

## Edward Albee's Supreme Fictions: A Stevensian Analysis of *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*

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### Abstract

Drawing on Wallace Stevens's ideas of Supreme Fiction, this research aims to prove that Albee's plays are a form of supreme fiction which adopts deviant or unreal ways to depict the real. The primary texts used in this research are *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*. In "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction", Stevens gives us an inexhaustible pool of fiction available to mankind by way of which the real can be accessed. Just as the roaring of 'the lion', 'buzzing of bees, composing of 'music', and making of sculptures are various expressions (Stevens, 1942)—amidst others—of a single idea, Theatre of the Absurd is also an expression of a creative imagination that seeks ways to channel its creative outpour in socially expressible ways. The paper also maintains that the darkly comic mode, the grotesquely caricatured characters, and the absurd situations are sublimated versions of the real. This invented mode of expression is the writer's method of expressing the inexpressible.

**Keywords:** Supreme Fiction, Wallace Stevens, Albee's Plays, *The Sandbox*, *The American Dream*, Theatre of the Absurd.

### Introduction

Edward Albee's plays, *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* stand as important works in modern American theater, which are renowned for their sharp critique of societal norms and the human condition. Albee's use of absurdity and surrealism not only challenges conventional narratives but also reveals profound insights into modern existence. This paper explores how Albee's plays embody Wallace Stevens's concept of art as a supreme fiction, where the unreal is utilized to convey deeper truths about reality. Stevens, in his collection *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, posits that "reality is not what it is. It consists of multiple realities," suggesting that art can transform and intensify these realities through imagination.

The characters in *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* are deliberately exaggerated and surreal, serving as vehicles to expose the vacuity and superficiality of contemporary life. For instance, Mommy's obsession with trivial details, Daddy's emasculated passivity, Grandma's meta-theatrical commentary, and the Young Man's hollow perfection all reflect the hollowness of societal roles and expectations. These characters, through their absurd interactions and traits, exemplify Stevens' idea that fictional or unreal things have a reality of their own. By presenting exaggerated versions of societal archetypes, Albee unveils the lack of meaningful connections and the pervasive materialism that define modern existence. Furthermore, the surreal situations crafted by Albee, such as the grotesque adoption narrative in *The American Dream* and the indifferent handling of Grandma's death in *The Sandbox*, serve as potent critiques of societal norms. These scenarios, while absurd, mirror real-life existential malaise and the dehumanization inherent in consumer culture and family dynamics. Stevens's belief that art can create an unreal framework to reveal profound truths is vividly illustrated in Albee's work, where the boundary between reality and fiction is intentionally blurred to evoke introspection and critique. In this paper, we delve into how Albee's absurd characters, surreal situations, and minimalist language align with Stevens's concept of supreme fiction, ultimately challenging the audience to reconsider

the superficial values and connections that underpin contemporary society. Through this lens, Albee's plays emerge not only as theatrical masterpieces but also as powerful commentaries on the human condition.

### Literature Review:

A substantial body of critical literature exists on Edward Albee's plays, particularly concerning themes of aging, the American Dream, historical context, and materialism. Zaheer and Din's paper titled, Aporia in Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, utilizes Derridean Deconstructive Term Aporia to analyze the play, examining how the once-inspiring ideals of equality, liberty, and happiness have devolved into destabilization and chaos in the twentieth century. Originally a beacon for prosperity and self-awareness, the American Dream has become a source of bewilderment and disillusionment. Through the lens of Aporia, the paper explores the deterioration, disorder, and confusion now associated with the American Dream, focusing on three specific aspects: justice, undecidability, and the limitations of human knowledge. Albee's play is dissected to reveal the internal contradictions of the American Dream and its impact on postmodern and postwar American society (Zaheer & Din, 2016). Albee portrays the American Dream as a corrupted ideal, exploited for selfish interests, and uses his narrative to expose the grim reality of a society where the dream has become meaningless. The language and themes in *The American Dream* highlight the fragmentation and degeneration of American society, illustrating how the lofty promises of the American Dream have failed, leaving a confused and disoriented populace (Zaheer & Din, 2016).

Elmira Bazregarzadeh's (2018) study, Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* in the Light of New Historicism, highlights the critical role of history in shaping human perspectives and how it mirrors life by linking past events to present circumstances, potentially influencing the future (Bazregarzadeh, 2018). This broad scope of history aligns with the New Historicist approach, which examines the interplay of power, resistance, and subversion in literature, as advocated by figures like Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt. By applying New Historicism to Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*, Bazregarzadeh's paper seeks to uncover the connections between the play and historical events in American history. This analysis reveals the cultural and historical issues stemming from the failed American Dream, particularly the disillusionment with ideals of family life and marriage that were supposed to ensure equality and respect (Bazregarzadeh, 2018). Albee's play, through this lens, critiques the socio-historical conventions of America, exposing how they affected familial relationships and left individuals questioning the true meanings of happiness and success. The New Historicist examination thus provides a fresh perspective on the unfulfilled promises of the American Dream in the 19th and 20th centuries (Bazregarzadeh, 2018).

