"Do You Have It In You?": Conventions in Edward Albee's plays

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# Abbreviations

In the in text references the following abbreviations are used:

- **Albee IV**: Edward Albee, *At Home at the Zoo* (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2008)
- **Albee V**: Edward Albee, *Me, Myself & I* (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 2011)
Introduction: Do You Have It In You?

Edward Albee discusses the idea of 'proper and common' behaviour. He focuses on American society and raises the questions whether much of the behaviour of the upper middle class is based on imposed and seemingly safe conventions and whether the restrictive nature of these conventions inhibits people from participating fully in life. Is adherence to social regimen a result of fear of public reprimand or is it instinct?

Many of the characters in his plays strive for safety, convenience and peacefulness, but end up in a life of turmoil. The restrictions and limitations they impose on each other and themselves cause dissatisfaction and as a result the characters try to wangle themselves out of the situation and thus very often make matters even worse. Peter in At Home at the Zoo (2004) explains what 'man' wants: "...that what we wanted was a smooth voyage on a safe ship, ... a pleasant journey, all the way through." (Albee IV 20). In The Play About The Baby (1998) the character 'Man' puts it less pleasantly, but very clearly:

Well, I would image we want what almost everybody wants - eternal life, in great health, no older than we are when we want it; easy money, with enough self-deception to make us feel we've earned it, are worthy people, a government that lets us do whatever we want, serves our private interests and lets us feel we're doing all we can for ...how do they call it - the less fortunate?; a bigger dick, a more muscular vagina; a baby, perhaps?" (Albee III 494).

Many of the conventions in modern Western society are made explicit in this statement. Modern Westerns are supposed to be married with children, to work and be successful in the sense of
having money and to care for their fellows. If all of this is unattainable, then they should at least strive for it or keep up appearances. According to Albee this is exactly where the problem begins.

In Albee's view the need to live up to expectations and the urge to 'manage' the conditions under which we live have tragic consequences: we try to control others and ourselves, yet in the process we prevent ourselves from living life to its potential. And if we sense that we do not succeed in controlling our environment, we become so frustrated that we create a false image of it and thereby deceive others and, more importantly, ourselves. Albee translates these things into themes for many of his plays: Truth versus illusion, What is gained is loss and Our failure to participate in life as fully as we can.

The age old problem of nature versus nurture seems to be linked to this discussion. This debate which became especially heated in the twentieth century (Onkal) developed into the 'heredity vs environment' debate and then into what became known as the 'Structure vs Agency' debate, in which 'structure' refers to set patterns in human society and 'agency' denotes the individual choices and free will of people. As such the question of which of the two determines our behaviour becomes a political one and divides left (Structuralists) and right (Agentists) (Sewell Jr. 3 - 4). At first glance the conventions may be seen as the nurture side of the two adversatives. After all, a convention is a sort of agreement or a definition that a group of people have created. Yet Albee digs deeper and examines to what extent these conventions are part of our nature. Does our inclination to set up and live by conventions come naturally to us? And if so, where does that take us as a species? Is Peter's wish for a 'smooth voyage on a safe ship' laid down by society or is it a natural inclination?
In *Stretching My Mind*, a collection of essays and interviews by and with Edward Albee, there is a chapter called 'Conversation with Catch', which took place in 1981. In it Albee says that he has "come to the conclusion that most of the things that [he] thought were imposed from without are really imposed from within" (Albee VI 100). He states this in answer to the question whether he found that "the individual himself is limiting his potential, regardless of societal restriction whereas, in [his] earlier work, [he] saw societal restrictions limiting that potential" (Albee VI 100). In light of the discussion outlined above this has a few important implications. The things that "were imposed from without" refer to the conventions that Western society has created. Society subjects the individual to these conventions and demands adherence. Society, however, is a conglomeration of individuals and therefore one might ask, and Albee does just that, if the rules and regulations are not just as much an invention of the individual as of the group. That which we create as a group is also partly a creation of the individual. Every person wants to belong to a group and to be in a safe environment. In a group of people this means that rules and norms are set up to give everyone the opportunity to experience this safety. The individual acts out of natural inclination (Atkinson et al. 622 - 625). Conventions are, then, part of our nature. Taking all of this a step further, one could state that it is not important to try to distinguish between the two opposing concepts of 'the natural' and 'the conventional' or 'nature' versus 'nurture', for they are really only two sides of the same coin. In this respect Albee's question is in line with developments in sociological studies, which have come to study the duality of structures; structures are not fixed, they are influenced by people's choices and can be transformed (Sewell Jr. 4, 27). It is part of our nature to create conventions by which we want to live and by which we want our society to function. 'Nurture' is part of our 'nature'. The only thing that matters is how one deals with conventions in one's life. Albee reaches the conclusion that conventions become a strangling cord when people fail to recognize that they no longer fit them.
He came to this conclusion in the second half of his career. This means that one should be able to
discern a gradual shift in his plays: the problem of society and its restrictive conventions versus
the individual gradually moves towards the problem of the individual versus him- or herself. I
will examine to what extent his plays show just that development and whether the individual
becomes more the focus of his attention in his more recent work compared to his earlier work.

When discussing conventions in the works of a playwright, one should distinguish between
theatrical and social conventions, for they are similar, but not the same thing. Both require
attention and both influence each other. Therefore I will first look at the implications of Albee's
discussion of theatrical conventions. The next step is to examine the role social conventions play
in his work and focus on Albee's favourite setting: the American family. I will present a general
chapter about the conventional American family and move on to study Albee's portrayal of it,
which says much about his views on the restrictions of social conventions. Part of this chapter
will also be his position in American drama where family drama is concerned. He very often
uses sex and gender roles to make his point, and so my third chapter will be an examination of
these aspects in his work. From there I will study his take on conventions in light of heredity and
evolution and finally I will draw conclusions based on my findings. I will base my research and
conclusions on fifteen of his plays, the ones that are most well-known and regularly performed; a
list of these is to be found at the end as an appendage. In other words: conventions are discussed
on an individual, a societal and a theatrical level.

The overall title of my work comes from one of his latest plays, Homelife (2004), in which
Ann wonders if Peter 'has it in him' to want more out of life, to sometimes let go completely
and give in to cravings. In other words, she wonders about the question that is raised above:
are the conventions by which Peter and Ann live 'natural' or not. I will show that this play
holds the key to the answer. The development in his work throughout the years all comes back to this play.
1 Albee and Theatre Conventions

For Albee the theatre has a clear purpose and it is the playwright's responsibility to fulfil this. In the introduction to *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968) Albee explains: a playwright has to "attempt change". He has to "make some statement about the condition of 'man'" and, at the same time, "make some statement about the nature of the art form with which he is working". Albee thinks this last statement is important if the playwright is to contribute to the preservation of art. He has to "try to alter the forms within which his precursors have had to work", and perhaps most importantly, he believes that an audience "has an obligation to be interested in and sympathetic to these aims ..." (Albee II 261 - 262).

