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Aging Ragefully: A Look at Aging Women in Four Contemporary American Dramas

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AGING RAGEFULLY:
A LOOK AT AGING WOMEN IN FOUR CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMAS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Rachel Thomas

May 2015

AGING RAGEFULLY:
A LOOK AT AGING WOMEN IN FOUR CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMAS

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Department of English

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Despite the growing feminist discourse in America, ageism continues to be a problem, partially due to stereotypical representations of aging women in the media and in literature. This thesis examines the portrayals of aging women in four American dramas: Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, and Tracey Letts' *August: Osage County*. Each of the aging matriarchs in these dramas plays a different role within her family structure; however, all employ others' perceptions of them as a means of gaining or keeping control over their own situation. Chapter 1 examines Mrs. Bett from Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, and how she uses the way she is perceived by her family as a means of helping her daughter, even though her own fate is set. Chapter 2 explores the character Grandma from Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, and the ways in which Grandma uses her family's perception of her, as well as her own rhetoric about aging, to establish her own self-definition. Chapter 3 discusses Violet, the matriarch of the family in Tracey Letts's *August: Osage County*, and how she uses the way her family perceives her as a way to control the family's destruction.

Introduction

In a scene from Edward Albee's *The American Dream*, the character Grandma responds to another character's wish that there were more men around to share his opinions by asking, "I don't hardly count as a woman, so can I say my piece?" (23). Grandma's problem is, unfortunately, not an unusual one. Grandma's concerns are not the same as younger women; however, she does not share the privileged position of a man. It is distressing that, considering the growing feminist discourse in America and the increase in studies on the aging population due to the rapid aging of the baby boomer generation, ageism continues to be a prevalent problem. This problem is, at least partially, due to the kind of inaccurate and stereotypical representations of aging individuals that are a problem for members of various minority groups.

A History of Aging Studies

In "Against Wisdom: The Social Politics of Anger and Aging," Kathleen Woodward argues that the rhetoric surrounding age, which focuses on the wisdom of the aged, is damaging because it invalidates the emotional life of the aging (187). Woodward argues that the association of age with wisdom is an "ideal...that serves as a screen for ageism" (187). Woodward examines and responds to two major works on aging, Betty Friedan's *The Fountain of Age* and G. Stanley Hall's *Senescence: The Last Half of Life*. Though Friedan was an activist and author and Hall a psychologist, Woodward notes that "both came to consider aging in America only when they were themselves older, and both wrote ambitious books that have been destined to be forgotten" (188). One can only speculate about the reasons for this neglect, but it is certainly plausible to suggest that the aging population is pushed to the fringes of society and of academic study because the

rest of the population inherently wants to postpone thinking about the inevitable. Perhaps the reasons for this neglect in the field of study are related to the reasons for the associations between anger and aging that are a major point of focus in both Hall and Friedan's work; both, according to Woodward, "deploy a rhetoric of anger, ranging from belligerence to rage" (189).

In her book *The Fountain of Age*, Betty Friedan claims that even the women's movement was caused by "the additional years of human life" (16). Friedan argues that the increase in life expectancy for women meant that "our groping sense that we couldn't live all those years in terms of motherhood alone was 'the problem that had no name'" and that "realizing that it was not some freakish personal guilt but our common problem as women had enabled us to take the first steps to change our lives" (16-7). While Friedan's earlier work, *The Feminine Mystique*, was popular and well-received by feminists of the time, Woodward notes that *Fountain* "was disregarded by academic feminists...in part because Friedan is a liberal feminist and in part because of the ageism implicit within feminism itself" (197). Friedan's book focuses on the concerns specifically of aging women, and on concerns related to gendered aging. In it, she argues that there is an "age mystique" that in many ways parallels "the feminine mystique" that she discusses in her earlier book. She argues that in the case of age, it is the fear of age that masks the personhood of the aging: "the image of age as inevitable decline and deterioration...was also a mystique of sorts, but one emanating not an aura of desirability, but a miasma of dread" (Friedan 41). An effect of the fear of aging, like the "aura of desirability" possessed by younger women, is the potential for that misperception to be used as a tool for the manipulation of other individuals.

The second major study of aging, in addition to Friedan's book, is G. Stanley Hall's *Senescence: The Last Half of Life*. In *Senescence*, Hall argues that the societal rejection of the aging population "results in stagnation...moroseness and depression...and subscribes to the view that intensity of feelings and emotions diminishes over the life course, and that this is one of the conditions of wisdom" (193). The problem with this thinking is that it leads to the misconception that older people are not entitled to their emotions, simply because their control over these emotions leads to the erroneous belief that the emotions are no longer present or are invalid. Hall comments on this phenomenon in which the control that the aging have learned to exercise over their emotions is falsely interpreted as a lack of emotion rather than restraint:

If the fires of youth are banked and smoldering they are in no wise extinguished and perhaps burn only the more fiercely because they cannot vent themselves ... We get scant credit for the self-control that restrains us from so much we feel impelled to say and do and if we break out, it is ascribed not to its true cause in outer circumstance but to the irritability thought characteristic of our years. (383)

Woodward suggests that Hall's earlier study of adolescence informs his observations about old age (195). Both adolescence and old age are periods of life in which individuals are in danger of having their emotional value dismissed as a symptom of their physical age.

In response to Hall and Friedan, Woodward concludes that "challenges to ageism that draw on a rhetoric of protesting anger should not be dismissed...anger in this sense is a judgment, or more strongly, an indictment" (206). Woodward notes that more recent

psychological research “has shown that many cognitive functions do not inevitably decline with age... mental exercise is key to maintaining and strengthening those abilities” and that “the same is true with emotions” (196). She argues that “the emotions ...need not inevitably diminish with age, and...emotional exercise...is as fundamental to their vitality as is their cultural authorization” (196). The problem here is that this emotional exercise is viewed as the opposite of healthy, and when emotions are exercised by the aging, others fail to take their intellectual assertions seriously. The failure to take academic work on aging seriously because of its roots in anger is part of a vicious cycle in which the aging population is dismissed because their show of emotion does not fit into the younger population’s image of what age should look like. The aging population responds with justified anger, and the cycle continues.

Unfortunately, this cycle is present not only in psychology and women’s studies, but also in literary studies—even in literature itself. Considering the significant role played by grandparents in many American families, particularly in Appalachia and the South, aging women are widely underrepresented in American literature. The plays examined in this thesis—Zona Gale’s *Miss Lulu Bett*, Edward Albee’s *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, and Tracey Letts’s *August: Osage County* are an exception to this underrepresentation. Perhaps this is because the structure of drama lends itself well to the examination of “roles” within a family. The depth that can be achieved in a novel allows for more extensive character development; however, the theater allows a closer look at roles as such. These plays reveal how different roles within a family, like members of a cast, either unite to create a cohesive unit or break down and result in the failure of the family unit to function.

Modern and contemporary family dramas frequently focus on the breakdown of a family. Many of these plays focus on marriage; however, in the plays examined in this thesis, each member of the family experiences the breakdown of their role within the larger structure, and in each of these plays, the grandmother figure's struggle to retain some power within the family is crucial to the depiction of how modern society cannot support a traditional patriarchal family structure. In this patriarchal family structure, family members are valued according to their ability or potential ability to produce or contribute to the family life. The father traditionally works outside of the home and is the source of power within the family, while the mother cares for the home and children. Because these aging women do not work outside of the home and are incapable of bearing children, they are dependent on their adult children and are undervalued. Their justified anger at being undervalued, combined with their children's exaggerated perceptions of their parents' failing minds, is used by the families of the aging as justification for their de-legitimization.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the portrayals of aging matriarchs in four American dramas: Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, Edward Albee's *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*, and Tracey Letts' *August: Osage County*. These women all play different roles within their family dynamic: Grandma Bett is elevated to a false position of honor: her family speaks of her as though they are solicitous of her yet treat her in a way that indicates that she has no real power. Albee's Grandma is dismissed and eventually discarded by her family, while Violet Weston is very much at the center of her family, despite their dysfunctional dynamic and ill will towards her. The mental state of these characters is both a product of their treatment by their families and a tool that they

use to manipulate others. They accept that they cannot change the unfair, dismissive way in which others perceive them, so they take ownership of that perception, in the same ways as younger women might take ownership of other's perceptions of their sexuality, and use it to achieve their own goals and maintain a sense of self.

Senility, Memory, and Power in *Miss Lulu Bett*

Miss Lulu Bett by Zona Gale depicts a family for whom the traditional patriarchal structure is failing. Lulu, the main character, is trapped by circumstance in the home of her sister's husband. As an unmarried woman, Lulu seems destined to a life as an unappreciated housekeeper to her sister Ina and brother-in-law Dwight, until Dwight's brother Ninian comes to visit, and wants to marry Lulu and take her away. This work has appeared in three different versions: a novel, the play as it is originally written, and a revised version that Gale wrote as a response to audience reception. When discussing this work, scholars tend to focus on the Miss Lulu Bett herself and her relationships with the men in the novel and her prospects for marriage. This is certainly fitting, as family life and marital prospects for women are obvious themes of the work. Marilyn Atlas notes that "Zona Gale may be indecisive about the extent of her critique of the patriarchal family, but she never dismisses the problems she sees in marriage and in the power relationships that traditional, heterosexual families support" (38). Gale's indecisiveness is in reference not only to the changes made in the title character's marriage prospects in the different endings of the work, but also to the effects of women's social and economic prospects on the entire family, including Lulu's nieces, Monona and Diana, as well as Mrs. Bett, Lulu and Ina's mother. Lulu and the two young girls perhaps have the potential to break the cycle; however, because of her age and dependence on her son-in-law, Mrs. Bett is trapped in her current circumstances.

Mrs. Bett is in many ways a cautionary tale of what Lulu could become. She is a complex character who is different in each version of the work, and the changes in her character between the various forms significantly alter the plot and message of each play;

however, in this chapter I will focus on Mrs. Bett's character in the revised version of the play. Mrs. Bett knows that, because of her powerlessness within the family structure, she cannot change the fact that she is perceived by her family as a senile old lady, or that she will be dependent on her son-in-law for the rest of her life. Because she cannot change her circumstances, Mrs. Bett opts to use the way she is perceived by her family as a means of helping her daughter Lulu to break the unhealthy cycle of entrapment within the family due to limited options.