Manisha Chillar (2019) in "Substitution of Artificial for Real Values: A Study of Edward Albee's *The American Dream*" examines how the American Dream, initially rooted in the ideals of limitless progress, personal happiness, and individual freedom, has devolved into a nightmare due to distortions such as materialism, egotism, anarchic individualism, and a lack of moral discipline. Through an ironic lens, Edward Albee critiques these corrupted values, underscoring the need to foster genuine concepts of freedom, success, and happiness. Albee's play serves as a vehement critique of the erosion of humanistic values in American society, illustrating how the pursuit of unlimited happiness and progress has become an illusion (Chillar, 2019). Americans have been misled by false notions of liberty, success, and prosperity, often resorting to immoral and inhuman means to achieve their goals. Ultimately, the play does not dismiss the possibility of attaining the true American dream; instead, it condemns the corruptions that have tainted this ideal and the unethical methods employed in its pursuit (Chillar, 2019).

Babashekh's (2019) analysis of Edward Albee's *The Sandbox*, A Succinct One-act Play, delves into its critique of American society and the pursuit of the American Dream. Albee, a keen observer of societal flaws, uses the play to highlight issues of elderly care, senility, and death. Each character in the play represents a personal viewpoint and role in life, with dialogues revealing the dehumanized interactions within a family. The sandbox symbolizes Grandma's confrontation with her children's cruelty during the height of the American Dream, showcasing its detrimental effects on modern American life (Babashekh, 2019). The study emphasizes several points: the title itself symbolizes dehumanization, depicting an old woman relegated to a sandbox and ignored until her death; Daddy and Mommy's treatment of Grandma reduces her to the status of a domestic animal, culminating in their hiring of a musician to honor her death; and the mechanical transmission of lost attitudes and ideas across generations (Babashekh, 2019). In the play, Mommy treats Grandma as an object, placing her in the sandbox and awaiting her death to remove what they perceive as an obstacle to their future. This home setting becomes a spatial arena for repeating generational offenses, illustrating the ongoing degradation of familial relationships (Babashekh, 2019).

Alqadhi and Pawar (2020) examine the American Dream as an ideology established post-World War II, promising justice, welfare, peace, coexistence, opportunity, wealth, and total satisfaction for all people equally. The United States became a promised land for millions worldwide, attracting immigrants seeking these privileges. The American Dream's core principle is that individuals should be evaluated based on their contributions to the nation, not personal wealth. However, Edward Albee critiques the superficiality and failures of the American Dream, highlighting that it often leads to more suffering than fulfillment. Albee targets the family as society's fundamental unit to demonstrate this dream's failure in fostering genuine

satisfaction within familial relationships (Alqadhi & Pawar, 2020). The term ‘American Dream,’ coined by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931, envisioned a world full of love, equality, and ideal human values. However, global power struggles and world wars have eroded these ideals, leading to a focus on materialism and capitalism. Albee’s play portrays the disintegration of family relationships in a postwar, absurd community, marked by the hegemony of the wife, the husband’s submissiveness, and the tragic outcomes for other characters. The play concludes with the continuous destruction of conjugal and familial bonds, reflecting a life that has become meaningless and futile. The chaos and materialistic attitudes of the modern era have corrupted love, marriage, human contact, and welfare, reducing human beings to commodities in a consumer-driven society (Alqadhi & Pawar, 2020).

Réka M. Cristian, (2021) in her paper, “End-life Crisis in Edward Albee’s *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*”, explores how these plays depict aging and death through the character of Grandma. Utilizing age studies and close readings of the dramas, the study examines how Albee’s elderly characters challenge conventional views of aging by reconnecting with their pasts and constructing a unique “age autobiography,” a term coined by Margaret Morgenroth Gullette, as they reflect on their life’s events and emotions (Cristian, 2021). Through this process, they attain what Gullette calls an “agewise” identity, culminating in a moment of profound insight (Cristian, 2021). In *The Sandbox*, Grandma’s loss of autonomy and participation in a quasi-ceremonial farewell challenge the idea of self-reliance, while in *The American Dream*, Grandma’s detailed account of old age and her metadramatic departure emphasize her conscious agewise condition (Cristian, 2021). Both plays reveal Albee’s nuanced portrayal of aging, portraying Grandma’s end-of-life moments as times of reflection and self-realization, thus offering a complex and empathetic view of the aging process (Cristian, 2021).