Art in general is there for a reason, as Albee explains in his speech to the American Council for the Arts in 1998: "I hold that we are the only animal who has invented and uses art as a method to communicate ourselves to ourselves. ... to hold an accurate mirror up to ourselves to observe ourselves, to observe our behaviors, ... intentions, ..." (Albee VI 202). All is aimed at the betterment of man's condition: "And so if a play can make us realize that we're skimming along, we're really not grabbing - participating - in our lives, and we're letting other people do all the stuff we should do ..., then maybe we'll change a little bit, maybe we'll start being more socially and politically responsible animals" (Albee VI 182). This means he wants to 'renew' theatre with every play he writes and change conventions as they have been up to that point. In 2005 Thomas P. Adler pointed out how this 'renewal' and experimentation has been a thread in Albee's career:

*Three Tall Women* (1991), with its postmodernist emphasis on intersubjectivity and a multiplicity of viewpoints to demonstrate how perspective can skew perception, and with its disruption of a strictly linear narrative, is - alongside *Box and Quotations from*
*Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968) and *Listening* and *Counting the Ways* (1976) - certainly the most formally experimental of Albee's dramas. (Adler 87)

Adler comes to the conclusion that "the challenge that Albee has always set for himself has never been very different from the one he poses for his characters: to change and always venture into new territory. His stylistic experimentation has assumed many different forms ..." (Adler 87) and thus Albee meets his own expectations and challenges theatre conventions with the plays that he writes.

This makes his work different from what most commercially successful American theatre, in other words Broadway, is like, since the latter adheres to these conventions rather strictly. Albee has always had a love-hate relationship with this, America's most important and influential theatre scene. His plays were not always performed there and he did not particularly mind this, seeing that the kind of productions that did make it to the Broadway stage were definitely not what he himself stood for. Of course, Albee has always hoped that Broadway will one day change its ways and agree with him on its obligations:

> We [Pinter, Shaffer, Williams, Miller and Albee himself] ... keep trying, because, I think, we have a sense of responsibility to people's understanding of what theater's about. There could conceivably come a time ... when the standards that now apply to regional theater will be the Broadway standards. I'm convinced, ..., that if a miracle could occur and for the next ten years there was enough money supplied by somebody so that only the very best plays filled all the Broadway theaters, and none of the junk was allowed to be on Broadway, ... excellence would be the standard of the Broadway audience. ... It's the combination of greed and cowardice on the part of the people who
are mounting these plays on Broadway that gives us so many terrible ones. (Albee VI 92)

The group of playwrights that Albee mentions here are those whose work fit in the tradition that he refers to in his introduction to *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. These British and American authors focus(ed) on similar themes and forms for their work and consequently Albee feels linked to them. The audiences that frequent Broadway theatres are, however, still also the type of audiences that Albee aims at: the WASPs. The Broadway League (the official website of the Broadway theatre industry) does annual research into their audience profile and for years the result has been more or less the same: Caucasian, affluent, well-educated 40-year-olds go to see productions (www.Broadwayleague.com; *The Demographics of the Broadway Audience*). The typical Broadway production does not fulfil the obligation that drama productions in Albee's eyes have; they only seldom prod, confront or let alone shock audiences into new realisations, but allow them to sit back and enjoy a show. A survey of productions on Broadway today shows us that 80% of them are musicals and only 15% are plays (of which, significantly, at least two are the kind that Albee would probably endorse: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*).

This is exactly what Albee wants to avoid. He plays with theatre conventions to keep audiences on their toes and to make a production a new and invigorating experience for them. For this reason Albee has been classed among playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd by Martin Esslin.

The realism of these plays is a psychological and inner realism; they explore the human sub-conscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of
human existence. Nor is it quite correct that these plays, deeply pessimistic as they are, are nothing but an expression of utter despair. It is true that basically the Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious and political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. (Esslin)

Beckett and Ionesco are famous absurdist playwrights and Albee has always expressed his admiration for them, acknowledged that he got his inspiration for much of his work from them: "The American Dream, ..., is a homage to Ionesco. I couldn't have written it in the manner I wrote it without him" (Gussow 140). The link with Beckett becomes clear in many of his plays, for instance in Finding the Sun (1982), the character Daniel says: "What did Beckett say?: I can't go on; I'll go on?" (Albee III 246). And in Marriage Play (1987) Jack tells Gillian in the final scene that he is leaving her, yet "They sit, silence; no movement" (Albee III 306). Both examples clearly refer to Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1953), in which the last thing the audience sees is Vladimir asking Estragon if they should go and Estragon replies: "Yes, let's go", upon which "they do not move" (Gainor, et al. 905). However, Albee is not particularly happy with the term Theatre of the Absurd, since he feels that this only limits the experience of an 'Absurd' production: "...the term Theater of the Absurd was invented to encompass (and isolate, alas) [the] accomplishments [of the playwrights]" (Albee VI 144 - 145). Albee senses that audiences tend to disconnect as soon as they stop recognizing themselves in the production on stage: "...they [American theatre-goers] see something that is not naturalistic- automatically the warning flags go up. ... There is nothing in any Beckett play that I've ever experienced that is inaccessible to anybody with a reasonable mind" (Albee VI 179); "... they [American theatre-goers] want something recognizable. The more art moves away from realism to abstraction, they get in trouble, these people" (Albee VI 244). Although
he disagrees with people on the implications of 'Absurd' productions, he understands what happens to audiences. The term allows the audience to discard what happens on stage and what happens to the characters as something not even remotely linked to their own lives, which is just the opposite of what Albee wants the audience to feel.

The absurdity in his work is slightly different from Beckett's in that it is often more subtle. Linda Ben-Zvi captures the essence when she explains that "the characters in Godot were generally assumed to be clown avatars, ..., most critics did not ask questions about their origin, social condition, or language, ..., [but] in Albee's case, they do, and expect answers because his characters do not look or act like clowns" (Ben-Zvi 181). Albee's characters are 'real' and Albee always asks his actors to play the characters as naturalistically as possible (Solomon 39). The absurdity lies in other things such as vaudeville elements, the use of language and the direct address of the audience. These disrupt conventions and challenge audiences.

In her paper "'Playing the Cloud Circuit": Albee's Vaudeville Show' Linda Ben-Zvi explains how vaudeville elements in Albee's plays work:

[Albee] does have knock-down fights, giant talking lizards, singing professors, dramatic divas, disappearing babies, parasol-sprouting guns, telegram and flower swallowers, and enough puns, plays on words, grammatical confusions, and jokes to supply a comic vaudevillian enough material to more than fill a "two-a-day" schedule. These physical and verbal acts, usually executed in realistic settings and performed by recognizable types, create the same unsettling, disorienting, and explosive effect that
Jenkins describes as the vaudeville aesthetic: dissolving or calling into question the carefully delineated world of the play, rendering it strange and disturbing (180).