Though there is sufficient material for discussion to be found even in examining this one fascinating character, the existing body of work on Zona Gale is sparse, and the critical writing concerning the play version of Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* is even rarer. Zona Gale was a prolific writer, producing more than thirty novels, plays, poems and works of non-fiction between 1906 and her death in 1938. Additionally, she was a journalist and political activist who fought for equal rights for women (Simonson 11). During her life, her plays and novels were popular, and she was viewed as important among her contemporaries, including Edith Wharton and Eugene O'Neill (O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* was produced during the same season that Gale won the Pulitzer Prize for *Miss Lulu Bett*). It is puzzling, then, that today she is seldom anthologized and her plays are rarely performed. That Gale's work is largely ignored by critics is undeserved, because although "Gale's style remained conservative when compared to radical experimentalists of her time such as Gertrude Stein...when she adapted *Miss Lulu Bett* as a play (1920), Gale, for a moment, embraced a very modern attitude toward closure, or the lack of closure" (35). This lack of closure refers to the ambiguity of the ending of the first version of *Miss Lulu Bett*—in this version, the reader is given no concrete idea of what will become of Lulu.

Gale rewrote the last act after the play had been running as originally written for only two weeks (Simonson 85).

Miss Lulu Bett was adapted from Gale's earlier novel by the same title. All three versions of the work—the novel and the two versions of the play—have significantly different endings. In the novel Lulu Bett marries, albeit somewhat accidentally, the brother of her sister's husband. After discovering that Ninian is already married, Lulu has no choice but to return to the home of her brother-in-law, but is "saved" by her marriage to another suitor—Neil Cornish. In the stage adaptation, Lulu refuses Cornish's offer of marriage and ventures out into the world on her own. In the revised ending, Lulu returns to her family after Ninian reveals the secret of his first marriage, is aided by her mother in a plot to run away, but is stopped at the last minute by the return of Ninian, who declares that his wife has been dead for many years and that his marriage to Lulu is legitimate. Although Mrs. Bett is the mother and grandmother to the other female characters in the play, her role is defined by her relationships with the men in the play, particularly Dwight, who looms over her relationship with her daughters and granddaughters.

Mrs. Bett and the Men

Because Mrs. Bett is ignored and undervalued by the other characters, she clings to the only method she has of manipulating others' perceptions of her by controlling how they view her state of mind. Though she certainly is not always lucid, she is much more observant than most of the characters give her credit for, and she uses their perceptions of her to gain information and act as she wants without having to give an excuse. Mrs. Bett uses her mental state as a form of currency, but she does so differently with different characters. The men in the play are dismissive of her, so she embraces the image of her

that they hold—one of a senile, excessively emotional old woman—in order to achieve what she wants to achieve. She identifies with Lulu’s powerlessness, so she uses her age as grounds to speak in Lulu’s defense. Finally, she is willing to sacrifice the last of her power to save Lulu from sharing in her fate: in one ending, by fully submitting to Dwight’s image of her; in the other, by giving Lulu all of the money she has so that Lulu can run away and seek a better life.

Mrs. Bett’s manipulative nature is most evident in her interactions with the men in the play. Mrs. Bett’s duplicitous interactions with the men might be the result of their emotional distance from her—all of the women are her blood relatives, but none of the men—but also of their failure to value her as an individual. She is not deliberately slighted by her granddaughter’s suitors, Neil and Bobby, but they do not include her or notice her as an individual. She is only valuable to Dwight as food for his self-image: her presence is useful to him because he enjoys thinking of himself as a man who takes care of and venerates his mother-in-law; however, when she is difficult, he ignores her. Only Ninian values her in any way as an individual, and it is Ninian to whom she reveals the most about herself.

The two suitors, Neil Cornish and Bobby Larkin, each interact with Mrs. Bett in an attempt to gain information about the women in whom they are interested, Lulu and Diana. Because they are both focused on their love interests, their inattention to her is understandable if not forgivable; however, the way that they treat her is telling about her position in the family. After cutting the grass, Bobby, obviously looking for either Mr. Deacon or Diana, questions her as to the whereabouts of the rest of the family:

Bobby: Where’s Mr. Deacon?

Mrs. Bett: Gone, thank the Lord!

Bobby: I've got the grass cut.

Mrs. Bett: You act like it was a trick.

Bobby: Is—is everybody gone?

Mrs. Bett: Who's this you're talkin' to?

Bobby: Yes, well I meant—I guess I'll go now. (98-9)

Bobby's slight is obviously unintentional, and Mrs. Bett's reaction can be read as overly defensive. He is looking for Mr. Deacon, to be paid for the grass, or for Di, to flirt, but he accidentally slights Mrs. Bett in the process. While he is not overly solicitous of her in the fake, flattering way Dwight is, he does leave her out of the family circle; she is not part of the "everybody" to whom he refers. However, she is fully aware of Di and Bobby's flirtation, even though they fail to pay her any mind. She tells Lulu that she "hears a-plenty" and that "Di wiggles and chitters" (99-100). Mrs. Bett's chastisement of Bobby for failing to include her in the family group appears to be an attempt to observe his reaction rather than a genuine expression of disapproval.

Mrs. Bett is a bit more direct with Neil Cornish, though she speaks harshly to him for ignoring her in much the same way she does Bobby. Cornish is a significant character, because in the end of the play he proposes to Lulu, and his proposal sets up a series of alternative choices for Lulu. Though Cornish's failure to notice Mrs. Bett is, like Bobby's, accidental, his proclamation that he does not see her once again demonstrates

that outsiders view her as someone who is something other than a valuable member of the Deacon-Bett family:

Mrs. Bett: I'm just about the same as I was.

Cornish: What—er—oh, Mrs. Bett, I didn't see you.

Mrs. Bett: I don't complain. But it wouldn't turn my head if some of you spoke to me once in a while. Say—can you tell me what these folks are up to?

Cornish: Up to...up to?

Mrs. Bett: Yes. They're all stepping round here, up to something. I don't know what. (109)

As usual, it is unclear whether or not Mrs. Bett's confusion is genuine or an attempt to gain another perspective on the matter. She does not merely accept her role as an outsider; she calls attention to others' failure to notice her, but her forgetfulness is not quite what it seems to be. Whether or not she has forgotten the plan to go to the theater, she is aware of what is going on between Lulu and Ninian; she is aware of the internal motivations of the other characters, and that awareness is not dependent upon her awareness of the literal details of the plot. Additionally, her framing of Cornish as one of the "some of you" who could bother to speak to her can be read as an attempt to diminish his individuality in the same way hers is diminished by his failure to notice her.

The interactions between Mrs. Bett and the suitors are significant because they are evidence of how the society outside of the family views and treats an aging woman;

however, her relationship with Dwight is much more significant. Because of their family connections, both Dwight and Mrs. Bett play a significant role in the definition of the other person's role in the family dynamic. Mrs. Bett's interactions with Dwight are interesting because she is actually dependent upon him for her livelihood; however, his treatment of her is condescending at best. Theater critic Kathleen McLennan says of the play that:

Zona Gale's treatment of family dynamics points to the results of a metamorphosis where bonds of love have given way to obsessions with status in a community. Further, the play suggests that Dwight's values are maintained only at the expense of keeping women in a subordinate position in the family. Grandmother Bett's uselessness in the structure suggests that a woman's primary function in the family is to bear children and serve as housekeeper. (247)

As McLennan says, Dwight gains his power by squelching that of the female characters, but, having no socially acceptable role to play within the family, Mrs. Bett appears to have less power than the rest of the women. Lulu keeps the house running, Ina is the mother to Dwight's children and a status symbol, and both Di and Monona's value comes from their potential as wives and mothers. In this value system, Mrs. Bett is powerless; however, she is still necessary to Dwight's self-image. Dwight's position as patriarch and breadwinner is dependent upon the other members of his family. Mrs. Bett allows Dwight to appear to be (or, play the role of) the caring, somewhat put-upon, son-in-law. The only power she does have lies in the ability to manipulate others' perceptions of her by her behavior and her choice to display or not display her emotions and the appearance of

lucidity. By maintaining this small control, she has the power to manipulate Dwight's image of himself.

While Mrs. Bett has no real power within the family, she uses her emotions to manipulate the way that others perceive her, which inevitably alters—or at least challenges—the way they perceive themselves. Every action Lulu or Mrs. Bett takes that causes Dwight any kind of discomfort is referred to as an action that is not considered with a sound mind. Dwight's assertion that Lulu and Mrs. Bett are "havin' the tantrum" (147) is actually an assertion that his will is superior to theirs, and that any actions which do not contribute to the fulfillment of his will could not be anything but crazy:

Dwight: ...Lulu must be having the tantrum.

Mrs. Bett: I s'pose you think that's funny.

[...]

Dwight: You mustn't talk like that. You know you're my best girl.

Mrs. Bett: Don't you best-girl me.

Dwight: There, there, there... (146)

Dwight's framing of his relationship with Mrs. Bett as an affectionate, playful one is related to Woodward's arguments about the perception of the aging population in which age equals wisdom. Recall that Woodward argues that this model does not work, because the attitude that the aging are venerated for their wisdom is actually a path to their dismissal and the invalidation of their emotions. By calling Mrs. Bett his "best girl," Dwight is suggesting he is fond of her and values her; however, by calling her a girl he is simultaneously suggesting that she is childlike he has the right to tell her what she can and cannot say and attempting to control the manner in which she expresses herself. This

urge to control her is, again, for Dwight to maintain his own self-image, Mrs. Bett must fit his preexisting ideas of an elderly lady. Dwight believes Mrs. Bett should behave like a wise old grandmother, but the problem with that is that “wisdom carries the connotation of dignified behavior” (Woodward 206). When Dwight tells Mrs. Bett she “mustn’t talk like that,” he is asserting that he does not believe her behavior fits the standard of behavior for an aging woman, which is actually an attempt to deprive her of an emotional economy.

The earlier conversation continues with more of this same type of dialogue. Dwight continues to attempt to define Mrs. Bett as excessively emotional and irrational any time she expresses anger toward him, but she challenges him by accepting the way he has identified her:

Mrs. Bett: Now look at you. Walking all over me like I wasn’t here—like I wasn’t nowhere.

Dwight: Now, Mama Bett, you’re havin’ the tantrum.

Mrs. Bett: Am I? All right then I am. What you going to do about it? How you going to stop me? (147)

Dwight attempts to exert control over Mrs. Bett by naming her emotions for her; she is identified by him as “old,” and he tries to use her as a prop for his own posturing as the man of the house who provides for everyone. He blames his anger at Lulu’s failure to serve him on false concern for his mother-in-law’s needs, and he attempts to characterize his abuse toward Mrs. Bett and Lulu as a response to their lack of emotional control or sanity. Mrs. Bett, however, refuses to allow his “othering” of her to be a simple matter. As a subversive way of pushing back against his accusation, she accepts it and makes use

of it. He attempts to dismiss her emotions by accusing her of “havin’ the tantrum”; her response confronts his assumptions about her and himself. Her statement, “All right then I am. What you going to do about it? How you going to stop me?” (147), allows her to take ownership of his identification of her and forces him into an interaction with her. This is the opposite of what he intended his statements to be, which was a direct dictation toward her. Dwight is both incapable of and unwilling to stop Mrs. Bett from behaving in whatever way she will because his self-image depends upon her behavior.

