Childless Women in the Plays of William Inge, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee

Suzanne Macdonald Winkel

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CHILDLESS WOMEN IN THE PLAYS OF WILLIAM INGE, TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, AND EDWARD ALBEE

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
University of North Dakota
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota
May
2008
This dissertation, submitted by Suzanne Macdonald Winkel in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

Susan Koprince
Chairperson

This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

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Degree Doctor of Philosophy

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................................................. v

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................... vi

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................... 1

II. VEILED LOSS IN WILLIAM INGE’S *COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA* ........................................... 31

III. MENDACITY AND MOTHERHOOD IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS’S *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF* .............................................................................................. 68

IV. FECUND YEARNINGS IN EDWARD ALBEE’S *WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?* ........................................................................................................ 103

V. CONCLUSION .................................................................................................... 152

REFERENCES ................................................................................................................. 160
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Susan Koprince, the chairperson of my Faculty Advisory Committee, for her impeccable guidance and unwavering patience; without it I would not have finished this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Sheryl O’Donnell, Dr. Lori Robison, Dr. Yvette Koepke, and Dr. Cindy Juntunen for their valuable input as members of the Faculty Advisory Committee. Many thanks also go to Ursula Hovet, whose assistance has been immeasurable during this process.

Many family members and dear friends have been instrumental in helping me complete this project. I want to thank Dr. Barbara Glor- © for serving as my “ruthless reader” and invaluable motivator. I also want to thank Kathy Randolph, my walking partner and sounding board; Kate Randolph, my technology consultant; Diane Schmidt, my long-distance phone support; Nancy Adams, my internet “conscience”; and Sandy Crary, who graciously stepped in during several medical crises and took care of our infant daughter, Alexei, as if she were her own.

Finally, this dissertation was made possible by the loving support of my husband, Mike, and the endearing “help” of our twins, Alexei and Jacob, who hid my only copy of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? behind the piano then promptly forgot where they had put it.
For Michael, Alexei, and Jacob
ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an examination of three major twentieth-century American playwrights—William Inge, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee—and their dramatic use of childless women characters in *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) respectively. Although the plays of Inge, Williams, and Albee have been analyzed individually by numerous scholars, they have not been studied together as works about procreation and childlessness. The study's historical focus is the post World War II era during which time the three plays proposed for analysis were written and produced. Commonly called the baby boom era, the postwar years saw a marked increase in this country's birthrate. By turning to the perceived security of domestic life and traditional family values following the upheaval of war, many Americans created a cultural mandate that emphasized marriage and parenthood as essential to success, happiness, even national patriotism.

This study argues that *Sheba*, *Cat*, and *Virginia Woolf* complicate the idealistic view of domesticity many Americans embraced during the postwar years by truthfully exposing the underlying anxiety and disturbing sense of tragedy that characterized much of family life in the 1950s. Through extended readings of the individual works, this study seeks to illuminate the complex ideas about gender roles and family structures that emerge from the texts of the plays by exploring the socially, culturally, and
psychologically subversive and disruptive potential represented in the presence of childless women characters.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Theatre is and always has been a revolt against the established order.
(Jean Duvignaud, *Sociologie du theatre*)

On February 16, 1950, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, William Inge’s play about a hapless, middle-aged childless woman, Lola Delaney, and her broken-down alcoholic husband Doc, opened on Broadway. Five years later on March 25, 1955, Tennessee Williams’s Broadway play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* portrayed a sexually frustrated, childless Southern belle, Maggie Pollitt, doing battle in the bedroom of a Mississippi Delta plantation with her uncooperative husband, Brick. The circumstances of a childless woman were staged again on Broadway in Edward Albee’s 1962 play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, with Martha and George engaged in mutually sadistic warfare over who was to blame for their miserable lives. Although the writings of Inge, Williams, and Albee—three major twentieth-century American playwrights—have been analyzed individually by numerous scholars, the three plays chosen for this dissertation, *Come Back, Little Sheba, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* have not been studied together as works about procreation and childlessness. Furthermore, and not incidentally, *Sheba, Cat, and Virginia Woolf* were the only major plays written and performed during the postwar era that dealt specifically and prominently with childless circumstances. When the three plays are read within the cultural and historical context of
idealized family life in 1950s America, the childless female characters who are central to the productions stand as poignant reminders of the social tensions inherent in the nation’s postwar years. Indeed, the plays complicate the idealistic view of domesticity many Americans embraced during the postwar years by truthfully exposing the underlying anxiety and disturbing sense of tragedy that characterized much of family life in the 1950s.

William Inge’s *Come Back, Little Sheba*, Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* can be examined as reflections of the social and psychological discontent that arose in middle-class American culture during the postwar era. By placing childless women characters at the center of a seemingly benign domestic setting, Inge, Williams, and Albee disrupt the status quo of a 1950s patriarchal culture that mandated motherhood as the ultimate achievement for women, thereby exposing the fact that many families did not fit the stereotypical notion of what society deemed “normal” or appropriate. Through extended readings of the individual works, this study seeks to illuminate the complex ideas about gender and family that emerge from the texts of the plays by exploring the socially, culturally, and psychologically subversive and disruptive potential represented in the presence of childless women characters.

**Broadway Premieres**

William Inge’s first Broadway production, *Come Back Little Sheba*, opened to mixed reviews. Across the board, critics agreed that Shirley Booth and Sidney Blackmer were an acting tour de force as the play’s lead characters, Lola and Doc Delaney. The
major complaints appeared to be leveled at Inge’s script. Even critics who heralded the production saw Inge’s play as “unnecessarily bare” (Atkinson 348), “a little short of being a play” (Chapman 348), “an under-written drama” (Coleman 350), and “slender and unfulfilled” (Watts 350).

The reviews were mostly positive for the opening of Tennessee Williams’s play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Although the actors and director received nearly unanimous kudos for staging a magnificent production, many critics struggled with the play’s “elusive narrative” (Kerr 342). Other reviewers felt that “some heart or point or purpose was missing” (Chapman 343) which imbued the production with “a strange and somehow unsavory flavor... [as well as] an absence of warmth and tenderness” (McClain 344).

When Edward Albee’s first full-length play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, was staged, the production garnered praise from most critics, who recognized Albee’s genius as a writer, the director’s shrewd interpretation of the script, and the actors’ excellent performances. And yet, Albee’s play, a full three hours and several minutes long, perplexed reviewers who found it “too drawn out and not ideally resolved” (Nadel 254), lacking unity because “a pillar of the plot [was] too flimsy to support the climax” (Taubman 253), and, “a brilliant piece of writing, with a sizable hole in its head” (Kerr 252).

The above reviews illuminate what Antonin Artaud refers to as the disconnect in Western theater between the scripted word and the *mise en scene*, or nonverbal environment created on a theatrical stage. Overwhelmingly moved by the physical performances of the actors and the metaphysical moods created by the set designers, the
reviewers nevertheless found themselves piqued by the texts of the plays which, in their minds, failed to provide them with adequate resolutions. Perhaps in response to the critics' comments, Inge later wrote in the foreword to his published play: “I deal with surfaces in my plays, and let whatever depths there are in my material emerge unexpectedly so that they bring something of the suddenness and shock which accompany the discovery of truths in actuality” (x).

Regardless of Inge’s motivation on his own behalf, it can be argued that what the theater critics failed to account for was the cultural paradox created by the disruptive presence of childless women characters in *Come Back, Little Sheba, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Not only did Inge, Williams, and Albee write significant and central roles for women in their plays, they emphasized the condition of female childlessness within the dramatic structures of their works during a time in American history when procreation was nothing less than a cultural mandate. Hence, the reviewers missed the social complexities that resonated within and beyond the words spoken on the stage by ignoring the theme of childlessness that was introduced in all three plays within the larger cultural context of post World War II pro-family America. Granted, the presence of childless women characters does not exactly reach the level of a prolonged “violent and concentrated action” (82) that marks Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty (except in Albee’s play); however, it most certainly may have disrupted or at least challenged a culturally complacent middle-class theater audience in postwar America. Marvin Carlson maintains that “a continuing point of debate in modern theatre theory has been over whether the theatre should be viewed primarily as an engaged social
phenomenon or as a politically indifferent aesthetic artifact”; moreover, Carlson suggests that “a significant amount of contemporary theoretical discourse can still be oriented in terms of this opposition” (454).

Another way to approach the impact of childlessness in the three plays is to liken it to the Brechtian *gestus*, which is described as “a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau, by which, separately or in a series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator” (Diamond 52). For Bertolt Brecht the “theatre’s social function” was to educate the bourgeois society (qtd. in Carlson 384). Additionally, Elin Diamond notes that Brecht’s *Gestus* “invites us to think about performers and spectators in their historical... specificity” (54). Of the three playwrights proposed for this study, Edward Albee is the most pointed about his dramatic purpose in *Virginia Woolf*. In a 1981 interview he noted that the play “was the result of my examination of the 50s as much as anything” (qtd. in Finkelstein 53). Tennessee Williams was interested in the deeper issues of social life as well, as he remarked in the preface to *Cat*, “I still don’t want to talk to people only about the surface aspects of their lives, the sort of things that acquaintances laugh and chatter about on ordinary social occasions” (ix). And, in his foreword to *Sheba*, Inge discussed the play as a “fabric of life, in which the two characters (Doc and Lola) were species of the environment” (ix). Although the plays are first and foremost works of art, they can also be read as examples of sociological thorns in the side of theatergoers who are looking for a “pleasant” escape from reality.
Domestic Paradox

The tension that accompanies the childlessness revealed in *Come Back, Little Sheba*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* signals a generation’s growing dissatisfaction with the highly conformist ideals that were adopted by an entire culture of middle-class Americans during the postwar era. The central argument of this project rests on a theory of underlying angst present in the 1950s that some scholars term the “age of anxiety” (Susman 19). As these historians contend, beyond the placid façade of domestic bliss portrayed in the media and idealized by many Americans during the postwar era lay a deep-seated uneasiness about the homogeneous values being embraced by a white, middle-class population. Usually associated with mid-century poets such as W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot, the notion of the “age of anxiety” can be extended to American dramatists of the period as well. Indeed, Inge, Williams, and Albee reveal the anxiety and dissatisfaction associated with the postwar years by using a theme of childlessness to subversively implode the American family ideal.

This study follows a chronological path along Broadway from *Come Back, Little Sheba* to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. As time moves forward, from 1950 to 1955 to 1962; as geographical setting moves East, from the puritanical Midwest, to the sultry Mississippi Delta, to the liberal Northeastern college town; and as alcohol flows more freely in each of the plays, it appears that an anti-maternal sentiment grows from a psychologically repressed inkling in *Sheba* to an overt attack in *Virginia Woolf*. However, paradoxically, there are moments within each work when the playwrights seem to embrace the pro-family edicts of the 1950s. Indeed, while
the creation of childless female characters who possess many unflattering attributes can be read as endorsing maternity, the playwrights’ perceptive and at times sympathetic portrayals of childlessness in their plays signals a contradictory affiliation with those members of society who exist outside of cultural norms. The authors present their central (childless) female characters—Lola, Maggie, and Martha—as socially ostracized and highly conflicted, at times strong and individualistic, at times needy and deeply troubled. In much the same way that their female characters struggle with gender role identifications of the postwar years, the playwrights’ lead male characters, Doc, Brick, and George, wrestle with the cultural expectations of the times as well. Most certainly alcoholics, presumably not at the top of their careers, and without a child to prove their virility, all three husbands fail when measured in terms of 1950s standards. In a similar fashion, again paradoxically, at the same time that Lola, Maggie, and Martha occupy a central role in the dramas, their voices are often dismissed or silenced altogether. Moreover, the childless women in the plays depend almost entirely on approval from the male characters to validate their existence, which echoes a 1950s reliance on patriarchal structures that promoted an adherence to domestic ideals. Ultimately, a complex, paradoxical portrait of postwar American family life is revealed within the multilayered texts of all three plays.

Social Context

This study’s historical focus is the post World War II era during which time the three plays proposed for analysis—William Inge’s *Come Back, Little Sheba* (1950), Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid
of Virginia Woolf? (1962)—were written and produced. The period in question, roughly 1949 through 1962, has been referred to as the Fifties, the Cold War era, postwar America, and nostalgically, “The Good Old Days.” In the end, perhaps it is the baby-boom era that best describes the “long” decade which saw a marked increase in this country’s birthrate. Across race, class, and ethnic categories, birth rates rose from 18.4 per 1,000 women during the Depression to a high of 25.3 per 1,000 in 1957 (Coontz 24). By turning to the perceived security of domestic life and traditional family values following a devastating economic depression, the upheaval of war, and the cold war threat of nuclear annihilation, many Americans created a cultural mandate that emphasized marriage and parenthood as the answer to a country’s ills. As historian Elaine Tyler May notes, the safety and stability of family life became paramount during the postwar years when a “domestic cold war ideology” dominated the American mindset. She suggests a direct connection between the pro-family rhetoric proffered by the “postwar experts” and the baby boom of the 1950s and early 1960s when marriage and reproduction were encouraged, even expected (Explosive, 167). Consequently, those men and women who did not abide by the national consensus and thereby produce children during the baby boom era were viewed as socially perverse, even un-American. As May suggests, “childlessness became a mark of social maladjustment” in the postwar era (Barren 127). Thus the pronatal sentiments that circulated throughout middle-class culture during the fifties cannot be over-emphasized in relation to the timing of the three plays proposed for analysis. When Inge, Williams, and Albee put the issue of
childlessness front and center on Broadway they identified a segment of the population that did not fit neatly into postwar social categories.

In addition to the pro-maternal mandate, other defining characteristics of postwar America included such phenomena as an economic prosperity that fostered unbridled consumerism in the middle-class, a vast exodus from urban dwellings to the suburban ranch house, utopian visions of the future portrayed in the mass media and modeled at venues like Disneyland, a pathology of fear and suspicion brought on by the Cold War and epitomized by McCarthyism, and a "cocktail generation" that coexisted alongside the notion that alcoholism served as a marker for discontented families (Rotskoff 189). Many historians of the period argue that Americans were left feeling empty and dissatisfied when the consumer goods they could finally purchase after the war did not fulfill them, or when they found themselves living in their much-desired suburban tract home, isolated and without the community they had enjoyed in the city. Certainly the domestic perfection portrayed in television shows like Ozzie and Harriet or Leave it to Beaver left many Americans feeling inadequate by comparison. Furthermore, the impact of the cold war and McCarthyism led an entire population into paranoid insecurity. And alcohol served as an emollient that could quell the rising discontent.

It comes as no surprise, then, that prominent historians such as Warren Susman characterize postwar America as possessing "something disturbing: a new self-consciousness of tragedy and sense of disappointment" (19). Likewise, in her study of alcoholism during the postwar era, historian Lori Rotskoff uncovers a pattern of psychological uneasiness as well. She writes:
If scholars have painted a broad picture of domestic ideology in the post-World War II period, they have only just begun to delineate the tensions that lay embedded within the postwar domestic consensus—tensions that belied the family’s mythic promise as a site of psychic and material well-being for men and women alike. While producers of popular culture crafted endless depictions of the “happy” 1950s family and experts tried to mold Americans into “well-adjusted” households, an undercurrent of anxiety and unhappiness ran through domestic culture. (8)

In many of their plays, Inge, Williams, and Albee explore the “disturbing” or “anxious” underbelly of family life in postwar America that scholars strive to identify. The three plays in which childless women characters take center stage, however, push familial tensions to an unprecedented level in American theater, culminating in Albee’s topsyturvy world in *Virginia Woolf*.

When Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* first appeared in 1963, it found a population of women across America who were caught up in “the problem that has no name,” searching in vain for meaning in their daily lives as housewives and mothers. Friedan maintains that during the postwar years women were educated in the basics of 1950s femininity, “they learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights—the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for” (16). Instead, women could find “true feminine fulfillment” in their role as “American housewives,” whose “only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get
and keep their husbands” (Friedan 18). Similarly, historian Stephanie Coontz characterizes the postwar era as glorifying domesticity and elevating housework “to a form of self-expression” (27). The 1950s women, according to Coontz, “created makework in their homes and felt guilty when they did not do everything for themselves” (27). In addition, according to Coontz, the care and tending of children occupied an increasing amount of the housewife’s time, “more than twice as much as it had in the 1920s” (27). Two of the childless women in the plays, Lola and Martha, exhibit less-than-exemplary housekeeping skills, while Maggie’s performance is confined to a bedroom setting. In addition, all three women are rejected sexually by their husbands. Just as they fail at childbearing, the women thus also fail at housework and sexual attractiveness, ironically leaving them desperately out of reach of Freidan’s “feminine mystique.”

Mardy S. Ireland, a psychologist who has conducted extensive research on the experiences of childless women in American society, has identified three groups of women who fall into the category of childlessness: “Traditional women,” who “have desired but been biologically denied the adult identity of mother” (17); “transitional women,” who “want to pursue the social and career possibilities that are now open to women,” but “delay childbearing until it is seemingly too late to have a child” (41); and “transformative women,” who choose a “child-free life” (70). As products of the 1950s, all three childless women in the plays fall into Ireland’s category of traditional women. Without alternative options, and regardless of their motivations, Lola, Maggie, and
Martha all desire motherhood. Furthermore, as Ireland suggests, “traditional women have tried to fulfill their female identities (at least in part) as mothers, and failed.” Thus, she continues, “of all childless women, they may experience the most anguish” (19).

Male Playwrights

Ultimately, the significance of the plays, written and performed during a time of maternal valorization, rests in part in their male authorship. Although authorial intention is not a focus of this study, the awareness with which Inge, Williams, and Albee portrayed the circumstances of childlessness invites a brief comment on their purpose. Perhaps the writers challenge their childless women characters with some of the issues and frustrations they were facing themselves as homosexual men during a time of culturally stringent, traditional family values. For William Inge, homosexuality was a secret that must remain hidden at all costs (Voss 117), while Tennessee Williams suffered physical and emotional abuse for his decision to be more open about his sexual identity (Paller 190). In the end, Edward Albee’s final estrangement from his adoptive parents came as a result of their unwillingness to accept his homosexuality. Certainly the childless female (and male) characters suffer an emotional and psychological isolation, even a social ostracism in the plays as a result of non-compliance with societal norms. Consequently, each character questions his or her value as an individual in a cultural milieu that did not validate childless circumstances.

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1 As Ireland notes, “In contrast to voluntarily childless women, involuntarily childless women are more likely to have a feminine sex-role orientation; they more frequently endorse characteristics associated with a traditional female sex role. This sex-role orientation tends to make them more vulnerable to the loss of motherhood than are women who are less traditional, because one aspect of the traditional female role is being a mother” (161).
In his work as a sociologist, Erving Goffman explores society's need to categorize people and assign them attributes based on "normative expectations" (*Stigma* 2). Within social settings and during social interactions, Goffman maintains:

Evidence can arise of [a person] possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind. . . . He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap. . . . Note, too, that not all undesirable attributes are at issue, but only those which are incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be. (*Stigma* 2-3)

With the 1950s stereotype of quintessential domesticity—mother, father, children, living blissfully in the suburbs—so prevalent during the postwar era, it is safe to say that childless women and homosexual men bore a stigma in many social situations.

In addition, the three playwrights did not produce children themselves within a culture that all but mandated reproduction and then equated it with masculinity. Indeed, amid the pro-family rhetoric of the postwar era a male's virility and manhood was questioned if he did not procreate. As anthropologist Margaret Mead suggested in 1949, "in any society that has provided the conditions under which men desire to father and care for children, the man who does not desire children will find himself to some degree anomalous and deviant. He may label his lack of yearning as inversion and become
homosexual" (226). Of this same phenomenon Stephanie Coontz writes, “for the first time, men as well as women were encouraged to root their identity and self-image in familial and parental roles” (27). She continues:

Even for people not directly coerced into conformity by racial, political, or personal repression, the turn toward families was in many cases more a defensive move than a purely affirmative act. Some men and women entered loveless marriages in order to forestall attacks about real or suspected homosexuality or lesbianism. (33)

Quite possibly, the playwrights recognized the plight of childless women characters as a social injustice that was similar to the prejudice they had experienced themselves as members of a larger society that did not endorse their particular domestic situation. This is not to say, however, that Inge, Williams, or Albee created politically and socially acceptable heterosexual characters to represent “disguised” homosexual figures in their dramas as many critics have claimed.2

2 During the 1960s and 1970s several prominent theater critics including Howard Taubman of The New York Times, Richard Schechner of The Tulane Drama Review, Philip Roth in The New York Review of Books, Martin Gottfried of Women’s Wear Daily, and Stanley Kauffmann of The New York Times viciously attacked Inge, Williams, and Albee in print for producing “homosexual drama” that used heterosexual characters as thinly veiled gay substitutes on stage. In his 1976 book, Persons of the Drama, Stanley Kauffmann sums up the critics’ concerns. He writes, “Because three of the most successful American playwrights of the last twenty years are (reputed) homosexuals and because their plays often treat of women and marriage, therefore, it is said, postwar American drama presents a badly distorted picture of American women, marriage and society in general” (291). He continues, “If [the author] writes of marriage and of other relationships about which he knows or cares little, it is because he has no choice but to masquerade. Both convention and the law demand it. In society the homosexual’s life must be discreetly concealed. As material for drama, that life must be even more intensely concealed. If he is to write of his experience, he must invent a two-sex version of the one-sex experience that he really knows” (292).
Maternal Paradox

Alongside the cultural complexity that can be found within the texts of the plays resides an ambivalence surrounding maternity. The assumption in the texts, articulated in part by the “Daddy” figures, the supporting characters, and the childless couples themselves, is that a married couple will have children. When the couples do not, in fact, have children, in addition to the tension experienced by the childless couple, an anxiety develops for the other characters, leaving them in the uncomfortable position of needing to respond to the childlessness. As psychologist Mardy S. Ireland notes, “Women who are not mothers indeed reside in a paradoxical realm. They seem to disrupt the boundaries between the sexes, but they also expand the definition and subjectivity of what it means to be a woman” (148). The other characters might dismiss the childless woman’s circumstances or ignore her comments altogether, as happens in Sheba. This non-response renders Lola invisible. For Maggie in Cat the opposite is true. Her childlessness becomes a community project. The supporting characters insist that Maggie produce a child or she and Brick will lose their inheritance, which leaves her desperately clinging to any possibility that Brick might find her sexually interesting. In Virginia Woolf’s Martha and George’s childlessness engulfs their late-night visitors. By the end of the play the couple have psychologically annihilated their guests and summarily rejected their cultural belief systems.

Childlessness in any society is linked inextricably with motherhood. That is, in order for childlessness to have meaning it must be constructed in opposition to maternal desire. Thus an in-depth look at some of the issues surrounding maternity will help to
illuminate how and why the childless women characters in the plays disturb the postwar domestic ideal. The significance of the maternal role in culture has fascinated theorists and philosophers from Plato through Rousseau to Irigaray, Kristeva, and beyond. The notion of maternity has moved from mystical and chthonic during ancient times through Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialism to Nancy Chodorow’s focus on a cultural and social construction in the present day. In addition, challenging Chodorow’s notion of socially constructed female and male identities is a philosophical mindset that uses evolutionary theory to explain human behavior, a hypothesis that Albee toys with in *Virginia Woolf*. In Darwinian theory, one explanation for the anguish suffered by the childless couples in the plays (the women in particular) might include biological yearnings that have been in place for millions of years as a way to assure the continuation of the species.

Evolutionary psychology, an emerging, albeit controversial field, seeks to explain human behavior, thought, and emotions in terms of Darwin’s theory of evolution. To the dismay of feminists and others concerned about the implications for women of biological determinism, Robert Wright and practitioners in the field of evolutionary psychology might argue that any social constructs strong enough to create misery for an infertile couple must have developed in response to a biological or inherent drive to procreate. According to Wright, it is within this “natural” need to reproduce that social pressures develop, fostering expectations that couples will have children. Of course, the theory of biologically created or influenced reproductive drives has been thoughtfully critiqued by prominent feminists such as Chodorow who suggest an alternative view of procreation that is culturally constructed through socialization practices. For Wright, the new
Darwinian scientists must struggle against the ideas Chodorow and others put forth, which he maintains reflect a dominant “doctrine” that “biology doesn’t much matter—that the uniquely malleable human mind together with the unique force of culture, has severed our behavior from its evolutionary roots; that there is no inherent human nature driving human events, but that, rather, our essential nature is to be driven” (5). As a compromise, Wright suggests a move toward evolutionary psychology, which uses a combination of evolution and culture to more accurately explain the human animal.

In contrast, extending the work of object-relations theorists Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott, Chodorow argues that masculine and feminine identities develop through habits and practices of socialization that are passed on from generation to generation. She writes:

Biological sex differences exist; however, it is clear that all those characteristics that constitute “feminine” experiences and behavior, or feminine “nature,” may also characterize men where other sorts of work or role expectations require them. Beyond the minimal requirements of childbearing and nursing, for which even girls can be socialized more or less appropriately, girls’ socialization can produce women whose adult personality can range among all those characteristics which we consider male and female. We do not need to confuse statistical predominance with norm, and to explain norms in terms of biological nature. (Feminism 30-31)
If male and female differences are attributed to biology, then, for Chodorow, they become “inescapable,” which helps to perpetuate the oppression of women and reinforce the mandate for motherhood (Feminism 23). Certainly a mentality of biological determinism helped to support questionable medical treatments for female infertility during the postwar years. As Debra C. Davis notes, “before the mid-1970s, most of the research on infertility focused on determining whether differences existed in the psychologic characteristics of infertile and fertile women that would explain the reasons some women suffered from infertility” (221). This kind of diagnostics came from a medical profession that stigmatized women who were unable to have children. Incredibly, an article written by Chicago gynecologist W.S. Kroger and published in 1952 in the respected medical journal, Fertility and Sterility, claimed that if women gave up their careers and reconnected with their husbands, they would be able to have children. “We have all seen,” he wrote, “a long desired pregnancy follow the renunciation of a career” (548). As Margaret Marsh and Wanda Romner observe, “It is impossible to know how many women were treated by physicians who blamed their infertility on a lack of femininity, but such an idea was prevalent enough to cause considerable anxiety” (197). One of the most troubling aspects which is present in all three plays is the sexual rejection of the childless women by their husbands. Rather than focus on the women’s “lack of femininity” as the cause of the rejection, however, an alternative reading might examine the psychological motivations of the men.

Using psychoanalytic theory as her basis, Chodorow argues that because women are responsible for the primary socialization of both male and female children in our
culture, and because the adult male father figure often “performs his male role activities away from where the son spends most of his life,” then, “a boy, in his attempt to gain an elusive masculine identification, often comes to define this masculinity largely in negative terms, as that which is not feminine or involved with women” (Feminism 50-51). With a father figure who is, for the most part, absent from day-to-day life, the boy resorts to “fantasies” of the masculine role in order to create his own identity. Then, because he has internalized much of his mother’s femininity in his development thus far, he must reject or deny the feminine aspect in himself by “denigrating and devaluing whatever he considers to be feminine in the outside world” (Feminism 51). Similarly, young girls must reject the mother to gain an individuated identity as well. However, the close proximity between the mother and the young girl during primary socialization allows the female role to be demonstrated clearly, and, according to Chodorow, provides the girl with a more stable identity. The key for the young girl’s development is whether or not the female role holds value in her culture, which it did in the 1950s, but only for reproducing children and maintaining a household.