And a little further on she touches upon the topic of conventions: "Albee's figures are often unsettling and riveting precisely because of the disparity between their expected modes of behaviour and their shocking, annihilating routines that call into question the reality of the world in which they appear" (Ben-Zvi 181). The sudden use of vaudeville elements in his plays combined with realistic, naturalistic settings and characters shock the audience, since no one expects comical outbursts or silly language games in the middle of serious, emotional moments. The realism in the play does not match with the vaudeville elements and thus conventional consistency is disrupted.

Albee uses language to keep the audience on their toes and to draw them away from becoming too much focused on emotions. His characters usually engage in witty and sharp verbal fights, commenting on each other's words, employing double meanings and playing word games in the middle of serious confrontations which cause the audience to jump back and forth between emotional involvement in the story and reflection on the performance in general. His use of language games provide the characters with a good defence mechanism against attacks and the audience is forced to stay alert. Christopher Bigsby compares the language of the characters in Albee's plays with Albee's own language: "There is often something guarded, wry, calculated, overprecise about [Albee's] replies - as if language were simultaneously exact, compacted with meaning provided it is respected, and a useful protection against intrusion." ... "There are linguistic fencing matches in his plays ..." (Bigsby 157). In other words Albee's characters are a reflection of himself; they apply the tricks that he applies. When George catches Martha and Nick petting in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?
(1961), he acts as if nothing has happened and presents the ice he has just collected from the kitchen. The audience is in anticipation of a burst-out over the infidelity and the first thing that happens is a little 'fight' over grammar: George: "...I've got the ice..." Martha: "...gotten..." George: "Got, Martha. Got is perfectly correct ...it's just a little ...archaic, like you." (Albee I 267). It seems such an inappropriate piece of conversation that the audience will experience this as 'absurd'; the conventional consistency of setting and character is disturbed. In Seascape (1975) the two couples are 'discovering' each other and each other's terms for things. Most words and terms that seem self evident to us humans are strange to lizards and so Charlie and Nancy try to explain them to Leslie and Sarah. The audience settles in the convention of talking lizards and humans running into each other on a beach and communicating. The lizards come off as fairly ignorant and this makes the whole scene rather silly. Nancy at one point refers to emotions and says that lizards must have them. All of a sudden Leslie uses language that seems incongruent with his character; his phrasing is very accurate, he uses 'high-brow' words and he comes across as well-educated: "We may, or we may not, but we'll never know unless you define your terms. Honestly, the imprecision! You're so thoughtless!" (Albee II 419).

After having established certain conventions with the audience, Albee shakes them up and redefines them. He has used this technique throughout his career, which becomes clear when we recognise George and Martha's way of communicating in Stevie and Martin's in The Goat, or Who is Sylvia? (2002). Martin and his wife Stevie are in the middle of a fierce fight and Stevie urges Martin to confess and explain everything that he has done with 'his goat'. She screams: "...Vomit it all up! Puke it out all over me. ... DO IT! ... I'm naked on the table; take all your knives! Cut me! Scar me forever!" Martin (Thinks a moment): "Before or after I vomit on you?" Stevie a little later disentangles from the fight and comments on Martin's
remark: "Very good, by the way." Martin: "Thanks." Stevie: "...and hopelessly inappropriate" (Albee III 595). Apart from the fact that this gives extra information about the characters; two well-educated, otherwise rational people with good backgrounds and considerable social status, it also jerks the characters and thus the audience out of the emotion of the scene and makes the audience reflect on the whole thing.

The audience is, for Albee, a player in his productions. "I don't like the audience as voyeur, the audience as passive spectator," Albee has said, "I want the audience as participant. In that sense, I agree with Artaud: that sometimes we should literally draw blood. I am very fond of doing that because voyeurism in the theater lets people off the hook" (quoted in Roudané 12).

One way of ensuring that the audience is involved in the performance is by using direct audience address. In nearly all of his plays Albee has the characters occasionally talk to the audience either in their role or as the actor/actress him- or herself. Rakesh H. Solomon followed Albee's career and observed him especially as a director. In his book 'Albee in Performance' he points out that "direct address - to create dramatic immediacy, encourage closer attention, and steer response - forms an integral part of director Albee's persistent concern with the audience" (Solomon 35). In that respect Albee has learned from Brecht, who employed this technique in most of his plays too. Brecht's didactic view of the theatre is reflected in Albee's work, as Albee himself acknowledges (Gussow 132). Albee has found his own way to 'crack' American audiences; he wants naturalistic acting, since that is what American audiences seem to want ("..., because American theater - as opposed to European theater - is based on naturalism." "...they (American theater-goers) see something that is not naturalistic - automatically the warning flags go up." "There is nothing in any Beckett play that I've ever experienced that is inaccessible to anybody with a reasonable mind" (Albee VI 179)) and puts in his Beckettian - absurd- elements almost on the sly. Where the absurd is
clear and 'out in the open' in Beckett, Albee uses it only at certain points for maximum effect. He wants the spectator to fully believe in his characters, so that it becomes impossible to distance him- or herself from the absurdity of the situation when that moment hits him/her.

His belief in naturalistic acting ties in with his Stanislavskian approach. He has always urged his actors to believe in themselves "as actual, physical, realistic, naturalistic persons - not stylized characters" (Solomon 39). Especially at the beginning of his career he was a fervent advocate of the Strasberg method and the Actors' Studio. As Solomon explains:

Actors ... remained the focus of Albee's directorial attention, and his comments to them reveal a theatre aesthetic significantly rooted in the Stanislavsky-Strasberg tradition. ... Reflecting the Actors' Studio influence, Albee defined the ideal actor as one "capable of using his craft fully and vanishing into the character, not the kind of star who projects his or her own personality at the expense of the character" (Solomon 38).

For him, however, naturalistic acting was and is a means to an end, more so than for the Actors' Studio. That is why later on in his career he drew away from the Actors' Studio to some degree.

Albee admire[s] ... non-realistic plays - by Brecht, Beckett, and Pinter, for instance - far more than the realistic plays associated with the Actors' Studio, and ... [his] directing avoids the Actors' Studio's excessively and superficially detailed naturalism. ... Albee, both as a playwright and director increasingly championed a theatre of simplicity, minimal effects, and symmetry (Solomon 40).
This is also reflected in his staging and sets. Going through his plays for stage directions and set descriptions one is struck by the fact that they become less and less specific over the years. Naturalistic settings with detailed descriptions of backgrounds (as in All Over (1971): "... The room is solid and elegant, a man's room. The furniture, all of which is good and comfortable, is most probably English. ... A tapestry, eighteenth-century family portraits. An Oriental carpet" (Albee II 304)) have made place for minimal directions (as in his latest play Me, Myself & I (2008): "No naturalistic enclosures, furniture for various scenes in space required. Flats and blacks" (Albee V 6)). As Rakesh Solomon says: "Albee has a fondness for spare stages, ... . The emphasis lies on the figures and, in a sense, still more their voices" (157).