Because Dwight and Mrs. Bett are dependent on each other in this negative way, Mrs. Bett does not reveal any of her true emotions to him; however, she does reveal things about herself to Ninian—Dwight’s brother, and in the revised version of the play, Lulu’s husband. It is significant that it is Ninian to whom Mrs. Bett reveals the most personal thing she says in the play. This is because he is also a duplicitous character. He lies about having never been married; however, it is to him that she reveals the most about herself in the play:

Ninian: ... Oh, Mrs. Bett! Won’t you come to the theater with us tonight?

Mrs. Bett: No. I’m fooled enough without fooling myself on purpose. But Lulie can go.

Ninian: You don’t let her go too much, do you, Mrs. Bett?

Mrs. Bett: Well, I ain’t never let her go to the altar if that’s what you mean.

Ninian: Don’t you think she’d be better off?

Mrs. Bett: Wouldn't make much difference. Why look at me. A husband, six children, four of 'em under the sod with him. And sometimes I feel as though nothin' more had happened to me than has happened to Lulie. It's all gone. For me just the same as for her. Only she ain't had the pain.

[*Yawns*] What was I talkin' about just then?

Ninian: Why—why—er, we were talking about going to the theater. (106-07)

Ninian is the only male character who gives Mrs. Bett any kind of respect. He plays according to her rules, and because he does, she gives up a truth about herself to him. He knows that Mrs. Bett is not going to the theater with the group, but she views his asking as an act of respect, and instead of being manipulative with him, she is straightforward. Her admission that she sees no point in fooling herself is only partially true, though: her very response to him contradicts that idea. Her remark that she is “fooled enough without fooling [herself] on purpose” is quite a clever, nuanced one. On the surface, it would seem to be a reference to the play; watching a play, that one knows to be fiction but must suppose is true, could certainly be fooling oneself on purpose; however, the self-deception could also be a reference to the delusion that his invitation was genuine rather than a gratuitous one that he knew would be declined. It is also unclear who is doing the “fooling” in the earlier part of her remark. She’s “fooled enough,” but that could be a reference to her own declining memory or to her family’s neglect of her. It is a passive way to frame the remark: she “is fooled” could mean that she is deceived or that she is made into a fool, but she takes no responsibility in the action.

Even though Mrs. Bett answers Ninian's questions in this nuanced way, the conversation between them is more honest than with any of the other men in the play. Ninian actually attempts to discuss the relationship between Mrs. Bett and her daughter. Even though he is the only character in the play who may actually take one of her daughters away from her physically, he is the least threatening emotionally, because he actually engages with her. She responds to Ninian in a real, emotional way, and he allows her response and does not make judgements about it or attempt to define her. Ninian is less of a threatening presence than Dwight, because Ninian has a conversation *with* Mrs. Bett rather than using manipulative rhetoric toward her. Dwight's presence looms over the whole family; even though Mrs. Bett lives in Dwight and Ina's home with both of her living daughters and granddaughters, she is unable to have a relationship with any of them that is not colored by Dwight's perceptions of them all.

Mrs. Bett as Matriarch: Her Daughters and Granddaughters

Mrs. Bett and her granddaughters are an excellent illustration of the point Woodward makes about Hall's research in *Senescence*. Woodward argues that Hall's insightful study of age was informed by his many years of research on adolescence, and notes that "the association with infancy, of a second childhood with childhood proper, is altogether familiar—and demeaning to the old...by linking old age with adolescence [Hall] borrows the energy of adolescence and transfers it to old age" (195). This reference to "energy" means, specifically, emotional and intellectual energy. Hall claims that "senescence, like adolescence, has its own feelings, thought, and wills, as well as its own physiology, and their regimen is important, as well as that of the body" (100). Old age, like adolescence, is a period in which a person has many emotions that are directly

related to their physiology, and there exists a misconception that this relationship invalidates all of a person's thoughts and emotions. This invalidation only feeds into the cycle of ageism, because the anger that is the natural result of the invalidation of the self is dismissed as the result of senility or hormones.

Perhaps this connection is the reason Mrs. Bett identifies with her granddaughter Monona more than any other character: they are both neglected and powerless.

Throughout the play, Dwight and Ina chastise Monona when she is not behaving in a way that fits their image of their family, but they do not pay any serious attention to her, and they frequently fail to follow through on their threats. Because they are seldom taken seriously by the other characters, both Mrs. Bett and Monona are forced to act out in some way to be noticed; however, their words and actions do little to change their situations. When Dwight and Ina fail to pay attention to Monona, Mrs. Bett is quick to call attention to the fact that her daughter and her husband are not very parental. Just as Dwight cares more about being able to see himself and having others see him as a man who cares for and respects his mother-in-law, Dwight Ina and care much more about the appearance of having a well-behaved, quiet child than they do about shaping Monona as a person. Monona's response to her parents' behavior is not unreasonable, considering that she is a child whose parents have a neglectful attitude toward her:

Monona: I hate the whole family.

Mrs. Bett: Well, I should think she would.

Ina: Why, mama! Why, Pettie Deacon!

[Monona *weeps silently*]

Dwight: [*To Ina*] Say no more, my dear. It's best to overlook. Show a sweet spirit... (118)

Dwight frequently belittles Mrs. Bett and Monona by referring to them as “pettie” or some other pet name, insinuating that they are more of an amusement or a pet than a person to be taken seriously. In this passage, neither Mrs. Bett nor Monona express a thought or emotion that is ignored by Dwight and Ina. Mrs. Bett responds to Monona's exclamation with agreement, but Ina can only utter a meaningless exclamation of surprise in reply. When Monona cries, Dwight opts out of an interaction with her, saying that it is “best to overlook” her tears.

Dwight's advice to Ina to “show” rather than “have” a sweet spirit is also noteworthy, because it demonstrates his priorities, which become Ina's priorities, in their role as parents. Dwight wants Ina to “show” a sweet spirit because it is important to him to have a wife who appears to others to have a sweet spirit. He places much more value on how their family is perceived by outsiders than on its actual function. Dwight and Ina care more about the appearance of a polite, well-mannered child than the actual happiness and emotional health of their daughter, and Mrs. Bett calls their parenting style into question:

Mrs. Bett: About as much like a father and mother as a cat and dog.

Dwight: We've got to learn—

Mrs. Bett: Performin' like a pair of weathercocks.

[Both talking at once]

Dwight: Mother Bett! Are you talking, or am I?

Mrs. Bett: I am. But you don't seem to know it.

Dwight: Let us talk, pussy, and she'll simmer down. (118-119)

Mrs. Bett is quick to point out the importance of performance in the family dynamic. Though she never makes an effort to restrain her feelings about Dwight, she is most willing to be belligerent in defense of Monona or Lulu, perhaps because her efforts on their behalf might actually yield results.

Mrs. Bett is her most lucid, kindest self when she is fulfilling her role as mother and grandmother in the way that she would like; however, Ina and Mrs. Bett appear to have no relationship apart from Ina's role as Dwight's wife and Mrs. Bett's role as Dwight's mother-in-law. The two characters are never seen alone together apart from Dwight; his presence looms over the entire family, and the distance that it creates between Mrs. Bett and her daughters and granddaughters is reason enough for her resentment, even if he did not treat her as condescendingly as he does. Even when Mrs. Bett stands up to Dwight, he simply ignores the responses that do not fit into his own self-image. Dwight diminishes the women in his family by using animalistic "pet names" when they are not speaking or acting in accordance with his wishes, and in turn, Ina does the same to her mother and her children. Only Lulu (and eventually perhaps Di) can escape from this environment, and Mrs. Bett's power is only truly useful in aiding her daughter in that endeavor.

Mrs. and Miss Bett

Mrs. Bett and Lulu's relationship is complicated by the fact that, until the appearance of Ninian, Lulu seems destined to repeat the same fate as her mother. In both versions of the play, Mrs. Bett has moments of perfect lucidity at the precise moment when Lulu needs her the most, but in both versions she is also somewhat lost in the effort to save Lulu from sharing her fate.

Even though Mrs. Bett is softer and more lucid in the second ending, in the first, she is still the most lucid that she has been for the entire play. She alternates rapidly between moments of clarity and confusion. In a scene near the end, she reminisces with Lulu and Cornish about her life before she came to live with Dwight and Ina:

That was when I was first married. We had a little log house in the clearing in York State. I was seventeen—and he was nineteen. While he was chopping I use' to sit on a log with my sewing. Jenny was born in that house. I was alone at the time. I was alone with her when she died, too. She was sixteen--little bits of hands she had. (132)

This is the only time, other than her conversation with Ninian about saving Lulu from the perils of married life, that Mrs. Bett reveals anything about her earlier life. This is the first real mention of one of her other children, and while her comments about her marriage give no indication of whether or not it was a happy one, it is important that she notes that she was alone with her daughter during her birth and her death. She was alone with her other daughter, Jenny, at the critical moments of her life, and now she finds herself in a similar predicament with Lulu. Even though Lulu is not about to die, at this point, Mrs. Bett is the only character who has a truly disinterested affection for her and

has her best interests in mind. Dwight and Ina want Lulu to keep Ninian's bigamy a secret, and Cornish wants to marry her. Though Mrs. Bett is the only character that truly needs Lulu, she is also the only character that is willing to sacrifice her own will and power to aid Lulu.

Throughout the play, Mrs. Bett alternates between moments of clarity and moments of confusion that seem to alternate more rapidly as the play progresses. One minute she is reminiscing about her past, dreamily recounting memories of her husband and daughter, only to become confused again shortly thereafter. She mercilessly teases Di when word gets out that she tried to run away and marry Bobby Larkin, but moments later, she has her most lucid moment of the play as it originally was performed, and once again, it is her role as Lulu's mother that produces this moment. In the scene in which Lulu tells Mrs. Bett about the contents of a letter from Ninian, who has found that he is still married to his first wife, Mrs. Bett shows a side of herself not yet seen in the play:

Mrs. Bett: Did he want you to stay with him?

Lulu: I don't know. But I think he did. Anyway, now I know the truth about him.

Mrs. Bett: Well, I wouldn't want anybody else to know. Here, let me have it and burn it up.

Lulu: Mama, mama! Aren't you glad for me that now I can prove Ninian wasn't just making up a story so I'd go away?