Here Chodorow’s theories can help to explain the maternal paradox that accompanies the issues of childlessness in the plays by Inge, Williams, and Albee. When both male and female children must reject the maternal figure in order to obtain individual identities, they turn away from the pre-oedipal, primary site of nurturance that was key to their survival in infancy. For the male, this all-encompassing mother threatens to engulf him at the same time that she provides him with sustenance. For the female child who can more easily identify with the mother because she is of the same
sex, her separation leads to confusion because she is ultimately faced with a "negatively valued gender category" (Chodorow Feminism 110). The maternal paradox comes into play when we must reject the mother in order to obtain our individual identities, while simultaneously we are drawn to her as the site of our primary nurturance. This paradox is complicated further by the presence of childless women. As Ireland argues:

Women who are not mothers threaten society with the loss of the presumed adult identity for women. By not ever becoming mothers and invalidating by their very presence the universality of this restricted female identity, they may also seem to undermine the bases of gender identity for men. This subtle, and perhaps deeper threat, helps explain why patriarchal society seems to have a stake in keeping the childless woman as the "invisible woman," . . . . (133)

To say that the husbands of the childless women in the plays have confused gender identities is perhaps an understatement. If nothing else, their wives' childlessness challenges their masculinity—a point with magnified significance in the 1950s. Furthermore, the conflicted attachment to the maternal figure is certainly a component of Doc's characterization, although the connections that Brick and George have to their mothers are less clear. In Brick's case Big Mama is summarily silenced by the other characters and rendered null and void, while George's mother is mentioned only in relation to the (possibly) apocryphal story of his parents' death.

In her well-known chapter, "The Dread of Woman," psychoanalytic theorist Karen Horney deals with maternal ambivalence in a more visceral way than Chodorow
does. For Horney, “men have never tired of fashioning expressions for the violent force by which man feels himself drawn to the woman, and side by side with his longing, the dread that through her he might die and be undone” (134). In the following passage, Horney touches on some of the issues that Julia Kristeva would later present in her theories on the abject maternal. Horney writes:

At puberty a normal boy has already acquired a conscious knowledge of the vagina, but what he fears in women is something uncanny, unfamiliar, and mysterious. If the grown man continues to regard woman as the great mystery, in whom is a secret he cannot divine, this feeling of his can only relate ultimately to one thing in her: the mystery of motherhood.

Everything else is merely the residue of his dread of this. (141)

Like Chodorow, Horney turns to psychoanalytic theory to explain this male “dread of woman.” During the oedipal phase, young boys have something tangible and outside of themselves to fear—the threat of castration by the father which arises from a cultural adherence to the incest taboo. In contrast, the mother maintains total control and power over the needs and desires of the young child. Consequently, if and when these desires are forbidden by the maternal figure, the child’s first sadistic behaviors will be enacted against the mother and her body. Chodorow agrees with Horney’s interpretation of maternal dread and views this all-encompassing control by the mother as creating “enormous anxiety in the child” (Feminism 34) which develops into a fear and resentment of women, especially for males in our culture.
For Julia Kristeva, this fear and resentment in the form of dread, or “abjection,” needs an outlet that is separate from women and individual mothers. In other words, the “maternal function” must remain differentiated from the mother as a woman. If this can happen, then the child can work through abjection of the maternal body without also abjecting the mother herself. As Kristeva scholar Kelly Oliver suggests, although Kristeva argues that we all must separate from our mother by abjecting her, she also argues that we need a myth or conceptualization of motherhood that will “absorb” abjection so that it is not misplaced onto women (160-1). This misplaced abjection, for Kristeva, ultimately leads to the oppression of women. Problematically for many feminists, Kristeva does not provide concrete solutions for our culture’s misplaced abjection except to suggest that the myth of the Virgin had served such a purpose before a “crisis in the religious representation of maternity.” She continues:

The image of the Virgin—the woman whose entire body is an emptiness through which the paternal word is conveyed—had remarkably subsumed the maternal “abject,” which is so necessarily intrapsychic. Lacking that safety lock, feminine abjection imposed itself upon social representation, causing an actual denigration of women. (Tales 374)

However, as Oliver points out, women were certainly oppressed during the heyday of the myth of the Virgin. In Kristeva’s defense, though, Oliver argues that her theories do not “endorse” the myth of the Virgin per se, but rather question the availability of alternative discourses of motherhood that have the potential to absorb abjection (161). For Kristeva,
then, without an adequate outlet for abjection, the physical act of maternity becomes conflated with our society’s representation of women. She writes:

... we are caught in a paradox. First, we live in a civilization where the \textit{consecrated} (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood. If, however, one looks at it more closely, this motherhood is the \textit{fantasy} that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory; what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the \textit{relationship} that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized—an idealization of primary narcissism. \textit{(Tales 234)}

Much like Chodorow’s claim that “idealization of mothers is an infantile fantasy,” \textit{(Feminism 90)}, Kristeva’s theories equate the infant’s initial life-or-death dependence on the mother with the adult longing for an idealized, yet ineffable maternal figure. Perhaps Kristeva’s theories on maternity raise more questions than they answer; however, her notion of the abject maternal in \textit{language} can nevertheless help one to sort through the conflicted portrayal of childless women characters as (mis)representations of maternal figures in the three plays to be studied.$^3$

$^3$ Some feminist critics have challenged Kristeva’s views, claiming that she supports everything from fascism to biological determinism. In her seminal book, \textit{Gender Trouble}, Judith Butler provides a thoughtful analysis of Kristeva’s theory on the ability of the “semiotic” in language to displace the Symbolic/paternal law. For Butler, Kristeva’s association of the pre-oculal maternal body with the semiotic suggests a reification of motherhood that serves to “preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability” (103). Furthermore, Butler questions the subversive effect of the semiotic on the symbolic, calling it nothing more than “a temporary and futile disruption of the hegemony of the paternal law” (103). She continues, “in the end, it seems that Kristeva offers us a strategy of subversion that can never become a sustained political practice” (103). The usefulness of Kristeva’s theories in the political realm is beyond the scope of this study. However, as tools for textual analysis her ideas can help to illuminate the power that language holds in the plays. As to Butler’s suggestion that Kristeva reifies motherhood, it is Kristeva’s view that maternity in and of itself does not lead to women’s oppression, but rather the \textit{representation} of the maternal figure in patriarchal culture leads to the oppression of women.
Like Horney and Chodorow, Kristeva turns to psychoanalytic theory in order to explain the complexities of maternity. What differentiates Kristeva from other psychoanalytic theorists, however, is her focus on the infant/maternal relationship before and during birth. Kristeva emphasizes the womb ("receptacle"), or what she metaphorically calls the "semiotic chora" in her linguistic analyses, as the site of initial subjectivity. Thus it is during the primary separation from the mother, during the act of birth, that "the abject confronts us with our earliest attempts to release the hold of the maternal entity even before ex-isting outside her, thanks to the autonomy of language" (Powers 13). Kristeva continues:

> We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what treatens (sic) it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be... (Horror 9-10)

Similar to Chodorow's "fear and resentment" or Horney's "dread," Kristeva's "abjection" speaks to the maternal anxiety, on the part of all of the characters, that inhabits the plays. Furthermore, in her reinterpretation of psychoanalytic theory to include childlessness, Ireland notes, "Childless women embody a different kind of female energy that represents a 'bodily' basis for the entrance of female 'signifiers' besides
maternal ones into the collective language of our culture.” She continues, “They bring with their female experience an alternative reading of Freud’s ‘anatomy is destiny’” (134). Thus, between the maternal anxiety and the destabilizing influence of childlessness which can be read in Come Back Little Sheba, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the male characters find themselves lacking a secure masculine identity. As the patriarchal structure embraced by the 1950s middle class breaks down in the texts, the husbands of the childless women find themselves falling into abjection. In a twist on Kristeva’s abject maternal, then, one might argue that the men are drawn to an ethereal fantasy of the maternal lying dormant in their wives while at the same time they are repulsed by an equally distorted fantasy of her (childless) physical reality.

Although Kristeva writes that “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. . . . that skin on the surface of milk.” it is nevertheless “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. . . . a place where all meaning collapses” (Powers 2, 4). Because the childless women characters do not fit neatly into a socially validated category, or in Goffman’s terms, because they are stigmatized in the plays, perhaps the male characters cannot tolerate the ambiguity surrounding their presence. And certainly the reader/spectator must reconcile the maternal anxiety in the plays as well.

Through her theories on the semiotic chora in language, Kristeva brings her reader back to the pre-oedipal relationship with the mother as a state that is pre-language
and pre-symbolic. For Kristeva, this primary relationship with the maternal body, which her predecessors Freud and Lacan largely ignore, contains the seeds for social and psychological transformation. Freud’s oedipal process and Lacan’s mirror stage come about during the child’s entry into the Symbolic realm which constitutes ordered language and culture. Once in the Symbolic realm, in psychoanalytic theory, the male child’s oedipal relationship with the maternal figure must be broken by the paternal threat of castration in order for him to gain independence through language. Kristeva discusses the fear of castration as proffered by Freud and Lacan:

Castration is, in sum, the imaginary construction of a radical operation which constitutes the symbolic field and all beings inscribed therein. This operation constitutes signs and syntax; that is, language, as a separation from a presumed state of nature, of pleasure fused with nature so that the introduction of an articulated network of differences, which refers to objects henceforth and only in this way separated from a subject, may constitute meaning. (Women’s Time 22).

In Freudian and Lacanian theory, because a girl does not have a penis, she cannot experience the fear of castration that necessarily moves a male child into the Symbolic realm. This is where Freud’s “penis envy” and Lacan’s phallic “lack” come into play. Again, extending psychoanalytic theory to include childless women, Ireland writes:

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4 As Kelly Oliver notes, Kristeva’s use of the term symbolic differs from Lacan’s Symbolic in that the latter encompasses the “entire realm of signification” or culture whereas the former is “one element of that realm” (xiv). For Kristeva, “the symbolic element of language is the domain of position and judgment. It is associated with the grammar or structure of language that enables it to signify something” (Oliver xiv).
Because the penis, symbolizing wholeness, has resulted in masculine characteristics becoming associated with positive value and presence whereas female characteristics have become associated with negative value and absence, the empty womb of the childless woman can be seen as a symbol of even greater absence. The childless woman’s lack is thus simply more obvious than that of other women in her pronatal culture.

Ireland discusses the childless woman as a “symbol” of “absence” in patriarchal structures and calls for a “redefinition” (123) of her empty womb as “potential space,” in which she can construct an alternative, positive identity of femaleness that does not include motherhood. One of the problems for all three childless women in the plays is a postwar cultural milieu that permeates their lives and dictates their worth based on maternity and domesticity.

One way to analyze the maternal paradox or anxiety in the plays is through Julia Kristeva’s linguistic theories on maternity which include the abject maternal, semanalysis, and the semiotic chora. It has been well documented by scholars of Kristeva’s work that her theoretical writings can be difficult to pin down—like trying to hold mercury in one’s hand. Indeed, Kristeva embraces ambiguity by using the maternal body as a site of contradiction in her work, which, in her estimation, unsettles the linguistic power structures of patriarchy. As philosophy scholar Michelle Boulous Walker suggests, “by simultaneously advocating maternal dissidence and criticizing female romanticism [Kristeva] challenges us to shake the bonds of rigid, conformist
thought” (124), the kind of rigid thought that epitomized the 1950s and the sort of dogma that the three playwrights expose with their themes of childlessness. For the purposes of this study, then, Kristeva’s theoretical frameworks prove helpful precisely because she refuses to accept a stable or fixed notion of identity and chooses instead to focus on the erupting, contradictory “subject-in-process” within a text. Ultimately, she is interested in those moments that “shatter” the dominant discourse (Revolution 15).

Kristeva argues for a return to the state prior to the attainment of language and the entry into the Symbolic order as a way to unsettle or disrupt dominant (patriarchal) structures. She brings the maternal body back into language through the semiotic component in language, especially the language of “art,” which includes theater. Kristeva’s work in linguistics, semiotics, and psychoanalytic theory has led her to identify certain signifying practices that she calls “poetic language.” Borrowing from the Russian Formalists, Kristeva sees in poetic language the “infinite possibilities of language. . . . [that allow for the creation of] an activity that liberates the subject from a number of linguistic, psychic, and social networks” (Revolution 2). Departing from her mentor, Roland Barthes, and other linguistics theorists, Kristeva locates and emphasizes a semiotic component in the symbolic signifying process. For Kristeva the semiotic reflects the unconscious drive forces that are repressed, in Freudian theory, after language acquisition. Conversely, the symbolic component in the signifying process represents the dominant patriarchal culture which is constructed through language. Kristeva explores the semiotic rhythms, gestures, and intonations in poetic language through a linguistic
methodology she has named "semanalysis," which is a combination of semiology and psychoanalysis.

As part of her semanalysis Kristeva refers to the "oscillation" between the symbolic and semiotic components in poetic language which she identifies as the genotext and the phenotext. For Kristeva, the genotext consists of the "physical" or "material" aspect of poetic language, such as rhythms, sounds, nonverbal utterances, and combinations of letters. The genotext focuses on the unconscious drives of the semiotic. Kristeva's phenotext, on the other hand, encompasses the language of communication which must comply with societal, cultural, syntactical, and other grammatical constraints. The violent and foul language in Doc's drunken scene in *Sheba* can be read as the genotext or semiotic. Similarly, Big Daddy and Big Mama's shocking vulgarity in *Cat* and George and Martha's filthy repartee in *Virginia Woolf* leads the reader/spectator into the realm of the unrepressed unconscious where social codes and cultural rules of conduct no longer hold any value.

A reading of the plays that illuminates the semiotic "discharges" in the texts can point to moments where identity breaks down. Because Kristeva associates the semiotic with the maternal through her semiotic *chora*, one might argue that the disruptions in the texts caused by the genotext contain opportunities for a dismantling of culturally constructed notions of female identity—in particular the societal mandate for motherhood so prevalent in postwar America. To this end, Kristeva discusses the maternal body as a site where a splitting of identity occurs. A pregnant woman, in Kristeva's estimation, is responsible for an "other," the fetus, which makes her, in effect, a split identity. Because
of this duality, a maternal figure cannot exist within a static subject position. Instead, the maternal body is constantly changing—a state Kristeva calls the “subject-in-process-on-trial,” hence her use of maternity which “shatters” the dominant discourse. When the unconscious drives of the semiotic are discharged into the symbolic language in the plays, then, a disruption occurs in the patriarchal power structures that challenges the status quo. Ultimately, the significance of *Come Back, Little Sheba, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, all written and performed during an era of maternal valorization, rests in part in their truthful depictions of the frustration and disappointment surrounding a culturally idealized domestic life that was not meeting the needs of a generation of American women.
CHAPTER II

VEILED LOSS IN WILLIAM INGE'S COME BACK, LITTLE SHEBA

Do not fear death so much, but rather the inadequate life.
(Bertolt Brecht, The Mother)

On February 16, 1950, William Inge’s Come Back, Little Sheba opened at the Booth Theater in New York while the author sat in a nearby restaurant drinking coffee, too nervous to attend his play’s debut performance on Broadway (Voss 115). In an autobiographical twist, Inge, much like his central character in Sheba, Doc Delaney, was an alcoholic who struggled daily with sobriety. Autobiographically as well, Inge fashioned the childless couple in the play, Doc and his wife, Lola, after his aunt and uncle who did not have children (Voss 86). One might imagine that Inge had opportunities to witness a household without children in order to determine how the circumstances of childlessness impacts a couple. And although the influence of an author’s biography on his work can never be known, one might argue that Inge’s complex relationship with his own mother and his exposure to a couple without children as he grew up colored his depiction of maternal and childless figures in his writing. Indeed, a fascination with maternity, childlessness, and the family structure in general can be read in much of his work. Inge includes childless women in several of his plays, as Susan Koprince notes, and explores their situations with a certain level of insight and sensitivity (251
An emerging playwright at the time Sheba opened, Inge imbues the setting and characters in his play with a sense of his own culturally restricted, puritanical beginnings in the small town of Independence, Kansas. Most certainly Inge’s portrayal of childlessness in Sheba is affected by the cultural value system of his early milieu as he places Lola and Doc in a “Midwestern city” (Inge 5) where, as a childless couple, they struggle to fit in and continue to feel shame for their indiscretions of the past.

This chapter will examine Inge’s depiction of a childless couple, Lola and Doc Delaney, whose characterizations disrupt the fixed gender role categories and the pro-family ideologies that dominated an American mindset in the early 1950s. Indeed, Inge lays bare the emptiness and futility inherent in striving to meet the unattainable goals of domestic perfection which had been prescribed by a postwar culture. Through the long-married couple; their college-age boarder, Marie; Marie’s suitors, Turk and Bruce, and the other characters who drift in and out of the Delaney household, Inge addresses his generation’s overwhelming need to comply with social strictures. Then, by speaking through characters who do not fit the postwar domestic mold and consequently reside on the margins of society, childless women for example, he exposes the deep-seated anxiety and disillusionment that plagued the baby-boom era. However, because Inge could not, or did not openly attack societal conventions in his play, intertwined with his cultural critique one can find an ironic, at times devious, subversion of 1950s gender role expectations. As Tennessee Williams wrote in response to Inge’s work, the playwright “has begun to uncover a world within a world, and it is not the world that his welcome
prepared you to meet, it's a secret world that exists behind the screen of neighborly decorum” (Inge back cover).

By exposing a private domestic scene on a public stage with all of its imperfections, Inge broaches uncomfortable topics that most families kept hidden during the postwar years. He does so, however, through the childless and garrulous Lola, an unreliable character who is never taken seriously. Despite the other characters' attempts to quiet it, Lola's incessant chatter throughout the play reveals many subjects that would have been taboo for a 1950s audience, including Doc's alcoholism and his unusually close relationship with his mother, premarital sex, an unwanted pregnancy, the death of a baby and the resultant infertility, and Marie and Turk's promiscuity. Because Lola is depicted as "psychologically maladjusted," a common stereotype attached to childless women in the postwar era (Koprince 257 "Childless"), her revelatory ramblings take on a tone of insignificance in the play. She is portrayed in many ways as a nattering ninny, a character who invites laughter at times, ridicule at others. Furthermore, although Lola is a central figure in the play, the other characters summarily disregard her, leaving her effectively silenced. The other characters dismiss her at their own peril, though. Without a real voice in the play, Lola resorts to devious machinations in order to levy her influence and control her environment. It is all in vain, however, as she finds herself at the end of the play exactly where she started. Lola's potentialities for a more fulfilling life appear to be the most limited of the three childless women to be examined in this study.
Unlike the childlessness experienced by Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Lola's barrenness assumes an added dimension of pathos because she lived through an actual pregnancy, then subsequently lost her baby during childbirth. For Inge, whose older brother, Luther Boy, died of blood poisoning as a young man (Voss 14), a mother's grief upon losing a child would have been painfully evident. Through his depiction of Lola and Doc's loss, Inge links the idea of the baby's death with longing for lost opportunities, unfulfilled desires to reproduce, and an inability to accept the aging process. Overwhelming themes in Inge's play, youth and beauty represent future potential and fecund possibilities when measured against the lost hope and sterility of middle age and the finality of death. Without progeny to carry on the family heritage, Doc and Lola cling to their fantasies of idealized youth. As R. Baird Shuman notes, Inge works with stark contrasts: an aging, hapless Lola, beyond her child-bearing years, is juxtaposed with Marie, the quintessence of youth, sexual appeal, and fertility, while Doc, the broken-down alcoholic, is positioned alongside Turk, the young, athletic Adonis and prototypical beefcake. In all cases, even with the Delaney's lost dog, Sheba, Inge forsakes the wisdom of maturity in favor of the carefree exuberance of naïve youth. To grow older, for Inge, means to wander off and die, in the case of Sheba, or to become unnecessary and merely exist from day to day, as is the fate of Lola and Doc.

Death and the Maiden

A man plagued by addictions and insecurities who eventually took his own life in 1973 (Voss 270), Inge explores the subject of death at length in *Sheba*, but only from a
psychological distance. Lola and Doc’s baby has died some twenty years before the
action begins and Sheba has mysteriously disappeared and is presumed dead. In Lola’s
dreams, Sheba represents the Delaneys’ lost child and becomes a substitute figure that
absorbs some of her devastation at losing her baby and remaining childless. Thus a
palpable anguish develops in the play when Lola walks onto the porch and calls out for
her lost dog, “Little Sheba! Come, Little She-ba. Come back . . . come back, Little
Sheba!” (16).

And yet, although the subject of death occupies an important position in the play,
it nevertheless resides in the recesses of Lola’s idle chatter as a topic that must not be
fully explored. Like the couple’s childlessness, Sheba’s disappearance, and Doc’s
alcoholism, the baby’s death is a topic that all of the characters, with the noted exception
of Lola, attempt to dismiss. Marie ignores it completely by changing the subject after
Lola reveals her plight for the first time in the play, “When I lost my baby and found out I
couldn’t have any more, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I wanted to get a job, but
Doc wouldn’t hear of it” (13), Lola tells her. It appears that Marie has not even heard
Lola’s intimate revelation as she responds with the following non sequitur: “Bruce is
going to come into a lot of money some day. His uncle made a fortune in men’s garters,”
after which she “Exits into her room” (13). Marie’s insensitive (non)response ecities the
overriding sentiment throughout the play—that Lola’s words are not important. Later,
when Lola attempts to express her grief to Doc, “I wish the baby had lived, Doc” (33), he
patronizingly tells her to stop dwelling on what could have been. An emotional tension
develops in Sheba when Inge limits the other characters’ responses to Lola’s lamentations
about her dead child and her lost dog. Indeed, Lola’s psychological pain simply hangs in
the air, not unlike the “elephant in the living room,” and makes everyone, including the
reader/spectator, uncomfortable. Furthermore, an audience in a theater might miss Lola’s
references altogether, while even a close reading of the text can lead to the assumption
that Lola’s losses are insignificant. By seeming to dismiss Lola’s past tribulations,
though, perhaps Inge invites the reader to do the opposite. A more sympathetic reading
of Lola’s character, one that carefully considers Lola’s circumstances as a childless
woman in the 1950s and accounts for the emotional traumas in her past, might reveal a
woman in need of compassionate understanding, not derision. In fact, Lola’s
characterization as an annoying, infantile woman can take on an entirely different nuance
when read against the backdrop of a puritanical Midwestern town in postwar America.

Lola’s Nostalgia: The Way We Never Were

Although their baby died twenty years before the action of the play begins, Doc’s
insistence that Lola forget the past only keeps her nostalgic for an idealized time that
never existed. Indeed, he is correct when he tells her, “If you can’t forget the past, you
stay in it and never get out” (33). In order for Lola to forget the past, however, she must
be allowed to grieve the loss of her baby. Clinical psychologist Donna Bassin relates
feelings of longing or nostalgia to the notion in psychoanalytic theory of the psychic loss
of one’s own mother through the separation and individuation process. The potential for
personal growth through individual regeneration or “internal transformational activity”
(169) can come about, in Bassin’s estimation, through a woman’s own experience of
motherhood. Or, a woman might find something she values on which to focus her
energies, a career, for example, to give her life meaning. Unfortunately for Lola, the opportunity to become a mother has been thwarted. And the postwar era certainly offered limited opportunities for women’s employment. Suffering a double loss—her baby and her maternal potential—and lacking an outlet for her grief or any possibility for meaningful work, Lola experiences what Bassin calls “incomplete mourning,” which she describes as “an attempt to reenact reunion with the lost object” (168). Lola’s dreams of losing Sheba and her preoccupation with finding the dog can be read as indicative of her need to reunite with her baby in order to properly grieve the loss. Her continual need to revisit her past, and her inability to mourn her losses, keeps her trapped in a state of “endless seeking” (Bassin 168) and inhibits her ability to develop an inner self. By focusing her desires on external objects, her lost baby and Sheba, Lola maintains a nostalgic fantasy that keeps her insulated from the responsibilities of the outside world. As Bassin puts it:

The transformation the nostalgic seeks is assumed to reside in a situation or an object rather than in the self. The urge to hold onto the object that cannot be properly mourned precludes investment in or libidinization of a new object. Thus, this pathology of mourning—manifested in wistful nostalgic sentiment—is an obstacle to growth beyond infantile wishes of mother. (168)

Lola certainly portrays a child-like figure in much of the play, to the point that she calls Doc “Daddy,” and he refers to her as “Baby.” By immersing herself in nostalgia for a happier time, a time when she was pretty, sexually desirable, and able to have children,
Lola avoids any opportunities for personal growth. Furthermore, the inability of the other characters in the play to recognize Lola’s need to grieve the loss of her baby (and her fertility) leaves her emotionally isolated and unable to attempt the process of mourning—a process that might help her find emotional and psychological contentment.

A specialist in perinatal and neonatal bereavement, Deborah L. Davis emphasizes the importance of memories in the grieving process. However, she notes that when a baby dies shortly after birth, thereby taking away any opportunities to get to know him or her, one “may have difficulty separating the typical idealized fantasies about this baby from the probable realities” (4). Lola imagines that the baby would have been about Marie’s age, “if we’d had the baby she’d be a young girl now... and she could be going to college—like Marie” (33). And, in many ways, their tenant, Marie, like the dog, Sheba, stands in as a substitute, or surrogate child, for both Doc and Lola. Lola’s attempts to fantasize about the lost baby are cut short, however, because Doc cannot reconcile his own past, “Baby, what’s done is done,” he tells her, hoping that she will change the subject (33). Ultimately faced with Doc’s placating dismissal of the baby’s death, Lola must find another outlet for her emotional pain. By focusing on Sheba, the “cute little puppy,” and her unexplained disappearance, she “just vanished one day... vanished into thin air” (8), Lola can relive, to a certain extent, the trauma of losing her baby. As Davis suggests, until the last few decades “after death, the baby was whisked away to spare the parents the sight of their child and the grief they might have experienced if they had been allowed to hold the baby” (7). Quite literally, Lola’s baby
may have “vanished into thin air,” especially considering the circumstances surrounding the birth.

Davis also suggests that the grieving process can be impeded when one loses a baby because family and friends often inadvertently diminish the loss (6). Under the best of circumstances, others may not respond in a helpful way to the death of a baby, perhaps out of a fear of feeling uncomfortable or an inability to recognize the depth of the loss. Because Lola’s pregnancy was not “nice” and “proper” (33), she would have faced even more reluctance on the part of others to get involved. In fact, Lola’s parents were the only ones who knew about her pregnancy and they had all but disowned her. Davis points to the isolation many parents experience when customary rituals “designed to support the bereaved. . . are often denied, overlooked or minimized” (6) when a baby dies. More than likely Lola and Doc were left to deal with their baby’s death alone—and they remain equally isolated twenty years later.

Lola’s Depression

In addition to the dismissive attitude Lola receives from Doc and Marie about the baby’s death and Sheba’s disappearance, many scholars have glossed over her unfortunate losses as well. R. Baird Shuman refers to her baby’s death as a miscarriage (21), while other critics merely mention the tragedy in passing, as simply another component of Lola’s characterization. As mentioned earlier, Inge allows Lola’s monologues about her baby and Sheba to remain, for the most part, unnoticed by the other characters in the play. This is not to say, however, that Inge ascribes to Doc and Marie’s insensitive dismissal of Lola’s plight. Indeed, a careful reading of Inge’s stage
directions reveals, at times, his keen understanding of Lola’s emotionally untenable circumstances within a postwar culture that looked askance at childless women. If the loss of the baby and Lola’s subsequent infertility are viewed as more significant in the overall dynamics of the play, then Lola’s slovenly behavior, her lack of interest in her own life, makes more sense—she is suffering from depression.\(^5\) Inge describes Lola in relation to Doc and Marie when she first enters the stage:

*She is a contrast to DOC’s neat cleanliness, and MARIE’S. Over a nightdress she wears a lumpy kimono. Her eyes are dim with a morning expression of disillusionment, as though she had had a beautiful dream during the night and found on waking none of it was true. On her feet are worn dirty comfies.* (7)

And even though Lola fixes her appearance in preparation for the arrival of Turk, one of Marie’s lovers, shortly after the young couple leaves the house, she loses her energy. As Inge describes it, “a sad, vacant look comes over her face. Her arms drop in a gesture of futility” (16). It is at this point in the play that she steps onto the porch and calls plaintively for Sheba.