Samir (2021) discusses how terms like “anguish,” “void,” “dehumanization,” “estrangement,” and “nothingness” have become integral to the vocabulary describing socio-economic realities, particularly in twentieth-century American drama. This genre is deeply concerned with the impact of materialism on individuals, highlighting the fractures and damage within American families due to consumerism. Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* exemplifies this existential void, offering a Baudrillardian critique of materialism as a hyper-real force that replaces genuine values. Albee’s work exposes the destructive effects of substituting real human values with artificial ones, portraying modern man’s fear of confronting reality and the ensuing chaos from clinging to illusions (Samir, 2021). Albee is portrayed as a moralist, emphasizing the need to rediscover reality by becoming aware of the “radical crisis” in American life, where reality is often masked by pretense. The play illustrates the disintegration of the family unit, which Albee sees as the foundation of society. As a cog in the societal machine, the family’s breakdown symbolizes the collapse of broader American values and the American Dream itself (Samir, 2021).

Nejim (2023) explores Edward Albee’s one-act play *The Sandbox*, revealing the playwright’s pessimistic view of American society where individuals, in pursuit of the American Dream, become mechanized and detached from humane values. The play portrays a bleak portrayal of aging and mortality, as characters confront their perspectives on life and death, particularly in relation to the elderly. Nejim’s (2023) study focuses on the theme of family disintegration within the play, illustrating how familial compassion erodes as the grandmother is mistreated and isolated by her own family. The title of the play symbolically represents this mistreatment, highlighting the decline of moral values amidst America’s rapid societal progress (Nejim, 2023). The narrative juxtaposes the breakdown of familial bonds with the advancements of a materialistic society that values consumerism over human connection. Daddy and Mommy, embodiments of this materialism, conflict with Grandma, who embodies traditional moral values but is treated like an animal, confined to a sandbox. The tragic culmination occurs when Grandma, abandoned and mistreated, welcomes death with a smile, underscoring the moral decay and dissolution of family ties in a society driven by materialistic pursuits (Nejim, 2023).

Despite the extensive scholarship on Edward Albee’s plays, particularly focusing on themes of aging, the American Dream, historical context, and materialism, there remains a notable gap in the application of Wallace Stevens’s concept of the Supreme Fiction to Albee’s works. Previous analyses have illuminated various aspects of Albee’s critique of societal norms and existential dilemmas. However, none have explored how Stevens’ poetic philosophy, which emphasizes the power of imagination and the creation of supreme fiction as a means to find deeper truths, could provide a fresh perspective on Albee’s dramatic exploration of human existence. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing Albee’s plays through the lens of Stevens’s Supreme Fiction, thereby offering a novel interpretation that underscores the transformative potential of imagination and fiction in confronting and redefining reality.

### Theoretical Framework:

Wallace Stevens, in his exploration of the role of poetry and imagination, introduced the concept of the “supreme fiction” as fundamental in understanding human perception and reality. Central to Stevens’s philosophy is the idea that art, through its imaginative and linguistic power, creates a heightened reality that is not only valid but essential for understanding the world (Stevens, 1942). Stevens has also described poetry

or art in general as a kind of violence which protects the creative mind from the violence of the outside world where wars, killings, and injustice continue without impunity and accountability. Art is thus an act of survival for the poet and his creative imagination. It helps the poet to fight against the pressure of reality.

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (Stevens, 1951)

Moreover, In Notes, Stevens uses characters which are, on one level, fictive creations, but on another, very much extensions of the real expressing some essential truths about human existence. Linking the particular feature to the literary device, Synecdoche, Frank Doggett writes in 'The Invented World: Steven's Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction', 'Stevens is always ready for the instant expansions of synecdoche, poetry is the quintessence of all concept, and the poet, therefore, has had to do with whatever the imagination and the senses have made of the world' (Doggett, 1961 P. 284). One can very well argue that the Absurdist mode of Albee's plays is also an attempt to decode the deeper and more disturbing truths about human existence. At its core, the supreme fiction represents a poetic creation that transcends mere representation or description. It embodies an imaginative construct that redefines reality by weaving together language, perception, and human imagination into a coherent and meaningful whole. Stevens posits that this supreme fiction is not confined to literature alone but extends into our everyday lives, shaping how we perceive and interpret the world around us (Stevens, 1942).

Applying this theoretical framework to Edward Albee's plays, *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, allows for an exploration of how Albee's absurd and surreal characters, situations and language embody the ideals established in Stevens's Supreme Fiction. Through this lens, Albee's works can be seen as artistic endeavors that use the unreal to critique societal norms and personal identity, thereby uncovering deeper truths about the human condition.