Mrs. Bett: [*Clearly and beautifully*] Oh, Lulu! My little girl! Is that what they said about you? Mother knows it wasn't like that. Mother knows he loved you...How still it is here! Where's Inie? (135)

The stage direction specifically notes that Mrs. Bett is to deliver the first part of the last line “clearly and beautifully,” despite her erratic, trailing language in other parts of the play. In this moment, Lulu needs her mother’s reassurance, and for just a moment, she gets it. This moment is a turning point for Mrs. Bett, no matter which ending is being considered. In the original ending, this scene is a last effort to be of help to Lulu. Mrs. Bett is either sardonic or confused from that point on—evidence of the fractured family with whom she must live without being really accepted as one of their number. In the second ending, Mrs. Bett is a much softer, more likable character, yet Atlas argues that “Miss Lulu Bett may be kindest and most sentimental in the second version of the play; her mother in this same version may be the most supportive, the least selfish and senile, but the family, even in this romanticized version, is nevertheless a questionable institution--hurtful, hypocritical, and frightening” (37). Gale changed the ending to the play because of speculation that audiences wanted a more traditionally happy ending, yet the change was met with dissatisfaction from the literary world. Though Gale defended her choice, many thought the second ending lessened the seriousness of Lulu’s predicament. Atlas argues that the softer ending does not change the message of the play:

Her changing the play’s ending to a more family-friendly version in which Miss Lulu Bett’s mother is clearly supportive and Lulu’s husband not a bigamist after all at least allows for the possibility that Zona Gale’s own ambivalence toward single life, for she herself was still single, as well as her discomfort with her anger and confusion about the proper way to cope with emotional betrayal or to control feelings of bitterness when one is being belittled and abused, influence her willingness to go for a safe

ending that offered closure and romance instead of risk, open-endedness, and embittered, unsolvable, irony. (39)

Even with the softer ending, the desperation of Lulu's situation is no less poignant: the same is true for Mrs. Bett. The revised ending offers her an opportunity to choose, as Lulu intends to do, the direction she will take in life.

In the revised ending, Mrs. Bett essentially admits that she is more aware of her surroundings than she sometimes appears to be. When Lulu tells her of her plan to leave the Deacon house, she is unsurprised:

Lulu: Mother. Now, mother darling, listen and try to understand.

Mrs. Bett: Well, I am listening, Lulie.

Lulu: Mother, I can't stay here. I can't stay here any longer. I've got to get clear away from Dwight and Ina.

Mrs. Bett: You want to live somewhere else, Lulie?

Lulu: I can't live here and have people think Ninian left me. I can't tell the truth and bring disgrace on Ninian. And I can't stay here in Dwight's kitchen a day longer. Oh, mother! I wish you could see—

Mrs. Bett: Why, Lulie, I do see that.

Lulu: You do, mother?

Mrs. Bett: I've often wondered why you didn't go before....you needn't think because I'm old I don't know a thing or two. (145)

Even though Lulu assumes incorrectly that her mother will not understand her predicament, Mrs. Bett is more patient, kind, and understanding than she has been

throughout the entire play. She gives Lulu the money intended for her own funeral, to go away and start a life on her own.

Though Mrs. Bett gets the last word in the original ending, and close to it in the revised version, she appears to gain very little from her efforts at manipulation. She cannot use her small power to help her situation. She is still dependent upon Dwight for her needs; however, her physical needs are not, for her, the most significant thing. Mrs. Bett's use of her own mind to control others' perceptions of her allows her to maintain her dignity, even if she and Lulu are the only ones who know.

Identity and Power in *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox*

Edward Albee's short plays *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* center around the same family and characters, inaccurately named Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma. Grandma is Mommy's mother; however, the characters do not actually fulfill these roles, because their family is missing a child. In *The American Dream*, the family awaits the arrival of the person who will come to take Grandma off to a nursing home, and their erratic, nonsensical conversation up to this point paints a clear picture of their dysfunction as a family. In *The Sandbox*, Mommy and Daddy take Grandma to a beach-like setting, which becomes the stage for the moment of her death, which occurs in a children's sandbox. The family already does not fit into a traditional patriarchal American family structure, because although the family members are literally embodying a role, they do not fulfill that role in a traditional way. The discussion of Mommy and Grandma's backstory shows that at one point they had a mutually beneficial relationship, but at the point at which their roles would change, they did not. Although they have taken on the roles of "Mommy" and "Grandma" in name, those are not the roles they are performing because they lack an audience—a child. Instead, the two of them are now competing for the attention of and control over Daddy. Though Grandma does not have any control over the fact that her daughter and son-in-law disregard her and, ultimately, leave her to die, she employs their perception of her and her own rhetoric of aging to define herself, and through self-awareness, maintains a sense of dignity in an undignified situation.

Edward Albee is one of the few playwrights who gives significant attention to elderly female characters. The character "Grandma" in Albee's plays *The American*

Dream and *The Sandbox* is based on Albee's own grandmother, and Albee dedicated *The Sandbox* to her. This fact is particularly resonant when one is familiar with the subject of the play: a woman returned to infancy in her death by her daughter and son-in-law.

Lucina Gabbard suggests that Albee writes on the theme of abandonment as a direct result of issues with his own parents, and that "considering this personal closeness to the theme of abandonment, it is not surprising that his first plays express a serious concern for life's expendable ones" (27). These "expendable ones" are, specifically, the very young and very old. The symbolism of the sandbox itself is obvious. In placing Grandma in a sandbox to die, Albee "blends the rejection of the young and old... the circumstances of Grandma's death emphasize the play's comment on society's neglect of both children and the aged" (27). In the introduction to *Three Tall Women*, another Albee play that touches on themes of aging, Albee discusses the aging of his own mother and grandmother. Despite his animosity toward his mother, he speaks of her as a person in whom he could find things to admire:

It is true I did not like her much...but I did admire her pride, her sense of self. As she moved toward ninety, began failing rapidly both physically and mentally, I was touched by the survivor, the figure clinging to the wreckage only partially of her own making, refusing to go under. (Albee *Three Tall Women*)

That Albee values this sense of self is no surprise; it is what ultimately makes Grandma a likeable character, despite her cantankerousness. Grandma appears in stark contrast to more common portrayals of the elderly in contemporary culture: she is vivacious, unyielding, and complex. According to Nicholas Canaday, Grandma "gives a realistic

picture of old age, yet manages at the same time to retain her own dignity...the fact is that she is far ahead of all the other characters in the play” (32). Though her situation is the tragic product of a society whose structure is failing, Grandma is not a tragic character.

That she is not a tragic character is likely the result of her having been based on Albee’s own grandmother. He writes that he found the character to be quite likeable: “when I based the character ‘Grandma’ on my own (adoptive) maternal Grandmother, I noticed that ... I liked the lady a lot—we were in alliance with those folk in the middle” (Albee *Three Tall Women*). This alliance with and opposition to “the folks in the middle” is a recurring theme in discussions of the aging. Grandma, like Mrs. Bett, faces the derision of the middle-aged because her emotional outbursts, even her intellectual assertions, are dismissed as the result of her age rather than the result of justified anger over the attempt to deny her a sense of self. However, while Mrs. Bett has the future of her daughter and granddaughter as a motivating factor, Grandma has the welfare of no one but herself to motivate her. Her focus, then, is on self-definition.

Because of this character’s focus on self-definition, it is fitting that she, in contrast to other characters in modern and contemporary plays who are demographically similar to her, is the central character in the plays in which she appears. Canaday notes in reference to *The American Dream* that “the void at the center of modern life is the basic assumption on which this play rests; the action is primarily concerned with typical responses to this existential situation” (31) and that Grandma is the only character who responds positively to the situation:

She is realistic; she has a sense of her own freedom and especially of her own dignity...her attitude is tinged with cynicism in her present situation, but this is a necessary antidote to the more than slight nausea we feel about the relationship between Mommy and Daddy...she says that she is a “muddle headed old woman,” but the fact is that she sees more clearly than anyone else in the play. (31-32)

This labeling of herself as a “muddle headed old woman” is her own choice. Grandma’s preservation of dignity is made possible by the fact that she defines herself and what it means to age before any other character has the chance to do so.

Grandma and Mommy

Because Grandma and Mommy are so defined by their family roles, it is natural that much of Grandma’s self-definition would be entangled in her relationship with Mommy. Mommy is persistent in her assertions that she loves Grandma, even though she does not behave in any ways that support that notion. She and Grandma have a dynamic in which Grandma sacrifices her needs in order to care for her daughter. This would be normal between an adult woman and her young child, but in a normal family situation, the daughter, once she becomes an adult, would begin to care for her aging mother. In the fractured American family depicted in these plays, the cycle does not complete; Mommy and Daddy do not have their own child, and Grandma and Mommy grow resentful of one another. At one time, however, Mommy and Grandma appear to have had a mutually beneficial relationship:

Mommy: When I was a little girl, I was very poor, and Grandma was very poor, too, because Grandpa was in heaven. And every day, when I went to

school, Grandma used to wrap a box for me... when it was lunch time, all the little boys and girls used to take out their boxes of lunch, and they weren't wrapped nicely at all, and they used to open them and eat their chicken legs and chocolate cakes; and I used to say, "Oh, look at my lovely lunch box; it's so nicely wrapped it would break my heart to open it." And so, I wouldn't open it.

Daddy: Because it was empty.

Mommy: Oh, no. Grandma always filled it up, because she never ate the food she cooked the evening before; she gave me all her food for my lunch box the next day. After school, I'd take the box back to Grandma, and she'd open it and eat the chicken legs and chocolate cake that was inside. Grandma used to say, "I love day-old cake." That's where the expression "day-old cake" came from. Grandma always ate everything a day late. I used to eat all the other little boys' and girls' food at school, because they thought my lunch box was empty, and that's why I wouldn't open it. They thought I suffered from the sin of pride, and since that made them better than me they were very generous. (*American Dream* 13-14)

This passage shows that both woman are concerned with the external, but for different reasons. Grandma's fixation on the wrapping of boxes suggests that she focuses most of her energy on the presentation of a thing rather than the contents; however, the contents do matter to her. Though they are poor, she does fill the box with food, even though her daughter manages to get food from her classmates. Her primary concern in wrapping the box nicely is to protect its contents. If the contents did not matter, she could easily leave

the food out of the box, and the result would likely be the same, but in wrapping the box nicely and also including the food, she ensures that her daughter will be able to eat, even if she runs the risk of going without herself. She even attempts to protect her daughter from understanding the extent of their poverty by claiming that she enjoys eating “day-old cake.”

Mommy is also concerned with the wrapping, but it is the ability to manipulate others that motivates her. She will never be as successful a manipulator as Grandma, however, because she lacks self-awareness. She is sure that her classmates’ generosity toward her was the product of their own pride, which was in turn the result of their perception of her as prideful. She names pride as a sin that she does not truly commit, but fails to name her actual sin: deception. Her continued conversation with Daddy after she recounts this story is in essence a confession that her marriage to him was also a manipulation for her own personal gain:

Daddy: You were a deceitful little girl.