Inge’s depiction of Lola sets her up in no uncertain terms as the antithesis of Marie, the youthful college student. Throughout the first act, Lola, a picture of haggard,

\(^5\) According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or the DSM-IV, depression can be diagnosed when at least five of the following symptoms have been present for a period greater than two weeks: “1) depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, 2) markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day, 3) significant weight loss or weight gain, 4) insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day, 5) feelings of restlessness or being slowed down nearly every day, 6) fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day, 7) feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day, 8) diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness nearly every day, 9) recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying)” (327).
frumpy malaise, is characterized in contrast to Marie who enters the kitchen, “skipping airily” in a “sheer dainty negligee” and “smart, feathery” mule slippers, with “the cheerfulness only youth can feel in the morning” (5, 7). Furthermore, as Lola’s fertility foil, Marie represents the fecundity that Lola has lost. In her exuberant solipsism, Marie insensitively emphasizes the stark contrast between the two women, “I’m going to have lots and lots of children” she says, to which Lola evenly replies, “I wanted children, too” (13). Marie’s naïve assumption that a woman controls her own maternal potential echoes the sentiment expressed by many Americans during the postwar years—a sentiment that fueled disdain toward childless women who had presumably “shirked their reproductive duties” (May 132). During a time in history when nothing less than national security was at stake, women were “vilified as un-American” (May 127) if they did not add to the country’s growing population by producing children.

Of all the characters in his play, Inge provides the most physical and emotional detail about Lola in his stage directions. As readers we can visualize her demeanor and feel the weight of her struggles. Her general depiction is one of lethargy interspersed with stretches of heightened activity or “industry” as Inge calls it (5). Lola’s industry comes about, however, only with the anticipated arrival of a guest. Without an external motivation—the impending visit of Marie’s fiancé for example—she cannot bring herself to clean her house or fix meals. She lounges on the sofa, eats candy, listens to the radio, and, for the most part, never ventures out to engage in life. She waits for people to come to the door, generic characters like the postman and the milkman, then entices them in
with a drink of water and a prize from a cereal box or a compliment about their physique—anything to forestall her loneliness.

Indeed, after Marie and Turk have left the house and after she has called in vain for Sheba, Lola gives up on the day. In the following passage Inge carefully constructs a portrait of despair:

She waits for a few moments, then comes wearily back into the house, closing the door behind her. Now the morning has caught up with her. . . .
The sight of the dishes on the drainboard depresses her. Clearly she is bored to death. . . . it looks hopeless. She hears the POSTMAN. Now her spirits are lifted. She runs to the door, opens it and awaits him. When he's within distance, she lets loose a barrage of welcome. (16)

Lacking the potential within herself for some kind of fulfillment, she depends on others, as Bassin describes it, to give her purpose—a common problem for women in the 1950s, especially for women who did not have children. Thus without a family to validate her existence or a job to occupy her time and without an outlet for her grief, Lola falls into depression.

Unable to express her grief outwardly, Lola’s sorrow turns inward, leaving her by her own admission, “old and fat and sloppy” (32), sleeping until noon, and uninterested in meeting the responsibilities of her daily life—all signs of depression. In addition, as noted in the DSM-IV, feelings of guilt\(^6\) can contribute to depression. Deborah Davis

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\(^6\) The DSM-IV distinguishes between “normal” bereavement and the diagnosis of a “Major Depressive Disorder” when depressive symptoms are still present two months after the loss. In addition, certain symptoms can be differentiated from “normal” grief and can lead to a diagnosis of depression. They include: “1) guilt about things other than actions taken or not taken by the survivor at the time of the
suggests that "guilt is anger directed at the self" (16). Furthermore, she writes, "this self-directed anger can lead to self-destructive behavior and chronic depression" (16). Lola is still consumed by guilt twenty years after her baby's death—guilt for getting pregnant out of wedlock and guilt for not obtaining appropriate medical care during the baby's delivery. Rather than holding the medical community responsible for the baby's death, she blames herself. She laments to Doc, "I thought nothing we could do together could ever be wrong—or make us unhappy. Do you think we did wrong, Doc?" (33), and he attempts to comfort her:

DOC: (Consoling) No, Baby, of course I don't.

LOLA: I don't think anyone knows about it except my folks, do you?

DOC: Of course not, Baby.

LOLA: (Follows him in) I wish the baby had lived, Doc. I don't think that woman knew her business, do you, Doc?

DOC: I guess not.

LOLA: If we'd gone to a doctor, she would have lived, don't you think?

DOC: Perhaps.

LOLA: A doctor wouldn't have known we'd just got married, would he? Why were we so afraid?

DOC: (Sits on couch) We were just kids. Kids don't know how to look after things.
LOLA: **(Sits on couch)** If we’d had the baby she’d be a young girl now; then maybe you’d have *saved* your money, Doc, and she could be going to college—like Marie.

DOC: Baby, what’s done is done. (33)

In this exchange between Lola and Doc, Inge highlights the prevalence (and dangers) of social stigmas that were present in the 1930s—when the Delaneys would have lost their baby. These same stigmas continue to plague Lola two decades later. Fearful of being “found out,” Lola had hidden her pregnancy and settled for sub-standard care during childbirth. Still haunted by her decision, she looks to Doc for some reassurance in order to assuage her guilt. Depressed from feeling responsible for the baby’s death and hopeless about her future, Lola punishes herself by depriving herself of a meaningful life.

Female Sexuality in the 1950s

Implicit in the depiction of Lola’s guilt over her baby’s death is her failure to take responsibility for her feminine sexuality in the past. The social expectations for young single women in the 1930s, when Lola and Doc found themselves facing a pregnancy out of wedlock, would have been similar to the social mandates of the 1950s, when it was incumbent upon a young woman to remain sexually chaste until after marriage (Coontz 39). According to Elaine Tyler May, in response to an assumption of postwar “masculine power... drawn from sexual potency” (85), 1950s experts in social etiquette “repeatedly

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7 As Elaine Tyler May writes in “Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb,” “Fears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change. The depression and the war years were two such times when concern over the impending doom of the family surfaced... . . . By articulating the unique form this anxiety took during the postwar years, professionals in numerous fields, government officials, and creators of the popular culture revealed the powerful symbolic force of gender and sexuality in the cold war ideology and culture. It was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself” (81-82).
explained that it was up to young women to ‘draw the line’ and exercise sexual restraint, thereby safeguarding the stability of their future families” (88). May also notes that early marriage became the antidote or “appropriate container for the unwieldy American libido” (88). True to a 1950s sensibility, then, “nice” girls did not have premarital sex (as Lola had) and become pregnant. Or, at the very least, “nice” girls who found themselves pregnant got married, had a baby, and allowed the cloak of motherhood to hide their social stigma.

Besides the direct comparison Inge makes between the two women, Marie can certainly be read as a representation of Lola in her youth. Perhaps Lola embodies a cautionary tale for Marie by personifying the possible long-term effects of participation in risky sexual behavior—an activity, we learn from the outset, that Marie feels perfectly comfortable enjoying. In all probability, Lola facilitates Marie’s tryst with Turk as a way to validate the choices she made when she was younger. Perhaps inadvertently, Lola sets Marie up to repeat the same mistakes she made when she was Marie’s age. Indeed, Doc’s drunken accusations may not be unfounded when he suggests that Lola has facilitated Marie’s sexual encounters. Upon learning that Marie and Turk spent the night together under his roof, he rants, “I suppose you tucked them in bed together and peeked through the keyhold and applauded. . . . [Bruce] probably has to marry [Marie], the poor bastard. Just ‘cause she’s pretty and he got amorous one day. . . . Just like I had to marry you” (56).

Adding to Lola’s burden of guilt regarding her sexuality and her baby’s death is Doc’s attitude toward female sexuality, which echoes the postwar notion that the
aggressive male libido must be "managed" by the woman. Doc initially absolves Marie of any responsibility for her sexual behavior, as he assumes that Marie's lover, Turk, is merely forcing himself upon her. Doc's need to maintain his fantasy regarding Marie's virtuous chastity becomes clear during an early exchange with Lola:

DOC: [Marie's] too nice a girl to be going out with a guy like Turk.
LOLA: I don't know why, Daddy. Turk's nice.

(Cuts coffee cake)

DOC: A guy like that doesn't have any respect for nice young girls. You can tell that by looking at him.
LOLA: I never saw Marie object to any of the love-making.
DOC: A big brawny bozo like Turk, he probably forces her to kiss him.
LOLA: Daddy, that's not so at all....

DOC: (An angry denial) Marie is a nice girl.
LOLA: I know she's nice. I just said she and Turk were doing some tall spooning. It wouldn't surprise me any if....

DOC: Honey, I don't want to hear any more about it. [. . .]

DOC: [. . .] I just like to believe that young people like her are clean and decent. . . . (11)

By refusing to acknowledge Marie's consensual participation in sexual activity, Doc can forgo dealing with his own sexuality which got him in trouble some twenty years before. If he can transfer the onus of sexual propriety onto the women (most notably, Lola), then
he can absolve himself of any social indiscretions in his past. His act of self-absolution, however, leaves him emotionally and sexually repressed.

When Lola attempts to reminisce about their courtship, Doc reveals his struggle with sexual/emotional repression in the play. He becomes increasingly uncomfortable, even emotionally fragile, when Lola pushes him on the subject of their sexual relationship:

LOLA: I was pretty then, wasn’t I, Doc? Remember the first time you kissed me? You were scared as a young girl, I believe, Doc; you trembled so... We’d been going together all year and you were always so shy. Then for the first time you grabbed me and kissed me. Tears came to your eyes, Doc, and you said you’d love me forever and ever. Remember? You said... if I didn’t marry you, you wanted to die... I remember ‘cause it scared me for anyone to say a thing like that.

DOC: (In a repressed tone) Yes, Baby. (32)

It is true that Lola had been the pretty girl with all the suitors and Doc was the naïve momma’s boy. Thus, in Doc’s estimation, if Lola had not been so sexually accessible and so willing to give up her virginity to him, he would not be in such a horrible situation now. Unable to face the gravity of their sexual indiscretions, he implores her to let the past be, “Baby, you’ve got to forget those things. That was twenty years ago” (32). Despite Doc’s pleadings, however, Lola continues to dig through their painful memories until, unable to continue, he begs her to stop, “(Sighs and wipes brow) I... I wish you wouldn’t ask me questions like that, Baby. Let’s not talk about it any more. I gotta keep
goin’, and not let things upset me, or . . . or . . .” (34). Or he might drink again. A step, one might increasingly suspect, Lola subconsciously wants him to take.

Taboo

Doc’s inability to reconcile his carnal desires with his need to believe that “nice” girls remained sexually chaste until after marriage leaves Lola to deal with her own sexual desires through fantasy and vicarious living. Facing another day filled with social isolation, Lola turns on the radio. The sexual innuendo is unmistakable, when, as Inge describes it, “A pulsating tom-tom is heard as a theme introduction.”:

TA-BOOoooo! [. . .] It’s Ta-boo, radio listeners, your fifteen minutes of temptation. (An alluring voice) Won’t you join me? . . . Won’t you leave behind your routine, the dull cares that make up your day-to-day existence, the little worries, the uncertainties, the confusions of the work-a-day world and follow me where pagan spirits hold sway. . . where palm trees sway with the restless ocean tide, restless surging on the white shore? Won’t you come along? (More tom-tom. Now, in an oily voice) But remember, it’s TA-BOOOOOOO-OOOOOOO! (Now the tom-tom again, going into a sensual, primitive rhythm melody. LOLA has been transfixed from the beginning of the program. . .). (22)

Beyond the obvious sexual overtones contained in this passage, a Kristevan analysis reveals the unconscious at work in the semiotic chora—the maternal uncovered, the primordial site of birth. Indeed, if the “Taboo” passage is read as not only sexual, but maternal, then it can be argued that Inge subversively reminds us of the underlying issue
in Lola and Doc's life—their childlessness. Thus, the onomatopoeia can be interpreted as the sounds of a woman in labor. The pulsating of the tom-tom mimics the rhythm of the womb. It is the abject maternal, at once tempting, beckoning, while simultaneously reviling and forbidden. As Kristeva writes, "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be. . ." (Powers 10). She continues, "The abject confronts us. . . with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal" (Powers 12). Certainly the radio program is meant to be animalistic and foreign, an invitation to venture into the dark recesses of human existence. More specifically, Lola's private enjoyment of "Taboo" contrasts with the guilt she carries over her past sexuality. Without the symbolic gesture of maternity to absorb societal abjection, Lola remains defiled, on the edge of a 1950s identification system that repudiated aberrations from the social norm.

Lola not only invests her time and energy in sexual fantasies, but with no children to care for in a postwar culture that validated women solely for motherhood, and lacking any positive outlets in her own existence, she turns her focus toward the lives of others. Unbearably lonely, yet psychologically unable to leave her house to interact with the world, Lola lives vicariously through Marie. From the beginning of the play it is clear that Lola has become emotionally involved in the intricacies of Marie's love life—for example, her excitement at the arrival of Marie's lover, Turk, exceeds Marie's own anticipation. Lola flirts with Turk, "She is by nature coy and kittenish with any attractive man" (14), while she looks him over, "admiring his stature and physique" (15). And she
basks in his flattery when he "gives her a chuck under the chin" and calls her "a swell skirt" (16). Of course, Lola's voyeuristic interest in Marie's romantic interludes can be read as laughably absurd, as a communal joke on an aging, overweight, former beauty queen. Indeed, Turk complains to Marie about Lola's ogling, "She makes me feel naked," he tells her, and then asks, "Didn't she ever see a man before?" (24). Lola's fascination with Turk's physical prowess turns more pathetic, however, when her sexual frustration and her childlessness are taken into account.

In addition to living vicariously through Marie, Lola operates behind the scenes to control Doc by keeping temptation close at hand. Despite Doc's alcoholism, she keeps a "quart of whiskey in the pantry for company" (17) when they seldom have visitors; she takes in a pretty, flirtatious nineteen-year-old female as a boarder when she herself has become old and unattractive. It's as if Lola wants to test Doc, or, in a more narcissistic way, she wants him to drink again so that she can control him. In many ways, when Doc drinks he stands in as a surrogate child for Lola and fills the void created by her lack of identity as a childless woman in the pronatal world of the 1950s. In the final scene of the play, following his return from the "City Hospital," Doc pleads with Lola, "Honey, don't ever leave me. Please don't ever leave me. If you do, they'd have to keep me down at that place all the time" (67). Doc's desperation gives Lola a much needed sense of purpose, "(There is surprise on her face and new contentment. She becomes almost angelic in demeanor. Tenderly she places a soft hand on his head) Daddy! Why, of course I'll never leave you. (A smile of satisfaction) You're all I've got. You're all I ever had" (67).
Dust Mops and Dirty Dishes

Besides the pronatalism that permeated the American culture during the 1950s, the expectations for women in the postwar years included a dedication to housework. As Betty Friedan notes, by the 1950s “the new image of American woman, ‘Occupation: housewife,’ had hardened into a mystique... shaping the very reality it distorted” (50).

The first chronologically of the three plays proposed for analysis, *Come Back, Little Sheba* adheres most stringently to the 1950s ideal of domestic perfection by ironically flipping the expected gender roles of the postwar era. Without the artistic freedom that Albee enjoyed some twelve years later with *Virginia Woolf*, Inge was forced to go underground, as it were, and conceal his critique of the postwar domestic ideal. Inge scholar Jeff Johnson defines the subversive techniques Inge uses in *Sheba* as “gendermandering” or “the intentional undermining of expected gender roles for the dramatic purpose of politically and socially destabilizing social norms” (20). As Johnson explains:

[Gendermandering] exposes the pernicious cultural habit of gender stereotyping while confirming it by exploiting the expected sexual behavior of characters for dramatic effect, intensifying the stress inherent in the conflict between what is considered natural and unnatural, normal and abnormal, based on values governed by social contracts of expected gender behavior. (21)

In Kristevan fashion, then, Inge challenges the static subject positions touted as “correct” during the postwar years by “exploding” the culturally accepted definitions of 1950s
gender roles. Kristeva is interested in linguistic moments that wreak havoc with socially prescribed mandates. Her theory of "poetic language" includes the "revolutionary" act within a text of "displacing the boundaries of socially established signifying practices" (Poetic 16). Beyond the disruptive potential in the mere presence of the childless woman, Inge "shatters" the predominant postwar "discourse" (Kristeva Poetic 15) surrounding gender role expectations by inverting gender stereotypes and by disrupting traditional family structures.

In setting Lola up as the hopelessly inadequate housewife, Inge emphasizes Doc’s role as domestic caretaker in the play. The play begins on an empty stage so that the audience can take in the setting of domesticity gone awry—among other things, Inge describes a "davenport" that is "littered" and a table full of "dirty dishes" (5). The first scene shows Doc descending the stairs in the morning, tucking a towel in his vest for an apron, and tending to household chores that a 1950s audience would have expected his wife to handle. In fact, Lola does not appear until Doc and their boarder, Marie, have already had breakfast. Inge describes the setting of the play, "an old house in one of those semi-respectable neighborhoods in a Midwestern city," as "extremely cluttered and even dirty" (5). Dinner dishes still sit on the kitchen table the following morning and Doc sets to work cleaning up as if he has done it every day of his life. The implication as Inge constructs the scene is that Lola has shirked her housekeeping duties. He writes, "Woodwork in the kitchen is dark and grimy. No industry whatsoever has been spent in

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8 Mardy S. Ireland, clinical psychologist and professor of psychology, suggests that childless women "disrupt an equation of female identity = motherhood..." She continues, "As the "undecideable," women who are not mothers are neither traditional females nor traditional males. As a third element they are destabilizing our binary arrangement of gender definition and traditional gender roles" (132).
making it one of those white, cheerful rooms that we commonly think kitchens should be" (5). Here Inge suggests that a certain standard of domesticity exists during the 1950s—a standard that kitchens "should be" white and cheerful and women are responsible for making it so. However, as mentioned in the previous section, if Lola’s character is read as depressed, then the disheveled state of the house as Inge describes it reflects more than a housewife’s lack of “industry;” it reflects Lola’s state of mind.

As the first scene unfolds, the initial judgments regarding housewives and their responsibilities come from the two women, Marie and Lola. They both suggest that a wife should get her husband his breakfast. Yet, despite their protests, both characters are willing to let Doc wait on them. And he appears eager to please. It is not until Doc unleashes his fury on Lola during his drunken rage in act two that he echoes the cultural sentiment of the 1950s and reaffirms its expectations for women, “What are you good for?” he asks her, “You can’t even get up in the morning and cook my breakfast” (56). Indeed, within a postwar milieu what purpose does Lola serve? Without children to nurture, her role must be to keep house and cook meals, duties she will only engage in for someone outside of the household.

The expectations for women in the postwar era are echoed as well in the character of the Delaneys’ neighbor, Mrs. Coffman, Lola’s other fertility foil and housework antagonista. An exaggerated figure set up as Lola’s conscience, Mrs. Coffman continually admonishes her from across the fence, “I don’t have it as easy as you. When you got seven kids to look after, you got no time to sit around the house, Mrs. Delaney” (18). Like Doc and Marie, Mrs. Coffman also diminishes Lola’s losses, “The only way
to keep from missing one dog is to get another,” she tells her. And then, “You should get busy and forget her [Sheba]. You should get busy, Mrs. Delaney” (19). A dutiful spokeswoman for 1950s gender role expectations, Mrs. Coffman forces Lola to face her lack of ambition for housework, “I’m going to start my spring housecleaning one of these days real soon,” Lola finally confesses (19). And yet, even when Lola does get to work, her efforts are hidden offstage, between scenes.

When Lola learns at the end of act one, scene one, that Marie’s fiancé, Bruce, will be paying them a visit, she feverishly sets to work. However, all of her accomplishments take place behind the curtain. As viewers and readers, we do not witness any of Lola’s household activity—an astonishingly clean house simply appears when the curtain rises on the following scene. Inge’s decision to hide Lola’s “industry” between scenes can be read as reinforcing (or subversively critiquing) the 1950s belief that a woman’s work was invisible. A successful housewife in postwar America was expected to greet her hard-working husband at the door in a beautiful dress and high heels while behind her awaited an immaculate home and a delicious dinner. In the same manner, Jane Wyman’s character on the popular 1950s television show, Father Knows Best, with her perfectly applied lipstick and her impeccably coifed hair, buoyantly greeted Robert Young as he came home after a long day at the office. Similarly, as David Halberstam notes, advertisements in magazines such as Ladies’ Home Journal and McCall’s portrayed beautifully arrayed (and spotless) models joyfully cleaning their ovens. As part of the illusion, or “mystique” of the American housewife, all signs of the labor that went into cleaning the house and preparing the food remained hidden. This glorification of
housework and motherhood helped to change the perception of femininity as viewed by a 1950s middle-class culture. According to Halberstam:

To be feminine, the American woman first and foremost did not work. If she did, that made her competitive with men, which made her hard and aggressive and almost doomed to loneliness. Instead, she devotedly raised her family, supported her husband, and kept her house spotless and efficient, got dinner ready on time, and remained attractive and optimistic; each hair was in place. (590)

In keeping with this 1950s feminine ideal, as Inge writes it, the beginning of act one, scene two reveals a "miraculous transformation" (28). Inge’s description of the scene suggests that, “LOLA, apparently, has been working hard and fast all day” (28). Doc’s astonishment matches our own, “You got all this done in one day?” he asks her (28). Indeed, Lola has accomplished an impossible feat. The rooms are “spotlessly clean,” and the “surfaces glisten” (28). She has even managed to varnish the woodwork and buy new lampshades and curtains (the only time in the play that she leaves the house). Much to Doc’s dismay, though, Lola’s unbelievable burst of energy is on behalf of Marie’s fiancé, Bruce, not him. Although he appears pleased upon entering the house and seeing the change, his true feelings of animosity arise during his drunken rage in act two, scene three when he lambastes Lola for her lack of loyalty, “You won’t even sweep the floors, till some bozo comes along to make love to Marie, and then you fix things up like Buckingham Palace” (56). Here Doc chooses to focus on Lola’s questionable motivation for cleaning the house instead of her accomplishment, thereby discounting her
hard work. Even Mrs. Coffman, who manages to eke out some praise, does so with a back-handed compliment, "I take my hat off to you, Mrs. Delaney. I didn’t know you had it in you. All these years, now, I been sayin’ to myself, “That Mrs. Delaney is a good for nothing, sits around the house all day, and never so much as shakes a dust mop’” (45).

With Doc and Mrs. Coffman ultimately diminishing Lola’s accomplishments, perhaps it is small wonder that she seldom engages in industrious activity.

As an adjunct to his critique of prescribed domestic duties, Inge comments at various points in the play on the secondary status of women during the postwar years. Writing about the seemingly preventable death of the Delaneys’ baby some ten years before advocates in the women’s movement began to fight in large numbers for reproductive rights, he recognizes the need for safe medical care for women. Interestingly, too, Inge critiques the career opportunities available for men and women in the 1950s. The assumption Lola makes during her discussion with Doc about their baby’s death—that a doctor would have been male—and her criticism of the female midwife’s abilities seems to flow naturally through the dialogue as if these stereotypes were understood. Indeed, the possibility for a woman to attend medical school in the 1950s would have been almost nonexistent, as Doc points out in his initial conversation with Marie. When Marie tells Doc that she has a biology exam he appears incredulous:

DOC: Biology? Why do they make you take biology?

MARIE: (laughs) It’s required. Didn’t you have to take biology when you were in college?
DOC: Well... yes, but I was preparing to study medicine, so of course I had to take biology and things like that. You see—I was going to be a real doctor then. (6)

Inge reveals Doc’s stereotypical 1950s sexist attitude toward women, while at the same time he shows Doc performing traditionally “feminine” chores. By contrast, Lola questions the use of naked female models in Marie’s art class and wonders why the male models do not pose naked too, “If it’s all right for a woman, it oughta be for a man” (23) she suggests. When she shares the opinion with Doc he responds with, “Well, that’s the way it should be, honey. A man, after all, is a man, and he... well, he has to protect himself.” “And a woman doesn’t?” Lola asks him. To which he replies, “It’s different, honey” (26). Lola also tells Marie that she wanted to get a job after the baby died but Doc wouldn’t let her. Lola’s progressive thinking on women’s issues in contrast to Doc’s conservative attitudes on the subject makes her inability to move forward with her life all the more difficult to witness.

Besides using gender role inversions to critique cultural standards, Inge rearranges familial relationships as a way to complicate a postwar society’s insistence on traditional, absolute family values. He wryly tinkers with the foundational kinship structures of western culture when he emphasizes Lola and Doc’s childlessness by creating child-like roles for the adults. Throughout the play, as mentioned earlier, Lola calls Doc “Daddy,” and Doc calls Lola “Baby.” This incestuous tension contributes to the overall anxiety in the play and is echoed in the relationships between Doc and Marie and Lola and Turk. Inge obviously presents Marie and her lover, Turk, as images of Doc
and Lola in their youth. At the same time, Lola refers to Marie as the daughter they never had. Thus the sexual fervor escalates on the stage when Doc surreptitiously lusts after Marie and when Lola can’t take her eyes off of Turk’s naked torso.

**Doc’s Dilemma**

Beyond the impropriety suggested in the older married couple’s sexual interest in the two young people, Inge muddies the issue when he characterizes Doc as an only child with a strong attachment to his mother. In essence, Doc remains as infantilized as Lola, even though she calls him “Daddy.” As Lola tells Marie, “Doc was sortuva Mama’s boy. He was an only child and his mother thought the sun rose and set in him” (47). And later, “Did you ever notice how nice [Doc] keeps his fingernails? Not many men think of things like that. And he used to take his mother to church every Sunday” (47). With a father who was absent most of the time, Inge himself relied on his mother for his initial socialization. Some critics point out that Inge’s relationship with his mother was oedipal (Shuman 2), and certainly she played a major role in his development.

As part of the 1950s ideal, so-called “experts” in psychological development warned against a mother/son bond that was too emotionally dependent. According to Elaine Tyler May, psychologists in the postwar era suggested that “mothers who overindulged their sons turned them into passive, weak, and effeminate ‘perverts.’ Sons bred in such homes. . . would find it difficult to form ‘normal’ relationships with women” (84). To complicate the matter further, as Mardy S. Ireland points out, “Women who are not mothers threaten society with the loss of the presumed adult identity for women. . . they may also seem to undermine the bases of gender identity for men. . . . [who may]
find these new women destabilizing” (133). With a strong, possibly oedipal, attachment to his own mother, Doc fits into Ireland’s category of “men who unconsciously accept the concept of woman-mother and attempt to project this attitude onto the women who aren’t mothers” (134). When this maternal attitude does not fit with the reality of the childless woman, the men, according to Ireland, may engage in “exaggerated stereotypical male behavior in an attempt to gain solid footing in the encounter. Alternatively, they may avoid or disavow her real existence altogether” (134). Indeed, Doc reacts to Lola only perfunctorily and with as little emotional energy as possible—it truly is as if she does not exist. As well, his behavior before his catastrophic drunken scene might be characterized as stereotypically female, his gentle “niceness” and propensity for domesticity fit the profile commonly associated with women. Conversely, the violent behavior and language he unleashes after drinking all night might be considered stereotypically male. Thus, caught between the two gendered options and forced to relive his sullied past with Lola in the embodiment of Marie, Doc loses his self-control. Doc’s drunken scene in act two, scene three is so shocking and so horrifyingly violent that critics have actually timed the action and dubbed it the “seventeen minutes” in Inge’s play.