### Analysis:

#### Situations:

Edward Albee's plays *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* utilize absurd and surreal situations to convey insights about human conditions. These situations can be seen through the lens of Stevens's idea of art as supreme fiction. It reveals the underlying realities of societal norms, personal identity and existential struggles depicted in the form of unreal situations. Wallace Stevens believes that "unreal things have a reality of their own" and art can intensify this unreality to uncover deeper truths. In *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, Albee has crafted surreal and exaggerated situations to mirror the absurdities of real life. Hence; it exposes the emptiness and superficiality that often underlie human behavior.

One of the most prominent absurd situations in the play *The American Dream* is the family's decision to adopt a child. Mommy and Daddy adopt a child who doesn't turn out to be according to their wishes. They wanted a perfect child who would behave just as they would want him to and would not do anything not permitted by his parents. Quite contrary to their expectations, this adopted child turns out to be someone who does not act according to their wishes. So, they cut his hands, tongue, feet and other organs. The grotesque maiming of the baby's body parts is graphically pictured in Grandma's horrific narration of the infanticide. But what is unreal and absurd is the normal routine tone with which the horrific story is told. This absurd and inhumane attitude of the characters reflects the ugly side of the real and that is the capacity human beings have of complacently and remorselessly committing such heinous crimes as murders and assassinations. The baby is brutally killed and this appears to be a routine happening in the conversation. In light of Stevens's theory of poetry, the episode can be read as an example of the violence within the creative imagination to fight against the violence of the outside world. The 'violence' on the stage is in fact a means to counter the negative impact of the 'violence' from the outside world. Just as Stevens has said in it is a violence from within that protects us from the violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality (Stevens, 1951).

Metaphorically this baby-killing act reflects the brutal operations society performs on an individual mind to enforce conformity. The independent thinking mindset of an individual is brutally mutilated and silenced. The finished product after the amputations of unacceptable parts of one's psyche is a desirable citizen who behaves exactly the way society wants it to be. The picture perfect handsome young man who comes in the end to work for the killer family is the finished outcome of those brutal amputations. This unimaginable violence is a metaphor for the violence societal forces commit on an individual mind when society enforces conformity. The particular surreal episode is inspired by Albee's personal life since Albee did not have a good relationship with his adoptive parents who wanted him to fulfill their expectations. John Lahr writes in 'Me and My Shadow', quoting Albee, 'I was not what they bargained for, what they thought they had bought' (Lahr, 2010). The coercive pressure of his parents to shove off the undesirable parts of his personality is become what they had expected of him. Expanding further on the estranged relationship between Albee and his parents, Lahr notes, 'At play on the ground of his parent's estate, Albee was soon a veteran of privilege and neglect' (Lahr, 2010). One after the other, the baby's body parts are removed till there is nothing left in his body. The baby is simply killed by the loveless couple.

These very unreal and inhumane mutilations depict the real operations all independent minded individuals are faced with. This unimaginable violence committed against a situation in which the society nature of the violence committed by society on an individual mind when society enforces conformity. This absurd situation critiques the unreal standards of society and parents. Society wants everyone to behave according to their desires. They impose strict boundaries and limitations on closed ones. Grandma's recounting of bumble's fate is a vivid example:

**GRANDMA:** That's what they thought. But after they cut off its you-know-what, it still put its hands under the covers, looking for its you-know-what. So, finally, they had to cut off its hands at the wrists.

**MRS. BARKER:** Naturally!

**GRANDMA:** And it was such a resentful bumble. Why, one day it called its Mommy a dirty name.

**MRS. BARKER:** Well, I hope they cut its tongue out!

**GRANDMA:** Of course. And then, as it got bigger, they found out all sorts of terrible things about it, like: it didn't have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was spineless, its feet were made of clay ... just dreadful things (Albee, 1961 P. 119).

This grotesque and surreal narrative emphasizes the societal expectations and criteria to perfect human beings. The extreme measures taken by the family to manage the imperfect nature of the adopted baby describe the cruel nature of people and their attempts to take control of every other thing to satisfy their egos.

Another surreal and unreal situation occurs in the play *The Sandbox*, a play in which an obscene disregard for the elderly is criticized by Albee. The real situation in the play unfortunately is the story of every household where the elderly are considered to be an unnecessary inconvenience to be rid of as soon as they become emotionally and financially dependent on their family members. Little is this considered that these senior citizens were once their sole support. The same is the case with the characters in *The Sandbox* in which an elderly woman named Grandma lives in an abusive environment created by her own daughter and her son-in-law. While nearing her death, she tells her angel of death that she was seventeen when she got married to a farmer who died when she was only thirty. Since then she raised her daughter as a single parent till she married a rich man named Daddy. Both Mommy and Daddy remove her from her house and keep her with them like a dog. As she says in the play, "they "fixed a nice place for me under the stove ... gave me an army blanket ... and my own dish ..." (Albee, 1959).