Mommy: We were very poor! But then I married you, Daddy, and now we’re very rich.

Daddy: Grandma isn’t rich.

Mommy: ... No, but you’ve been so good to Grandma she feels rich. She doesn’t know you’d like to put her in a nursing home.

Daddy: I wouldn’t!

Mommy: Well, heaven knows, *I* would! I can’t stand it, watching her do the cooking and the housework, polishing the silver, moving the furniture...

Daddy: She likes to do that. She says it's the least she can do to earn her keep.

Mommy: Well, she's right. You can't live off people. I can live off you, because I married you...all I brought with me was Grandma... Grandma is all the family I have. (*American Dream* 14)

Mommy's marriage to Daddy is an echo of the nicely wrapped lunch boxes of her childhood. Her manipulation does help Grandma, but it is almost coincidental. Grandma is doing all of the real work; "the cooking and the housework, polishing the silver, moving the furniture," while Mommy is doing basically nothing, yet it is Mommy, not Grandma, who benefits financially. Mommy's assertion that "you can't live off people" is ironic, considering that she admits to doing just that, and has been doing nothing but living off of other people's work and generosity her entire life. The affection she claims to have for Grandma is likely an attachment to the ways she continues to find Grandma useful more than a natural affection.

Throughout both plays, Mommy states that she loves Grandma, often at times that make no sense, yet her actions do nothing to support the notion. Youngberg notes that "Mommy's treatment of Grandma throughout the play underscores the brusque insensitivity of a society in which individuals are conditioned to think only of their own satisfaction. Albee implies more than once that Mommy would simply like to dispose of Grandma--her own mother--even though Mommy asserts that she loves Grandma" (109). Mommy's insistence that she loves Grandma calls into question the meaning of love in the context of these plays. Love, particularly between this mother and daughter, is present only in word or in action, never in both together. Mommy insists that she loves Grandma,

but her actions do not back up her claim. The descriptions of Grandma's past behavior suggest that at one time she behaved in a way that would demonstrate love for her daughter, yet she never claims to do so.

Grandma and Daddy

The relationship that comes closest to a genuinely affectionate one is that between Grandma and Daddy. Mommy insists that Grandma is her mother, not Daddy's, and although her insistence that she loves Grandma is contradicted by her behavior, she seems jealous of the more stable relationship her husband has with her mother. The relative stability that exists in the relationship between Grandma and Daddy is due to the fact that they are both dismissed by Mommy. In a comment on Mommy and Daddy's marriage, Grandma says that Mommy would like to be rid of the both of them:

Grandma: . . . Have you called the van people to come and take me away?

Daddy: Of course not, Grandma!

Grandma: Oh, don't be too sure. She'd have you carted off, too, if she thought she could get away with it.

Mommy: Pay no attention to her, Daddy. (*An aside to Grandma.*) My God, you're ungrateful! (*American Dream 17*)

Daddy attempts to sympathize with Grandma, or at least appease her, which is perhaps why Mommy tries to limit the contact between them. The two women are involved in a constant struggle for the power of perception; if Daddy buys into the image of old people that Grandma portrays, then Grandma wins, but if Mommy can distract him from seeing things from Grandma's point of view, then she comes out ahead. Grandma is aware of

her daughter's manipulative tendencies, so she can fight them; Daddy, however, is an easier target:

Daddy: I'd like to talk about it some more.

Mommy: There's no need. You made up your mind; you were firm; you were masculine and decisive....I won't argue with you; it has to be done; you were right. Open the door.

Daddy: But I'm not sure that....Was I firm about it?

Mommy: Oh, so firm; so firm.

Daddy: And was I decisive?

Mommy: So decisive! Oh, I shivered.

Daddy: And masculine? Was I really masculine?

Mommy: Oh, Daddy, you were so masculine; I shivered and fainted.

Grandma: Shivered and fainted, did she? Humf!

Mommy: You be quiet.

Grandma: Old people have a right to talk to themselves; it doesn't hurt the gums, and it's comforting. (*American Dream* 17)

Mommy convinces Daddy that her wishes are actually his by defining him in a way that he finds appealing: as a masculine, self-aware person, when in reality he is weak and not in control of himself. Daddy is actually fond of Grandma, he would like to have a conversation about it, at least, before putting her in a home, but once Mommy reframes his character in a more favorable way—a way that is more in keeping with his socially acceptable role—he is easily swayed.

Grandma is not so easily swayed, and her use of language to control the way others perceive her is careful and protective, but not deceptive. Grandma is defensive of Daddy, even though he has hurt her:

Grandma: ...if you'd listened to me you wouldn't have married her in the first place. She was a tramp and a trollop and a trull to boot, and she's no better now...I told you to stay away from her type. I told you. I did...

Mommy: You stop that! You're *my* mother, not his!

Grandma: I am?

Daddy: That's right, Grandma, Mommy's right.

Grandma: Well how would you expect somebody as old as I am to remember a thing like that? You don't make allowances for people.

...

Mommy: Grandma! I'm ashamed of you.

Grandma: ... Humf! It's a fine time to say that. You should have gotten rid of me a long time ago if that's the way you feel. (*American Dream* 15)

Once again, in this passage Mommy shows inconsistent feelings toward Grandma, which is evidence that it is she, not Grandma, who does not know her own mind. In a few lines of dialogue, Mommy moves from being possessive of Grandma, to angry with her, to ashamed of her. Grandma may have forgotten whose mother she is, or she may be pretending to have forgotten, but in either case, her opinion of Mommy is consistent, and she makes it clear, whether or not anyone is listening.

Defining Age

Grandma is sure not only of her opinions about others, but also of her self-concept. She is a stronger character than Mommy because she has greater self-awareness, and a stronger character than Daddy because she does not allow anyone to define her without her consent. She defines herself before anyone else has the chance to do so. Her assertion that "Old people have a right to talk to themselves; it doesn't hurt the gums, and it's comforting" (17) is just one of the many instances in which Grandma gives a preemptive definition of what it means to be an old person:

When you're old you gotta do something. When you get old, you can't talk to people because people snap at you. When you get so old, people talk to you that way... That's why you become deaf, so you won't be able to hear people talking to you that way. And that's why you go and hide under the covers in the big soft bed, so you won't feel the house shaking from people talking to you that way. That's why old people die, eventually. People talk to them that way. (*American Dream* 13)

Grandma argues that the symptoms of aging, which many people perceive as purely physical, are the result of psychological trauma caused by the poor treatment of the aging.

Even when Grandma's memory is not perfect—and there is no guarantee that it is not—she uses language to make a point that is true in essence if not in fact. According to Canaday,

Grandma's use of language and her comments about language reveal another creative response to life. In general the comic irrelevance of the language mirrors the meaninglessness of life and demonstrates especially

that language as gesture has replaced language as communication. For Grandma, however, language does serve to communicate, and her comments on style are both amusing and significant. Mommy tries to imitate her, but Grandma scornfully points out Mommy's failure to achieve harmony of rhythm and content." (32)

Grandma uses language to communicate meaning. She is artful—manipulative, even—but her language actually communicates something that is bigger than the moment in which it occurs. Her proclamations about age are more than humorous self-defense; they have depth. Mommy's efforts to replicate Grandma's use of language fail because she lacks Grandma's depth of character, and in turn, her assertions also lack depth. The subject at the heart of the power struggle between Grandma and Mommy is dignity, and this extends into Grandma's use of language. Grandma uses language more successfully than Mommy because she uses language to preserve dignity rather than present a false image of it. In the scene referenced by Canady, Mommy attempts to make an assertion about old age in a manner similar to Grandma, but her claim falls flat:

Daddy: Maybe Grandma has something to say.

Mommy: Nonsense. Old people have nothing to say; and if old people *did* have something to say, nobody would listen to them... You see? I can pull that stuff just as easily as you can.

Grandma: Look. I'll show you how it's really done. Middle-aged people think they can do anything... but the truth is that middle-aged people think they're special because they're like everybody else. We live in the age of

deformity. You see? Rhythm *and* content. You'll learn. (*American Dream* 22)

Mommy's statement that "if old people did have something to say, nobody would listen to them" is ironic because her failure to successfully mock her mother is the result of her failure to listen carefully to her mother's pronouncements about age. Mommy is attempting to make a statement about a time of life with which she has no experience; her claim is actually an assumption. Grandma's juxtaposition of an assumption with a contradictory truth is what makes her statement artful, and her artistry is backed by her experience; she has been middle-aged, but Mommy has not yet been old.

The best example of Grandma's artful proclamations about old age comes when she is told by her daughter to "dry up";

Grandma: There you go. Letting your true feelings come out. Old people aren't dry enough, I suppose. My sacks are empty, the fluid in my eyeballs is all caked on the inside edges, my spine is made of sugar candy, I breathe ice; but you don't hear me complain. Nobody hears old people complain because people think that's all old people do. And *that's* because old people are gnarled and sagged and twisted into the shape of a complaint. (*Signs off.*) That's all. (*American Dream* 21)

Grandma's artistic complaining is at its best here, and it is here that she is the most sarcastic. Her sarcastic remark that Mommy is finally "letting [her] true feelings come out" is a belittling description of her daughter as someone who never keeps her feelings to herself. It is also worth noting that she says "you don't hear me complain," not "I don't complain." Obviously, she does complain—she has complained throughout the play—but

no one hears her, because no one cares to hear her. What Grandma says in this passage is almost the same thing that her daughter says in the passage discussed earlier, but the accompanying imagery of an old person, “gnarled and sagged and twisted into the shape of a complaint” makes the remark resonate much more. Grandma’s opinions have both style and substance; that no one wants to hear them is one of the many indignities she has to suffer.

Throughout both of the plays, other characters frequently apologize to Grandma. Grandma attributes these apologies to the need for a sense of dignity: “Well, that’s all that counts. People being sorry. Makes you feel better; gives you a sense of dignity... And it doesn’t matter if you don’t care, or not, either. You got to have a sense of dignity, even if you don’t care, ‘cause, if you don’t have that, civilization’s doomed” (12). Grandma knows there is nothing really in these apologies; a real apology, a show of genuine remorse, would need to be made only once. The apologies made to Grandma throughout *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* are not genuine because they are made *for* the person who makes them. Grandma is the only character in the play who has dignity because she is the only character whose internal truth becomes external. She is also the only character who speaks directly to the audience, which suggests that she is the only character who is aware of the performance as such:

Well, I guess that just about wraps it up. I mean, for better or worse, this is a comedy, and I don’t think we’d better go any further. No, definitely not. So, let’s leave things as they are right now ... while everybody’s happy ... while everybody’s got what he wants ... or everybody’s got what he thinks he wants. Good night, dears. (*American Dream* 42)

Grandma knows that the play is a performance, but she is the only character who is self-aware enough to realize that there is a risk of performance eclipsing reality. Her prediction that the performance will cease to be a comedy if it continues is correct.