Act two, scene three opens with a “Funereal atmosphere” in which, as symbols of youth and beauty, the “lilacs in the centerpiece have wilted,” and Lola is “beginning to show despair for the situation she is in” (54). Under the influence of alcohol, Doc shakes off his “nice” demeanor. In Doc’s state of identity crisis, as Kristeva describes it, his self-image “rests upon an abjection that sunders it [identity] as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed” (Powers 13). Indeed, the whiskey facilitates the release
of Doc’s violent unconscious. Unable to reconcile Marie’s sexuality and Lola’s lack of
maternity with his attachment to his own mother, Doc obliterates the physical
representation of his illusions and sends the dishes, their most valuable possession, to the
floor, “... you fix things up like... a Chinese whorehouse with perfume on the
lampbulbs, and flowers, and the gold-trimmed china my mother gave us. We’re not
going to use these any more. My mother didn’t buy those dishes for whores to eat off of”
(56). In this pivotal scene, Doc rails against Lola for her slovenly ways, her dumpy
appearance, and her role in Marie’s fall from grace. When Lola pleads with Doc to forgo
another drink, “You know what it does to you!” she exclaims, he responds with, “You’re
damn right I know what it does to me. It makes me willing to come home here and look
at you, you two-ton heifer” (56). Then, “Scream your head off, you fat slut. Holler till
all the neighbors think I’m beatin’ hell outuv you” (57).

Doc’s cataclysmic breakdown does not take place in a social vacuum, but remains
unspoken and implicit throughout the play as a symptom of his own struggles as a
childless man in a 1950s culture that equated a male’s virility with his child-bearing
potential. As Elaine Tyler May notes, “fatherhood took on a heightened significance” in
the 1950s. “It became the new badge of masculinity and meaning for postwar men”
(135). She continues, “Parenthood also provided proof of virile heterosexuality at a time
when ‘homos,’ like ‘pinkos,’ were targets of rabid homophobic anticommunism” (137).
Thus without offspring to confirm his masculinity, and deeming himself a failure in the
workplace, Doc resorts to violence against Lola in order to exert power in the relationship
and prove to himself that he is a “real” man by postwar standards.
Despite his admonitions to “live for the present” (33), Doc is filled with regret for opportunities that are lost to him forever—he could have been a “real” doctor and he could have been a father:

I might be a big M.D. today, instead of a chiropractor; we might have had a family to raise and be with us now; I might still have a lot of money if I’d used my head and invested it carefully, instead of gettin’ drunk every night. We might have a nice house, and comforts, and friends. But we don’t have any of those things. So what! We gotta keep on living, don’t we? I can’t stop just ‘cause I made a few mistakes. I gotta keep goin’ . . . somehow. (34)

As readers of the play, we might wonder exactly why Lola’s unplanned pregnancy caused Doc to give up his dream of becoming a “real” doctor. In all probability, his drinking precipitated the lost career, but he cannot face that fact so, as becomes painfully clear in his drunken scene, he blames Lola and holds her responsible for his failures.

Doc’s “Niceness”

Although Doc’s rampage seems to arise out of nowhere, Inge, in fact, leaves clues to Doc’s undoing along the way. At various points in the play Lola alludes to Doc’s potential for violence, which appears incongruous with his quiet, complacent demeanor, his “niceness.” In the first act Lola suggests that Doc is not what he seems when she relates her troubles with him to Marie, “But Doc’s always good to me. . . now” (13). Inge uses ellipses to signal Lola’s reluctance to delve into the violent side of her life with Doc. Lola’s emphasis on the word “now” might be read as representative of her fear of Doc—
which appears unfounded until he unleashes his wrath in his drunken scene. Then, she
shares a bit of her very personal life with the nameless postman, “You know what? My
husband is an Alcoholics Anonymous. He doesn’t care if I tell you that ‘cause he’s proud
of it” (17). Here Inge sheds some light on Doc’s past behavior, when he was a practicing
alcoholic, by way of Lola’s chatter, “You know, alcoholics can’t drink like ordinary
people; they’re allergic to it. . . . Liquor transforms them. Sometimes they get mean and
violent. . . . You should have seen Doc before he gave it up. . . . just wanted to stay
drunk all day long and he’d come home at night and. . .” (17). Again, Lola’s abrupt
pause in mid-sentence suggests that Doc possesses a darker side which contrasts sharply
with his characterization as the amiable do-gooder thus far in the play.

In particular, one might read Inge’s inversion of the meaning of the word “nice”
as his subversive commentary on 1950s gender role expectations. Using Kristeva’s
semanalysis, Inge’s ironic use of the word “nice” becomes important linguistically as a
representation of the unspeakable, repressed violence of the unconscious, as a semiotic
component within the larger realm of signification in the play. It’s as if the word “nice”
can keep the lid on a boiling pot. Indeed, one of the first lines in the play contains four
instances of the word “nice.” In the beginning scene, as Marie flirts with Doc in the
kitchen, she ironically foreshadows his imminent breakdown in the second act: “Dr.
Delaney, you’re so nice to your wife, and you’re so nice to me, as a matter of fact, you’re
so nice to everyone. I hope my husband is as nice as you are. Most husbands would
never think of getting their own breakfast” (6 my emphasis). In fact, throughout the first
act Marie continually uses the word “nice” to describe Doc, which has the effect of contrasting eerily with Doc’s “unrepressed” demeanor in his drunken scene.

Although Doc exists in a fragile psychological state throughout the play—his potential to drink again hanging in the balance—it is not until he is finally confronted with the truth about Marie’s sexuality that he loses his hold on his particular version of reality. His illusions about Marie’s chastity ultimately shattered, he enters the confounded state where identity dissolves, where physical boundaries disappear. Doc’s entry into abjection becomes clear as Inge describes his reaction to Marie’s defilement:

> It is a sickening fact he must face and it has been revealed to him in its ugliest light. The lyrical grace, the spiritual ideal of Ave Maria is shattered. He has been fighting the truth, maybe suspecting all along that he was deceiving himself. Now he looks as though he might vomit. All his blind confusion is inside him. With an immobile expression of blankness on his face, he stumbles into the table above the sofa. (44)

As mentioned earlier, with Marie’s sexual impurity comes maternal potential, a threatening, consuming space from which Doc has not fully separated. Using Kristeva’s theories of the abject maternal, one might argue that Marie’s “fall” returns Doc to his own site of origin. As Kristeva describes it:

> The abject confronts us... within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent,
clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. (Powers 13)

Consumed by his “maternal anguish” (Powers 12) and destabilized by Lola’s childlessness as well as by his own desire to be a father, Doc must turn to alcohol in order to mask his loss of identity. We eventually learn that seething beneath the domestic niceties portrayed on the stage awaits Doc’s uncontrollable rage. In keeping with a postwar notion of socially correct behavior, throughout the play any expression of rage must be masked by subversive characterizations and language, or released under extreme circumstances. Only during the cataclysmic scene, which takes place after Doc has been drinking all night, are his vicious actions and words allowed to escape from his repressed character. Indeed, with Doc’s rant Inge shatters the postwar illusion of placid domesticity that permeated a 1950s cultural milieu.

Doc’s drunken scene with Lola exposes his impulse to kill her at the same time that it illuminates his longing for her to return to the beauty of her youth. The bane of his existence, the cause of his deep dissatisfaction, Lola becomes the target of his frustration as he threatens to “hack off all that fat” with an axe (Inge 57). Lola’s response to Doc’s threat reveals her fragile identity and speaks to this chapter’s epigraph. “Doc, don’t say any more. . . I’d rather you hit me with an ax, Doc. . . . Honest I would” (57). Rather than face her situation and her general futility in life, she would prefer to be killed.

In act two, scene four, Inge abruptly brings Lola and Doc back to the stasis they were experiencing at the beginning of the play. By his final scene, the commitment between Doc and Lola is to maintain the status quo. Doc returns from the hospital, sober
once again, and resumes the domestic pretense he and Lola had both participated in
during the first act. However, even when her beloved little dog, Sheba, dies a symbolic
death in her dream at the end of the play, it will not relieve Lola’s suffering. The last
lines of the play might be read as redemptive or regenerative. After all, Lola decides that
she won’t call for Sheba any more and she fixes Doc some breakfast, a task he had
performed for her at the beginning of the play. The ironic implication here is that Lola is
finally embracing her role as housewife. And yet, Lola’s dream belies such a contented
ending. In her unconscious she remains powerless, invisible, and futile. As she relates
the details of her dream to Doc, the reality of her circumstances become clear:

LOLA: . . . All of a sudden I saw Little Sheba... she was lying in the middle of
the field... dead... It made me cry, Doc. No one paid any attention...
I cried and cried. It made me feel so bad, Doc. That sweet little puppy...
her curly white fur all smeared with mud, and no one to stop and take care
of her...

DOC: Why couldn’t you?

LOLA: I wanted to, but you wouldn’t let me. You kept saying, “We can’t stay
here, honey; we gotta go on. We gotta go on.” (Pause) Now, isn’t that
strange?

DOC: Dreams are funny. (69)

As a childless woman living in an era when females were expected to reproduce,
Lola will continue to be ignored, (“No one paid any attention.”) She will continue to
deny her own desires, (“you wouldn’t let me.”) And she will continue to allow herself to
be dismissed by Doc. "Dreams are funny" is all he can say in response to her heartrending story. Until she is able to stop looking to Doc for answers and mourn the loss of her baby and her fertility, Lola will remain emotionally and psychologically static, unable to experience any type of personal transformation. The same may be said of Doc. His unwillingness to examine his past and his reluctance to acknowledge any emotional impact from his own childlessness will keep him in the same vicious cycle of denial, guilt, and rage—struggling to stay sober and ultimately seeking escape from his problems through alcohol.

On the surface Inge's play is about a middle-aged couple living a "life of quiet desperation" brought on, in part, by their situation of childlessness. However, this chapter's preceding textual analysis reveals a much more complicated portrait of Lola and Doc's life together. Indeed, the gender role expectations and the traditional family structures of the postwar era collapse under the weight of Inge's text as an apron-clad Doc assumes the domestic responsibilities that his wife has neglected. Furthermore, in the familial abjection of the Delaney's living room the cultural signifiers of the 1950s—mother, father, son, daughter—conflate as Doc and Lola enact the role of their missing child for one another. Doc fills in as Lola's "Daddy," while at the same time he is reduced to a childlike figure who cannot exist without her. Similarly, Lola portrays Doc's "Baby" until he drinks again, at which time she stands in as his primary caretaker or mother. Moreover, Marie and Turk variously and problematically represent the children that Doc and Lola never had, the sites of Doc and Lola's sexual desires, and the images of Doc and Lola in their youth. Under the guise of a simple domestic drama Inge
exposes the social and familial discord that existed for many middle-class Americans in the 1950s.
MENDACITY AND MOTHERHOOD IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS’S  
CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

We have seen that woman’s inferiority originated in her being at first limited to repeating life, whereas man invented reasons for living more essential, in his eyes, than the not-willed routine of mere existence; to restrict woman to maternity would be to perpetuate this situation. . . .

(Simone de Beauvoir)

Throughout the dramatic action in Tennessee Williams’s 1955 play, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Maggie Pollitt, his childless female character, is restricted by familial and societal obligations to what Simone de Beauvoir calls a “mere existence,” (her maternal function). As a result, Maggie finds herself at odds with an overriding pronatal sentiment in the Pollitt household. Indeed, although she remains physically engulfed by the characters and setting in the play, the childless Maggie is emotionally and psychologically alone—a state that Williams himself experienced repeatedly throughout his life. Dianne Cafagna suggests that Williams was caught in a paradox of cultural value systems (118); for as much as he was compelled to follow the heterosexual mandates of the postwar era, he was drawn, nonetheless, to a homosexual lifestyle that allowed certain personal freedoms but required a difficult and clandestine existence—it is no secret that the pro-heterosexual sentiment of 1950s America created an environment that was “extremely turbulent and trying” for gay men (Savran 48). As Cafagna writes, “Williams
was deeply troubled on the one hand by an urge to become part of his society, and on the other by a fear of conforming to the meaningless drudgery of familial obligations” (119).

Compulsively searching for or evading relationships, Williams was never able to feel connected to a person or place for very long. Consequently, irrespective of where he traveled, he found himself profoundly alone, facing the same psychological and emotional circumstances he had attempted to flee. By his own admission, Tennessee Williams sought to “write” himself out of his loneliness. He alludes to his frustrated desire for a sense of community in his preface to *Cat*: “Personal lyricism is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life” (vii). Trapped in his own skin, as it were, Williams tried to “break through walls” (vii) of social isolation with his plays. With Maggie as the central character in his drama—a childless woman whose role can be read as complicating the pro-maternal sentiment of the postwar era in general and the Pollitt family in particular—Williams illuminates a highly conflicted relationship between the cultural constraints of the 1950s American South and the individual’s need for freedom of self-expression.

This chapter will explore the ways in which the characterizations, the setting, and the dramatic structure of Williams’s play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* can be read as a critique of the postwar societal pressures to conform to normative sexual standards, and, by proxy, the pro-family ideal. As Paul J. Hurley suggests, “... the ability of the individual to defend his personal values in the face of a society which demands adherence to group values,” represents “the heart” of Williams’s play (126). Indeed, Williams’s depiction of
the childless couple Maggie and Brick Pollitt, dramatizes the emptiness and futility in striving to fulfill cultural expectations without regard for personal integrity.

Social Context

Whereas Inge worked directly with the postwar domestic conventions of masculinity and femininity in *Come Back Little Sheba* (at times subverting them), Williams eschews many of the prevailing cultural mandates altogether. Maggie’s abilities as a traditional 1950s housewife (one who cooks, cleans, and creates a nurturing home for her family) are never addressed. Nancy Tischler suggests that “from the beginning Williams rejected the beloved American stereotype: the good wife, good mother, loving sweetheart” (497). At the same time, the question surrounding Brick’s sexual orientation takes precedence over his failure to maintain a career. Granted, Brick and Maggie are held up to a different set of domestic standards than the Delaneys were in *Sheba* because they exist in a cultural bubble, as it were, a throwback to the mythic “Old Southern plantation” where “Negroes” (42) served the white folk. However, Brick and Maggie’s circumstances as a childless couple certainly transcend their privileged situation, at least where the issues of sexuality and maternity are concerned. Thus, purposefully placed in a claustrophobic bedroom setting steeped in ambiguous reminiscences and questionable histories, Maggie and Brick must navigate a pronatal mandate that is forced upon them by a 1950s Southern culture which is represented in all its glory by the physically and psychologically intrusive Pollitt family.

The various members of the Pollitt family concern themselves with Maggie’s maternal condition for two main reasons. First, Maggie is expected to produce an heir in
order to secure the lion’s share of her father-in-law, Big Daddy’s, estate. Second, a pregnancy for Maggie would signal Brick’s return to “normal” heterosexuality. In addition, aside from representing a social aberration within the pro-family culture of post-war America, the issue of childlessness takes on an added dimension of impropriety when explored within the social structure of Williams’s Mississippi Delta, the setting for *Cat*.

In many ways, the social hierarchy portrayed in *Cat* can be read as a (mis)representation of the South’s stereotypical antebellum culture which is most often characterized by good breeding and genteel manners. As Kimball King notes, “what Williams succeeds in doing is to convey the magnetic appeal of Southern cultural myths as he deconstructs them in play after play” (629). To begin with, the Pollitts do not preside over property that has been handed down through generations of impressive family lineage. Rather, Big Daddy, a “Mississippi red neck” (41), inherited the land from a homosexual couple, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, who took him in when he was a boy of ten and eventually made him the overseer of their plantation. Several times in the play Big Daddy describes his relationship with the two bachelors in a positive, even tender light. Hence, as Mark Royden Winchell suggests, “it would hardly be stretching a point to say that they [Straw and Ochello] became his surrogate parents” (709). Big Daddy’s heritage includes a less than ideal family tree by aristocratic Southern standards. As well, Big Daddy’s wife, Big Mama, came from a family that “was maybe a little superior to Big Daddy’s, but not much” (33). For reasons that are never fully explained in the play, Big Mama and Big Daddy hang all their hopes for the future on their younger son, Brick.
Most probably, the couple’s lack of socially elite breeding fosters their intense desire for Brick to produce a child.

In addition, despite his incredible wealth, Big Daddy still retains the vulgar persona of his youth and Big Mama is “notorious throughout the Delta” (33) for her lack of elegance and genteel manners. Garishly decorated with “at least half a million in flashy gems” (33), Big Mama enters the stage “tensed like a boxer, or rather, a Japanese wrestler” (33). She has a “riotous voice,” a “booming laugh,” and is the unfortunate recipient of Big Daddy’s “steady grimace of chronic annoyance” (52). It is obvious from Williams’s stage directions that Big Mama and Big Daddy Pollitt have risen through the ranks to a social station that is beyond their breeding.

A self-made man in many respects, Big Daddy Pollitt owns, by his estimation, “close on ten million in cash an’ blue chip stocks, outside, mind you, of twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile!” (65). He makes it clear in his rant to Big Mama in act two that he earned the right to sit on the throne of his kingdom through back-breaking work:

I made this place! . . . I quit school at ten years old and went to work like a nigger in the fields. And I rose to be overseer of the Straw and Ochello plantation. And old Straw died and I was Ochello’s partner and the place got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger! I did all that by myself with no goddam help from you. . . . (58)

For Williams, the mystique of the Old South had less to do with money than it did with “grace and elegance” (Holditch and Leavitt xi). In many ways, Williams looked askance
at the *nouveau riche* who represented the “soulless quality of the so-called ‘New South,’
the land of... Kowalskis, in which there is no place for a Blanche DuBois who yearns for
music and poetry and art” (Holditch and Leavitt x). As Bernard F. Dukore notes, the
Pollitts “may be seen as upper-income Stanley Kowalskis; they are among the hogs of the
earth” (96). And yet, the quintessence of coarse, vulgar “new money,” Big Mama and
Big Daddy revel in their roles as ill-mannered social outcasts, much to the chagrin of
their older son, Gooper, and his wife, Mae, who have failed to gain entrée to “the
smartest young married set in Memphis” (51) because of their parents’ antics. In spite of
Big Daddy’s crudeness, though, Williams maintained a fondness for the character,
imbuing him with a certain degree of gentle understanding for those who existed outside
the mainstream of proper society. However, as will be discussed later in the chapter, Big
Daddy had no tolerance or respect for women—least of all his wife.

**Poor Maggie**

It seems that Maggie suffers most at the hands of the ill-bred Pollitts, who lack the
social graces to respect her privacy with regard to her childlessness. Ironically, though,
of all the characters in the play, it is Maggie who sees Big Daddy most accurately; for
one thing, both characters know first-hand what it means to be poor. “I’ve always sort of
admired him in spite of his coarseness, his four-letter words and so forth,” she tells Brick,
“Because Big Daddy *is* what he *is*, and he makes no bones about it. He hasn’t turned
gentleman farmer” (40-41). In contrast to Big Mama and Big Daddy, Maggie
understands the role expected of her within a culture of Southern gentility only too well
as a “society” (60) girl with a pedigree who grew up with no money. Her desperation to
maintain her position in the Pollitt family through pregnancy becomes clear as she shares her past with Brick, "y'know I've been so God damn disgustingly poor all my life!—

That's the truth, Brick!" (41). Then:

... and my poor Mama, having to maintain some semblance of social position, to keep appearances up, on an income of one hundred and fifty dollars a month. ... When I came out, the year that I made my debut, I had just two evening dresses! One Mother made me from a pattern in Vogue, the other a hand-me-down from a snotty rich cousin I hated! (41)

Much like Williams's mother, Edwina, Maggie possesses the proper breeding to travel in the circles of high society, but she lacks the financial means to carry it off without Big Daddy's fortune. Paul Hurley suggests that Maggie shares the same value system with Big Daddy: "A veneration for life and a belief in the necessity for its continuance" (132).

The caveat, of course, is that both Maggie and Big Daddy "venerate life" in the service of their own self-interest.

In characterizing Maggie as the adequately fertile, yet sexually frustrated Southern belle whose husband will not comply with a cultural mandate to procreate because he "can't stand" (47) her, Williams unleashes a tension with regard to maternity that is represented by ambivalent motivations, or, as Hurley suggests, "shoddy" values.

Throughout the play, Maggie's quest to entice Brick to sleep with her rings (maternally) hollow. Her desire to become pregnant stems more from her desire to prove her sexual attractiveness (and, she hopes, her fertility) in her mission to secure Big Daddy's fortune than it does from any longing to have children. For Maggie, children represent financial
security—something she craves more than motherhood. Unlike Lola in *Come Back*, *Little Sheba*, whose involuntary childlessness creates great anguish and defines her identity, quite simply, Maggie must have a child in order to demonstrate to the Pollitt tribunal that she is still sexually attractive to Brick, hence, fecund, an accomplishment that will ultimately lead her to the inheritance of Big Daddy’s fortune. However, as Dianne Cafagna notes, “From birth Williams’s women struggle against an emotional and social tide that prevents any lateral movement. As adults they are thrust unwittingly into the depths of the predatory caste society of the South” (119). Like the cotton grown on the family plantation, then, Maggie is merely a commodity to the Pollitts, totally replaceable if she does not fulfill her purpose—to lure Brick into bed and achieve a pregnancy. As Big Daddy tells Brick in the second act, “If you don’t like Maggie, get rid of Maggie!” (63).

**Childless Maggie**

While Lola’s childlessness is dramatized as a dark secret lurking in the corners of the Delaney household in *Sheba*, Maggie’s lack of children drives the action of the play in *Cat*. Because Maggie and Brick remain without a child, their sexual relationship becomes the central issue for all of the characters. Big Mama is the first family member to enter the fray as she places the blame for Maggie and Brick’s faltering sexual relationship squarely on Maggie’s shoulders. Then, concerned with their own financial well-being as their future hangs in the balance, Brick’s older brother Gooper, his sister-in-law Mae, and even their children, stand on the sidelines and heckle Maggie about her childlessness. They watch and listen to every move that Brick and Maggie make, hoping
that Brick maintains his attitude of "DISGUST!" (78), which will preclude any chance of Maggie's achieving a pregnancy and assure their own ascendancy to the Pollitt throne. Most importantly, Big Daddy's psychological state as he faces his own death from cancer depends on whether or not Maggie and Brick can produce an heir. With so much riding on her ability to have a child, it is small wonder that Maggie cannot sort through her conflicted feelings about sexuality and its intended result, maternity. Using Maggie's questionable motivations for wanting children and Brick's complete indifference to the topic (and to her), Williams constructs a drama that confounds the overreaching pro-family rhetoric so pervasive in the postwar era. Perhaps wary of the solutions proffered by pronatal mandates in the 1950s, Williams creates characters whose desires to procreate follow from their own self-interest and not from a longing to create a familial safe haven (a longing that was fostered in large part by the pro-family rhetoric of the postwar era).

The intrusion of the Pollitt family into Brick and Maggie's bedroom, hence the privacy of its occupants, can be read as representative of the rhetoric proffered by the cold war culture during the postwar years—a rhetoric that overwhelmingly supported traditional family values as a defense against foreign invasion. By insinuating itself into the personal lives of many Americans, the rhetoric of the cold war machine created a highly suspicious mentality in American culture. There are no locked doors allowed in the Pollitt household and one never knows who might be lurking behind the curtains or listening through the walls. For instance, when Big Mama finds Maggie and Brick's bedroom door locked, she "rattles the knob" and calls out, "What's this door doin',
locked, faw?” (32-33). Then, without waiting for a response, she runs around to the other side of the room and enters through the open gallery doors, pronouncing, “I hate locked doors in a house. . . .” Maggie responds “with affected lightness: I’ve noticed you do, Big Mama, but people have got to have some moments of privacy, don’t they?” “No, ma’am, not in my house,” Big Mama counters (33). It seems that anyone who accepts largesse from the Pollitt family is subject to their unrelenting scrutiny—especially with regard to deeply personal issues like sexuality and maternity.

In the Pollitt world, in typical 1950s fashion, the responsibility for who sleeps with whom lies solely with the woman. Throughout the play, the intrusive Pollitt family derides Maggie for her childlessness, implying that she and Brick would certainly have a baby if they were sleeping in the same bed. Big Mama confronts Maggie with the “problem” early in the play. She believes that it is perfectly normal and logical to interfere in her son’s sex life and blame Maggie for the couple’s lack of sexual intimacy:

BIG MAMA: . . . I want to ask you a question, one question: D’you make Brick happy in bed?

MARGARET: Why don’t you ask if he makes me happy in bed?

BIG MAMA: Because I know that—

MARGARET: It works both ways!

BIG MAMA: Something’s not right! You’re childless and my son drinks!

[. . . She turns to the door and points at the bed]

--When a marriage goes on the rocks, the rocks are there, right there! (37)
Maggie appears momentarily defeated by this exchange as Big Mama slams the door on her response, "That's--not--fair" (37). Williams's stage directions are very telling at this point, "Margaret is alone, completely alone, and she feels it" (37). Indeed, Maggie's progressive attitude toward sexuality—that sexual pleasure is as much the man's responsibility as it is the woman's—positions her as an outcast within the family and, to a larger degree, leaves her outside the realm of acceptable female behavior in 1950s America. Incredibly, even Big Daddy broaches the subject of Maggie's sexuality with Brick, "How was Maggie in bed?" he asks him during their powwow in act two. Without doubt, Maggie is well aware of the scrutiny under which she lives.

Remarkably, Big Mama and Big Daddy's pervasive and voyeuristic attitude extends all the way to Mae and Gooper's children. At the end of act one, when a particularly wrenching confrontation between Maggie and Brick has reached an emotional climax, a child "bursts into the room" without knocking. Then, when Maggie calls her a "little no-neck monster," the child retorts "with a precocious instinct for the cruelest thing: You're jealous!—You're just jealous because you can't have babies!"

Finally, in an effort to mock Maggie's childlessness, the girl "sashays past her with her stomach stuck out" (46). This altercation sets up an exchange between Brick and Maggie that speaks to the core of their problem:

MARGARET: You see?—they gloat over us being childless, even in front of their five little no-neck monsters! . . . I've been to a doctor. . . a gynecologist. . . there is no reason why we can't have a child whenever
we want one. . . . Are you listening to me? Are you? Are you
LISTENING TO ME!

BRICK: Yes, I hear you, Maggie. . . But how in hell on earth do you imagine—that you’re going to have a child by a man that can’t stand you?

MARGARET: That’s a problem that I will have to work out. (47)

With this passage Williams elucidates Maggie’s childless situation for the reader. First, Maggie feels great pressure from the Pollitt family—even from their children. Second, she is not barren, but merely lacks the cooperation of her male counterpart in the fertility dance. And finally, she will not sit by passively, but will take action toward attaining her goal of a pregnancy.