The play starts at a point when Mommy and Daddy enter a beach. They have Mommy's eighty-six-year-old mother with them whom they wish to put in a sandbox. After the elderly woman is placed in the sandbox which is symbolically reflective of a coffin or death, both wait for grandma to die. Showing complete disregard for grandma, her screams and shouts, both talk about weather or other routine things. Grandma prepares herself to die all by herself. Attempting one last time to gain their attention, she first screams, "Haaaaaaa! Ah-haaaaa!" (Albee, 1959 P. 12) then throws sand on Mommy in retaliation, and then finally begins to throw sand on herself to prepare herself for the burial. The situation is unreal and absurd but exposes the true face of a society composed of soulless, feelingless human beings who do not wish to attend to anything which is not profitable. The elderly have become worthless, expendable items people just want to get rid of. No one wants them alive; they are a mere inconvenience and people just wait for them to die just as Mommy and Daddy in *The Sandbox* are after putting Grandma in a sandbox. They say, "We ... wait. We ... sit here ... and we wait... that's what we do" (Albee, 1959 P. 4). This situation is very unreal and apparently lacks any sort of emotions and feelings but it aligns with Stevens' idea of depicting profound reality through the use of unreal and imaginative work. The absurd mode adopted by Albee may be fictive but it certainly is more impactful.

It reflects on the American Dream and its false proclaiming of an ideal life and sustainable family. The American Dream is believed to be giving people economic sustainability and happier joint families in the 1950s but Albee has presented the reality through these surreal situations in his plays. Another very important absurd situation in the play *The Sandbox* is the presence of a musician. He is brought by Mommy and Daddy to sing a song while they put Grandma in a sandbox and wait for her death. It shows the total disconnection of emotions of a younger generation from the older generation. They don't feel any emotions to be sad about the death of Grandma instead they bring a musician with themselves.

Both plays utilize meta-theatrical elements to enhance the sense of unreality and to draw the audience into the deeper themes. In *The American Dream*, Grandma's direct address to the audience breaks the fourth wall and underscores the play's artificiality. *The American Dream* ended with Grandma's address to the audience about the happy state of the characters and about the play being a comedy. Here in the play *The Sandbox*, when she is placed there for some time, she talks to someone offstage, "I'm not complaining. (She looks up at the sky, shouts to someone offstage) Shouldn't it be getting dark now, dear? (The lights dim; night comes in)" (Albee, 1959 p. 4). This scene is very important because it again breaks the fourth wall and Grandma behaves as an active participant directing the stage setting. She adopts a dual character in this scene, as a character she is placed in *The Sandbox* and as a director she is instructing someone offstage to dim the lights and hence night

comes in. It is an absurd situation and it doesn't happen frequently in other plays. It is an embodiment of Stevens' idea of supreme fiction being the work of imagination and unreal. It serves to highlight the constructed nature of the narrative, aligning with Stevens's belief that art must create an unreal framework to convey deeper truths.

The absurd and surreal situations in Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* serve to expose the superficiality, materialism, and existential struggles of modern life. By drawing on Wallace Stevens's idea of art as a supreme fiction, these situations, though unreal, effectively convey the underlying realities of the human condition. Albee's use of exaggerated and surreal scenarios challenges the audience to look beyond the surface absurdity and recognize the profound truths about societal norms and personal identity.

### Characters:

Wallace Stevens in his "The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination" states that reality is not what it is. It can be made up of many realities it consists of. This philosophy of Wallace Stevens is portrayed in the plays of Edward Albee by representing scenarios and characters that while seemingly absurd and unreal, reveal profound insights about human existence. He states that the unreal must be created out of something that is real (Stevens, 1951 p. 17). Edward Albee's plays *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* use characters who embody absurdity and unreality to reveal deeper truths about the human condition. Wallace Stevens's idea of Art as a Supreme Fiction where the unreal becomes a passage to convey reality helps these symbolic and hyper real characters in exposing the emptiness and superficiality of modern life. In *The American Dream*, the characters reflect the absurdity of their pursuits and the emptiness of their lives through their exaggerated and surreal manner. Mommy and Daddy's characters are major embodiments of the unreal nature possessed by characters. Mommy's obsession with very little and insignificant details of the color of her hat symbolizes her superficial and materialistic nature. She buys a beige color hat but a woman tells her that the hat is wheat, "I've always wanted a wheat-colored hat myself". She argues, "Why no, my dear; this hat is beige; beige" (Albee, 1961 p. 83). She goes back to the shop and asks them to give her a beige hat. The shopkeeper returns with the same hat and she takes it knowing that it was the one she had bought earlier. When Daddy asks Mommy if it was the same hat they tried to sell her before, she responds, "Well, of course it was!" (Albee, 1961 p. 84).