Identity and Death

What was amusing in *The American Dream* becomes perverse in *The Sandbox*; the threats to send Grandma away are realized when she is taken to a children's sandbox to die. The moment of her death becomes an opportunity for performance for Mommy and Daddy, but the cost of their performance is Grandma's dignity in death. Because Mommy and Daddy do not treat Grandma with dignity in the moment of her death, she is forced to manipulate the situation to preserve her own identity, and that preservation of identity also preserves her dignity.

Because Mommy did not bond with Grandma in life, all they have in death is the knowledge of what a death scene should look like. Now, Mommy's insistence that Grandma is her mother, not Daddy's, means that Grandma's death is hers to stage. Grandma's response to being treated like an infant is to behave like one:

Grandma: (*Banging the toy shovel against the pail.*) Haaaaa! Ah-haaaaa!
Mommy: Be quiet, Grandma...just be quiet, and wait. (*Grandma throws a shovelful of sand at Mommy ...*) She's throwing sand at me! You stop that,
Grandma; you stop throwing sand at Mommy! (*To Daddy*) She's throwing sand at me. (*Sandbox 51*)

Mommy looks to Daddy, but she has denied him any real relationship with Grandma up to this point, and now he is in no position to help her deal with Grandma. Albee's choice to name the characters according to family roles is most useful in this moment; when

Mommy tells Grandma to “stop throwing sand at Mommy” it is the only moment that seems to be a genuine role reversal. Many mother-daughter relationships experience a role reversal when the mother is aging, but Mommy is deliberately infantilizing her mother out of frustration, not as the result of a genuine effort to care for her.

Mommy and Daddy have no real feelings about Grandma’s death; they take their cues, literally, from stage conventions:

Mommy: ... It was an offstage rumble ... and you know what *that* means....

Daddy: I forget ...

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

Daddy: (*Vacantly*) I ... I suppose you’ve got to be brave.

Grandma: (*Mocking.*) That’s right, kid; be brave. You’ll bear up; you’ll get over it... (*To Mommy*) I’m fine! I’m all right! It hasn’t happened yet!

(*Sandbox 52-3*)

Mommy and Daddy only know how to behave according to convention; there is no real emotion in what they do. They are purely role-playing. Daddy’s lines are delivered vacantly, and when the lights come back on, Grandma is still alive and muttering to herself. Because they assume she is dead, she pretends to be dead; this is a continuation of her behavior in *The American Dream*. She accepts the fate that is thrust upon her in order to take ownership of it. She pretends to be dead here so that she may die without Mommy and Daddy, in peace, and, according to Gabbard, she “depart[s]... willingly from the two-faced environment on the beach, a world dominated by Mommy and

Daddy's counterfeit love and grief. This hypocrisy is the keynote of the confusion of reality and fantasy in *The Sandbox*, and Albee emphasizes it by use of the play/life metaphor" (Gabbard 30). Grandma's choice to pretend to be dead in order to die on her own terms is the only choice she can make that allows her to maintain her integrity. She must submit to the façade in order to escape from it.

Once Mommy and Daddy exit, however, she becomes almost an entirely different character than she has been up to this point. Even though the bumbling Young Man is representative of the Angel of Death, Grandma's interactions with him are the most genuine of all the interactions between characters:

GRANDMA: ... I...I can't move...

YOUNG MAN: Uh...Ma'am; I...I have a line here.

GRANDMA: Oh, I'm sorry sweetie; you go right ahead ... Take your time, dear.

YOUNG MAN: ... I am the Angel of Death. I am ... uh ... I am come for you.

GRANDMA: (*The Young Man bends over, kisses Grandma gently on the forehead. Her eyes closed, her hands folded on her breast again, the shovel between her hands, a sweet smile on her face*) Well ... that was very nice, dear... What I meant was...you did that very well, dear.

YOUNG MAN: (*blushing*)... Oh...

GRANDMA: No, I mean it. You've got that...you've got a quality. (53-54)

Grandma is able to not only have an actual conversation with the Young Man, but to actually contribute something to him that has the potential to change his image of himself, because he is the only character in the play who treats her like a person with agency. Gabbard refers to the pair as “counterparts in abandonment”; (29) however, their relationship is the only one in the play that is mutually beneficial. The kindness and deference in the relationship between Grandma and the Young Man echoes the mutual beneficial relationship that Grandma and Mommy had during Mommy’s childhood.

The Young Man functions as a surrogate grandson to Grandma, and it is significant that she is the only character who gets to fulfill the role for which she is named. The relationship between Grandma and the Young Man is made possible by her self-awareness and his deference to her and acceptance of her humanity. This type of relationship allows Grandma to be benevolent and complimentary toward the Young Man. Much like Mrs. Bett, Grandma is at her best when she is able to be of use to another person. It is not their service to others that allows the women to be their best selves. Both Mrs. Bett and Grandma consistently demonstrate that they are more interesting, fully developed characters than their oppressors; however, their potential to show kindness can only be realized when it is exercised on the behalf of an individual who is able to look beyond age and socially acceptable family roles.

Anger, Presence and Performance in *August: Osage County*

From the moment the play premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, Tracey Letts' *August: Osage County* was compared to other famous family dramas, such as Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Sam Shepherd's *Buried Child*, and Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. All of these plays are about families that are irreparably broken, and when *August: Osage County* arrived on the scene, the discussion around it often focused on whether or not these comparisons were merited.

Many comparisons of *August* and the earlier plays focus on the female lead character, Violet Weston. Violet has been compared to O'Neil's Mary Tyrone, Albee's Martha, and Hellman's Regina. According to Isherwood, "for unrestrained malice and unstoppable powers of emotional destruction...Violet puts all the rest in the shade" ("Matriarch"). Violet, whose mouth cancer Gleiberman calls "both a metaphor and a punchline," (56) is the acidic matriarch of the deeply dysfunctional Weston family. Like Mrs. Bett and Grandma, Violet is fueled by her anger toward her family's attitude toward her. When forced into an undignified situation, Mrs. Bett seeks control in changing the future of her daughter and granddaughter, while Grandma looks toward self-definition as a way of maintaining dignity in an undignified situation. Faced with the inevitable destruction of her family, Violet uses performance, rooted in her role as the aging, drug-addled matriarch, as a means of maintaining control over the manner of that destruction.

In *August: Osage County*, the Westons are brought together by the disappearance and subsequent suicide of their patriarch, once-poet Beverly Weston, whose presence permeates the entire play, despite his almost total absence from it. In the prologue

Beverly, a character reminiscent of Albee's George from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, tells the maid he has hired that "my wife takes pills and I drink. That's the bargain we've struck" (11). Beverly and Violet's marriage functions according to an absurd set of rules, but interestingly, they are not co-dependent. Their relationship is a paradox; they are an independent pair. Their children continue the cycle of dysfunction that started with their parents. According to Isherwood, each of their three daughters "exhibit[s] clear indications of past, present, or future emotional damage" ("Mama"), and it is easy to see why. To speak of Violet's biting wit would be a gross understatement. Isherwood claims that Violet "possesses a spirit of aggression that a pro linebacker would envy, and a sixth sense for...exploiting the sore spots and secret hurts of everyone around her... she can keep the blood in her own veins flowing only by drawing blood from others" ("Mama"). The dysfunction of her daughters is the natural result of having a mother like Violet Weston. Barbara, the eldest daughter, is repeating her parents' marital mistakes in her own relationship, and as the burgeoning matriarch of the family, she continues her mother's tradition of using literal "family drama" to gain power: theatrics, for Violet and Barbara, equal power and control. Middle daughter Ivy, who has stayed near her parents her entire life, is so enveloped in family life that she has entered into an incestuous affair with Little Charles, whom she thinks is her cousin but is later revealed to be her half-brother. Youngest daughter Karen is the family joke; she talks a lot about how much she values her family and wants to strengthen her bond with her sisters, but really, she is all talk, and does not seem to realize it. She also does not realize that her fiancé Steve is making wildly inappropriate advances toward her fourteen-year-old niece Jean.

Violet is the heart of the family and the core of its drama. This family is involved in a constant power struggle, and the struggle depends entirely on who can put on the best show. It is almost always Violet, and even when someone else appears to have bested her, it all comes back to her in the end. Violet is the master manipulator, but her family tends to underestimate her because of her age and her drug use. She realizes this and uses it to her advantage. Despite their dysfunctional marriage, her husband is her partner in the culture of deception that exists within their family, and the central theme of their relationship is the game of determining what is real, what is a lie, and what is the difference. Violet and Beverly's children and grandchildren have only this game as a life model, so this type of performance is a central part of all of their relationships, and the cycle of mother/daughter dysfunction is continued in Barbara and Jean's relationship. The family's structure depends entirely on performance, and when any family member performs their role differently than another, usually Violet, has "written" it, the structure breaks down.

A Crumbling Foundation

The precedent set by Violet and Beverly's marriage suggests that a successful marriage, for the Westons, is one that functions by maintaining an agreed upon status quo. Their marriage may or may not have been the result of initial love—it is impossible to say—but by the time of the play, they have agreed on the terms of their marriage, and they stick to those terms, no matter what tragic consequences might result. Their marriage is described by Beverly as being based on a series of "bargains." When Beverly is hiring Johnna, the maid, he tells her that his and Violet's alcohol and drug habits are included in "the bargain we've struck...one of the bargains, just one paragraph of our

marriage contract...cruel covenant. She takes pills and I drink. I don't drink because she takes pills. As to whether or not she takes pills because I drink...I learned long ago not to speak for my wife" (11). Beverly's comment that their habits are one of many bargains suggests that these marital bargains will become a recurring theme in the play.

Additionally, their relationship depends on their ability to remain independent. Beverly will speak only for himself; he takes no responsibility at all for his wife, and she none for him. The success of their marriage depends not on any sense of mutual responsibility, but on the following of the "cruel covenant" on which they have agreed.

When he speaks about Violet in this opening scene, Beverly is consistently passive, and shows little or no attachment to her. He tells Johnna that "my wife has been diagnosed with a touch of cancer, so she'll need to be driven to Tulsa for her final chemotherapy treatments" (15). To say that one's wife has a "touch of cancer" is an incredibly blasé way to speak about something so serious, yet Beverly makes this comment as though he is giving Johnna instructions on how to care for the family cat, suggesting that he considers her just as ineffective as her daughters appear to consider her later in the play.

The state of their relationship in the prologue raises the question of how they got together to begin with. Charles reveals that his wife Mattie Fae rejected Beverly and introduced him to her sister Violet--a fact that becomes even more interesting when it is revealed that Beverly is the biological father of Mattie Fae's son Little Charles. Before this fact and Beverly's suicide are revealed, Mattie Fae seems to think Beverly will turn up again and lambasts him, telling Ivy that he's "done this before" (18), but claiming no responsibility in the matter:

Mattie Fae: I always liked your father...I introduced Vi and Bev, for God's sake.