An insightful observer of human behavior, Maggie understands the pressure to perform her role as “woman” only too well. A witness to Mae and Gooper’s attempts to parade their five children (with a sixth on the way) around to impress Big Daddy (which, incidentally, goes unappreciated by the patriarch), Maggie fully comprehends the magnitude of her childlessness. “It goes on all the time,” she complains to Brick, “along with constant little remarks and innuendos about the fact that you and I have not produced any children, are totally childless and therefore totally useless!” (16). To Maggie, the “remarks and innuendos” most certainly suggest that she has lost her sexual allure and is thus responsible for the couple’s infertility. After all, if it were Brick’s problem, then Big Daddy and the rest of the family would be faced with Brick’s ambiguous sexuality. And in spite of Maggie’s suggestion that Big Daddy “harbors a
little unconscious 'lech'” (19) for her, he displays an eagerness to replace her if she cannot hold Brick’s sexual attention.

Maggie the Cat

Maggie’s insecurities over her sexual attractiveness surface throughout the play, mostly in response to Brick’s rejections. In addition to her suggestion that Big Daddy “still takes in [her] shape,” she insists that other men find her attractive as well. In a pathetic attempt to stir Brick’s libido, she stands in front of a mirror and “touches her breast and then her hips with her two hands.” “Look, Brick!” she pleads, “How high my body stays on me!—Nothing has fallen on me—not a fraction. . .” (38). During this scene, Williams notes, Maggie’s voice is “soft and trembling: a pleading child’s.” She continues her vain attempt to spark some interest in Brick:

Other men still want me. My face looks strained, sometimes, but I’ve kept my figure as well as you’ve kept yours, and men admire it. I still turn heads on the street. Why, last week in Memphis everywhere that I went men’s eye burned holes in my clothes, at the country club and in restaurants and department stores, there wasn’t a man I met or walked by that didn’t just eat me up with his eyes and turn around when I passed him and look back at me. (38)

With this scene Williams is clear that Maggie is losing the one thing that is deemed most important for a woman in 1950s America, especially a Southern belle—the ability to attract and keep a mate. And, although she says that she is sexually frustrated, she is unwilling to take a lover, even with Brick’s blessing:
BRICK: Maggie, I wouldn’t divorce you for being unfaithful or anything else. Don’t you know that? Hell. I’d be relieved to know that you’d found yourself a lover.

MARGARET: Well, I’m taking no chances. No, I’d rather stay on this hot tin roof.

BRICK: A hot tin roof’s ‘n uncomfo’table place t’stay on... . (39)

Maggie will not engage in an affair because it is not only the act of sex, per se, that she craves but, rather, everything that it represents to the outside world. What she fights to create is the illusion of a union between a husband and wife and all that goes along with it, including a sexual relationship and a baby. Thus when Brick suggests that she leave him, Maggie vehemently rejects his offer, “Don’t want to and will not!” (39). She would rather suffer under (or on top of) the Pollitt roof than take steps to extricate herself from a miserable existence.

In rejecting Brick’s suggestion that she take a lover, Maggie tacitly accepts the Pollitt philosophy of what it means to be a woman—giving birth to a child. Camille Paglia writes that “in hunting or agrarian societies dependent upon nature, femaleness was honored as an immanent principle of fertility” (7). Certainly the metaphorical connection between Big Daddy’s “twenty eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile” (65) and Maggie’s fecundity, or lack thereof, cannot be missed within the larger picture of procreation in the play. Because Maggie has not produced a child, she is considered infertile, hence less sexually attractive, and ultimately less female. Even if Maggie admits the truth, that she is childless because Brick will not have
sexual relations with her, she will be blamed for not possessing the womanly wiles to seduce him. It appears that Williams sets Maggie up to fail. He characterizes her as the determined female whose energy is directed toward one goal—self-preservation through pregnancy—yet he provides her with a husband who will not sleep with her, presumably because of his latent homosexuality.

One might wonder why Maggie married Brick in the first place. After all, we are led to believe that she had plenty of suitors in her younger days. And, she had suspicions about Brick’s sexual orientation when they were still dating, “Why I remember when we double-dated at college, Gladys Fitzgerald and I and you and Skipper, it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if it was necessary to chaperone you!—to make a good public impression” (44). Louise Blackwell suggests that “Williams created a group of women who are remarkable for their sexual demands upon men who are either homosexual or otherwise inadequate to make a lasting relationship” (246). While Blackwell makes a valid point, she misses the overriding theme of childlessness in the play which motivates Maggie to persist in her attempts to conquer Brick’s sexual malaise. The primary reason that Maggie will not give up her fight with Brick’s indifference to her is that the production of an heir is her ticket to survival in the 1950s patriarchal South.

Monster of Fertility

To further accentuate Maggie’s childlessness, Williams creates her fertility foil, the hyper-productive, grossly unattractive Mae Pollitt who is described dismissively by Big Daddy as a “good breeder” (60). Throughout the first act through the third, Mae takes a
decided interest in Maggie’s fertility, sneaking around corners, listening through the bedroom walls, reporting to Big Mama about Brick and Maggie’s sex life, and finally announcing to the group, “Do you know why she’s childless? She’s childless because that big beautiful athlete husband of hers won’t go to bed with her!” (113). Mae’s first priority is to protect her inheritance, which includes challenging Brick’s virility and Maggie’s sexual appeal in front of the family.

Presented as an odious creature, Mae Pollitt can be read as the polar opposite of Maggie, a character who had “become steadily more charming” (125) to Williams as he worked on the play. However, an alternative reading, suggested by Paul Hurley, presents Mae and Maggie as one and the same. He writes, “Williams seems to have taken special care to emphasize Maggie’s characteristics by paralleling them to the point of parody in Gooper’s wife” (134). Hurley argues that both Maggie and Mae are ambitious and greedy—Maggie simply subverts her intentions while Mae is more obvious. For Hurley, Maggie and Mae possess the same set of values—they both manipulate others in the interest of self-preservation. The similarities between Maggie and Mae are not lost on Big Daddy, who comments to Brick, “It’s funny that you and Gooper being so different would pick out the same type of woman” (60). Perhaps Gooper and Brick are not so different after all. Or, perhaps Williams sees all women as ambition-driven, regardless of their charm. Most likely, Williams understands that Maggie and Mae are “squaring off” on Big Daddy’s “big piece of land” (60) in response to the limited options available to women during the postwar years.
Limited Roles for Women

The uncertainty that Maggie experiences concerning her role in society and her place in the Pollitt family weighs heavily on her as she prepares herself for Big Daddy’s sixty-fifth birthday party:

Well, now I’m dressed, I’m all dressed, there’s nothing else for me to do.

[Forlornly, almost fearfully.]

I’m dressed, all dressed, nothing else for me to do . . . (42)

This moment echoes an earlier scene in which Maggie stares into the mirror “with a grimace and says, ‘Who are you?’—Then she crouches a little and answers herself in a different voice which is high, thin, mocking: ‘I am Maggie the Cat!’” (37). As a result of the expectations for women in the postwar era and the domestic pressures from the Pollitt family, Maggie has no sense of who she is or where her value lies. Because she has succumbed to the belief that her identity is dependent on her sexuality and her fertility, she feels lost when those two things fail her.

Simone de Beauvoir challenges the societal pressures that require that women perform solely in the bedroom and the nursery. She maintains, “[Woman] cannot consent to bring forth life unless life has meaning; she cannot be a mother without endeavoring to play a role in the economic, political, and social life of the times” (525). Similarly, Paul J. Hurley suggests that procreation for procreation’s sake “pervert[s] the meaning of love” (135). Indeed, he maintains that “in valuing the creation of life, without reference to the kind of life created, man threatens to destroy the ‘one great true thing’ in human relationships” (135). By showing us the struggles that Maggie must endure as a result of
the times in which she lives, perhaps Williams is making a commentary or calling for a re-evaluation of women’s roles; for it is evident that Maggie’s lack of any purpose except to get Brick into bed has left her insecure and, as she believes, changed in some way. She laments to Brick, “I’ve gone through this---hideous!---transformation, become---hard! Frantic!---cruel! That’s what you’ve been observing in me lately. How could y’help but observe it? That’s all right. I’m not---thin-skinned any more, can’t afford t’be thin-skinned any more” (22).

Williams developed his original ideas for Maggie in the character of Margaret in his short story, “Three Players of a Summer Game,” which first appeared in the New Yorker in 1952. Widely considered the precursor to Cat, “Three Players” follows an alcoholic Brick as his marriage to a strong, determined Margaret crumbles. In “Three Players” Williams sets up a gender role reversal, with Margaret taking over the management of the plantation when a drunken Brick becomes too incapacitated to handle it. As the narrator describes it, “His wife, Margaret, took hold of Brick’s ten-thousand-acre plantation as firmly and surely as if she had always existed for that and no other purpose” (306). In the short story Williams gives Margaret the wherewithal to run the plantation, while in Cat he strips Maggie of her power, leaving her to languish, unfulfilled, in the bedroom until the final scene. Furthermore, not only will Maggie in Cat never be afforded an opportunity to participate in the management of the plantation, her value as a person depends on her ability to produce an heir.
No-neck Monsters

Unlike Inge, whose play about a childless couple deals with overwhelming loss, for Williams there is no pathos surrounding the issue of childlessness—it merely represents an obstacle that Maggie must overcome. As Nancy M. Tischler notes, much like his character, Maggie the Cat, Williams “rarely had kind words about any children” (302). Perhaps Williams’s own tumultuous childhood impacted his view of children.

Williams’s mother, Edwina, claimed that his father, Cornelius, “took no joy in the children,” but rather considered them, “just a nuisance, as though he wished they had never been born” (Spoto 18). Cornelius was especially hard on Williams, admonishing him for his interest in reading and writing, and calling him “Sissy” and “Miss Nancy” (Spoto 18). Perhaps it is no surprise that a lack of tolerance for children in general can be detected throughout the play. Early on Williams showcases Maggie’s disdain for Mae and Gooper’s family:

MARGARET: One of those no-neck monsters hit me with a hot buttered biscuit so I have to change! . . .

BRICK: Why d’ya call Gooper’s kiddies no-neck monsters?

MARGARET: Because they’ve got no necks! Isn’t that a good enough reason?

BRICK: Don’t they have any necks?

MARGARET: None visible. Their fat little heads are set on their fat little bodies without a bit of connection.

BRICK: That’s too bad.
MARGARET: Yep, they’re no-neck monsters, all no-neck people are monsters. . .

[Children shriek downstairs.] Hear them? Hear them screaming? I don’t know where their voice-boxes are located since they don’t have necks. (16)

In a later scene Big Mama astutely suggests that Maggie does not have children because she does not like them, “Shoot, Maggie, you just don’t like children.” “I do SO like children!” Maggie counters, “Adore them!—well brought up!” “Well, why don’t you have some and bring them up well, then,” Big Mama responds, “instead of all the time pickin’ on Gooper’s an’ Mae’s?” (34).

A woman’s contempt for children can be read as well in “Three Players.” When Margaret takes over the plantation, Brick has an affair with a woman whom he has befriended after her husband has died. As the widow and Brick share intimate moments within the walls of the widow’s house, the widow’s young daughter is left outside to fend for herself. In one instance, when she demands some attention from the couple, her mother stands at the bedroom window and screams to her, “. . . in a shocking cry of rage: ‘Oh, be still, for God’s sake, you fat little monster!’” (324).

An intolerance for children also tinges the character of Big Daddy. He refers to Mae and Gooper’s children as “screechers” “like parrots” and “five same monkeys” (80-81). He cannot remember how many children are in the brood, let alone their names. And, according to Maggie’s account, he tells Gooper and Mae to “put them pigs at a trough in th’ kitchen” (16) during his birthday dinner. In the most telling example, in the final scene of act two after Brick has told Big Daddy the “truth” about his cancer, Big
Daddy leaves the room in a fury, and, according to Williams’s stage directions, “There is the sound of a child being slapped. It rushes, hideously bawling, through room and out the hall door” (95). Granted, Gooper and Mae’s children do act like monsters. Still, it seems inconsistent to think that any other children, even Brick and Maggie’s, would be treated differently, notwithstanding the fact that Brick is the golden child, Big Mama’s “only son” (106), and one of the few people Big Daddy “did always have some kind of feeling for” (81).

**Brick Wall**

In spite of the overwhelmingly negative attitude towards children that is present in the play, the act of procreation still holds a position of primary importance for all of the characters—except, that is, for Brick. In contrast to Doc in *Sheba*, who intimates at least once in Inge’s play that he regrets not having children, Brick remains completely indifferent to the issue. One might surmise that a misanthropic character like Brick who sees no value in life also finds little or no value in continuing the species. At the very least, Brick is not willing to adopt normative social or sexual behaviors in order to fit in with mainstream culture; for him there is no truth in such an existence.

Although Williams may not have intended it, Maggie’s childlessness eclipses Brick’s questionable sexuality as the central theme in the play. The issue of Brick’s sexual preference would not be important in the play at all if it did not explain, in part, his disdain for Maggie (and for himself)—which is the direct cause of her infertility. The mystery surrounding Brick’s sexuality helps to put his rage towards Maggie into some perspective. Brick’s contempt for Maggie appears to be deeper than mere anger, so it is
inconsistent to think that he abhors his wife simply because he thought (mistakenly) that she had slept with his best friend, and college teammate, Skipper—unless, that is, he has homosexual feelings for his friend.

The play does not answer any questions about Brick’s sexuality, but it does not dismiss them either. Williams would have been acutely aware that a 1950s audience might not be sympathetic to a homosexual character on the stage. Brick’s friend Skipper was most likely homosexual; however, he is what Susan Koprince describes as an “unseen character” whose spirit inhabits the stage only through the discussion of the other characters (Skipper has died before the play begins) (73). Ironically, the one visible character in the play whose sexuality remains in question is the one character who is least accepting of homosexuality. In contrast to Big Daddy’s “tolerance” (89) for Straw and Ochello’s lifestyle, Brick’s homophobic disgust for their “unnatural” (88) union speaks to the probable sentiment shared by many Americans in the postwar years, “Don’t you know how people feel about things like that?” he asks Big Daddy, “How, how disgusted they are by things like that?” (88). However, the prodigal son who refers to Straw and Ochello as “a pair of dirty old men,” “ducking sissies,” and “Queers” (88), nonetheless reaps the financial benefits of Big Daddy’s liaison with the “pair of old sisters” (86). Certainly Brick’s opportunities to attend Ole Miss, join a fraternity, start a professional football team with Skipper, and quit his job as a sports announcer in order to devote himself full-time to drinking were facilitated by Straw and Ochello’s estate. Brick’s lack of understanding for those who are different from the societal norm as well as his lack of
gratitude for all of the privileges that the “tainted” plantation has bestowed upon him leaves him without a moral or ethical center.

Thus, during the confrontation between Brick and Maggie in act one, when the subject of Skipper is broached and she tells him, “You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes!” he responds with, “I married you, Maggie. Why would I marry you, Maggie, if I was—?” (44). It seems that Brick is not asking Maggie this question; he is asking himself. Ultimately, he does not know who he is, so he cannot give himself to anyone. Although each of the characters in the play struggles with his or her own sense of identity, the character of Brick lacks the substance to compete with Maggie or Big Daddy on the stage, which relegates him to the background of the action.

Beginning with the first production of *Cat* on Broadway, Brick has been the most problematic character for critics and audiences alike to understand. And it seems that Williams wanted it that way. In his stage directions to the pivotal scene between Brick and Big Daddy in act two, Williams writes, “*Some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of character in life, even in one’s own character to himself*” (85). While it is true that individuals in real life can refuse to reveal themselves to others, it is a risky business to put a reticent character on the stage. Brick’s dialogue in the play provides little information about his interior motivations. And, although the “mysteries” of Brick’s character are described with more clarity in Williams’s stage directions, a theater audience is not privy to such information.
Brick’s enigmatic role in the play has the effect of pushing the tension surrounding Maggie’s childlessness to the forefront of the action. When the audience or reader loses interest in Brick’s fate, then Maggie’s quest to have a child becomes the central concern. The tension builds in the play as one wonders whether or not Maggie can entice Brick into bed. Brick has difficulty captivating an audience because in many respects Williams has created a non-character character. Theater critic John Simon refers to Brick as a “nonentity” (121), then asks, “why all this fuss about Brick, when he seems to have nothing beyond his good looks to recommend him?” (121). Walter F. Kerr suggests that Williams “has failed—or refused—to isolate the cause of the corruption in Brick” (120), while Frank Rich argues that “it’s a major flaw of Cat that this character is underwritten” (125). Charles May discusses the character of Brick in relation to the character of Hamlet, another brooding, inexplicable theatrical role: “... whereas Hamlet cannot find anything to do that is adequate to resolve the disgust he feels, Brick no longer tries to do anything. This withdrawn impassivity, Brick’s refusal to act, even to think, makes his basic situation difficult for the reader to understand” (8). “The result,” May notes, “is that while a great deal of action goes on around Brick in the play, action which reveals the motives of the other characters, Brick remains inactive and thus unrevealed” (8). Perhaps Harold Bloom says it best when he suggests that the character of Brick lacks the interiority to elicit much interest in the play. He writes, “Brick’s narcissism is central to the play, but even more crucial would be his nihilism, if only Williams could tell us something about it” (2). In the end, Brick’s character is reduced to a procreative parody—his “seed” is all that matters.
Big Daddy’s World

Just as Williams sets up the issue of Brick’s sexual ambivalence to complicate the 1950s image of the virile male, he dismisses and disrupts the postwar domestic ideal by creating male characters, Big Daddy in particular, with cynical, jaded impressions of female sexuality and motherhood. If Big Daddy’s obscenities are read in light of Kristeva’s notion of poetic language, then his vile outbursts serve as semiotic intrusions into the social status quo of Southern gentility. Big Daddy’s verbal muck even violates the relaxed standards of proper behavior in the Pollitt household. As readers/spectators Big Daddy’s performance shocks and disgusts us, yet in keeping with Kristeva’s theory of abjection, we can’t look away. Unlike Doc’s diatribe in Sheba, which seemed to arise out of nowhere, Big Daddy’s vitriolic harangues continue as long as his character is on the stage. Indeed, as the arbiter of social propriety in the play, Big Daddy sets the tone for the treatment of women and their maternity. His continual derision of Big Mama, Mae, and Maggie permeates the Pollitt plantation and overrides any attempt by the women to temper it. Echoing the theories of Karen Horney, David Savran suggests that, “Williams’s most original move in the play is to turn Big Daddy, despite—or perhaps because of—the taint of homosexuality, into the play’s exemplum of normative masculinity. . . . He seems to epitomize the orthodox heterosexual masculinity of the 1950s that simultaneously desires and degrades women” (53). Williams’s original version of Cat limits Big Daddy’s stage time to one act, but the outlandish raunchiness

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9 For the purposes of this study, the controversial third act, director Elia Kazan’s “Broadway version,” is noted here, but the textual analysis focuses on Williams’s original third act as it appears in the Signet version. In his “Note of Explanation” to the “Broadway version,” Williams discusses his disagreement with the changes Kazan made to his play: “I didn’t want Big Daddy to reappear in Act Three and I felt that
of his performance makes him one of the most memorable characters in twentieth-century American theater.

In an extremely distasteful moment during his birthday celebration, in front of the entire family, Reverend Tooker, and Doc Baugh, Big Daddy asks Brick how he broke his leg, "Was it jumping or humping that you were doing out there? . . . . I ast you, Brick, if you was cuttin' you’self a piece o' poon-tang last night on that cinder track? I thought maybe you were chasin' poon-tang on that track an’ tripped over something in the heat of the chase—'s that it?" (55-56). Here Big Daddy attempts to bolster the public image of Brick's virility by denigrating women.

When Big Daddy believes that he is going to live, he cruelly denounces Big Mama for overstepping her bounds: "Didn't you have an idea I was dying of cancer and now you could take control of this place and everything on it? I got that impression, I seemed to get that impression. Your loud voice everywhere, your fat old body butting in here and there!" (57). Unlike the character of Brick in "Three Players," Big Daddy will not relinquish control of his estate to a woman. "For three years now you been gradually taking over," he tells Big Mama. "Bossing. Talking. Sashaying your fat old body around the place I made! I made this place!" (58). And, reminiscent of Doc's diatribe in Sheba, when he threatens to hack off Lola's fat with a hatchet, Big Daddy's rant contains an illogical, ad hominem attack that reduces Big Mama to a ridiculous caricature—one that has dared to speak her mind or act on her own behalf. The irony that Williams emphasizes in this passage, however, is that, although he has yet to learn the truth about the moral paralysis of Brick was a root thing in his tragedy, and to show a dramatic progression would obscure the meaning of that tragedy. . . ." (125).
his condition, Big Daddy is, in no uncertain terms, dying. And all of his belligerent
accusations will not change that fact. If she can stave off Mae and Gooper, Big Mama
will take over the plantation when Big Daddy dies, whether he likes it or not.

The level of insensitivity toward women in the play reaches a fever pitch during
Big Daddy’s “discussion” with Brick in the second act. Still believing that he is merely
suffering from a “spastic colon,” Big Daddy regales Brick with his sexual history and his
hopes for the future, “[Big Mama] can’t admit to herself that she makes me sick. That
comes of having slept with her too many years. Should of quit much sooner but that old
woman she never got enough of it—and I was good in bed. . .” (72). In anticipation of
his newfound freedom, though, Big Daddy plans to make the most of his sexual prowess
and venture outside the marriage bed, “I’m going to pick me a choice one, I don’t care
how much she costs. . . I’ll strip her naked and choke her with diamonds and smother
her with minks and hump her from hell to breakfast. Ha aha ha ha ha!” (72).

At one point Big Daddy attempts to break through Brick’s emotional wall of
silence by showing his tolerance for homosexuality and by intimating that he, too, might
have possessed such inclinations, “I knocked around in my time” (85), he tells him.
However, regardless of his admissions, Big Daddy’s message remains clear. Brick has a
responsibility to act like a man. In an effort to help Brick understand the sacrifices he has
made in his marriage to a repulsive woman like Big Mama, Big Daddy shares his disgust:

Think of all the lies I got to put up with!—Pretenses! Ain’t that
mendacity? Having to pretend stuff you don’t think or feel or have any
idea of? Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama!—I haven’t
been able to stand the sight, sound, or smell of that woman for forty years now!—even when I laid her!—regular as a piston. . . . (80)

Perhaps the most shocking thing about Big Daddy’s talk, and a point one might forget while reading the play, is that Big Mama is Brick’s mother. Indeed, it seems that Big Daddy’s inability to humanize Big Mama in particular and women in general has carried over to the next generation. Despite his anger with Maggie, Brick’s treatment of her borders on misogyny. Given the low opinion of women that the male characters in the play express, it is little wonder that Maggie invents a “pregnancy” lie.

The Setting

The sultry plantation bedroom in Cat bears little resemblance to the opening scene that William Inge describes in his stage directions for Come Back Little Sheba. Set in an “old house in one of those semi-respectable neighborhoods in a Midwestern city” (5), Sheba begins and ends in a predictably bland, albeit disheveled, domestic space. Inge hides any hint of sexuality in the physical aspects of Lola and Doc’s living room while Williams exploits it in his setting for Cat, calling for a large double bed, “the surface of which should be slightly raked to make figures on it seen more easily” (xiii). In spite of Williams’s admitted “invidious resentment of Inge’s great success” (qtd. in Devlin 97), the two men were friends and, in fact, Williams had been instrumental in getting Sheba, Inge’s first major play, produced on Broadway. The five years that separate the two productions (Sheba debuted in 1950), along with the vast difference in geographical and cultural milieux in the plays (and in the lives of the authors) might help to explain Inge’s
need to subvert the topic of sexuality, hence pregnancy and motherhood, while Williams makes it a driving force in his work.

A nurturing space in many respects, the bedroom setting in *Cat*, according to Williams's stage directions, must imbue "the grace and comfort of light, the reassurance it gives, on a late and fair afternoon in summer, the way that no matter what, even dread of death, is gently touched and soothed by it" (xiii). At the same time, however, Williams suggests that his characters need to transcend the soothing space, "... above all, the designer should take as many pains to give the actors room to move about freely (to show their restlessness, their passion for breaking out)" (xiv). Perhaps the characters' "passion for breaking out" of a comforting and reassuring place reflects their struggle to overcome the restrictive yet predictable cultural expectations of the times.

Furthermore, according to Williams, the bedroom setting had been inhabited by an aging homosexual couple, which gives it an aura of being "poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon" (xiii). And yet, the semiotic atmosphere of warmth and acceptance evoked by the setting is shattered when the words that are spoken by the characters contradict it. As John M. Clum points out, the dialogue in the play—in particular Brick's diatribe against the bedroom's previous inhabitants, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello—does not support Williams's stage directions, but rather contains homophobic discourse, which leaves the reader confused as to Williams's viewpoint on sexuality (36). Nevertheless, with Maggie's childlessness serving as a primary theme in the play, the issues surrounding sexual desire and sexual behavior are disproportionately emphasized. Perhaps it is not by accident that the entire
play takes place in the “bed-sitting-room” (xiii) of its current occupants, Maggie and 
Brick Pollitt, a couple whose relationship is complicated irrevocably by sexual 
ambiguity.

Throughout the play it is clear that the entire Pollitt family and their friends feel 
welcome in Brick and Maggie’s bedroom at any time. At the same time Maggie 
struggles to present a false front of domestic bliss to them. The fact that Maggie and 
Brick’s bed had been occupied by two “old bachelors” (xiii) adds a twist of irony to 
Williams’s blurred distinction between public and private space. Indeed, Maggie’s fight 
to overcome Brick’s sexual intransigence is emphasized by the prominent position of the 
bed on the set and the innuendos surrounding its previous occupants. Like the Pollitt 
family, as an audience or as readers of the play we are invited to join the couple in their 
most intimate setting.

In addition to the closeness of the bedroom setting that restricts its inhabitants to 
one place for the duration of the play, the offstage activity in Cat impinges on the 
characters as well. According to Williams’s numerous stage directions, the sounds of 
outdoor activity and indoor strife can be heard in the background throughout the play. 
This clamor serves as an added distraction that circles around the characters on stage, 
daring them to attempt an escape from their socially constricted space. For the world 
outside of the stage setting contains monstrous children “doin’ tricks all the time” like 
“animals. . . at a county fair” (16) and dying patriarchs screaming for morphine—not 
extactly a desirable alternative to the psychological confinement of the bedroom. The 
offstage characters also closely monitor what goes on in the bedroom setting, as Maggie
warns Brick, “We mustn’t scream at each other, the walls in this house have ears . . . .” (26). Indeed, Maggie and Brick’s bedroom serves as the nucleus of activity in the Pollitt household, and their sex life provides the family with its central topic of voyeuristic intrigue. For example, when Mae Pollitt challenges Maggie’s claim of “pregnancy” at the end of the play, she speaks for the entire clan, “We know it’s a lie because we hear you in here; he won’t sleep with you, we hear you! So don’t imagine you’re going to put a trick over on us” (120). All eyes and ears are focused on Maggie and Brick’s sexual activity.

The Stork and the Reaper

When Reverend Tooker (“the living embodiment of the pious, conventional lie”) is caught making his pronouncement to Doc Baugh in act two, “—the Stork and the Reaper are running neck and neck!” (54), he captures the essence of Williams’s play. Just as Inge juxtaposes death and lack of regeneration in Sheba, Williams links Maggie’s childlessness with Big Daddy’s impending death in Cat. As Bernard F. Dukore notes, “An atmosphere of death and decay permeates the play and infuses its three major characters. Big Daddy is dying of cancer, Maggie is dying of sterility, and Brick is killing himself with liquor” (98). However, Dukore also suggests that Williams is concerned primarily with “procreation and the family, with the mainstream of life” (99). Thus from the opening scene of the play to the final curtain the race against time is on—the tension mounts as Maggie desperately struggles to achieve a pregnancy before Big Daddy’s cancer consumes him. Williams intensifies the urgency with which Maggie must seek to secure her pregnancy through his overall dramatic structure. The rising
action in the first act, with Maggie and Brick dancing around the topic of his sexuality and Big Daddy’s cancer, sets up the crisis or revelation in the second act, when Big Daddy confronts Brick directly about his sexual desires and, in quid pro quo fashion, Brick stuns Big Daddy with the news that the patriarch is, indeed, dying. Big Daddy does not appear in Williams’s original third act, but instead is heard crying out in agony off stage. In the end, Big Daddy’s rapid decline in health from the first act to the third forces Maggie to announce her “pregnancy” prematurely.