The vacuity of mommy's existence can be seen in her frenzied shopping mania, which, in addition to buying expensive items of use for their sign-exchange value. She wants to possess things which, through their sign-exchange value, will puff her ego and validate her privileged social positioning. Raypole, who states that when a person's life feels hollow, they fixate themselves on trivial matters as a way to cope with their inner emptiness (Raypole, 2009). This absurd preoccupation with insignificant and inconsequential details emphasizes the hollowness of her existence and serves as a critique of consumer culture. It aligns with the idea that Mommy's character is presented as materialistic and lustful for money. She marries Daddy for his money and openly tells him, "We were very poor! But then I married you, Daddy, and now we're very rich" (Albee, 1961 p. 89).

Mommy's lust to have control over people and luxury items has completely taken away all humanity from her. Dehumanized as she is, she is unable to differentiate between a thing and flesh and blood human beings. Her frenzied shopping mania, in addition to buying unnecessarily expensive items of use, also includes a baby whom she wishes to perfectly fit the standards of perfection society has ordained for its citizens. The baby would make their household a perfect picture of happiness. It will remove the stigma of sterility from the household. Superficially perceived, the household gives an ideal picture of a humane society with three generations living happily under one roof but Albee takes the play to the absurd level in order to unravel the obscene inhumanity beneath the perfect veneer of happiness. The baby because it is flesh and blood, refuses to be a dead object like the hat bought by Mommy. He is butchered; his body is dismembered and is finally killed. The absurd, distorted phraseology, i.e. 'bumble of joy' instead of bundle of joy demonstrates that the baby was exactly the opposite of a bundle of joy babies are for their parents. Mommy's superficially perceived joy is actually an insatiable, obscene lust to control the baby. Since the baby failed to provide Mommy with the joy she had expected from him, he must simply be eliminated. The graphic details of the butchering of the baby's body parts are discussed earlier in the paper.

Daddy's character is presented as emasculated. His character is portrayed in stark contrast to the traditional male roles of the 1950s. According to Andrew, in the 1950s, the subordinate male figure was often viewed as an unreal or ambiguous presence in American society. This perception was influenced by cultural ideals that emphasized traditional gender roles, where masculinity was defined by assertiveness, dominance, and breadwinning roles (Andrew, 2007). Daddy, on the other hand, is exactly the opposite. He does exactly what he is told to do. When Mommy insists on the color of the hat, Daddy fully agrees, "I would imagine that it was the same hat they tried to sell you before," and Mommy's subsequent response is an approval of his answer, "Well, of course it was!" (Albee, 1961 p. 84). His passivity and willingness to be controlled by Mommy are exemplified in language. He is seen agreeing with all of Mommy's ideas and doesn't say a word against her. He adopts a uniform and similar tone to answer Mommy. Whenever she asks something "Oh, I think that's just grand, don't you think so, Daddy?", he replies in affirmation, "Yes, just grand." It is this very

absurd and unconventional behavior of Daddy's which doesn't resonate with the conventions and morals of the 1950s, making it a critique of the American dream.

Daddy's emasculated personality is a synecdoche of those subservient, subjugated individuals in society who are shamelessly empty of all morality and humanity. Their super egos are dead and they are criminally complicit in everything their master asks them to do. Daddy's character is despicable and dangerous because the heinous sins of matricide and infanticide committed in the play have been made possible through his resources and complicity. He could have been instrumental in stopping these since he is financially empowered but he has no will or opinion of his own. He is undoubtedly important for Mommy because his comments which are a xeroxed version of Mommy's comments reinforce her inflated ego and confirm her authority over him. He thus happens to another object which satisfies Mommy's voracious lust to control others. Mommy controls him, his mind and his resources and he is simply a passive object of Mommy's authorial commands.

The character of Grandma aborts almost completely the perfection one associates with the American Dream. On a surface level, the household mommy, Daddy and Grandma are a part of a perfect household. It has all the amenities and comforts. Grandma lives with her daughter but as the play opens one realizes Grandma is an object of neglect and abandonment. Mommy is keeping her in the house not because she loves her; but because dependable Mommy is an object she has control over since she dislocates her from her former habitat, and gives her a place which is absurdly described as 'under a stove'. She can keep Grandma like a dog. On its face value, Mommy can perhaps flaunt being generous and kind hearted since she is letting her elderly mother stay with her. Since the hypocritical Mommy is more concerned about her image in society, she also wishes to bury Grandma in style and thus all arrangements are made for the funeral ceremony to look perfect. The musician in the end is also hired to complete the picture of a perfect ceremony. Grandma thus is also an object which is utilized by Mommy for its sign exchange value.