...

Charlie: You had a date with him and stood him up and sent your sister.

...

Mattie Fae: He was too old for me and anyway, Violet? "Shrinking Violet?" She couldn't meet a man on her own.

Charlie: No one ever called her "Shrinking Violet"— .(18)

Mattie Fae behaves as though she is her sister's caretaker, as if she is the one who is in control of the family. She either has no real understanding of her sister or has constructed an image of Violet that is totally inaccurate to protect her own ego. In any case, Violet, as she is in the play, could never be referred to as "Shrinking Violet"; based on Charlie's comment, Mattie Fae is only deluding herself. Ivy comments that she thinks Beverly's disappearance this time is different than his disappearance before, and that that is because "back then they were trying" (19).

Despite the previous assertion that she and Beverly are not dependent on each other, Violet does admit that she is angry with him "for putting me through all of this. For leaving me to handle this...I can't do it all by myself" (25). Her anger is about the work that he has left her to do, not about his absence in the face of a difficult situation. This anger, however, is easily replaced by her concern about her eldest daughter's arrival, and once again, she cares more about preparing the stage, so to speak, for Barbara's arrival than about having her daughters all home to comfort her. She asks Ivy a multitude of questions about her conversation with Barbara; has she called her, how is she getting

home, is she bringing Jean--Ivy gives short, succinct answers to all of her mother's more practical questions, but what Violet really wants is information about her daughter's emotional response to her father's absence:

Violet: Did you tell her that?

Ivy: I think so.

Violet: What did she say?

Ivy: She said she was on her way.

Violet: Goddamn it, Ivy, what did she say? Was she irritated? Was she amused? Tell me what she said.

Ivy: She said she was on her way.

Violet: You're hopeless. (*Takes a pill*). (25)

Because her husband is gone, Violet needs someone to respond to her in order to feel like she has any power in the situation. Much like Beverly in the opening scene, Violet's discussion of Beverly's absence seems shockingly casual for something so serious. She never suggests that Barbara might be upset that her father is missing, and most likely dead. It is not Barbara's feelings about Beverly's absence that concern Violet; it is her reaction. Instead of "Was she upset?" she asks "Was she irritated? Was she amused?" as if she is trying to plan her strategy in dealing with Barbara instead of worrying about her husband.

The odd arrangement between Beverly and Barbara is revealed to be even more complex when the deal they made concerning the safety deposit box is revealed. Violet tells her children that she and Beverly had an "arrangement" that if something happened to either of them, the other would empty the safety deposit box to avoid having its

contents go into probate. Violet is obsessed with making sure that she completes this arrangement, so much so that she does it before Beverly's death has been confirmed. She reveals to her family that she had emptied the box before alerting the police and calling her daughters. Violet's priorities may be misplaced, but it is out of an effort to maintain her agreement with Beverly, not out of simple callousness. This is not evidence that she does not sufficiently care about Beverly. Immediately after this revelation, she starts to reminisce about when she fell in love with him: "What I first fell off with--fell in love with, you know, was his mystery. I thought it was sexy as hell. You knew he was the smartest one in the room, knew if he'd just say something...knock you out. But he'd just stand there, little smile on his face...not say a word. Sexy" (36). When Violet misspeaks here, she says she "first fell off with--fell in love with" Beverly. This suggests that the beginning of her relationship with Beverly was not only when the two of them, as a couple, separated themselves from the rest of the world, but that it was somehow a misstep. It is also one of the only times they are mentioned as a couple. It is interesting that it is his mystery that appeals to her, since she tries, and usually succeeds, at being one step ahead of everyone throughout the play. She knew about the affair between Beverly and Mattie Fae, and that Little Charles was Beverly's son; knowledge she kept to herself until she felt that it was necessary to reveal it--or, one could argue, until it benefitted her to reveal it--even though she says that Beverly knew that she knew. Violet and Beverly kept their marriage together to the point of his death because they were each the only one who could match the other in wit.

On the day of Beverly's funeral, Violet, alone in his study, attempts to carry on their game without him. The central conflict between Violet and Beverly, even after his

death, is making the distinction between what is his and what is hers. Violet quotes Beverly's poem, but she can only match it with Emily Dickinson; she has no poetry of her own. In fact, she has nothing that is hers alone to dedicate to him. Even the girls, the only thing she can think of that she created, are half his. Here and also in the final scene of the play she speaks to Beverly as if he is with her:

“Dedicated to my Violet.” Put that one in marble.

(She drops the book on the desk. She takes a pill.)

For the girls, God love ‘em. That’s all I can dedicate to you, sorry to say.

Other than them...not one thing. No thing. You think I’ll weep for you?

Think I’ll play that part, like we played the others?

(She takes a pill.)

You made your choice. You made this happen. *You* answer for this...not me. Not me. This is not mine. (58)

Her addiction and her self-representation are the only things of which she alone has sole ownership. She resents Beverly, because she feels that now she will be made to take responsibility for the action he has taken. She wonders if he expected her to play the part of the grieving widow after his death. This scene is a turning point for Violet, because it is here that she realizes that she has lost her “scene partner.”

At this point, Violet must either replace Beverly, or give up the act entirely. She can attempt to replace him with her daughters, and while Barbara comes close, none of them can truly replace Beverly because none of them can understand the past in the same way. The generational divide cannot be crossed. Because all three daughters have something of each of their parents in their own personalities, performance as power is an

essential part of their relationships with each other and with their mother. Karen's powers of deception extend only to herself, while Ivy is so reluctantly entrenched in the family secret that she literally falls in love with it. It is Barbara, however, who comes closest to replacing Beverly in her mother's twisted games.

A Cycle of Dysfunction

Even the daughters' names suggest their alignment with their parents. Karen is the outlier, both in her name and in the family life. The alliteration of Beverly, Barbara, and Bill suggests that Barbara is the most like her father and that she has chosen a husband who could lead her down exactly the same path as her mother. Both Violet and Ivy have floral, suggestive names, with implied double-meanings; Ivy creeps. Violet can be "shrinking Violet," as Mattie Fae suggests; however, considering her behavior toward her family, the similarity between "Violet" and "violent" is perhaps more relevant. These connections to their parents are only the beginning of the similarities between the girls and their parents.

Letts begins the second act with the aforementioned scene of Violet in Beverly's study, having what is perhaps, despite his being dead, the most honest moment of their relationship, but the act immediately moves to Karen's description of her relationship with her fiancé and how it parallels the relationship she dreamed of as a girl, thus juxtaposing the most deeply-rooted and longest lasting meta-performance of the play with the most shallow and trivial.

Karen tells her sisters that she spent much of her childhood dreaming about her future husband and trying to make every man she met fit her idea of an ideal man, even if it meant changing herself. She says that "if he cheated on me...I'd think to myself, 'No,

you love him, you love him forever, and here's an opportunity to make an adjustment in the way you view the world'" (59). She claims that she had to get to a place in her life where she could function on her own without a man before she could find one who "has his priorities straight" (61), but she is still so delusional that she does not realize her fiancé is carrying on a flirtation, that he intends to act upon, with Barbara's fourteen-year-old daughter right under her nose. When she does find out, she rewrites her situation to suit her perception of Steve and of her own life. Even though her niece is only fourteen years old, she defends Steve, telling Barbara that she "doubt[s] Jean's exactly blameless in all this... she might share in the responsibility" (121). She claims to "know Steve should know better than Jean, that she's only fourteen" but argues that "it's not cut and dried, black and white, good and bad. It lives where everything lives. Somewhere in the middle. Where everything lives, where all the rest of us live, *everyone but you*" (121). It is interesting that she makes this comment at this point, because while almost every action taken by a character in this play is in a moral gray area, this one is decidedly not. It is true that Barbara, more than any other member of this family, is the most likely to see the world in absolutes. Though there is truth in what Karen says, her occasion for saying it is not to speak truth for its own sake: it is for purely selfish reasons. In most ways, Barbara is more like her parents than Karen, but here the opposite is true. Karen, though she is not capable of dramatic deception on the grand level of Violet and Beverly, falls prey to the family mythology that says that no one person has a natural responsibility to another. She believes that Steve, as an adult, has no responsibility to Jean, as a child, and that she, as a daughter, sister, and aunt, has no responsibility to her family: her only priority is protecting her self-image.

Earlier in the play, Karen talks about wanting to improve her relationship with her family, but does nothing to back up her words; Ivy, however, knows nothing but family life, but speaks as though she does not value it at all. She argues that there is nothing in family relationships beyond coincidence:

I can't perpetuate these myths of family or sisterhood anymore. We're all just people, some of us accidentally connected by genetics, a random selection of cells, nothing more...maybe my cynicism flowered with the realization that the obligation of caring for our parents was mine alone.

(102-3)

Like Karen's defense of Steve, there is some truth in what Ivy says, but she says it for her own reasons. She, too, is not trying to speak any larger truth, only to justify her incestuous relationship with Little Charles. It is important to note that at this point, Ivy thinks that Little Charles is her cousin.

Violet's response to Ivy's near-revelation that she not only is having an affair with Little Charles but is in love with him says a great deal about both Ivy and Violet. Violet has always known that Little Charles is the product of the affair between Mattie Fae and Beverly, and she also knows about the relationship between Little Charles and Ivy; she has likely known about it since it began. Rather than telling Ivy about it then, and putting a stop to it before it got serious, she chooses this moment to reveal to Ivy that her lover is actually her brother. The secret about Little Charles is one of the last power-cards that Violet holds, and she cannot resist what may be her last opportunity to play it:

Ivy: Little Charles and I are--

Violet: Little Charles and you are brother and sister. I know that....I've always known that. I told you, no one slips anything by me...I knew the whole time Bev and Mattie Fae were carrying on. Charles shoulda known too, if he wasn't smoking all that grass.

Barbara: It's the pills talking.

Violet: Pills can't talk. (133)

It is important to Violet to let her daughters know that she has always known something that they just found out. Even though they have raided her house for pills, tried to keep secrets from her, and argue about whose responsibility it is to care for her, she is still in control. She blames Charles' marijuana use for his lack of knowledge about what is going on right in front of him, and emphasizes this to let her daughters know that despite her own drug use, she still hears everything, knows everything, and speaks for herself.

Ivy's reaction is not to be upset that Little Charles is her brother, but to be angry that her mother *told* her, and that Barbara allowed her to be told. Like Karen and Violet, Ivy needs to know that she alone is in charge of her self-image. She calls Violet and Barbara "monsters ... [p]icking the bones off the rest of us" (94) and says that she "won't let [them] change her story" (134). This scene is Ivy's last in the play, and her last line is a comment on the similarity between Violet and Barbara:

Barbara: Don't leave me like this.