At the end of act three, when Maggie tells the Pollitt family that she and Brick are going to have a baby, her lie suggests more than just a ploy to keep Big Daddy’s estate out of Mae and Gooper’s hands. By creating the illusion that she is carrying Brick’s child, Maggie is resurrecting her image as a sexual creature. Maggie’s invented pregnancy comes as no surprise to Paul J. Hurley, who suggests that “If one is going to get along and at the same time get ahead, in a society which values appearance more than reality, living by, for, and with lies becomes instinctive” (132). If Maggie’s sexuality, hence her fecundity wanes, she is in danger of being tossed out of the fold altogether. Precariously perched on the edge of the Pollitt world, then, Maggie’s basic survival depends on her ability to create the false perception that she has attracted Brick and produced a child.

Maggie’s supposed “pregnancy” suggests that all will be right with the world. By the end of the third act, the mere possibility of Brick’s child serves as a panacea for everything that troubles the Pollitt family. Big Mama cannot contain her elation when she hears the news, “Oh, my, my! This is Big Daddy’s dream, his dream come true! I’m
going to tell him right now before he--” (118). Dies? Big Daddy will die peacefully knowing that Brick has resumed sexual relations with Maggie, thereby removing any doubt as to Brick’s (or his own) questionable sexuality. For Big Mama, Maggie’s pregnancy will bring about even more miraculous changes—it will fix Brick. “And Brick!” she rejoices, “A child will make you pull yourself together and quit this drinking! [She seizes the glass from his hand.] The responsibilities of a father will--” (118). Unable to finish her sentence because no one in the Pollitt household truly understands what the responsibilities of a father are, Big Mama bustles from the room in a torrent of excitement. Big Mama’s celebration is cut short, however, as Big Daddy’s off-stage wailing overtakes the scene, “A long drawn cry of agony and rage fills the house” (120). The end is near when Big Mama rushes back into Brick and Maggie’s room to get the morphine, “I can’t bear it, oh, god! Oh, Brick! Brick, baby! [She rushes at him. He averts his face from her sobbing kisses. Margaret watches with a tight smile.] My son, Big Daddy’s boy! Little Father! [The groaning cry is heard again. She runs out. sobbing.] (123). As Big Daddy struggles in death, Maggie informs Brick that they are “going to make the lie true…” (123), and Brick appears to be acquiescing to her demands. With their potential to have a child still intact, Maggie and Brick represent the promise of the future for Big Daddy and Big Mama. However, even though she possesses fertile ovaries and a perfectly functional womb, Maggie cannot reproduce unless her mate cooperates with her.

The final outcome of the play is left unclear. As readers we might assume that Maggie has managed to coerce Brick into sleeping with her, at least for one night. It
might appear that Maggie is just hitting her stride as the curtain comes down. Whether she achieves a pregnancy or not is hardly the point. The mere act of lying about it has given her the strength to deal with Brick on his own terms, not as a subservient, pleading inferior. In the final scene Maggie takes control of the situation instead of letting Brick dictate all the moves. When he momentarily leaves the room, she removes all of his liquor. And not only does she take away Brick’s figurative crutch, she throws his literal crutch off of the balcony as well:

Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn’t want to be overpowered by you. But now, since you’ve taken to liquor—you know what?—I guess it’s bad. But now I’m stronger than you and I can love you more truly! Don’t move that pillow. I’ll move it right back if you do! (122)

With a newfound sense of her own potential, Maggie tells Brick the way it will be.

Marian Price takes a more pessimistic view of this final scene in the play:

The sex act that [Maggie] demands is a life-affirming creative act... yet Maggie’s victory is a hollow one, achieved by manipulation and producing only a temporary gain in the race for the inheritance. There is little ground for thinking that Maggie will actually succeed in becoming pregnant after the curtain falls, and her domination turns out not to have any beneficial effect on Brick: whatever talent he once possessed is going to lie fallow, or more likely, wither away like his will to live. (332)
Price makes a valid point. Furthermore, even if Maggie achieves a pregnancy and inherits Big Daddy’s fortune, she has only managed to accomplish a goal that was set out for her by a culture that did not value women beyond their maternal abilities.

In the end, although Williams sets Maggie up to fight against the insinuation that if she were truly a woman, she would have produced offspring, within the world of 1950s America and under the Pollitt family’s scrutiny, basic survival takes precedence over personal integrity. After all, Maggie was reared without money and she clings to the security that Big Daddy’s fortune can provide, so she ultimately succumbs to her culture’s demands. Thus, through the ridicule she must suffer at the hands of the Pollitt family, Maggie is relegated to the lowest common denominator of what it means to be female. Perhaps Simone de Beauvoir describes the fate of 1950s women best when she declares, “Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female—this word is sufficient to define her” (3). This oversimplification of the term “woman” holds a particular resonance in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Indeed, characters like Maggie, who are willing to abide by the social conventions of a pronatal American culture, will survive, while characters like Brick will most certainly be destroyed by their inability to adapt to culturally acceptable mandates.
CHAPTER IV

FECUND YEARNINGS IN EDWARD ALBEE’S
WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.

(James Agee, A Death in the Family)

The above passage from James Agee’s autobiographical novel, A Death in the Family, moved Edward Albee to tears during an interview with Mel Gussow, Albee’s biographer. An adopted child of an unhappy couple who could not or would not express love for him, Albee grew up searching for something he had never known. In an uncharacteristic emotional revelation, Albee’s reference to Agee’s experience with his own family suggests a longing for and interest in identity that filters through Albee’s work and personal life. Who will tell me who I am? The question haunted Albee as he attempted to reconcile his adoption and subsequent emotional abandonment with his idealization of family life. If Agee, whose seemingly perfect childhood filled with love and nurturance left him wondering who he was, then Albee, having never known his biological parents and estranged from his adoptive parents, possessed little chance of recovering the identity he sought. Agee’s novel, alongside Samuel Barber’s piece for voice and orchestra based on the novel, allowed Albee to imagine a dream of childhood.
that was never available to him. “Listen to it. Read it.” Albee says, “It is a piece of music that I cannot listen to or even think about without crying. If you look at the text of that you will understand a good deal about me” (Gussow 15). In many of his plays, Albee’s nostalgia for the ineffable fantasy of a childhood filled with acceptance, familiarity, comfort, and safety, a fantasy that remains lost to him forever, manifests itself in a figure that is linked in some way with maternity. The maternal characters set within the family life that Albee portrays on the stage, however, provide a remarkable contrast to his fantasies of domestic life and complicate the 1950s rhetoric surrounding the pro-family ideal that touted marriage and children as the ultimate goal for a generation of American women.

This chapter will explore Edward Albee’s use of the topic of childlessness as a thematic principle in his seminal play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. When read as a critique of the cultural valorization of motherhood through its motif of barrenness, *Virginia Woolf* disrupts the pro-family sentiment that served as a predominant social ideology during the postwar decade. By creating female characters whose representations confound a pro-maternal bias, Albee dispels the societal myth that motherhood can compensate for an unexamined, hence unfulfilled life. Through topics as varied as housework, motherhood, children, biology, reproduction, eugenics, and fertility and death rituals, Albee’s characters expose each others’ personal myths by challenging the cultural beliefs they uphold with certainty. Apropos of a 1950s preoccupation with self-preservation, Albee’s portrayal of childlessness in *Virginia Woolf* illuminates the social ramifications, for women and for men, of an American culture’s
interest in nation-building through procreation. Thus Albee's introduction of an infertile couple in *Virginia Woolf* can be read as a commentary on idealized family life that critiques the rush-to-motherhood so prevalent during the cold war era. By situating a childless character, Martha, as the wife of an academic who questions, among other things, the future value of assisted reproduction, one might surmise that Albee, like Martha's husband, George, wrestles with the ethics of creating babies in test tubes simply to satisfy a cultural mandate to go forth and multiply. Rather than embrace a maternal sensibility, Albee uses the setting, thematic structure, and characterizations in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to subvert the ideologies of "motherhood and apple pie" that marked the decade between 1950 and the early 1960s.

Albee's Maternal Figures

Albee's focus on the maternal begins in his play, *The American Dream*, first performed in 1959, has its heyday in *The Play About the Baby* in 1998, and continues through his 2002 play, *The Goat: or Who is Sylvia?*. Unlike his other dramas, however, Albee's 1962 play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, can be read as an examination of the complexities of maternity as seen through a lens of infertility. Neither Lola in *Come Back Little Sheba* nor Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* could have prepared Broadway for the maelstrom that Albee creates with his childless character, Martha. Whether barren or fecund, Albee's female characters in *Virginia Woolf* represented a side of maternity that previously had not been seen on the American stage. And the men's characterizations were equally shocking. In the end, the incongruity of Albee's emotionally vulnerable exchanges with his biographer when considered alongside the
body of his work, and alongside the persona of the man, is not lost on Gussow, who writes, "in Albee's own life, these moments represent a longing for the unattainable. Paradoxically, such moments rarely exist in Albee's plays" (16). Although a start, Gussow's interpretation presents a considerable understatement of Albee's ability to shatter our preconceived notions of domestic bliss.

In *The American Dream*, his absurdist precursor to *Virginia Woolf*, Albee's "Mommy" and "Daddy" have mutilated and dismembered their adopted child for acting like—a child—before the action begins. By the end of the play, the parents have ordered and received a replacement, a superficially perfect, "American Dream" of a son, who will provide them with the "satisfaction" they believe they deserve (108, 126). Despite opening to mostly positive reviews, *American Dream's* premiere left some audiences and critics stunned and horrified by Albee's representation of parental abuse. In response to those critics who were offended by the content of his play, Albee explained, in part, his intentions:

The play is 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. Is the play offensive? I certainly hope so; it was my intention to offend—as well as amuse and entertain. Is it nihilist, immoral, defeatist? Well, to that let me answer that *The American Dream* is a picture of our time—as I see it, of course. (54)
Here Albee's longing for an idealized childhood manifests itself in disdain and contempt for a culture based on illusions and lies—a culture that consumes goods and children as if they were similar commodities. As Gussow observes, "long before the word dysfunctional was popularized, Albee stepped in with his scalpel and, without anesthesia, performed an exploratory operation on Mommy, Daddy, and their traditional values of marriage and parenting" (139). For Albee, societal values originate and remain in the home as he localizes the quest for the "American Dream" in the privacy of a family unit where adults have the power to dismember a child and request a newer, better version if it suits them. Moreover, Albee critiques a cultural dependence on the mother-as-nurturer by creating female characters whose representations complicate the predominant 1950s notion of motherhood.

Although *Virginia Woolf* was chosen to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1962, the board of trustees at Columbia University determined that it was too controversial to receive the award. Much like the controversy surrounding *American Dream*, the disagreement over the Pulitzer Prize sparked additional fervor over the objectionable content of Albee's plays. In many ways, *Virginia Woolf* embodies a reworking of the issues Albee had explored in *American Dream*. An infertile couple, unable to communicate except through denigrating interchanges or bizarre non sequiturs, seeks fulfillment in an imagined or adopted son. However, while the characters in *American Dream* have impersonal, generic names—Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, Young Man—and inhabit an absurd world composed of "thoughtless noncommunication" (Greenwald et al 464), the characters in *Virginia Woolf* actually attempt to communicate on some level and
their names make sense in our world: George, Martha, Nick, and Honey. By removing some of the absurdity he used in *American Dream*, Albee couches his argument in a more palatable presentation in *Virginia Woolf*. Recognizing the play’s satirical quality, Thomas E. Porter suggests that the “thrust of the play is indicated by the ironic way in which Albee constructs his façade—setting, dialogue, character-types—to represent a recognizable segment of the American scene” (227). One quickly discovers, however, that George and Martha may be recognizable but they are anything but ordinary. As hyper-articulate, middle-class academics who inhabit a privileged and isolated sphere unavailable to most Americans, George and Martha shock the reader/spectator because they do not follow the expected rules of social engagement. Furthermore, when their late night guests, Nick and Honey, are drawn into the chaos of George and Martha’s living room, any pieces of social fabric that might feel familiar begin to unravel.

When asked to explain the title of his play, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee often replies that it means: Who’s afraid to live a life without illusions? Indeed, by the end of the third act all of the characters’ psychological and social pretenses have been peeled back, stripped down to the “marrow” (*VW* 213), down to the truth of George and Martha’s biological sterility and Nick and Honey’s moral sterility. To reach this raw, exposed state, however, Albee must lead his characters through a drunken, orgiastic, Saturnalian topsy-turviness from the initial banter between George and Martha in act one, to the devastating, vitriolic abasements that begin to emerge in act two, to the no-holds-barred attacks in act three. To witness the deliberate destruction of one character’s psyche by another is to enter a world where subjectivity loses all meaning. If Albee
wanted to shock us out of our complacency in *The American Dream*, he wants to lure us into an all out annihilation of contentment in *Virginia Woolf*. As Porter observes, Albee attacks American society’s “most cherished assumptions—that the marriage bond is a source of communion, that the business failure is a weakling, that fertility is a blessing” (226). Thus lulled into a false sense of security by Albee’s familiar settings evoking childhood scenes—a park bench, a sandbox, a living room, a beach—we find ourselves blindsided by the subject matter of his plays.

Albee challenges the image of the safe, nurturing family by positioning two childless women in *Virginia Woolf* as potentially sympathetic characters in the pronatal milieu of early 1960s America and then dismantling the iconic stereotype of maternity our nation held in high esteem. Martha’s drunken, verbally abusive, sexually charged performance throughout the play belies any suggestion that she would have been a loving, caring mother had she been able to have children. And, one gets the impression that motherhood would not have solved Martha’s problems in any case. The real culprit, according to Bonnie Blumenthal Finkelstein, is a culture that denies her any “outlets for her abilities” (53). In other words, she is simply a housewife. In contrast, Martha’s fertility foil, Honey, a woman theoretically able to have children but too incapacitated by fear to face the idea of pregnancy, is an individual dispossessed of even the most rudimentary skills to care for herself, not to mention a child. As products of the postwar era, without possession of the maternal sensibilities touted as the ultimate goal for women, neither Honey nor Martha has the vaguest notion of her individual possibilities.
In a fascinating commentary on the societal myth that motherhood completes a woman, then, Albee positions both female characters as complex alternatives to the American view of maternity. Throughout the play, Albee introduces many of the gender role expectations prevalent during the late 1950s and early 1960s and then subverts the cultural stereotypes of the times, turning them into fodder for George and Martha’s games. Finkelstein recognizes Albee’s ability to critique the stereotypical sex roles of the postwar era, claiming that his awareness “suggests that George and Martha would be better off in a world that respected their differences from the conventional, and didn’t label them each as inadequate because of them” (57). A willingness to step outside of culturally imposed gender role identification allows Albee to give Martha attributes that would have carried her far in a professional or academic world had her circumstances been different. As Scott Giantvalley notes, Martha “clearly has the stuff, the will and the desire to run a college that her husband George lacks. . . [which suggests] a deplorable waste, as two people seek to fit socially-acceptable roles to which they are inherently unsuited” (qtd. in Finkelstein 54). Sadly, left to tend the house and kids as her culture expects, Martha’s talents, her intellect, quick wit, and drive can be developed only through her angry and bitter exchanges with George. She admittedly “wears the pants in [their] house because somebody’s got to” (157), and she is exhausted from it, as she tells George, “My arm has gotten tired whipping you” (153). Had she been able to direct her energies into more productive endeavors, Martha’s frustrations might have subsided. Instead, with a husband who represents a failure by her (and her culture’s) standards—a
"bog" in the History department—and an imaginary son approaching his twenty-first birthday, she finds her life devoid of purpose.

What a Dump!

When measured against the phenomenon that was the 1950s American housewife, Martha undeniably comes up short. Characterized variously as a childless, messy, adulterous, aging alcoholic, Martha is never certain of her value in a society that embraces the myth of the wholesome, nurturing maternal figure. From the beginning of the play she looks to George, then to Honey, then to Nick to support her notion of herself within the confines of gender role expectations. Is she housewife, mother, lover? By 1950s standards, the unfortunate tragedy of Martha’s life resides in her inability to produce a child and in her unwillingness to gleefully embrace the role of housewife. Like many of the women about which Betty Friedan writes in *The Feminine Mystique*, Martha’s life lacks meaning when she cannot find fulfillment in household chores. Perhaps this milieu of glorified domesticity and motherhood explains, in part, Martha’s need to create an imaginary son. A cultural contradiction from the start, then, Albee’s characterization of Martha eschews a societal valorization of domestic duties as well as motherhood. However, Martha cannot help but feel the tug of cultural expectations for housewives when confronted with the disorder in her own home.

In the first scene of act one Albee highlights Martha’s domestic inadequacies by directing the reader’s attention to the setting of the play. Just as Inge’s stage directions set Lola up as an incompetent housewife in *Sheba*, Albee’s dialogue suggests that Martha does not keep a tidy house either. At the beginning of the play, George and Martha enter
the stage, turn on the lights, and reveal a living room in a state of disarray. In addition to providing an indirect description of the stage setting, the first eight lines in the play contain an initial glimpse into the couple’s turbulent relationship and establish their abrasive, vitriolic communication style as *de rigueur*:

MARTHA. Jesus... .

GEORGE. . . Shhhhhhh. . .

MARTHA. . . H. Christ. . .

GEORGE. For God’s sake, Martha, it’s two o’clock in the. . .

MARTHA. Oh, George!

GEORGE. Well, I’m *sorry*, but. . .

MARTHA. What a cluck! What a cluck you are.

GEORGE. It’s late, you know? Late. (3)

Then, upon entering the house, as she continues to debase George, Martha gives the room a once-over and remarks, “What a dump” (3). Although Albee remains unclear as to the actual condition of the room at this point, later in act one George alludes to the mess when their guests arrive, telling them to throw their coats anywhere because it “doesn’t make any difference around this place” (20). The implication that it is Martha’s responsibility to keep a tidy house hangs in the air and depends on George’s delivery.

Yet, by her own admission, Martha’s housekeeping skills are lacking. And, although she positions her critique within a query about a Bette Davis movie, her words are not lost as a harsh self-evaluation of her homemaking skills. “Hey, what’s that from? ‘What a dump!’” (10). Martha’s futile attempts to explain herself to George illuminate
her emotional connection with the character in the movie as well as her inability to articulate her dissatisfaction with her own life to her husband:

MARTHA. This picture . . . Bette Davis comes home from a hard day at the grocery store. . . .

GEORGE. She works in a grocery store?

MARTHA. She’s a housewife; she buys things. . . and she comes home with the groceries, and she walks into the modest living room of the modest cottage modest Joseph Cotton has set her up in. . . .

GEORGE. Are they married?

MARTHA (Impatiently). Yes, They’re married. To each other. Cluck! And she comes in, and she looks around, and she puts her groceries down, and she says, “What a dump!”

GEORGE. (Pause) Oh.

MARTHA. (Pause) She’s discontent.

GEORGE. (Pause) Oh.

MARTHA. (Pause) Well, what’s the name of the picture?

GEORGE. I really don’t know, Martha. . . . (6)

George and Martha’s exchange introduces the reader to their assumptions regarding their own relationship as well as to the expectations each holds up for housewives. Martha’s notion that a trip to the grocery store represents a “hard day” prompts George’s erroneous (and purposeful) suggestion that Bette Davis’s character works at the store. Martha corrects his misinterpretation, then subtly attacks George’s abilities as a provider by
highlighting the “modest” life Joseph Cotton provides for Bette Davis in the film.

George responds to Martha’s provocation with an obtuse question he knows will incite her, “Are they married?” (6). One more “Cluck!” from Martha and the battle begins.

In the same scene, where Albee calls for pauses in the dialogue, the moments of silent contemplation begin to fill up with lost opportunities for meaningful communication. During these silences (the first of many throughout the play) a semiotic element emerges that suggests a need on the part of both characters to work through the unspoken issues that engulf them (the most important issue, of course, is their childlessness). Yet, although they each may have different motivations behind the pauses, Martha’s attempts to engage George in a more intimate conversation about her dissatisfaction with her own life end without resolution. When George responds inappropriately for Martha’s needs, she attacks him directly. He levies a judgment on the life she has been handed by a postwar culture: a housewife doesn’t “work,” so she berates him on the same grounds. When George claims fatigue and attempts to end the discussion, Martha responds with, “I don’t know what you’re so tired about. . . you haven’t done anything all day; you didn’t have any classes, or anything. . .” (7).

Ironically, in addition to its references to inadequate housework, the plot of the movie to which Martha refers, Beyond the Forest, hinges on a pregnancy. The Bette Davis character, bored with her life in a small town, attempts to entrap a millionaire industrialist from Chicago. Living in what she considers a “dump,” with a man who cannot measure up to her impossible standards, she uses pregnancy in an attempt to manipulate her future. With his semiotic reference to a film that parallels much of his
play. Albee slyly sets the audience up for the revelations to come—for example, Bette Davis’s abortion and consequent “peritonitis” foreshadows Honey’s hysterical pregnancy, or “puffing up,” and its result, her marriage to Nick. Then, as George reveals in his game, “Get the Guests,” Honey’s “puff went away. . . like magic. . . pouf!” (147), which suggests Albee’s nod toward the possibility that Honey has had an abortion. And, just as suddenly, George and Martha’s son turns out to be an illusion that George must destroy, “Now listen, Martha; listen carefully. We got a telegram; there was a car accident, and he’s dead. POUF! Just like that!” (233). From beginning to end, with his sense of irony fully intact, Albee presents a clear, if tongue-in-cheek, commentary on the value of housekeeping, pregnancy, and the pro-family sentiment that was embraced by a majority of middle-class Americans during the postwar years.

Many scholars have viewed Martha’s reaction to her infertility as resulting from an early 1960s sensibility that women were defined by their ability to keep house and produce children. Finkelstein suggests that “Albee’s insight into the world of 1962 outlines Martha’s problem as a lack of identity. . . .” She continues, “[b]y having no professional aspirations for herself, by never asking what she herself could accomplish in the world, [Martha] accepts the limiting sex role stereotypes that her culture defines for her, and then she fails at them, since she has no children either” (52-53). Had Albee created Martha a few years later she might have been a completely different woman. Indeed, Martha resides on the cusp of an ideological shift in America’s conception of maternity. After 1965, birth rates dropped precipitously as more and more couples would choose to limit their offspring or remain childless (Marsh and Ronner 109). As well, the
pronatalist sentiment that had dominated the two postwar decades came under intense scrutiny by a feminist movement rife with alternative possibilities for women’s futures. Additionally, technological advances greatly increased the medical community’s ability to treat infertility, prompting doctors to refocus their energies on its physiological causes.

Childlessness and Fertility Foils

In light of America’s postwar focus on maternity, numerous critics have analyzed Martha’s violent anger and caustic personality, discussing her character as the stereotypical female shrew. Finkelstein suggests that, “Martha’s anger has been interpreted as sexually unnatural, so that she is typically called emasculating and castrating, rather than merely hostile or vicious” (58). Martha’s attacks on George as well as on Nick are certainly painful to witness. However, Martha’s character can be read with more compassion if one understands how infertility ravages a relationship. In her article, “The Psychological Component of Infertility,” Patricia P. Mahlstedt explains how coping with infertility can often lead to feelings of intense anger, “the multiple losses and stresses of infertility leave couples not only depressed but angry. In particular, losing control over when or whether one becomes a parent—a loss most people never even consider, much less face—enrages many couples” (340). Then, because both the man and the woman are hurting, Mahlstedt suggests, “they may become less able to fulfill each other’s needs and thereby suffer a loss of closeness, to the point of feeling worlds apart” (337). It is safe to say that George and Martha’s relationship surpassed the “feeling worlds apart” stage years ago.
However, if we remind ourselves of Martha’s complete devastation at the end of
the play, and, of George’s tenderness in dealing with it, we can begin to dismantle the
layers of hostility in their relationship and see the raw pain and grief at the core. In a
poignant and telling moment, Martha reveals how she has been socially isolated by her
culture’s preoccupation with children and mothering, which explains, in part, her need to
share her imaginary son with others. “I FORGET! Sometimes... sometimes when it’s
night, when it’s late, and... and everybody else is... talking... I forget and I... want to
mention him... but I... HOLD ON... I hold on... but I’ve wanted to... so often...”
(237). In a postwar culture so concerned with fostering traditional family systems, an
inability to reproduce most certainly must have led to social ostracism, especially for
women. And, although George ultimately succeeds in destroying Nick and Honey’s
façade of success and happiness, the two of them nonetheless represent lost hopes for
George and Martha. On the surface Nick and Honey are young, just beginning their
married life, and their future holds great promise. They will have children, but all in
good time, when they are ready. Yet Albee does not embrace their personal myths.
Instead he dissects the social roles they use to identify themselves and exposes their
superficial existence.

Albee’s creation of Honey as a “fertility foil” to Martha’s childlessness helps to
clarify his disdain for identities based on reproductive abilities as he uses the characters
of Martha and Honey to move back and forth between the cultural consequences of
barrenness and fertility. In the character of Honey, Albee gathers all of the undesirable
characteristics a reproducing woman might possess and exaggerates them for the benefit
of social commentary. Honey simpers, whimpers, vomits, and provides no purpose in the play except as a foil to Martha’s infertility. She has nothing to add to the conversation except to squeal with delight at inappropriate times and require tending as she curls up in a fetal position, sucking her thumb on the bathroom floor. Granted, she is quite drunk, but she remains the representation of a baby throughout the play—someone with no mind of her own, no spirit, no direction. The only assertive thing Honey has done in her entire life was to become “hysterically” pregnant in order to trap Nick into marriage. She elicits George’s pity and contempt at the end of the play when she admits that she fears pregnancy and childbirth, “And you, you simpering bitch... you don’t want children?,” he admonishes her (178). And she provokes his ridicule when she later declares, “(In tears) I want a child. I want a baby” (223). To which George responds, “On principle?” (223). George’s mocking attitude toward Honey can be read as a commentary against women who choose to remain childless, as a reflection of a larger social edict that mandates motherhood for women. Another way to read George’s attack, however, is as an expression of his own frustration and anguish at being childless. Whatever the reasons, biological or social, George wanted children and neither he nor Martha could produce any.

The Kid

Whereas Lola’s childlessness in Sheba and Maggie’s infertility in Cat are introduced to the reader/audience within the first lines of the respective plays, Martha’s lack of children in Virginia Woolf is not revealed until the final scene of the third act. Until then, Martha and George’s imaginary son resides in the dialogue as an enigmatic
(off-stage) character that Martha is forbidden to discuss with anyone except George. And, although the reality of the child remains a mystery until the end of the play, Albee leaves hints along the way that suggest some peculiarities surrounding the son’s existence. For one, before Nick and Honey enter the stage, George warns Martha not to “start in on the bit about the kid,” to which she responds, “What do you take me for?” (18). “Much too much,” he replies, which incites Martha’s rage, “Yeah? Well, I’ll start in on the kid if I want to” (18). This is surely not a conversation most postwar audiences would have expected parents to have about a child. When George and Martha objectify the child in their discussion, referring to their son as “the kid” and “the bit,” Albee introduces the possibility that something is not quite right in the household. As tension mounts throughout the play, the information that is provided about the child becomes more and more questionable. The two are equal partners in the sham, though, as Martha warns George, “He’s mine as much as he is yours. I’ll talk about him if I want to” (19). And George foreshadows “the kid’s” fate when he responds with, “I’d advise against it, Martha” (19). Consequently, when Martha does, in fact, broach the subject, or “start in on the bit” (18) with Honey, George uses her indiscretion as motivation to bring about the end of their illusion.