Audiences today are, of course, more used to theatre productions not being entirely naturalistic and realistic as when Albee first started writing and Albee is probably one of the contributors to this. It seems as if Albee has incorporated this in his later work. In his later plays there is more subtle toying with conventions and less experimenting with staging. Especially in The Goat and Homelife it is striking that there is no direct audience address, naturalistic acting, and that the surprise and shock come from the story / plot. He still uses vaudeville elements; in his latest play Me, Myself & I the "Father appears driving a chariot - all the following clearly oversize and fake: papier-mâché, or whatever - pulled by four big black panthers on wheels - clearly fake" (Albee V 73). This, of course, surprises the audience, but one might ask if these tricks are still as challenging as they used to be. Albee's theatre conventions as he defined them have become common. The challenge he gives the audience is in his use of conventions in his stories. This is best illustrated by the fact that one of his most recent works is a prequel to his first play The Zoo Story: Homelife, in which he does not
experiment with or change theatre conventions, but makes his point (again) in his description of the characters and their situation.
2 Albee's Families

Albee himself claims that his plays are "family plays", referring both to the majority of his plays that explicitly deal with family matters, such as *The American Dream* (1960), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) and *Marriage Play* (1987), and to his other plays, which may revolve around very different things: the life of a fellow artist (*Occupant*; 2002) or matters of evolution (*Seascape*; 1975). Even *Tiny Alice* (1965), a play in which a priest is eventually lured into a marriage of sorts with Miss Alice, can be called a family play. The family, to Edward Albee, is a key element in our Western society and a reflection of all the conventions concerning men, women, children and their respective roles that are present in it. In his introduction to volume 2 of his *Collected Plays* he devotes a few lines to each of the plays in it and rounds off by saying "As you can see - family plays all" (Albee II 9).

Albee has always focused on upper middle-class white Americans, the group that traditionally frequents the theatre and, perhaps more importantly, the group that his own family belonged to (Gussow 46). His theatrical families represent the typical American family ideal in that most of his plays revolve around a family consisting of a father, a mother and at least one child. This ideal constitutes an upper middle-class, (white) married couple with 2.5 children who are financially, socially and intellectually successful. The parents raise their children to follow their example, instilling traditional American values and norms in them and equipping them with all the tools to become just as successful as they are. J. Cullen elaborately describes these American values and tools: a college education, a large group of friends and the belief that one will attain one's ends only through hard work are crucial components of the upbringing of children in American families. "... To become independent, to own my own business and get an education. I live the way I want to live, ... I do my duty ..." (Cullen 187). Of course, the whole concept of an
ideal American family is the perfect example of a convention: this is what people have agreed upon as the perfect definition of a 'family'.

According to surveys that cover the past seven decades by the Pew Research Center, Steven Martin of the university of Maryland and Joseph Carroll of the University of Missouri, St Louis, the majority of Americans believe that marriage is the ideal relationship and that two is the ideal number of children to have. Officially the average number of children to strive for these days is 2.5, whereas in the 1960s this was 2.8. Carroll describes in his article following a poll among Americans in 2007 that the majority of people indicate that they think two children is the perfect number (over 50% of respondents); smaller groups (mainly people with a religious background) hold three or more children to be ideal (Carroll 2).

Before World War II Americans believed in large families, consisting of four or more children. Due to economic crises, a lower standard of health care and lower wages in general, families were necessarily bigger to be able to survive: the more helping hands there were, the better. Factors such as technological developments, economic prosperity and different working conditions caused a shift in focus from survival to prosperity from the 1950s onwards, and with this the average number of children decreased. A study published by the US National Library of Medicine (Hagewen and Philip Morgan) shows that even though the actual average number of children is a little over one, the intended number of children is still around two (figure 4).

A survey by the Stanford University Hoover Institution also shows that since the 1920s the divorce rate among American married couples has gone up from approximately 15% to over 50% in the 1980s, a figure that has dropped only slightly in recent years. Americans do believe in marriage, however, because it turns out that nearly all divorcees eventually remarry. In the
1960s three-quarters of all households were married couples with children. By the year 2000 this figure had dropped to 53% and it is still going down. Now 31% of all households are made up of non-family households, which means single young adults or elderly people with no family left (Klein). Such surveys show that even though the configuration of families has changed drastically over the past decades, the ideal family has not or only slightly.

In an interview with PBS Newshour Albee said that his main purpose is to 'hold a mirror up to people and say: "Hey, this is you. If you don't like what you see, why don't you change?"' (PBS Newshour; June 2005). In the introduction to his plays *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story* he described his work as "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, and emasculation and vacuity, a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen" (Albee I 53). Given the fact that the upper-middle class is traditionally seen as the class that initiates most changes in society and starts most social movements, but also as the class which embodies the traditional American values, as Barbara Ehrenreich explains in her book *Fear of Falling* (146 - 153, 196 - 200), Albee's focus on them is a logical choice. He has used the American ideal for the families in his plays and thus uses the conventions in his mirror. In three of his early plays (*The Zoo Story, A Delicate Balance, All Over*) the characters are actually part of a family which adheres to the ideal: parents and two children. In the majority of the plays which focus on 'the family' the married couple has one (existing or non-existing) child. Of the fifteen plays which form the basis of my thesis six involve a son, two involve two daughters, one involves two sons, in four plays no children are mentioned or the gender of the child is not clear and in two plays the married couple has or had a son and a daughter. In other words: the configuration of the Albee family very often reflects the configuration of the American ideal family.
Albee's families, however, are always 'dysfunctional' to a certain degree, which manifests itself sometimes even in its configuration: in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? the married couple has one son, but it turns out to be an imaginary, invented child. In *A Delicate Balance* one of the two children, the son, died at an early age and now the family is stuck with the mother's sister. In *The Zoo Story* Peter acknowledges to Jerry that he had rather had a son, but now he is stuck with two daughters: "...naturally, every man wants a son, but .." (Albee I 115). In *The Play About the Baby* it is not entirely clear whether there really is a baby: "...your real or imagined baby.." (Albee III 503). In *All Over* the dying husband's mistress resides with the family, which leads to awkwardness and conflict. All in all Albee's families stick to the American family convention in that they are built up of married couples with one or two children or at least the wish for a child. The configuration of his families, however, already shows his discussion of that convention: the families strive for the ideal, but this is very often not attainable, leaving the audience with the question whether this ideal is really something to strive for. Someone or something disturbs the plan and gets in the way of the projected family course, yet the individual members deceive themselves in pretending everything is "peachy keen" and thus deepen the proverbial hole for the entire family.

Albee is often considered as one of America's most influential playwrights (Gainor et al. 1563), the successor of Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) are seen as iconic works for these playwrights as well as for American drama. All four put the family and its tribulations at the centre of most of their plays. All four use the dysfunctional family as a symbol for what is wrong with society in general and all four use the traditional family
configuration. In *Cat, Journey* and *Salesman* the family consists of a father, a mother and one or two sons. The difference between Albee and his predecessors is mainly to do with the roles he bestows on his family members; where Williams, O'Neill and Miller paint the breakdown of a patriarchal family that cannot live up to the expectations of traditional American values, mainly shown through distorted father-son relationships, Albee puts the mother at the head of the family and makes the shift in conventional gender roles part of the cause for its downfall.