Ivy: *You will never see me again.*

Barbara: This is not my fault. I didn't tell you, *Mom* told you. It wasn't me, it was Mom.

Ivy: There's no difference. (135)

For Ivy, the chance to leave with Little Charles and protect their troubling secret is the only way to break the cycle begun by Beverly and Violet. Because she cannot have children with Little Charles, her branch of the family will end with them, but her comment to Barbara suggests that she knows that the broken cycle of family drama will continue with Barbara and Jean.

Barbara and Violet's relationship evolves over the course of the play. Initially, Barbara seems to be a stand-in for Beverly. When Barbara, her estranged husband Bill, and daughter Jean arrive, the entire family is very careful to play the socially acceptable family roles, with Barbara and Bill stepping in to comfort Violet and take care of the practical aspects of Beverly's disappearance and death. Violet shows more grief in the first moment she sees her eldest daughter than she does in the entire remainder of the play, even when it is confirmed that Beverly is dead:

(Violet appears on the stairway, followed by Ivy. Violet bursts into tears, rushes to Barbara, clenches her. Ivy watches from the stairs.)

Barbara: It's okay, Mom. I'm here, I'm here.

(Violet weeps. The others are awkwardly respectful of the moment.)

...

Violet: What am I going to do? What am I going to do ... I'm just so scared. (31-32)

Violet is not present for her daughter's arrival; she must make an entrance and arrive on her own terms. Everyone else has been present, and they all seem to know that this moment is not fully genuine. It does not take long for the two women to devolve into argument. Violet wanted Barbara to come and take control of the situation, but she does

not want to allow her to actually take charge of the situation. She argues that all of her children, but especially Barbara, cannot understand the agreement between her and Beverly, because they did not have the difficulties in life that the older generation had:

Violet: We lived too hard, then rose too high. We sacrificed everything and we did it all for you. Your father and I were the first in our families to finish school and he wound up an award-winning poet. You girls, given a college education, taken for granted, no doubt, and where'd you wind up...Jesus, you worked as hard as us, you'd all be president. You never had real problems so you got to make all your problems yourselves.

Barbara: Why are you screaming at us?

Violet: Just time we had some truth's told 'round here's all. Damn fine day, tell the truth. (95)

Beverly has gone, and Violet suspects that her daughter is here to wrest control away from her, so she begins the process of "truth-telling" that will ultimately destroy her relationship with Barbara and her family as a whole.

"The Way the World Ends": The Cycle is Broken

Violet's daughters assume that all of her truth-telling is prompted by her drug use. It may be true that she says things under the influence that she might not otherwise; however, this is not a woman who cares a great deal about sensitivity or discretion. She has accepted that Beverly was her only equal, the only person with whom she could strike the type of "bargains" that allow things to go on as they have been, and her insistence now on revealing the family secrets is the result of her attempt to cling to the only power she still has: to prove that she is still the strongest in the family. The passage above was

prompted by her daughters' attempts to placate her, which she views as an attempt to control her. She tells them to "stop telling me to settle down...I'm not a goddamn invalid! I don't need to be abided, do I? Am I already passed over?!" (94). Each attempt Violet makes to maintain some control over her situation results in an irrevocable change in her relationship with, because she is changing the way she plays her role in the family.

Earlier in the play, when the family is preparing for Beverly's funeral, this changing of roles comes up in a discussion about women and age. Violet, trying to give some of her clothing away to her daughters, says that she is "downgrading," but quickly corrects this to "downsizing" (65). This is one of several moments in the play in which Violet misspeaks and reveals what is actually on her mind. She initially says that she is "downgrading," which references her position within the family. With the death of her husband, she senses that her role as matriarch could easily be usurped by her daughters. She expresses this fear by taking control of the situation, and attempting to move on from the past, by getting rid of her things, before anyone forces her to do so. When a picture of her is discovered in the things they are going through, Violet's comparison of what is and what used to be becomes a discussion of aging women and their inability to compete with younger women in terms of beauty:

Ivy: You're beautiful, Mom.

Violet: I was beautiful. Not anymore...one of those lies we tell to give us comfort, but don't you believe it. Women are beautiful when they're young, and not after... Wouldn't we be better off...if we stopped lying about things and told the truth? (66)

Violet insists on “telling the truth,” which in this instance, means saying the thing she believes to be true before anyone else can. While Grandma in Albee’s plays defines old age in this way in order to retain control of her identity, Violet does so in order to maintain her role within the family.

This same tactic is used in the earlier mentioned scene, in which Violet insists on telling the truth about her addiction. The result of Violet telling a “truth” that everyone already knows—that she is addicted to painkillers—is that Barbara physically attacks her, takes her pills, and orders the rest of the family to raid the house in search of more. This dramatic display prompts the rest of the family to answer to Barbara’s every command:

Barbara: (*To Jean*) Everything. Go through everything...

Charlie: What should we do?

Barbara: Get Mom some black coffee and a wet towel and listen to her bullshit. Karen, call Dr. Burke.

Karen: What do you want me to say?

Barbara: Tell him we got a sick woman here.

Violet: You can’t do this! This is *my* house! This is *my* house!

Barbara: You don’t get it, do you? (*With a burst of adrenaline, she strides to Violet, towers over her*) I’M RUNNING THINGS NOW. (97)

Using these dramatic displays as a way to wield power is most likely a behavior Barbara has observed in her mother for many years; however, once she uses this method herself, the entire family dynamic changes. Barbara has cast herself in her mother’s role, but is unprepared for its demands. Unlike Violet and Beverly, Barbara and Bill are unwilling to keep up the front of their marriage for the sake of the image—or the sake of their

daughter. Barbara is a paler reflection of her mother; she is incapable of trying to hold on to something that is already gone—her marriage and family—as her mother has for so long.

In Act III, Scene III, Barbara and Johnna, the housekeeper, are in Beverly's study, "in the same positions as Beverly and Johnna in the prologue," as per the stage directions, and much as Beverly does in the beginning, Barbara uses Johnna as a sounding board for her own musings. In a way, Johnna functions for Barbara here as a surrogate daughter in the absence of Jean, much as she does for Beverly in the beginning of the play. This scene with Johnna is Barbara's last attempt to cling as fiercely as her mother does to her construct of their family:

Barbara: One of the last times I spoke with my father...there was something sad in his voice...as if whatever was disappearing had already disappeared...this country, this experiment, America, this hubris: what a lament, if no one saw it go...dissipation is actually much worse than cataclysm...Johnna...what did my father say to you?

Johnna: He talked about his daughters...his three daughters, and his granddaughter. That was his joy.

Barbara: Thank you. That makes me feel better. Knowing that you can lie...

(Johnna nods, exits. Barbara refills her whiskey glass.)

Barbara: *(To herself)* I'm still here, goddammit. (124)

Barbara appears to finally understand the cause of her father's suicide and her mother's efforts to maintain control over her own story: she sees that once their family's story is

over, it will be as if it never happened. Her comfort in Johnna's ability to lie does not come out of a need to *hear* the lies about her father, but in the knowledge that Johnna is capable of participating in their family and in giving her mother what she needs.

Barbara's assertion at the end of this speech, that she's "still here" (124), is the essence of the argument Violet has been making, through her behavior, throughout the play. Violet is still alive, even though Beverly is not, and she is going to make sure that everyone knows it. She knows the inevitable end of all this is that her daughters will leave, and probably not return; at least, they will not return while she is alive: "I don't need your *help*. I've gotten myself through some... (*Stops, collects herself*) I know how this goes: once all the talking's through, people go back to their own nonsense. So don't you worry about me. I'll manage. I get by" (109). Since she knows that everyone is leaving her anyway, Violet is determined to play all of her cards while she still can. Just when it seems that they have made their peace with each other, Violet reveals, seemingly by accident, that she knew Beverly was going to kill himself, and that he left a note (136). When Barbara is angry, Violet reverts to blaming *her* for her father's suicide:

You had better understand this, you smug little ingrate, there is at least one reason Beverly killed himself and that's *you*. Think there's any way he would've done what he did if you were still here? No, just him and me, here in this house, in the dark, left to just ourselves, abandoned, wasted life-times devoted to your care and comfort. So stick that knife of judgment in me, go ahead but make no mistake, his blood is just as much on your hands as it is on mine...he did this, though; this was his doing, not

ours. Can you imagine anything more cruel, to make *me* responsible?

(136)

Violet has just finished blaming Barbara for Beverly's suicide, only to say that she can imagine nothing more cruel than blaming her, Violet, for his suicide. She goes on to say that in leaving the note, Beverly was continuing their game; she says he did it, "just to weaken [her], just to make [her] prove [her] character," (136) and at this point she seems to forget that Beverly is gone: "You want to show who's stronger, Bev? Nobody is stronger than me, goddamn it. When nothing is left, when everything is gone and disappeared, I'll be here. Who's stronger now, you son-of-a-bitch?" (137). This last speech, to Beverly, is certainly at least partially the result of the drugs, but by timing her revelation just before her daughter leaves, Violet ensures that she has at least one witness to the fact that she is the "winner" in the game with her husband—even though the game is over.

At this point, the choice of whether to continue on without her father is up to Barbara, and she concedes to let her mother keep the crown: "No, you're right Mom. You're the strong one" (137) are the last words Barbara utters in the play before she leaves, presumably with no plans to return. Violet, as she herself predicted, is left alone with Johnna. Arguably, the cost of her insistence on coming out at the top of the family power struggle is her relationship with her daughters; however, it is more complicated than that. On the surface, her prediction earlier in the play that everyone will leave her and she will be the only one left could be viewed as a self-fulfilling prophecy; she behaved in accordance with the way she expected her family to behave, so they fulfilled her expectations. Violet does, however, understand her family much better than they

understand her, because she is the reason they are the way they are. She and Beverly created a family structure in which no one feels responsible for anyone but themselves: this is why she is not surprised to be left alone. The lack of surprise does not lessen the sting of her daughter's behavior, however. In the closing lines of the play, Johnna recites the end of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," which Beverly lent her at the beginning of the play: "This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends" while Violet steps in with the repetitive "whimper," "and then you're gone" thus, sealing her fate. The cycle of dysfunction is broken, finally, but not by a change or the potential for change, as in *Miss Lulu Bett*. Although there are many parallels between them, Violet is, in some ways, the opposite of Mrs. Bett: she does not look toward a future, because she knows the destruction of her world, her family, is inevitable. She also does not, like Grandma, circumvent the cycle of dysfunction by maintaining a clear sense of self and setting the terms of her own death. The cycle of dysfunction carried out by the Westons, with Violet at the helm, is not broken by change, but by an annihilation.

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