grandma cannot recall.

Forcefully taking Mrs. Barker aside, Grandma whispers a solution to Mommy and Daddy's dilemma into her ear. Mrs. Barker exits to find them. Now alone, Grandma looks about and sighs "Goodbye". The Young Man returns and reports that all the boxes are outside. Sadly, Grandma wonders why she takes them with her. They contain little more than the "things one accumulates"—old letters, a blind Pekinese, regrets, eighty-six years of living, sounds, her Sunday teeth, and so on.

She instructs the Young Man to stay, and they slowly exit to the elevator. Mrs. Barker, Mommy, and Daddy return, celebrating the resolution of their dilemma: they will get their satisfaction after all. Suddenly Mommy exclaims that Grandma and her boxes are missing: she has left and stolen something no less. Mrs. Barker informs her that the van man claimed her. Near tears, Mommy replies that this is impossible: the van man is their invention. She calls to Grandma.

While Daddy comforts Mommy, Grandma emerges at stage right, near the footlights. She hushes the audience, declaring that she wants to watch the events to ensue. Motioning to Mrs. Barker, she tiptoes to the front door: the Young Man appears framed within. Mrs. Barker joyfully announces Mommy and Daddy's surprise.

They introduce themselves. Truly pleased with her replacement, Mommy calls for a celebration. Now at least they know why they sent for Mrs. Barker. She asks Mrs. Barker the Young Man's name; Mrs. Barker invites her to name him as she will—perhaps he can have the name of the other one. Mommy and Daddy cannot remember his name, however. The Young Man appears with a tray, a bottle of sauterne, and five glasses. Mommy chastises him: there are only four present. Grandma indicates to the Young Man that she is absent, and he apologizes. Mommy notes he will have to learn to count: they are a rich family. They toast satisfaction. Her voice a little fuzzy from the wine, Mommy promises to tell the Young Man of the disaster they had with the last one. She muses that there is something familiar about him.

Grandma interrupts and addresses the audience. We should leave things as they are and go no further while everyone is happy or has what they want or has what they think they want. She bids the audience good night.

Analysis

Grandma makes her exit. First, however, she waxes nostalgic over her departure, finally revealing the contents of the ubiquitous wrapped boxes. To this point, the audience has only heard that these boxes are nicely wrapped, that they had to be wrapped even though wrapping frightened Grandma and hurt her fingers. Though Grandma almost reveals the

boxes' purpose—and perhaps then her intention to escape—halfway through the play, Mommy quickly silences her. Perhaps Mommy and Daddy's insistence on their wrapping metaphorizes their negligence toward Grandma. In a play where an outwardly perfect Young Man becomes the son who provides satisfaction, it is probably easiest to consider Mommy and Daddy's patronizing emphasis on the boxes' wrapping as indicative of their satisfaction with surfaces. The boxes of course also serve as a diversion when the household attempts to ascertain the purpose of Mrs. Barker's visit. They perhaps then also allegorize the composition of the play, which largely consists of apparent and perpetually surprising diversions that keep the audience from the heart of the matter. In any case, it appears that Grandma has prepared for her flight from her entrance directly under the noses of Mommy and Daddy. She has eluded them through her obviousness. Perversely, she covers her last tracks by turning one of their fictions against them. With Grandma's ostensible exit with the "van man", a fiction revenges itself against the household, intruding—like the death of Martha and Georgia's child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*—into the action. Notably, the fiction does not invade the "real" but into the equally fictional spectacle on-stage: instead, a subterfuge, a "second-order" fiction so to speak, breaks in. This fiction conceals Grandma's exit from this spectacle's frame, her exit into the "outside", the reality of the audience. This crossing back and forth—like the Grandma's crossing between first and second order fictions—only functions to contaminate that reality with the "absurdity" of the scene on-stage.

In crossing between the spaces of the action and theater, Grandma literally becomes a commentator on the spectacle from the outside. Thus the reader should note how Mommy is quick to forget Grandma's absence upon the unveiling of the American Dream; the spectator perhaps wonders why she and Daddy do not perceive her by the footlights even as Mrs. Barker and the Young Man do. Certainly throughout the play Mommy wishes for Grandma's departure. Here their blindness to Grandma's presence—exaggerated by the Young Man's error over the glasses—is also a blindness to the staged nature of the denouement and Grandma's ensuing criticism, a shared denial that aims at preserving the hope that satisfaction will be theirs.

The celebration of the Young Man's arrival, however, is certainly a joke. His unveiling is less a miracle than a vulgar transaction; note his stilted introduction to and Mommy's gratuitous reference to the family's prosperity. Mommy's intimate aside with the Young Man and Daddy's sudden sullenness conceivable suggests an attempt at seduction as well, an attempt wholly consistent with the play's fantasy of the bad mother. Thus Grandma looks on ironically; her abrupt interruption and glib farewell clearly offer up the household to the audience's judgment.