The traditional husband and wife roles that are seen in, for example, *Death of a Salesman* do not occur in Albee's plays. Where usually the husband is the provider of the family, the leader and decision-maker and the wife is the carer who makes sure the home is a loving and safe base to venture from, in Albee's plays these roles are very often reversed. The conventions concerning family roles in traditional, meaning early 20th century, American society were based on the so-called natural order of things: the stronger sex goes out to hunt, while the weaker sex looks after the offspring. In post-war American society conventions have shifted: the wife is no longer the meek follower; through emancipation women have gradually gained ground in educational and professional respect, making their voice heard in all aspects of society. Since the family is a reflection of society and the basis of norms and values is laid down in family life, the 'new' role of women is part of the new conventions concerning men-women relationships. In Albee's plays it seems as if husbands and wives have incorporated these roles to a new equilibrium, but underneath the veneer that both sexes keep up, anger, frustration and discontent are bubbling.

Albee's depiction of the wife is one of 'dominance'. She is the defender of the family, the guardian of norms and the decision-maker to the point where she takes over the entire family and rules with an iron fist. Mommy in *The American Dream* decides what is going to happen, just as Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is the one who decides to invite Nick and Honey,
even though George does not agree. *Three Tall Women* is a portrait of Albee's own adoptive mother, who is described as "imperious, demanding and unloving" in Albee's biography (Gussow 26). Agnes in *A Delicate Balance* explains about the true roles a wife plays: "I shall...keep this family in shape. I shall maintain it; hold it" (Albee II 67). "...The reins we hold! It's a team of twenty horses, and we sit there, and we watch the road and check the leather...if our...man is so disposed" (Albee II 97). On the one hand she admits that she, the wife, actually runs the whole show, while at the same time pretends to be the obedient servant who waits for her husband's consent. There is enough cynicism in her remark to understand that she knows exactly what the true state of affairs is like. Tobias protests vehemently when Agnes a little further on says that she does not decide on the 'route' the family takes, but that she 'follows': "Never! You've never done that in your life!", he says (Albee II 97), suggesting it is quite the opposite: Tobias follows, albeit grudgingly apparently. At the end of the play, after all the crises the family has been through, Agnes still holds on to her rule: "...And when the daylight comes again...comes order with it. ...Well, they're safely gone...and we'll all forget...quite soon. (Pause) Come now; we can begin the day" (Albee II 122), suggesting that no matter what chaos and darkness overwhelm us, it is our duty to pick ourselves up and continue as before. One can almost see Agnes clapping her hands as if she encourages little children to do her bidding. She tells us to ignore what lurks in the darkness and simply go back to 'normal'. We keep up appearances and deceive ourselves into believing we are on our way to living an organised, quiet life modelled according to the standards that our parents taught us. Going through his work from beginning to now, one sees that this has not changed in Albee's plays: in *Homelife* (2004) Ann is the one who wears the trousers, causing Peter to escape from his home every Sunday to read in the park and in his latest play *Me, Myself & I* (2008) Mother dominates the household to the extent that at least one of her children feels he cannot take it anymore and sets up schemes to try
to escape. It is the wife in Albee's families that keeps the home and its residents in a stifling check.

Of course, the conventional husband is supposed to be the one to maintain the balance and to guide the family, but in Albee the wife takes on that role and sets the example. This way Albee plays with the conventional family roles: where the husband should provide and be the strong leader, Albee creates a docile follower who lives a subdued life. He is subdued by conventions and by his wife: be civilised, be nice, be faithful is his wife's assignment for him. Albee's men realise that they have been boxed, but they have drifted so far from their true selves that it has become near impossible to come back. It takes extreme provocation to get Peter, in *The Zoo Story*, to realise the "civility, the orderly domesticity, the feminized quality (wife, two daughters, two cats) of [his own] life" (Zinman 11) and to find his instinct again so that, in the end, he kills Jerry. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George is humiliated by his wife in front of their guests several times and he seems to take all the blows lying down. Occasionally we see the anger in George rise up and come out, although these fits are always quickly subdued. When Martha explains to Nick and Honey how she literally knocked George down in a boxing match, George sneaks out of the room to come back with a shotgun which he points at Martha. Hemock fires and the shock comes mainly from the guests, not so much from Martha, and in the end George's action is laughed away by everyone. A little later on he again lets his animal instinct out, yet again in a civilised way: "In my mind, Martha, you are buried in cement, right up to your neck. (Martha giggles) No...right up to your nose...that's much quieter" (Albee I 197). Only at the end when he has been provoked and pushed too much does he take revenge by 'killing' his and Martha's invented son. He shouts: "*I'M RUNNING THIS SHOW!*" and with that 'finally' takes control of the situation (Albee I 303).
Albee uses this killer's instinct as a manifestation of the animal inside man in other plays as well. In *A Delicate Balance* Claire and Tobias fantasize about Tobias losing control and killing the whole family. Claire says she cannot imagine Tobias, whose motto 'We do what we can' rings with cowardice and servitude, ever letting himself go like that; "Predictable, stolid Tobias" (Albee II 27) and Tobias deviously replies that "of course, with all of you dead, your brains lying around in the rugs, there'd be no one to say it wasn't an act of passion" (Albee II 27), showing us that there is more to 'stolid' Tobias than meets the eye. Later on in the play he tells the story of how he came to hate his cat and eventually had her put down; a story that reminds us of the story of Jerry and his dog in *The Zoo Story*: the animal inside is there, but it has been leashed. Husbands have become subjects to the ruling wives and the result is hidden frustration.

In the other roles that family members have, Albee also shows how conventions have become an impediment to happiness. The picture Albee paints of the mothers in his plays is even more unforgiving, which is not a surprise, considering he modelled most of 'his mothers' after his own adoptive mother (Gussow 403). In his biography she is described as racist, prejudiced and uncommunicative and Albee "spoofed" her onstage, which was his way of dealing with his childhood (Gussow 140). It seems as if the mothers are all too preoccupied with society around them and control in their own family to actually care for their children. They have the child because that is what 'convention' demands if they want to live up to expectations. The explicit carelessness and indifference with which 'Girl' has her child in the beginning of *The Play About the Baby* is what Albee wants to show us regarding the vacuity of the American Dream and its conventions. This mother simply does what is expected without realizing the consequences and implications of her actions. This is exactly what happens in *Occupant*, the play about the artist Louise Nevelson; she has her son, but does not know how to or want to take care of him (Albee III 659; 669). In this respect the play becomes even more poignant for an audience if they know
about Albee's background, because this was based on actual events and not mere imagination, and considering Albee's own background, one can imagine the ambivalence that this must have created in his attitude toward Nevelson, who was Albee's friend.