Albee makes Grandma break the fourth wall and speak to the audience directly. Here Grandma becomes the voice of sanity amidst absurdity. The eighty-six year old elderly citizen who is a marginalized voice often silenced by Mommy turns out to be a sage speaking to the audience. She says,

Well, I guess that just about wraps it up. I mean, for better or worse, this is a comedy, and I don't think we'd better go any further. No, definitely not. So, let's leave things as they are right now ... while everybody's happy ... while everybody's got what he wants ... or everybody's got what he thinks he wants. Good night, dears (Albee, 1961 p. 144).

This last speech emphasizes how empty and hollow the lives of the people are who blindly follow the ideals of the American Dream and while competing in that rat race, never take pains to think deeply about themselves and about what they want from their life. Maybe there are other things which will give them genuine happiness but which have not been outlined in the agenda of the American Dream that will make their life meaningful. Grandma thus asks us to think deeply because we perhaps are absurdly following a dream that is created by others. It is not our dream. We need to dissociate ourselves from ideals created by others and re-orient our lives. Grandma truly is a fictive creation but she is also part of the real. She is at once part of the unreal but is also an expansion of the real. From Stevens' point of view, she is the fiction, the unreal which makes us comprehend the real better. To use Stevens' words, "Imagination does not adhere to what is real" (Stevens, 1951 p. 14), but it certainly makes good use of the unreal to derive deeper philosophical truths about the real.

The Young Man, described as the "American Dream," is another unreal character who embodies physical perfection but lacks emotional depth. His willingness to do "almost anything for money" (Albee 127) and his description as "spineless" and "without guts" serve as metaphors for the superficiality and hollowness of societal ideals established in the narrative of the American Dream. His character represents Stevens' idea, "The world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable from one another" (Stevens, 1951 p. 74). The Young Man's perfection is an illusion, revealing the underlying emptiness of *The American Dream*. His moving speech in the play succinctly points out how the ideals of the American Dream have stunted his growth not letting parts of his brain develop properly.

I cannot touch another person and feel love. And there is more ... there are more losses, but it all comes down to this: 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. .. I am incomplete ... I can feel nothing. I can feel nothing. And so ... here I am .... (Albee, 1961 P. 115)

The agony of this incomplete man is the agony of a vacuous, meaningless existence which may be the outcome of blindly following the ideals of the American Dream which is again a fictive reality created to generate a rosy but fake picture of happiness. Beneath this picture of perfection embodied in the handsome young man, the truth is ugly and painful. The existential agony described in these lines perhaps is strikingly similar to the 'celestial ennui of the apartments' of the second poem of the first section, 'It must be Abstract' of 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction' (Stevens, 1942) This is the ennui of a hollow existence emptied of meaning which

has resulted from following mindlessly the rat race to achieve the fictive happiness and success outlined in the manifesto of the American Dream.

### Language:

Albee's *The Sandbox* begins with a note, which says:

When, in the course of the play, Mommy and Daddy call each other by these names, there should be no suggestion of regionalism. These names are of empty affection and point up the pre-senility and vacuity of their characters. (Albee, 1960)

The excerpt suggests that the names "Mommy" and "Daddy" in *The Sandbox* and in *The American Dream* transcend their literal, regional, and personal connotations. These names symbolize universal roles rather than individual identities, stripping away specific cultural or geographical markers. In doing so, they become archetypes—figures of empty affection that highlight the characters' pre-senility and vacuity. The universality of these names aligns with Stevens's idea that supreme fiction must be abstract and inclusive, capable of encompassing broad human experiences without being tethered to particularities. The names thus serve a dual purpose: they represent common relational roles while simultaneously pointing to the superficiality and emptiness of the characters' interactions, embodying Stevens's vision of a fiction that is both transcendent and reflective of deeper truths about human existence. In the very beginning of the poem, Stevens says:

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun.  
You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it.  
(Stevens, 1942)

The invocation to "begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea of this invention" in Stevens's poetry calls for a return to a state of ignorance, to perceive the world anew and abstractly. This perspective mirrors the roles of "Mommy" and "Daddy" in Albee's plays. Just as Stevens asks the reader to see the sun with an "ignorant eye," Albee strips the characters of their individuality to reveal the underlying vacuity of their existence. The names, devoid of specific affection or identity, force the audience to confront the empty, performative nature of the characters' interactions. They are not meant to be understood through the lens of specific experiences but through the broader, more abstract understanding of human roles and relationships. This abstraction invites the audience to perceive the universal emptiness and pre-senility that Albee critiques, much like Stevens' call for a perception of the supreme fiction that encompasses the broad spectrum of human experience without being confined to particular realities. In both works, the aim is to transcend the mundane and reach a higher understanding of existence and identity. Both Stevens and Albee emphasize the universal over the particular and reveal deeper truths about human nature.