Although the game of the imaginary son is mutually satisfying to both George and Martha, there is a striking difference in the way each of them reminisces about the child. On the eve of their imaginary son’s twenty-first birthday, George mockingly suggests that he and Martha need to share stories of him with their guests, “It’s very important we
talk about him” he tells Martha (214). By this point, however, George has had enough of the evening’s “fun and games” as he delivers one of the cruelest passages in the play:

All rightie. Well, now; let’s see. He’s a nice kid, really, in spite of his home life; I mean, most kids’d grow up neurotic, what with Martha here carrying on the way she does; sleeping’till four in the P.M., climbing all over the poor bastard, trying to break the bathroom door down to wash him in the tub when he’s sixteen, dragging strangers into the house at all hours. . . . (215)

George then continues to deride Martha as she gives her own version of the story:

MARTHA. It was an easy birth. . . .

GEORGE. Oh, Martha; no. You labored. . . how you labored.

MARTHA. It was an easy birth. . . once it had been. . . accepted, relaxed into. . . .

And I was young, and he was a healthy child, a red, bawling child, with slippery firm limbs. . . .

GEORGE. . . . Martha thinks she saw him at delivery. . . .

MARTHA. . . . with slippery, firm limbs, and a full head of black, fine, fine hair which, oh, later, later, became blond as the sun, our son.

GEORGE. He was a healthy child.

MARTHA. And I had wanted a child. . . oh, I had wanted a child.

GEORGE. (Prodding her) A son? A daughter?

MARTHA. A child! (Quieter) A child. And I had my child.

GEORGE. Our child. . . . (217-218)
At this crucial turning point in the play the relationship between George and Martha momentarily shifts from one of vicious animosity to one of mutual compassion. When George utters, “Our child,” he finally joins Martha in her grief over their childlessness. With Honey and Nick as witnesses, Martha reciprocates, “(With great sadness) Our child.” She tells them, “And we raised him... (Laughs, briefly, bitterly) yes, we did; we raised him...” (218). George and Martha continue to share memories of their imaginary son, finishing each other’s sentences, discussing in detail his “teddy bears,” and his “antique bassinet from Austria,” the “animal crackers,” and the “bow and arrow he kept uner his bed...” (218-219). And yet, they cannot stay in synch. The brutal accusations fly again as Martha attacks George’s failures as a man and suggests that he is not the father of their imaginary son, while George intimates that Martha was sexually inappropriate with the boy and could not control her drinking. And on they go, hurling epithets back and forth until the end of the third act, when, with all of the denigrating words and actions behind them, George delivers the final blow—he announces that their imaginary son has been killed in a car accident—which brings Martha quite literally to her knees. Indeed, within all of the sadness and pain of George and Martha’s inability to have children, underneath all of the acts of anger, frustration, and finally, mourning, lies Albee’s subversive commentary on the American family.

Test Tube Babies

Albee possessed a prophetic vision in 1962 when he addressed the subject of infertility in his play. Most astutely he centered the tension between George the historian and his younger, seemingly more virile counterpart, Nick the biologist, on the ethics of
reproductive technologies. Although the first human artificial insemination was claimed in 1909 and experimentation on various techniques of reproduction had been going on for some 30 years, the debate surrounding artificial reproductive technologies (ART) did not gain fervency until the 1970s. Ironically, Robert Edwards, who is credited with producing the first “test-tube baby,” Louise Brown, born in 1978, worked feverishly during the 1960s and 70s toward his goal of in vitro fertilization (IVF) while just down the street was the Cavendish Laboratory, where James Watson and Francis Crick had discovered the double-helix structure of DNA in 1953 (Helig 32). Ironically, as well, Watson would become one of Edwards’ sharpest critics. At a Kennedy Foundation conference on bioethics in 1971, Watson publicly denounced Edwards’ work with IVF, exclaiming, “You can only go ahead with your work if you accept the necessity of infanticide. . . . What are we going to do with the mistakes?” (Helig 76).

Indeed, Albee intuitively picks up on the future debates surrounding reproductive technology as he sets up an ethical dichotomy between George and Nick:

GEORGE. (After a pause) Oh. (Then, as if remembering something) OH!

NICK. Sir?

GEORGE. You’re the one! You’re the one’s going to make all that

Trouble . . . making everyone the same, rearranging the chromozones, or whatever it is. Isn’t that right?

NICK. (With that small smile) Not exactly: chromosomes.

GEORGE. I’m very mistrustful. Do you believe. . . (Shifting in his chair) . . . do you believe that people learn nothing from history? Not that there is
nothing to learn, mind you, but that people learn nothing? I am in the History Department. (36-37)

When Nick corrects George’s pronunciation of the word chromosomes, George knows that he has him in the palm of his hand. He then proceeds to make verbal and intellectual mincemeat of the poor neophyte, thereby proving his theory that the best and brightest may not be what they seem. George’s suggestion that history might teach us something about procreation reflects James Watson’s concerns, in his testimony before Congress in 1971, with the renegade experimentation on IVF and other reproductive technologies that was going on at the time, unimpeded by any kind of regulation or oversight. Watson argued for an open discussion of the issues so that the “implications could be envisioned, planned for, and, if need be, short-circuited before the science took on a life of its own” (Helig 76).

**Culturally Prescribed Social Roles**

Although the heated controversy over ART and the associated concerns over human cloning and genetic manipulation gained momentum in the 1970s, Albee had his finger on the pulse of the debate nearly a decade earlier. In an homage to childlessness as a respectable alternative to the postwar mandates to procreate, Albee uses the philosophical conflict between George and Nick to illuminate the absurdity (and potential danger) in culturally prescribed social roles. Before attacking the postwar American value system that embraced motherhood, however, Albee takes on the cultural hierarchy of professional and social status. In the following passage, an alliterative sequence that
Julia Kristeva would call “poetic language,” Albee deconstructs George and Martha’s cultural milieu. The semiotic significance of the descriptor George creates when he combines all of his titles serves to shatter any authority or importance that Nick places on his own degrees:

GEORGE. I am a Doctor. A.B. . . . M.A. . . . PH.D. . . . ABMAPHID!

Abmaphid has been variously described as a wasting disease of the frontal lobes, and as a wonder drug. It is actually both. I’m really very mistrusting. Biology, hunh?

(NICK does not answer . . . nods . . . looks)

I read somewhere that science fiction is really not fiction at all . . . that you people are rearranging my genes, so that everyone will be like everyone else. Now, I won’t have that! It would be a . . . shame. I mean . . . look at me! It is really such a good idea . . . if everyone was forty something and looked fifty-five? You didn’t answer my question about history.

NICK. This genetic business you’re talking about . . .

GEORGE. Oh, that. (Dismisses it with a wave of his hand.) That’s very upsetting . . . very . . . disappointing. But history is a great deal more . . . disappointing. I am in the History Department.

NICK. Yes . . . you told me.

GEORGE. I know I told you . . . I shall probably tell you several more times . . .

(37-38)
As George continues to dissect him, Nick can only stand by, speechless and unable to participate in the monologue. The last two lines of this exchange signal an inversion of social roles (one of many in the play) as Nick responds like a little boy when George mentions history too many times. George’s retort completes the inversion as he treats Nick like an impertinent child, which paves the way for the central topic of the evening—child bearing. In one of his many non sequiturs in the play, George abruptly tosses out the child question:

GEORGE. You have any kids?

NICK. Uh... no... not yet. (Pause) You?

GEORGE. (A kind of challenge) That’s for me to know and you to find out. (39)

Here Albee mocks the culturally dictated small talk inherent in role performances of 1950s America that continues to this day and serves as standard procedure in social situations. First we ask what a person “does,” and then we ask if that person has any children. With his retort, “That’s for me to know and you to find out,” George signals the continuing freefall into social abjection that began as soon as Nick and Honey entered the stage. The night will be long, difficult, and filled with mysteries and deceit. Honey and Nick will not know for sure what is true and what is false. In addition, with his response George taunts Nick (and the reader/spectator) with the significance of the “bit about the kid.”

George’s subsequent discussion with Nick about test tube babies holds an ironic resonance. After quizzing Nick as to whether or not he has children, George follows with, “People do... uh... have kids. That’s what I meant about history. You people are
going to make them in test tubes, aren’t you? You biologists. Babies. Then the rest of us... them as wants to... can screw to their heart’s content...” (40). With the advent of in vitro fertilization and other reproductive technologies, couples such as George and Martha may have been able to have the son they so desired. Instead, George’s opinion of reproductive technologies foregrounds the potential for its misuse and highlights the dangers inherent in any kind of genetic manipulation. Indeed, until Martha’s emotional breakdown in act three, Albee takes a decidedly unsympathetic view of children and the extent to which people will go to get them. Thus George’s exchange with Nick about children contains an edge of ridicule and torment. Nick represents the unattainable (and suspect) scientific possibilities for George—he is emblematic of what the future holds. And yet, in an unsettling twist, Nick possesses a kind of moral sterility that presents itself as a poignant counterpart to George and Martha’s biological sterility.

Of Apes and Men

In addition to using reproductive technologies as markers for tension between George and Nick, Albee throws Darwinian theory into the mix as a way to toy with the 1950s notion that a man must prove his virility by producing children. In setting George and Nick up in opposite corners of the evolutionary debate, Albee comments on the superficial importance of procreation during an era of unprecedented nation-building in American culture. He suggests that without sexual reproduction (on behalf of the best and brightest in a population) the human species is destined to fail. So not only does George’s childlessness create angst for him personally, it jeopardizes the future of mankind.
Albee’s commentary on the survival of the fittest begins with Martha’s assessment of George’s career. After their guests have arrived, Martha attacks George’s lack of success at Daddy’s university, “George is bogged down in the History Department. He’s an old bog. . . . A fen. . . . A G.D. swamp. Ha, ha, ha, HA! A SWAMP! Hey, Swamp! Hey, SWAMPY!” (50). In response to Martha’s chastisement, George protects his primordial being when he refuses to light Martha’s cigarette, “[n]o. . . there are limits. I mean, man can put up with only so much without he descends a rung or two on the old evolutionary ladder. . . (Now a quick aside to NICK). . . which is up your line. . . (Then back to MARTHA). . . sinks, Martha, and it’s a funny ladder. . . you can’t reverse yourself. . . start back up once you’re descending” (51). Perhaps it is not by accident that Nick is a professor of biology, or that Martha accuses George of being a “swamp,” the place, in Darwinian theory, whence we came. Ironically, Nick, the embodiment of virile reproductive status, fails miserably during his kitchen tryst with Martha, and she is ruthless in her critique, “Your potential’s fine. It’s dandy. (Wiggles her eyebrows) Absolutely dandy. I haven’t seen such a dandy potential in a long time. Oh, but baby, you sure are a flop” (188-9). Beyond Martha’s insinuation that Nick lacks the virility to reproduce, his inability to become aroused sparks her own self-doubt and feeds into her vision of herself as sexually unattractive. By this point in the play we understand that Martha uses the young men on campus to pique George’s waning sexual interest in her as well as to affirm her ability to still attract a (virile) mate—which assures the continuation of the species. Given that Martha’s identity depends on her ability to attract a younger man, it is not surprising that Nick’s poor sexual performance during the
“hump the hostess” game earns him the “houseboy” designation and a spot next to George on “the old evolutionary ladder.”

According to Darwinian theory, perhaps George’s erratic behavior and his preoccupation with Nick’s profession explains his concern with his inability to reproduce. His diatribe against what Nick represents, that is, reproductive technologies and genetic engineering, provides a case in point:

. . . this young man is working on a system whereby chromosomes can be altered. . . . the genetic makeup of a sperm cell changed, reordered. . . to order, actually. . . for hair and eye color, stature, potency. . . I imagine. . . hairiness, features, health. . . and mind. Most important. . . Mind. All imbalances will be corrected, sifted out. . . propensity for various diseases will be gone, longevity assured. We will have a race of men. . . test-tube-bred. . . incubator-born. . . superb and sublime. . . . But! Everyone will tend to be rather the same. . . . Alike. Everyone. . . and I’m sure I’m not wrong here. . . will tend to look like this young man here. . . a race of glorious men. (65-66)

In many ways, what George accuses Nick of creating in the lab is really a time-condensed version of Darwin’s theory of natural selection. As Robert Wright explains, in Darwinian theory, “if within a species there is variation among individuals in their hereditary traits, and some traits are more conducive to survival and reproduction than others, then those traits will (obviously) become more widespread within the population” (23). As a scientist, Nick is effectively removing George from the evolutionary equation, and
George reveals a painful awareness of the fact that his genetic link to the future has been broken, “... I, and with me the... the surprise, the multiplexity, the sea-changing rhythm of... history, will be eliminated” (67). Or has George taken himself out of the genetic running? Wright suggests that “no human behavior affects the transmission of genes more obviously than sex” (28). Although Martha is beyond the childbearing years, theoretically George’s age should not affect his ability to reproduce. Indeed, it is George’s lack of interest in sex that does not bode well for his reproductive endeavors. Here Albee sets up George’s questionable ability to assure the continuation of his own genetics as a pointed contrast to Nick’s potency—the cold, calculating scientist can accomplish in the lab what George cannot do naturally.

Threatened by a physically stronger and potentially more virile male, one with absolute confidence that he will procreate, then, George must engage Nick, a male version of the fertility foil, in a war of the minds. As Wright explains, “competition among human, and even prehuman, males has been largely mental. Men don’t have the long canine teeth that male chimps use to fight for alpha rank and thus supreme mating rights. But men do employ various stratagems to raise their social status, and thus their attractiveness” (90). Able to rely on an area where he does hold the power, George, obviously Nick’s intellectual superior, engages him in some verbal sparring:

GEORGE. “... Dashed hopes, and good intentions. Good, better, best, bested.

(Back to NICK) How do you like that for a declension, young man? Eh?

NICK. Sir, I’m sorry if we...

GEORGE. (With an edge in his voice). You didn’t answer my question.
NICK. Sir?

GEORGE. Don’t you condescend to me! (Toying with him) I asked you how you liked that for a declension: Good; better; best; bested. Hm? Well?

NICK. (With some distaste). I really don’t know what to say.

GEORGE. (Feigned incredulousness). You really don’t know what to say?

(32-33)

Physically George does not have a fighting chance with the young quarterback/boxer. He can no longer compete with younger males on the basis of looks, physical fitness, or fertility, but he can hold his own in the intellectual arena. So he wages his battles with Nick in a venue where he knows he can win. Indeed, underneath both Honey and Nick’s superficial role performances lies an intellectual, psychological, and emotional vacuum.

Cultural Abjection

In each of his three acts, “Fun and Games,” “Walpurgisnacht,” and “The Exorcism,” Albee pushes his characters deeper into a chaotic world where prevailing cultural norms and commonly held societal standards fall away, leaving them grappling for some semblance of identity and order. Again, with his small town setting and the appearance of normalized characters, Albee extends the realistic drama of his predecessors, O’Neill, Miller, Inge, then shatters the familiar by disrupting conventional thinking about family life, parenting, motherhood, and the reproductive future of civilization. Critic Anne Paolucci calls *Virginia Woolf* a “juxtaposition and integration of realism and abstract symbolism” (45), while Matthew C. Roudane sees the play as a combination of “realism and theatricalism—a fusion of the illusion of reality and
dramaturgic invention” (65). Thomas E. Porter reads the play as having an “affinity with the continental playwrights of the Absurd,” although he also recognizes its satiric as well as comic elements (226). Ruby Cohn explores the play’s “linguistic distinction” (4) in the vein of Artaud, while Dan Ducker likens the play to a comedy in the “great Western tradition” (476). For Ducker, the critics who have categorized the play as absurdist have missed its overriding theme which is “its concern for establishing community,” a common thread running through comedies (476). Anthony Channell Hilfer sees Albee as “not a symbolist,” but as a “brilliant comedian of sickness, a virtuoso of humiliation and cruelty” (136-7). Certainly the comic elements in the play can be emphasized, and this would depend on the way a particular stage performance handles Albee’s humor. It might be argued, however, that Albee’s humorous scenes—Honey’s inane mutterings, George and Martha’s hilarious exchanges, or George’s firing of the fake Japanese gun, for example—only serve to provide moments of levity in a devastating, methodical march toward a cultural and psychological abyss.

As the preceding litany demonstrates, Albee’s intricate and multilayered text opens up potentialities for a variety of readings. Indeed, the editors of The Longman Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Drama experienced some difficulty pinning Virginia Woolf down to a certain category of drama. Finally content to cover all their bases, they write, “despite its patina of contemporary realism, [Virginia Woolf] is part Sartian [sic] existentialism. . . and part Artaudian theater of cruelty as its characters ‘signal through the flames’ of their personal hell” (Greenwald et al 464). Although this study will attempt to avoid pat generalizations about Albee’s play, following some of
Antonin Artaud’s theories for his Theatre of Cruelty, one might suggest that Albee “defamiliarizes” (from the Russian ostranenie or making strange) his characters and setting in Virginia Woolf by breaking certain codes of social conduct we as a culture have come to expect. In this way, Albee forces his reader/audience to consider alternatives to rigid societal norms regarding motherhood, reproductive status, and familial systems. Much like Artaud’s call for shock value in theater, some of Albee’s methodologies include stripping away the structures of social interaction, inverting and changing social roles, and using certain linguistic techniques that serve to discomfit the reader. To better understand the ways in which Albee disturbs normative social values regarding maternity in postwar America, it will be useful to turn to linguist Julia Kristeva, whose ideas can provide helpful frameworks for an analysis of Albee’s play.

Poetic Language

In her work in linguistics, semiotics, and psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva refers to Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty as one example of the way in which “poetic language” (Revolution 2) can disrupt a static subject position by creating a crisis of meaning. In other words, an audience member might be moved to question his or her cultural belief system if faced with a theatrical presentation that turns the system upside down. Just as Albee challenges us to face our artificial values by shocking us out of our complacent acceptance of superficial realities, Artaud believes that the theater “should force audiences to confront their basest instincts and crimes, which . . . promoted the horrors of modern civilization.” For Artaud a theatrical performance must force people to reveal themselves by invoking a “visceral response that transcends sentiment and
rationality” (Greenwald et al 490). For Kristeva the visceral responses can be invoked through the semiotic component in language, which comprises the utterances, rhythms, and gestures of pre-language. Artaud’s formula for achieving such a response reads like a list of Albee’s stage directions: he calls for, “cries, groans, apparitions, surprises, theatricalities of all kinds... masks, and effigies” (qtd. in Greenwald et al 490), some of the hallmark effects of Albee’s productions.

For Artaud, as for Albee, nonverbal gestures and unexpected utterances serve to push audience members into an uncomfortable state of consciousness as they begin to question the longstanding security of their belief systems. Artaud writes, “Rhythmic repetitions of syllables and particular modulations of the voice cloaking the precise sense of words, will evoke great numbers of images in the brain by means of a more or less hallucinatory state, and will impose upon the sensibility and mind a kind of organic alteration...” (qtd. in Cohn 3). Kristeva places Artaud’s avant-garde theater within the realm of the poetic because it recovers the semiotic disposition in language, which includes the kinds of alliteration and intonation to which Artaud refers.

Using many of the techniques that Artaud describes, Albee’s invocation of the semiotic in *Virginia Woolf* has the theatrical effect of subverting the ideologies of motherhood that were so prevalent in American culture during the 1950s and early 1960s. Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic component in language allows for an analysis of the ways in which Albee uses certain non-language “marks,” such as ellipses and pauses, along with various linguistic techniques such as onomatopoeia, alliteration, and cacophony, to signal interruption, verbal power struggles, domination and subservience,
social inversion and chaos, and a general reversion back to instinctual primal behaviors. In turn, the verbal and nonverbal manipulations in Albee’s text “unsettle” or dismantle one’s notion of cultural norms and subversively introduce the theme of childlessness to his audience. Just as the reality of George and Martha’s imaginary son wanes by the end of the play, the illusion of familial contentment held up as the standard in postwar American culture disintegrates. With his superior linguistic abilities, Albee pounds away on the “substitution of artificial for real values in our society” (Gussow 54).

This unsettling of the subject occurs as the result of “phenomena” Kristeva identifies that Albee uses over and over again in Virginia Woolf: “sentential rhythms” and “obscene words” (Desire 140). (To a lesser degree but still with the same end result, Williams and Inge use obscenity which serves to disrupt a 1950s cultural status quo). The sentential rhythms are created, in part, through the use of what Kristeva calls the “three dots” (Desire 141), or, in our terminology, ellipses. The ellipses disrupt the syntax of a sentence causing the fragments that are set apart to “detach themselves from the sentence’s own signification” (Desire 141). Thus the “elided sentences and floating phrases” disrupt signification and illuminate the “instinctual drive that precedes and exceeds meaning” (Desire 142). Likewise, an “obscene word” “mobilizes the signifying resources of the subject, permitting it to cross through the membrane of meaning where consciousness holds it, connecting it to gesturality, kinesthesia, the drives’ body...” (Desire 143). Thus the use of ellipses and obscene language throws a rhythmic and verbal wrench into signification, which, in turn, throws us, the reader/spectator, into a quagmire of referential instability.
As Thomas E. Porter notes, on the surface *Virginia Woolf* resembles a Noel Coward “drawing-room comedy” except for the explicit language, as “the elements typical of [Coward’s comedies] are submerged by the shock of the dialogue which is very atypical...” (227). It seems we need only turn to the “atypical dialogue” in the opening lines of Albee’s play to discover both of Kristeva’s linguistic phenomena at work:

**MARTHA.** Jesus...  
**GEORGE.**... Shhhhhhhhh.  
**MARTHA.**... H. Christ... (3)

In addition to setting up a rhythmic cadence between the two characters and disturbing our expectations for social decorum, the initial scene between Martha and George indicates, first, their drunkenness, and second, that we have joined them *in medias res*. Something has occurred, perhaps, as George intimates, at one of Daddy’s “goddamn Saturday night orgies” (7), from which they are just returning, or, as we discover soon enough, perhaps George has simply had enough of Martha entertaining the young men with her “skirt up over her head” (17). In any case, although we are never privy to the exact reason, the two characters are at odds with each other when they enter the stage.

Albee uses ellipses and obscene language throughout his text to signal, among other things, alternating levels of alienation and community. Shortly after Martha’s initial outburst, seemingly out of nowhere, “(After a moment’s consideration)” she spews, “You make me puke!” (13). Her violent remarks shock and disturb us—primarily because the castigation seems unprovoked. Furthermore, the following exchange demonstrates how Albee uses ellipses and language to reflect the emotional and
psychological games George and Martha play with one another as they move back and forth between mutual admiration and disgust. To Martha’s statement that he makes her puke, George responds:

GEORGE. What?

MARTHA. Uh... you make me puke!

GEORGE. (Thinks about it... then...) That wasn’t a very nice thing to say, Martha.

MARTHA. That wasn’t what?

GEORGE. . . a very nice thing to say.

MARTHA. I like your anger. I think that’s what I like about you most... your anger. You’re such a... such a simp! You don’t even have the... the what?...

GEORGE. . . guts?...

MARTHA. PHRASEMAKER! (Pause... then they both laugh) Hey, put some more ice in my drink, will you? (13-14)

Here Albee’s ellipses and language indicate a connection that develops between George and Martha as he finishes her thought for her. For a moment they experience a mutual appreciation of one another, a camaraderie, even after Martha has informed George that he makes her puke. In a Kristevan analysis the semiotic element that “discharges” from George and Martha’s dialogue might be read as an indication of their underlying issue of childlessness—an issue that they both simultaneously struggle to recognize and repress.
Maternal Abjection

The pattern of communication George and Martha establish throughout the first act modulates back and forth between destruction and reconciliation. Or in terms of their infertility, between physical alienation and sexual intimacy. When George ribs Martha about her age, "(With boyish pleasure... a chant) I’m six years younger than you are... I always have been and I always will be." She retorts with, "Well... you’re going bald." To which George responds, "So are you." This exchange establishes community—they both laugh as George says, "Hello, honey" (15). However, for reasons unknown to us, when Martha advances sexually, George retreats:

MARTHA. Hello. C’mon over here and give your Mommy a big sloppy kiss.

GEORGE. ... oh, now...

MARTHA. I WANT A BIG SLOPPY KISS!

GEORGE. (Preoccupied) I don’t want to kiss you, Martha. Where are these people? Where are these people you invited over? (15)

First, Albee’s ellipses surrounding George’s “oh, now” serve to alienate Martha by breaking the syntax of their previous, symbiotically linked sentences; second, the inversion of familial positions, Martha as mother, George as son, pushes the boundaries of acceptable social interaction. This scene provides a brief introduction to the unstable
identities in George and Martha’s world and offers a possible explanation for the first of three times that George will reject Martha sexually—she crosses the threshold of the incest taboo—a topic George takes up in his reminiscences about their imaginary son in act three. With his attempts to reconcile Martha’s sexual advances (do they fall within the marriage contract, or are they maternal?), George enters what Kristeva would call the realm of abjection, “The abject confronts us. . . with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her. . . . It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” (Powers 13).

Additionally, considered a direct attack on one of the criteria by which Martha identifies herself as a woman—her sexuality, and by association, her fertility—George’s rebuff prompts her to facilitate his entry into abjection, “Neither subject nor object” (Kristeva Powers 1), George disappears for Martha, “I swear. . . if you existed I’d divorce you. . . .” Martha threatens, “I can’t even see you. . . I haven’t been able to see you for years. . . .” “. . . I mean, you’re a blank, a cipher. . . .” “. . . a zero. . . .” (16-17). When Martha reads George’s rejection as a challenge to her fecundity she turns the tables on him, suggesting that he is the sterile one, a blank. Perhaps in Martha’s world, if George’s progeny does not exist, then neither can he. Thus Albee’s ellipses create an ever widening psychological and physical divide between the two characters.

In addition to his use of elliptical rhythms and obscenities, Albee’s use of onomatopoeia, a linguistic technique that Kristeva terms poetic language, helps to illuminate the underlying factor one might consider to be the cause of the growing chasm
in George and Martha's relationship—their childlessness. For example, many of the instances of onomatopoeia in Albee's text—the genotext or semiotic for the underlying drive forces that may be present—appear during moments when the characters are focused on the issue of sexual reproduction. Thus Albee's use of POUF! in response to Honey's "pregnancy" signals the importance of the drive force of reproduction—something Honey does not possess. Obviously, without reproduction the human race will die off, and this is exactly what happens when George uses POUF! towards the end of the play to indicate their imaginary son's death. Likewise, when George brings out the toy shotgun and POW!!! shocks everyone back in line, he is calling attention to his angst over Nick's virility and foreshadowing Nick's failed performance in that department. Furthermore, in another instance of many, George's POW! refers to the impending death of his imaginary son, "You're dead! Pow! You're dead!" (57). As well, George's POW!!! with the gun echoes Martha's earlier challenge to his masculinity as she described their boxing incident, "... and George wheeled around real quick, and he caught it right in the jaw... POW! (NICK laughs) I hadn't meant it... honestly. Anyway... POW! Right in the jaw... and he was off balance... he must have been... and he stumbled back a few steps, and then, CRASH, he landed... flat... in a huckleberry bush!" (56). Here Albee inverts gender stereotypes by giving Martha the upper hand, so to speak, in the match. Also, Albee juxtaposes Martha's own driving life force and energy against George's lack of motivation, his impotence, his "flat'ness—in life as well as in the bedroom.
Albee uses a technique of onomatopoeia several more times throughout the play to signal a lack of regenerative energy. As Martha criticizes George’s faltering career in academia, the innuendo again suggests an ineffectual sexual (hence reproductive) performance: “You see, George didn’t have much . . . push . . . he wasn’t particularly . . . aggressive. In fact he was sort of a . . . (Spits the word at GEORGE’S back) . . . a FLOP! A great . . . big . . . fat . . . FLOP!” (84). In his stage directions Albee writes, “(CRASH! Immediately after FLOP! GEORGE breaks a bottle against the portable bar and stands there, still with his back to them all, holding the remains of the bottle by the neck. There is a silence, with everyone frozen, Then . . .) / GEORGE (Almost crying) I said stop, Martha” (84). The fact that George almost cries in the face of Martha’s insults suggests, despite his efforts to show otherwise, how vulnerable he is to negative remarks about his professional status. More important, though, is George’s keen understanding of Martha’s real purpose. Every vicious remark that she spews forth carries with it the innuendo that not only is George a failure in his profession, he is a failure in their sexual and reproductive life as well.