Once the child is there Albee's mothers have a difficult time dealing with the new member of their household. They either behave inappropriately towards the child (Martha in *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is accused of driving her son away by coming on to him (Albee I 293); Mommy in *The American Dream* sizes her new son up in a rather sexual way (Albee I 146)), become overly possessive and proud of them (Edmee in *Finding the Sun*), or fall out with them for not playing by their rules (Agnes and Julia in *A Delicate Balance* constantly fight over Julia's failure to keep a marriage going; The Wife is utterly disappointed in The Son and The Daughter in *All Over* for not living up to her expectations as are A and B in *Three Tall Women*). Stevie seems like an average mother toward her son Billy in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, but on closer inspection it becomes clear that she is anything but just that: she treats her seventeen-year-old son as if he were a pre-schooler: "Go away, Billy. Go out and play" (Albee III 600), yet when things get really difficult and harsh she fails to provide protection or even show her love to him. In a fight between Billy and his father the latter calls him a "fucking faggot" and Billy is clearly hurt by this. Stevie, however, is too much concerned with her own fight with Martin; she near ignores this insult and again dismisses him. The stage directions for her comments are: *(Even)* and *(Cool)*: "I said your father is sorry for calling you a fucking faggot, because he's not that kind of man. ... who right now would appear to be fucking a goat; and I would like to talk about that, if you don't mind. Or ...even if you do" (Albee III 572). Much of the behaviour these mothers display and many of the stories that encircle the mothers in Albee's plays are derived from Albee's own mother, even the stories that seem inappropriate for a son to know about his mother (e.g. about his mother's sexuality). Albee's relationship with his mother was deeply
troubled: "Obviously she was incapable of getting rid of her deeply held prejudices and still had never forgiven me for walking out" (Gussow 342). He saw why and how his adoptive mother had taken him as a son and it had formed his view of the American family; a view he has represented with the help of mainly his mother-characters in many of his plays.

Along with the unloving mothers come the ineffective and indifferent fathers in his plays. The conventional father is strict, a strong support and a good role model (Lewis and Lamb 214-215, 219). Albee's fathers are often quite the opposite. Many of them are simply unable to handle their wives and this shows in their relationship with their children. In both *A Delicate Balance* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the fathers are portrayed as weak and subservient to their wives, which causes them to fail to take a stand against their wives when their children are 'attacked' by them. In *The American Dream* Daddy is not the one who wanted the child in the first place and now he sees his wife's sexual interest in their son, but does not do anything about this. In *The Play About the Baby* 'Boy' is not a father at all, but merely a child, who, for sexual pleasure or because he 'needs' it, craves his wife's breast when his child is drinking from it: "Let me at it for a while. I won't bite!" (Albee III 463). He is preoccupied with sex and when 'Man' and 'Woman' tell him and his wife that they have come to take the baby away, he reacts more to the threatening attitude of 'Man' than to the news itself. Even 'Man', who might be interpreted as the boy when he has become older, is not much better as a father. He is cynical and definitely not a good role model: "The old baby bundle - treasure of treasures, light of our lives, purpose - they say - of all the fucking, all the ... well, all the everything" (Albee III 530).

Martin in *The Goat* has his ups and downs as a father. He is understanding when Billy, in all his confusion, embraces his father in a sexual way and Billy even calls him "splendid", "smart, and fair" and says that he has a "sense of humour" (Albee III 613). On the other hand, Martin is
unfaithful to his wife, a feature with many of the men in Albee's plays. And he makes matters worse by having the affair with a goat. It becomes clear that he has been lying and deceiving his family all this time. Billy explains that everything he thought his parents stood for, truth, fairness, love, has turned out to be a lie. On top of it all, Martin reciprocates Billy's kiss, which is, of course, not what the conventional father would do. Comparing fathers throughout Albee's plays, one sees that the portrayals have become more unforgiving in the second half of his career. Where Peter, George and Tobias were weak yet still concerned and loving fathers, 'Man', 'the Penguin' and Martin were too much concerned with their own situation to actually care for their child. In that respect 'the Father' in his latest play *Me, Myself & I* is the culmination of the previous unconventional fathers: he simply abandons his family, comes back on a chariot pulled by black panthers without uttering a word, and, as soon as the situation becomes difficult for him, he charges off again. No sense of responsibility, no interest in his family's well-being, only in his own.

Another of the conventions that Albee confronts is marriage. The concept of marriage is based on the idea and agreement that we, in the Western world, are to look for that one special person whom we want to stay with for the rest of our lives and whom we are to create a family with. The convention lies in the fact that we think we are destined to do this for the sake of happiness and the continuation of our Western culture. In Albee's marriages men and women nearly always deceive each other, lie about themselves and their relationships and, most importantly, lie to themselves. In *Marriage Play* Gillian puts it rather aptly when she says: "...marriage does not make two people one, it makes two people two - a good marriage, a useful marriage - makes individuals!" (Albee III 304), suggesting that in most marriages, like the one we see here on stage, partners do not complement each other, but merely get in each other's way. They hold on to this idea of monogamy, this convention around marriage that we have created, assuming that
they are better off following or even submitting to their partner instead of each growing and developing with the help of the other. The Wife in *All Over* realises in the end that her marriage is/was really a very individualistic affair: "All we've done is think about ourselves. Ultimately" (Albee II 366).

In many cases people hold on to their partner or to the whole idea of marriage for the sake of convention, hence the fact that most divorcees eventually remarry. Albee's marriages are a mirror to this with the intention of waking people up to their misconceptions. Whether it is George and Martha's, Martin and Stevie's, Agnes and Tobias's or Jack and Gillian's, Albee's marriages are based on self-deception and convenience turned into conflict. Again *Marriage Play* aptly phrases the perpetuation of this false idea when at the end Jack again tells Gillian that he is leaving her (without emotion) and Gillian gently says: "...I know you are" (Albee III 305). He, however, does not walk out at all. The cycle of deception, adultery and struggle begins again (and again and again). Albee turns men into feminized spouses and women into dominating leaders. This gives him the perfect opportunity to put conventions up for discussion. By switching the roles of 'mothers' and 'fathers', 'husbands' and 'wives' Albee slaps the audiences in the face and confronts them with their own self-deception.

Children play a crucial role in disturbing the peace in Albee's families. They demonstrate what kind of expectations the parents have and thus show us how Albee feels about the conventions that make up the ideal family. The parents have a difficult time coping with all the pressures and expectations that society puts upon them, yet they try very hard. The child serves as evidence of the parents’ failure to produce the ideal picture.
A prominent example of this is the invented child in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. The fact that George and Martha feel the need to create a child, because they cannot have a real child is telling with respect to the conventions of the American family. The couple actually meets all the requirements that apply to the idea of the white, upper middle-class American family: husband and wife, intellectual success and social status. The one thing they do not have is a child. The fact that their climb on the social ladder stagnates may have to do with this failure to produce a child, resulting in frustration and mutual blaming. Once they have created the imaginary child they then proceed to project all their own frustrations onto this child's actions. Martha says the reason the child has left his parental home and does not want to come back is the fact that his father is such a disappointment. George says his son does not want to visit his parents, because his mother drinks too much and is too dominant. The son is used as a weapon in their battle. On the other hand this child is exactly what keeps them together. It is what they have in common and what ties them. The fact that it is an illusion is again telling. George and Martha's bond is based on the convention of the American family and Albee shows us that this is dangerous, to say the least.