Although the language of both plays seems absurd and fictional, it reveals the condition of the American people and more broadly the modern man. Albee reflects on the unintegrated nature of modern men as can be seen in the following excerpt:

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!  
Grandma (banging the toy shovel against the pail). Haaaaa! Ah-ha-aaaaa!  
(Albee, 1960)

The lines imply that the American people are so unintegrated that they cannot even communicate with one another. The exchange between Mommy and Daddy demonstrates a profound disconnect, not just in their inability to engage in meaningful conversation but also in their lack of desire to do so. Daddy's hesitation and ultimate resignation, coupled with Mommy's mocking triumph, highlight a pervasive sense of emptiness and disconnection. This moment, marked by superficiality and a lack of genuine interaction, underscores the broader societal critique of modern life—where communication has become hollow and relationships are fraught with alienation. Grandma's reaction, banging the toy shovel and laughing, further emphasizes the absurdity and tragedy of this disintegration. Her actions serve as a stark contrast to the vacuous exchange, symbolizing both the frustration and the futile attempts to break through the barriers of superficiality. Albee's



portrayal of these characters and their interactions offers a reflection on the fragmented and isolated nature of contemporary existence, where true connection and understanding are increasingly elusive. Through the use of minimalist, absurd, and fictional language, Albee reveals the truth about modern men who are so disconnected from each other that they cannot communicate, as seen in the following excerpt:

Daddy (striving). It's nighttime.

Mommy. Shhhh. Be still... wait.

Daddy (Whining). It's so hot.

Mommy. Shhhhh. Be still... wait.

(Albee, 1960)

In both plays, Mommy always responds to Grandma in a very disrespectful manner, so exaggerated that it seems fictional, yet revealing the reality that such behavior makes the elders deaf. Grandma says:

When you get old, you can't talk to people because [they] snap at you. . . . That's why you become deaf, so you won't be able to hear people talking to you that way. And that's why you go and hide under the covers in the big soft bed, so you won't feel the house shaking from people talking to you that way. (Albee, 1960)

Grandma's reflection on the disrespect she endures highlights the superficiality and emptiness of the familial relationships depicted in Albee's plays. Her statement underscores the emotional and psychological distance that has grown between generations, a theme that aligns with the abstraction and universalism Steven champions in his supreme fiction. The exaggerated manner in which Mommy verbally attacks Grandma becomes a fictional device to illuminate the stark reality of the disconnection and lack of genuine affection within the family. Mommy's language is not just a commentary on individual failings but a broader critique of societal attitudes toward aging and the elderly. Just as Stevens's call to see the sun with an "ignorant eye" is an invitation to perceive beyond the surface, Grandma's insight reveals the deeper truth of isolation and neglect faced by the elderly. By portraying these dynamics, Albee forces the audience to confront the often hidden but universally resonant truths about human relationships and societal values, echoing Stevens's vision of a fiction that transcends the particular to uncover profound truths about human nature.

### Conclusion:

Conclusively, Albee's plays *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* masterfully utilize characters and situations that embody absurdity and unreality to critique modern society, revealing deeper truths about the human condition. By employing Wallace Stevens's concept of art as a supreme fiction, where the unreal becomes a pathway to convey reality, Albee's works highlight the emptiness and superficiality that often underlie human endeavors. The characters in these plays, such as Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and the Young Man, are exaggerated and surreal representations of societal roles and expectations. Mommy's materialism and fixation on trivial matters, Daddy's emasculation and passivity, Grandma's meta-theatrical insights, and the Young Man's physical perfection yet emotional void, all serve to highlight the hollowness of their existence. These characters, through their absurd interactions and exaggerated traits, embody Stevens' idea that "unreal things have a reality of their own" by exposing the lack of meaningful connections and individuality in modern life. The surreal situations depicted in Albee's plays, such as the grotesque adoption story in *The American Dream* and the indifferent handling of Grandma's death in *The Sandbox*, further emphasize the critique of societal norms. These scenarios, though absurd, reflect the real-life superficiality, materialism, and existential struggles faced by individuals. By crafting these exaggerated and surreal narratives, Albee aligns with Stevens' belief that art can intensify unreality to uncover profound truths.

Moreover, the language used in Albee's plays, devoid of regionalism and filled with empty affection, underscores the vacuity of the characters' interactions. The universal roles of "Mommy" and "Daddy" transcend personal identities, pointing to the broader human experiences and the superficiality of modern relationships. This abstraction, as Stevens suggests, allows for a deeper understanding of existence and identity, revealing the fragmented and isolated nature of contemporary life. In essence, Albee's plays, through their absurd characters, surreal situations, and minimalist language, challenge the audience to look beyond the surface and recognize the profound truths about societal norms and personal identity. By drawing on Stevens' concept of supreme fiction, Albee effectively critiques the superficiality and emptiness of modern existence, urging a reexamination of the values and connections that define human life.

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