So as George continues, semiotically, to kill off their son, Martha marches on in her mission to annihilate the one man who has ever made her happy. In a not-so-subtle way, Martha accuses George of shooting blanks, of being sterile, or, at the very least, of being unable to perform. He lacks the “push” to procreate—perhaps he never had it. Even his gun is devoid of bullets, “Pop! From the Barrel of the gun blossoms a large red and yellow Chinese parasol” (57). As if caustic material to battle George merely falls in her lap, Martha uses the metaphor of the empty gun to criticize his virility by comparing
it to Nick’s, “You don’t need any props, do you, baby?” she asks Nick. Then,

“(Suggestive) I’ll bet not. No fake Jap gun for you, eh?” (61). In a wry comment on the illusory nature of superficial appearances, it turns out that Nick’s “gun” does not function any better than George’s. Again, Albee inverts gender role stereotypes and challenges the idea of the aggressive male as sexually predatory. In Act 3 Martha’s gun metaphor indicates her own potency in response to George and Nick’s lack, “HAH! I’m a gattling gun. Hahahahahahahahaha!” (192). Martha’s gun is not ineffectual like George’s fake one with the limp flag or Nick’s “latch” that he can’t “get up,” and hers does not miss.

Liminal Space

In addition to the destabilizing linguistic techniques Albee uses to question static notions of sexuality and reproduction, he creates a world within the play that is governed by ethical and moral chaos. Thomas E. Porter notes that Albee implies a “‘moral norm’ in Virginia Woolf [by demanding] that the spectator recognize that societal standards can become defenses that the individual uses to avoid the pain of facing reality” (227).

George’s complete loss of procreative and professional identity in Martha’s eyes drives in the disintegration of culturally constructed identities based on superficial postwar criteria—an individual’s reproductive potential, for example.

When Albee strips away the societal or cultural structures in the play, he disrupts existing systems of coherent order and creates an anti-structure or liminal space of cultural abjection that forces the characters into various levels of self-examination. With social structures dismantled in the liminal space or abjection of George and Martha’s living room, truth and fiction coalesce, making a determination of personal identity
nearly impossible. By creating an environment in which identity falls apart, Albee’s funhouse of cultural distortion reflects the abjection that Kristeva discusses in relation to the maternal body, or, the “breaking down of a world that has erased its borders” (*Powers* 4). Within the arena of George and Martha’s borderless society Albee’s two couples jockey for position, toting around rules that have been determined in large part by the omnipotent off-stage character, Martha’s daddy. Thus social abjection ensues when, as Albee’s mouthpiece, George begins to break the longstanding rules that had governed Daddy’s university and, by implication, his relationship with Martha.

According to Kristeva, certain ritualistic behaviors often emerge within a liminal space, or cultural vacuum, as the participants seek to restore order and attain identity. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that Albee uses the titles of his three acts to signal a reliance on certain ritualized performances within the play. For example, act one, “Fun and Games,” may refer to the ritual function of play within a designated social system, while act two, “Walpurgisnacht” refers to the pagan rites of spring, or rituals to ward off evil spirits (and promote fertility). Act three, “The Exorcism,” evokes the ritualized performance of casting off demons through sacrifice. One might argue that Albee’s critique of the normative strictures that define idealized family life includes a devastating commentary on the roles that are expected of women (fecundity, motherhood, homemaking) and men (virility, professional success) in a cultural milieu so concerned with prosperity and procreation.
Given the venomous nature of the verbal attacks flying around George and Martha’s living room, it is not surprising that Albee places his characters in a setting that affords little room for movement. With no place to hide physically or psychically, the characters must face their demons in an exposed venue, unprotected from the castigations and debasements being hurled about. Many critics have remarked on the “claustrophobic” setting in the play, an effect, it seems, that Albee decidedly sought to create. Alan Schneider, who directed the first production of *Virginia Woolf*, confirms that Albee “wanted the image of a womb or a cave, some confinement. . . a room hole [the characters] had to stay within” (Mouton 39). It appears that, per Albee’s instructions, the claustrophobia of the living room engulfs the characters in a womb-like symbiosis they cannot escape without a kind of birth or re-birth of identity.

Let us not be mistaken, however, in assuming Albee’s figurative “womb” represents anything even mildly resembling a stereotypical site of nurturance and safety. Much like the womb in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, denounced as the site of Richard’s disfigurement, “Love foreswore me in my mother’s womb,” Albee’s womb in *Virginia Woolf* represents a site of extreme agitation. As Anthony Channell Hilfer describes it, Albee’s characters remain “trapped at a prolonged emotional debauch” within a “sustained pile-driving, repetition of verbal violence” (126-7). Indeed, if one envisions the entire structure of the play as representing the image of childbirth, then one might consider the moments when the action and verbiage reach the fever pitch of abjection as
representing moments of contraction and the instances of retreat as moments when the
contractions subside.

Throughout his play, Albee uses nonverbal utterances or the kinds of guttural
expressions one might associate with a woman in labor. For example: In act two, during
George’s game of “Get the Guests,” as he betrays Nick’s confidence about Honey’s
“hysterical pregnancy” and tells the story of her “puff,” “(With outlandish horror)”
Honey accuses Nick, “You... told them! You told them! OOOOHPPP! Oh, no, no,
no, no! You couldn’t have told them... oh, nooo!” (147). Then, as if experiencing real
labor pains, “(Grabbing at her belly)” Honey cries, “Ohhhhh... nooooo” (147), [. . .]“I’m going to... I’m going to be... sick...” (148). Here one might read Honey as the
embodiment of Albee’s notion of fertility-gone-wrong. Her character threatens to stall
the process of rebirth for all of the participants in Albee’s “womb” when she rejects her
symbolic pregnancy. In a half-dream state she stumbles onto the stage mumbling about
lying naked under a sheet, a possible reference to a prior abortion, “(Still with her dream)
I DON’T WANT ANY...NO...!” [. . .] “NO!... I DON’T WANT ANY... I DON’T
WANT THEM... GO ‘WAY... (Begins to cry) I DON’T WANT... ANY...
CHILDREN... I... don’t... want... any... children. I’m afraid! I don’t want to
be hurt... PLEASE!” (176). Albee places Honey and Martha within a maternal
dichotomy—one fears the horrors of pregnancy while the other describes the imaginary
birth of her imaginary son as “easy...” “once it had been... accepted, relaxed into”
(217). And Martha’s imagery of the newborn child, “... with slippery, firm limbs, and a
full head of black, fine, fine hair which, oh, later, later became blond as the sun, our son” (218), contrasts sharply with Honey’s impression that a baby will “hurt.”

Critics such as Lincoln Konkle see Honey as experiencing an epiphany of sorts when faced with Martha’s recollections of imaginary birth and motherhood. He writes, “by being made to realize the pathos of George and Martha, who are unable to have a child, and the tragedy of the death even of an imaginary child, Honey seems to have connected with a motherly instinct that had previously been repressed or perhaps transferred to Nick” (54). Beyond Konkle’s suggestion that the simpering, infantile character Honey portrays can be moved by Martha’s imagined reminiscences, his reference to “a motherly instinct” in an article published in 2003 indicates that the nature versus nurture debate rages on into the twenty-first century.

Death of a Son

When the long night in Virginia Woolf morphs into the denouement of early morning, George and Martha’s relationship boils down to one thing—they could not have children in a culture that deemed a lack of progeny unnatural, even un-American. In fact, Albee has recognized the allusion to George and Martha Washington in his play, America’s first “first family” (and a childless couple as well). When George finally convinces Martha that their imaginary son is truly dead, her response reflects the profound anguish we might expect to see from a mother whose very real, flesh and blood child had been killed:
MARTHA. (Leaping at GEORGE, but ineffectual) YOU CAN'T DO THIS!
(NICK rises, grabs hold of MARTHA, pins her arms behind her back) I
WON'T LET YOU DO THIS, GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!

GEORGE. (As NICK holds on; right in MARTHA's face) You don't seem to
understand, Martha; I haven't done anything. Now pull yourself together.
Our son is DEAD! Can you get that into your head?

MARTHA. YOU CAN'T DECIDE THESE THINGS.

NICK. Lady, please.

MARTHA. LET ME GO!

GEORGE. Now listen, Martha; listen carefully. We got a telegram; there was a
car accident, and he's dead. POUF! Just like that! Now, how do you like
it?

MARTHA. (A howl which weakens into a moan) NOOOOOOoooooo.

GEORGE. (To NICK) Let her go. (MARTHA slumps to the floor in a sitting
position) She'll be all right now.

MARTHA. (Pathetic) No; no, he is not dead; he is not dead. (232-3)

One might question Martha's devastation over losing something that she never had. The
son was, after all, only an illusion, a game that George and Martha played in their private
moments. The illusion served, however, as a means by which Martha was able to avoid
the emotional devastation of infertility. When faced with the ultimate finality of her
circumstance, when forced to finally acknowledge the loss, she crumbles. The anger and
bitterness that have propped her up throughout the play dissolve into a pathetic
acquiescence and a defeated acceptance of the truth.

Patricia P. Mahlstedt, author of the article, “The Psychological Component of
Infertility,” suggests that the infertile couple “yearns for the child that may never be and
mourns over the child that never was. Because there is no tangible or clearly defined loss
for family and friends to see—no sense of finality as in death or divorce—it is difficult
for others to truly empathize” (340). Still, she writes, “the grief associated with infertility
has been compared with the grief caused by the death of a child. But it is the child who
was never born, and there is no funeral” (341). By killing the imaginary son in such a
detailed fashion and in front of an audience, George gives Martha a very real way to
express her grief. He provides a ritual through which she can begin to let go of the
illusion of her imaginary son or exorcise her demonic fictions. As she cries out in
anguish, “HE IS OUR CHILD! . . . HE IS OUR CHILD! . . . NO!” (235), George recites
the Mass of the Dead. George’s decision to kill off the son and perform the ritual of the
Latin Mass happens concurrently with Martha’s revelation of her own infertility and
subsequent angst. As the mastermind of the action throughout the play, George brings
the evening to a close.

Many critics read George’s life as glaringly unsuccessful and overwhelmed by
inertia. Dan Ducker writes that, “George’s failure is one of inaction, or of an inability to
act or to take responsibility for action” (474). However, as Anita M. Stenz notes, “far too
much critical attention has been devoted to the ‘failure’ of George” (44). Indeed, despite
Martha’s numerous suggestions that George is a “flop,” he maintains control of the action
during the entire course of the play. Whatever blocked his ability to act in the past has
disappeared by the time the play begins. Matthew C. Roudane finds that, “George
possesses a compelling integrity, a belief in certain humanistic moral principles. . . . [and]
earns the audience’s sympathy . . . because of an ability to restore a qualitative order,
based on love, to their marriage by the final curtain” (155). Unlike Jerry’s abrupt and
unreconciled death in Albee’s play, *The Zoo Story*, the death of the imaginary son in
*Virginia Woolf* actually brings the action back from the brink of madness.

First Communion

If one reads Albee’s final act as representing a ritual of death, then one might also
read the imaginary son as sacrificial, a kind of scapegoat used to appease the gods. The
use of a symbolic scapegoat appears in both Inge and Williams’ plays, first in Lola’s
dream of Sheba’s death and in Brick and Maggie’s lamentation over Skipper’s death.
Linda Woodbridge explores magical thinking in Shakespeare’s plays as it relates to
scapegoats. She writes, “Scapegoat and fertility rites overlap in that sacrifice is part of
the discourse of fertility, and when tragedy invokes the language of fertility, the same
question arises as with scapegoating: does the hero’s death bring symbolic fertility to the
land? Is it redemptive?” (177). Woodbridge maintains that sacrificing a scapegoat
during ritualistic fertility magic can assure us that life will go on.

Julia Kristeva discusses sacrifice, as studied and reported by social
anthropologists such as Mauss and Levi Strauss, as a ritualistic performance within
groups that allows for a return to the societal norms that have been set out by any given
culture. So Albee brings his characters back from the brink of chaos through a ritualized
sacrifice of George and Martha’s imaginary son. The final moments in Albee’s second act, *Walpurgisnacht*, contain the beginnings of the imaginary son’s sacrificial death as George comes to terms with what he must do, “... (Very softly, so MARTHA could not possibly hear) Martha? Martha? I have some... terrible news for you. (There is a strange half-smile on his lips) It’s about our... son. He’s dead. Can you hear me, Martha? Our boy is dead. (He begins to laugh, very softly... it is mixed with crying)” (181). George’s ambivalence over orchestrating his imaginary son’s death reflects the uneasy nature of sacrifice. Kristeva writes that sacrifice has an “... ambiguous function, simultaneously violent and regulatory” (Rev 75).

George and Martha had a “contract,” an agreement which served to “normalize” their fantasies about their imaginary son by retaining the performance as private, within their own social boundaries, not for public view. Quoting Mauss, Kristeva explains the function of the sacrificial rite: “Fundamentally there is perhaps no sacrifice that has not some contractual element. ... Individuals... Confer upon each other, upon themselves, and upon those things they hold dear, the whole strength of society. The social norm is thus maintained without danger to themselves, with diminution for the group” (Rev 76). When Martha Exposure the “secret,” or starts in on “the bit” she pushes the fantasy play that she and George had shared in their intimate moments into the realm of the psychotic. Once viewed by outsiders, even if they are as silly and drunk as Honey and Nick, the game becomes untenable, abnormal, twisted, sick. George alludes to the need for an ameliorative sacrificial rite at the end of act two:
“(A Hideous elation): It’s very simple. . . . When people can’t abide things as they are, when they can’t abide the present, they do one of two things . . . Either they . . . Either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they set about to . . . Alter the future. And when you want to change something . . . YOU BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!” (178).

Ultimately, George rescues Martha, as well as himself, from the brink of madness by killing off the son, by sacrificing him so that they may continue to function within the cultural and societal norms of their community, which is represented in the unstable, yet regulatory presence of Nick, Honey, and Martha’s absent but very present father.

Thus restoration of order is brought about by George’s enactment of a sacrificial ritual. No character in Virginia Woolf escapes the tumult of soul-searching that drives the action of the play. Retrenchment and relative stability will follow the ritual of sacrifice, but it will be a stability unable to perceive what the chaos and disorder that preceded it could ultimately reveal. Matthew C. Roudane writes that “through these hypnotic scenes Albee places the viewer or reader within ‘the marrow’ of the play. Her illusion shattered by her son’s car accident. . . Martha cleanses her soul. . . her purging cry signifying the death of the illusion and the rebirth of some semblance of sanity” (81-82). For Martha the illusion of the son helped to ease the loss of a life—her own.

By the end of act three, amid the rubble of psychic devastation, George and Martha’s visitors finally understand. As Nick and Honey are released from the eternal
nightmare, Nick asks George, “You couldn’t have ... any?” (238). With George and Martha’s response Albee signals a possible change in their relationship:

GEORGE: We couldn’t.

MARTHA: (A Hint of communion in this) We couldn’t. (238)

Having stripped one another of all pretenses, George and Martha can finally stand together, united against a society that valued appearance over substance.

In the end, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf can be read as Edward Albee’s complication of the limited social roles available for his female characters, Martha and Honey, during a postwar era that mandated motherhood as the ultimate life’s pursuit for all women. Likewise, Albee questions a 1950s adherence to procreation as a demonstration of male virility with his characters, George and Nick—one of whom falls short of the masculine ideal—the other representing a 1950s cliché. Indeed, with his chaotic, claustrophobic setting and his semiotic linguistic techniques, Albee confounds the normative strictures that created a psychic imprisonment for many women and men during the 1950s and early 1960s.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The drama’s laws the drama’s patrons give,
and they that live to please must please to live.
(Samuel Johnson)

Little has changed in the world of the dramatic arts since the 18th century.
Playwrights today still must navigate the commercial tide of the theater in order to stage
their work. W.B. Worthen notes that “the growth of American drama and the theater was
decisively shaped by the commercial climate of the stage.” Furthermore, he contends
that “the freedom to make theatre has always been qualified by the need to make it pay”
(952-3). In 1968 Peter Brooks referred to much of the commercial theater as the “Deadly
Theatre.” In his seminal work, Open Spaces, Brooks suggests that “the form of theatre
we see most often... is most closely linked to the despised, much-attacked commercial
theatre” (9), which he describes as dull, lifeless, and mediocre.

A former drama critic, William Inge understood the financial pressures of the
theater business as well as anyone, and yet, in his preface to Come Back, Little Sheba, he
wrote, “Success, it seems to me, would be somewhat meaningless if the play were not a
personal contribution. The author who creates only for audience consumption is only
engaged in a financial enterprise” (viii). Of course, he wrote the preface in 1958 after a
decade of writing and staging four very successful plays, and, as his biographers note,
Inge's physical and mental deterioration in subsequent years came about as a result of his inability to reproduce the success he had enjoyed in the 1950s. Similarly, A.oert J. Devlin suggests that Tennessee Williams was under great pressure to recreate his success on Broadway after the theatrical debacle of *Camino Real* in 1953. Devlin maintains that for Williams, "writing in this 'place of stone,' to quote the original epigraph of *Cat*, occasioned the practice of a deceptive realism that satisfied both the economic law of Broadway and the artistic prompting of [his] endangered career" (95). Williams's struggle to retain the "truth" in *Cat* as he originally had written it, while at the same time acquiescing to the director, Elia Kazan's, demands, left him weary of walking the tightrope between commercial success and personal fulfillment. In the "Note of Explanation" to the published Kazan/Broadway version of the third act in *Cat*, Williams writes, "The reception of the playing-script has more than justified, in my opinion, the adjustments made to that influence. A failure reaches fewer people, and touches fewer, than does a play that succeeds" (125). By 1962, in typical fashion, Edward Albee turned the entire Broadway equation on its head. "In the end," Albee wrote in a *New York Times* editorial, "a public will get what it deserves, and no better. . . . For it is a lazy public which produces a slothful and irresponsible theatre" (3). And yet, despite the real or perceived limitations in the sophistication of audiences, there will always be rare artists who push the boundaries of acceptable (mediocre) theater. "We will experiment," Albee challenges, "and we will expect your attention" (4).

Within the body of work produced on the American stage during the mid-twentieth century, the three plays that were analyzed in this study, William Inge's *Come
Back, Little Sheba, Tennessee Williams’s Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Edward Albee’s Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? do not readily fit the mold of commercial theater, even though they were (and continue to be) financially successful. Indeed, the authors’ complex presentations of the social issues of the 1950s are more akin to Brooks’s “Rough Theatre.” “Freshness is everything,” Brooks writes of the Rough Theatre, “lightheartedness and gaiety feeds it, but so does the same energy that produces rebellion and opposition. This is a militant energy: it is the energy of anger, sometimes the energy of hate” (70). Certainly Sheba, Cat, and Virginia Woolf are fresh. They are also rebellious, angry, and, at times, hateful as they subvert, disrupt, and complicate the dominant postwar ideology that touted strict adherence to culturally prescribed gender roles within the nuclear family form.

In the end, these plays generate multi-faceted cultural, psychological, and linguistic paradoxes regarding female childlessness and masculine identity that a cursory reading of the texts or an initial viewing of the theatrical productions might miss. For instance, all three playwrights create atmospheres on the stage that belie the 1950s notion of hearth and home as nurturing sites of psychic contentment with their ironic use of benign domestic settings. As Alvin B. Kernan suggests, “While each modern set may reflect reality from a particular vantage point, they all seem to say that man finds the material universe they represent to be antagonistic to his transcendent hopes and the aspirations of his spirit” (28). In response to the false illusions encouraged by forms of realism in the theater, all three playwrights mock the realistic style: Inge subverts gender roles in his traditional “kitchen sink” realism; Williams questions sexual orientation in
the poetic realism of his sultry bedroom; and Albee annihilates social conventions in his seemingly innocuous living room. Set in stifling domestic boxes, the plays follow the classical unities of time, place, and action, allowing each writer to look increasingly inward as he attempts to explore the primary characters’ motivations and desires.

Furthermore, the portrayals of childless women in the plays intersect with the cultural portraits of perfect housewives and mothers so prevalent in the 1950s which serves to convolute the highly recognizable gender role stereotypes of the postwar era. In effect, the three childless women characters—Lola, Maggie, and Martha—confound the expectations of post-war middle-class American culture because they do not have children, they do not keep a clean house or perform the other domestic duties expected of women, and they are no longer sexually attractive to their husbands. What these three female characters are left with is an existence filled with social angst, psychological despair, and a crisis of identity. The social contradictions in the texts continue with the childless women’s fertility foils who are presented as equally disengaged with the cultural mainstream of the 1950s. All unsympathetic characters, Marie and Mrs. Coffman in Sheba, Mae Pollitt in Cat, and Honey in Virginia Woolf further complicate the postwar societal notions of maternity and childlessness.

On the other side of the domestic equation are the unstable masculine identities that arise, in part, from the childlessness in the plays. The fixed binaries of female/male gender roles in the 1950s are summarily shattered in the texts of the plays as both the women and the men fail to adhere to socially acceptable standards of conduct. In Sheba Doc’s oedipal attachment to his mother leaves him unable to move beyond infantile
fantasies of a simultaneously nurturing and suffocating maternal body. As a result, he cannot tolerate female sexuality or maternity. The sexual implications surrounding Lola’s childlessness only serve to push him deeper into his repressed psyche. Doc’s inability to respond to Lola’s sexuality leads her into sexual fantasies and vicarious living. Maggie’s childlessness in *Cat* forces Brick to confront his own homosexuality; a topic he would rather leave buried. Brick’s sexual crisis forces Maggie to beg him for physical intimacy throughout the play. In *Virginia Woolf* George’s lack of sexual desire for Martha means that he must suffer her constant harangues about his lack of masculine prowess as she blames him for not having the drive to procreate. In the absence of George’s sexual attention, Martha turns to the other men on campus in a futile attempt to validate her attractiveness. In addition to their sexual behavior which does not fit the normative masculine standards during the postwar years, Doc, Brick, and George have all failed in their careers. Furthermore, all three male characters turn to alcohol in order to evade the cultural expectations for men during the 1950s. Ironically, it is only through alcohol-induced violence that Doc, Brick, and George assume the dominant role in their relationships with their wives—the stereotypical position expected of males in the postwar era.

In addition to confounded gender roles, a close reading of each play in this study reveals the varied contradictions within the texts with regard to familial roles in postwar America. Inge, Williams, and Albee conflate traditional family structures in their plays by blurring the distinction between “Mommy,” “Daddy,” and “Child.” The cultural signifiers continually shift as Doc, Brick, and George fill in as “babies” for Lola, Maggie,
and Martha at various times in the plays while the women enact childlike roles for the men during moments of social tension. Perhaps the presence/absence of the imaginary son in Virginia Woolf speaks most pointedly to the disordered maternal, paternal, and filial referents in all of the plays.

In contrast to the conflated familial roles, though, the “big daddy” figures in all three plays serve to reinforce the cultural expectations of the postwar era. Lola’s offstage daddy in Sheba has tossed her out of the house for getting pregnant out of wedlock and refuses to allow her to return home after Doc’s brutal, drunken attacks. According to her daddy, Lola should have managed her sexuality like a “nice” girl and remained chaste until after marriage. In Cat the exaggerated patriarchal figure of Big Daddy Pollitt presides over the misogynous treatment of all the women in the play. If Maggie does not whet Brick’s sexual appetite, then, according to Big Daddy, Brick should get rid of her. Likewise, Big Mama is reduced to a “fat old body” (57) under Big Daddy’s scrutiny and Mae Pollitt becomes an odious breeder of porcine misfits. As president of the university, Martha’s “daddy” in Virginia Woolf, another offstage character, exerts his overpowering influence throughout the play. Martha was not allowed to explore her sexuality under “Daddy’s” watch and she was not given an opportunity to pursue a career. Furthermore, Martha ascribes to “Daddy’s” judgments regarding George—that he is a failure because he has not risen to the top of his field—which translate to his sexual impotence (in Martha’s opinion) as well. In the end, the cultural and psychological paradoxes regarding maternity, masculine identity, and childlessness that permeate the texts of the plays cannot be reconciled or contained.
Perhaps Julia Kristeva’s semanalysis helps to identify the semiotic components in the texts of the plays that signal moments of social disruption when gender role categories are destabilized. During these moments of disruption the linguistic techniques in the texts reveal unstable significations with regard to culturally constructed gender roles—housewife, mother, father—as social boundaries dissolve and identities break down. The patriarchal structures that supported rigid, static gender categories in the postwar years (represented by the symbolic component in the language of the plays) are shattered when the semiotic erupts from the texts. Furthermore, the semiotic component gains more prominence along a continuum—as time moves forward and as alcohol takes on a larger role in the characters’ lives. In *Sheba* (1950) a polite decorum, reflected in the symbolic component of the language—Doc’s “niceness,” for instance—presides over most of the play. It is only when Doc begins drinking that the unconscious drives or the semiotic rises to the surface. Likewise, in *Cat* (1955), the semiotic emerges only when Brick is challenged by Maggie or Big Daddy to face the truth about his sexual feelings for Skipper, which happens after his alcohol consumption has reached a certain level—after he has experienced the “click.” In *Virginia Woolf* (1962), on the other hand, all of the characters are drunk throughout the duration of the play. Indeed, the text of Albee’s play reveals a semiotic that cannot be contained by the symbolic component, which, one might argue, creates the social and psychological discord so characteristic of George and Martha’s world. It is within these moments of discord or disruption, Kristeva argues, where the potential for social transformation exists.
In keeping with Kristeva’s notion of disrupting the cultural status quo, Mardy Ireland’s rereading of psychoanalytic theory to include childlessness calls for a shattering of fixed identity positions as well. Rather than imagining the vacant womb of the childless woman as empty, or “absent space,” Ireland suggests “viewing this space not as empty or barren, but as an ambiguous, liminal space, waiting to be creatively filled. . . emptied. . . filled. . . and emptied again” (149). Like Kristeva’s semiotic *chora* or receptacle, Ireland’s “liminal space” of the womb can contain a transformational energy that reconsiders childlessness within a more expansive realm of cultural identification. In the end, one might argue that with their contradictory portrayals of gender and familial roles in the postwar era, demonstrated, in part, through their destabilizing linguistic techniques, Inge, Williams, and Albee helped to usher in a new and expanded way of thinking with regard to maternity, parenthood, and the institution of the American family.
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163


166


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