Julia's failure to keep her marriages afloat is a frustration to her parents in *A Delicate Balance*. They believe she should try harder and simply stick with it, no matter what. It is what they do, after all. The wish for the daughter to get married is hinted at when Julia says to her father: "Do I pick 'em? I thought it was fifteen hundred and six, or so, where daughter went with whatever man her parents thought would hold the fief together best, or something." .. And Tobias answers: "Well, you may have been pushed on Charlie [her first husband]..." *(Albee II 57)*. The parents have projected their conventions onto their daughter, who seems unable to put all the demands into practice. She has tried four times by the time of the action in the play and the only alternative she has is to turn into her alcoholic aunt. We are led to believe that Julia will keep
trying and failing. Yet that is what Agnes and Tobias expect: "...when the daylight comes again...comes order with it" (Albee II 122). Now there may be chaos in Julia's life, but she is supposed to pick herself up and start all over again.

Another child who faces parents' expectations is Billy, Stevie and Martin's son in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*. He is gay and this is something at least Martin struggles with. When his best friend Ross tries to reassure him that Billy will eventually come around and settle in a heterosexual lifestyle, Martin has trouble believing this, which tells us that he had imagined and wished for something else for his son. Billy will not grow up to follow in his parents' family footsteps and he does not fit in the picture that Stevie and Martin try to create to the outside world. He is not taken seriously by Stevie, she dismisses him every time he opens his mouth in the discussion, and he is betrayed by his father. Billy is a pawn in Stevie and Martin's game and when he cries "Dad? Mom?" at the end of the play, we know that whatever decision his parents take, they will not really take him into consideration (Albee III 622). He is there, because he is simply a prerequisite for the ideal family.

This also goes for the baby in *The Play About the Baby*. The baby is first carelessly put into this world, then treated very matter-of-factly and only when it is taken away do the parents actually care for it or at least for the idea of a baby. Throughout the play the audience wonders if this young couple is actually fit to raise a child and whether it only wants a child, because that is what couples do.

As Toby Zinman explains in her essay about *The Play About The Baby*: "...Albee's plays are filled with disappearing, invisible, imaginary and destroyed children” (138). Children in Albee's families lay bare the frustrations, deeply-rooted wishes and despair that the parents experience.
Albee shows us that the conventions the Americans wish to live by can cause damage to people and perhaps most significantly to their offspring, which is what he experienced himself with his own parents. In that respect it is important to note that many of Albee's families do not procreate. The chain stops after the generations that are presented in the plays. Neither George and Martha, nor their guests Nick and Honey will produce children. Julia, Agnes and Tobias's daughter, will not keep a steady enough relationship to raise children; Billy is gay, as is A’s son in *Three Tall Women* and Henden's son, Daniel, in *Finding the Sun*, and in that same play the only child who would be inclined to produce children, Fergus, simply disappears. The Wife in *All Over* is so frustrated with the fact that her children do not live up to her expectations that she says: "You've neither of you had children, thank God, children that I've known of. ... I hope you never marry ... Let the line end where it is ...at its zenith" (Albee II 349). The child brings out the conflict in the parents, but also serves as a warning to everyone to rethink their ideas and wake up to the truth, instead of living by illusions.
3  Sex and Gender: Confusing Matters

One way of discussing the themes in Albee's work is through studying the roles that family members in Albee's plays fulfil. It is also worthwhile to take a step back and look at the general roles that men and women play with reference to their gender and sexuality, seeing that these two elements are quite prominent in most of Albee's plays.

One of Albee's themes has always been the confusion of gender roles. He uses this theme to convey different messages, yet it is usually not a positive element in his plays. The shift in conventions on gender roles in society, as mentioned before, has had serious impact on the way people build a relationship and, in Albee's plays, the balance between the sexes in a relationship is difficult to maintain as a result. The traditional gender role for a man was to be strong, to strive for the upper hand in any battle and to show as little emotion as possible. The woman was supposed to be the softer character, concerned with fellow human beings and generally better at empathising with others (Dunleavy). Since the 1950s these conventions have changed. Women can be ambitious and more focused on what they want without prioritising other people's needs. Modern conventions claim what used to be seen as a more masculine and therefore inappropriate role for women, allowing women and men to strike deals with regard to responsibilities, tasks and qualities they can have in a relationship. In Albee's plays these deals disturb the balance and cause conflict. The disturbance and the causes are then denied or ignored in service of conventions, which leads the audience to question those conventions and their validity. It is important to note here that Albee's usage of the confusion of gender roles as a theme has changed with time; in the 1960s and 1970s he focuses specifically on this theme to portray the dysfunctional family. From the 1980s onwards it is less significantly present in his plays and it does not serve the same purpose, as I will discuss later on. Only in his most recent play Homelife
does Albee return to this explicit theme. Whether this points towards the author's reaction to political movements or a reaffirmation of his earlier belief is something for further research.

In *A Delicate Balance* (1966) Agnes says: "I do wish sometimes that I had been born a man."

..."[Men's] concerns are so simple: money and death - making ends meet until they meet the end.

*(Great self-mockery and exaggeration)* If they knew what it was like ...to be a wife; a mother; a lover; a home-maker; a nurse; a hostess, an agitator, a pacifier, a truth-teller, a deceiver ...

(Albee II 51). Then she talks of a book that poses the theory that "the sexes are reversing or coming to resemble each other too much" (Albee II 52). She says that we should not believe this, because it "disturbs our sense of well-being" (Albee II 52), but that the book is probably right. This is a perfect explanation of Albee's point; it is the core of what he wants to convey in many of his plays. She laments the conventional role of the woman and comments on the 'childish' role of the man, she goes on to acknowledge that the reversal of these roles is what causes trouble in their marriage, and for that matter in all of Western society, and finishes off by saying that she wishes to ignore the problem, because it does not match with her (and society's) expectations. Agnes knows she has taken on the conventional role of the man, leaving Tobias with no choice but to settle for the conventional role of the woman. The reversal is the problem, but the individual characters are too absorbed in pretending everything is safe, quiet, normal and 'peachy keen' to confront this. Conventions lead to self-deception.

Albee first discusses this slippage from conventional gender roles in *The Zoo Story* (1958) in the story of Jerry and the dog. This dog is out to bite Jerry and Jerry has to run or fight every time they see each other. This makes Jerry feel alive and it makes him feel like a man. That is why he really does not want the dog to die and is "heart-shatteringly anxious to confront [his] friend again" (Albee I 29). Jerry nearly kills the dog and they reach a sort of truce. The dog has been
tamed and now Jerry and his dog "neither love nor hurt because [they] do not try to reach each other" (Albee I 31). Jerry no longer 'feels the dog inside him' and it is this complacency, this emasculation, the lack of life that causes him to warn Peter and force his own death. If Jerry and Peter are really two sides to one man and Jerry is the part that "embodies the self-accusation that he is a vegetable, echoing Ann's accusation that Peter is too civilized" (Zinman 20), it would mean that Peter's stifling of his own gender role is the cause of the problem.

One of the plays in which Albee deliberately plays with conventional gender roles is *The Play About the Baby* (1998). In this play Albee uses generic names for the characters, Boy, Girl, Man, Woman, suggesting these are not individuals, but types and thus suggesting that he is referring to general descriptions of the genders. 'Boy' is immature, self-absorbed and totally obsessed with sex; he claims that he will "guard ['Girl']; [he] will guard the baby" (Albee III 488) and we learn soon enough that that is nothing but bravado. 'Girl' is a lot more perceptive, yet does not say half as much as 'Boy' does. 'Man' is really the one at the steering wheel and he decides what happens next. He is arrogant and convinced of himself and he knows exactly what he wants. 'Woman' says that she is merely there to "help ...him; to assist him" (Albee III 472). One of the messages to the young couple in the play is that you, as a person, are defined by your grievances, loss and wounds and that is what the couple still has to go through. 'Man' refers to this when he says that the question is "not who I think I am, but who I cannot be ..." (Albee III 521), yet in light of the discussion of gender roles, it is also Albee's warning to the young couple: do not force your partner into a different role than what comes naturally to him/her: "I cannot be a woman - therefore I cannot have babies, ..." (Albee III 522). Later on in the play it becomes difficult to discern who plays or played which role in the other characters' history; 'Man' suggests that he gave birth to a baby and that he experienced what 'Girl' experienced in a sexual encounter with 'Boy'. This causes confusion and conflict; nobody knows exactly what is true and what is
not and, more significantly, what their role is. The whole theme of gender roles serves a different purpose: is there a conventional gender role and to what extent is such a role conventional? Those two questions gradually present themselves in *The Play About The Baby*.

As in the beginning of *The Play About the Baby* gender roles are quite straightforward in *Seascape* (1975), although here, again, the theme is used to help bring across a different matter. Throughout the play the male characters Charlie and Leslie provoke each other, brag and show off. Leslie, the giant lizard, is protective of his mate, Sarah, and decides that, at the end, this world above sea level is not suitable for them; Sarah follows. When trying to explain the concept of love, Charlie asks how Leslie and Sarah met and it is telling that he brings across his point when he says: "He loved you. ... He drove the others away so he could have you. He wanted you" (Albee II 422). Love is obviously linked with or even defined by sexual drive: the conventional male description of the term. When later on Charlie tries to explain the same term to Sarah he refers to the hypothetical situation of Leslie disappearing and he wants to know what would happen to Sarah. She then starts to cry. Albee seems to say that the conventional gender roles are given and natural. The play really deals with the question whether we are an evolving species or one that is gradually disappearing. Apparently, according to Albee confusion of gender roles does not play a part in that discussion. What is striking is that in this play the female is more tolerant, more adventurous and more curious than the male, who is competitive and conservative by nature. Comparing *A Delicate Balance* to this play, one could conclude that Albee changed in this respect. In his later plays he does not raise the issue in the same way he did in his earlier plays. The exception is *Homelife*, the 'prequel' to *The Zoo Story*: he describes Peter's married life and deliberately takes the audience back to Peter's ordeal of his new conventional role. Albee comes back to his first take on these conventions and seems to say that we are 'back to square one' or that nothing much has changed.
The problem with the confusion as mentioned above is not so much the 'new' role for women; Albee is not an opponent of emancipation, as becomes clear from his essays on Louise Nevelson and Lee Krasner (Albee VI 71 - 80 / p.119 - 122). The trouble begins when people start deceiving others and themselves. For all the changes in conventional gender roles and the accompanying new relationships, innate behaviour will pop up anyway, according to Albee, despite new conventions, and Albee especially uses sex to show us this. The repression of instinct and the accompanying lies and deliberate ignorance result in falsehoods and unjustifiable persistence in conventions. Sex is an element that Albee uses to define conventions, roles and people's inclination to self-deception. In Three Tall Women 'A' says: "We [women] cheat for lots of reasons. Men cheat for only one - as you [B] say, because they're men" (Albee III 364). Albee makes a clear distinction in gender roles here: women rationalize or act according to emotions evoked by events, men follow their instinct, their innate drive. With this he explains a few important matters which cause trouble in relationships: we ask our partner to curb their instincts, to control the 'animal' inside of us, because we expect, in the convention of Western, Jewish-Christian traditional marriage, civilised and controlled behaviour. If this is not attainable then we at least pretend to the outside world, our partner and, ultimately, to ourselves that we live up to expectations. The animal will not be contained and eventually and occasionally breaks free in the form of sexual escapades on the part of men. All we can do to comfort ourselves and others is to ignore this and pretend it did not, does not and will not happen anymore.

Many men cheat in Albee's plays and in most cases this is not openly discussed by the characters. Tobias in A Delicate Balance, the husband in All Over, Jack in Marriage Play, the 'Penguin' in Three Tall Women all commit adultery which is not to be discussed, but which clearly puts a blemish on a 'peachy keen' marriage. Though it is not explicitly mentioned, Charlie
in *Seascape* refers to cheating as a natural thing when he asks Leslie about his and Sarah's sex life. And, of course, Martin cheats on his wife Stevie in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* and with a goat to boot. The sexual taboo is often used by Albee because it explicitly exposes the falsehoods of conventions which he wants to confront audiences with. This is most clearly done in *The Goat*. Martin is not able to express what it is exactly that draws him in the goat, but for him it is obvious that he cannot find it with Stevie. His is a life of civilised, restrained and also public behaviour in which there is little room for Martin's basic needs and drives. For this he goes to Sylvia. There is a great taboo on bestiality and audiences can easily, after their initial shock, shove Martin's 'unconventional' behaviour aside as absurd and having nothing to do with them. Albee does not give the audience much room for this, because he has always claimed that this play is naturalistic, there is nothing absurd about it, meaning that the characters on stage will take this matter very seriously for one and a half hours and so the audience is, eventually, forced to do the same. Albee confronts the audience with their own sexuality through this by saying: 'This is what happens, despite your conventions'. If anyone still manages to escape from this, Albee drags them back by again referring to sexual taboos which may lie closer to the audience's personal experience. He has Martin tell a story about him getting an erection caused by his own baby on his lap and, to top it all off, he has Martin engage in a passionate kiss with his son. Just as the audience thought they could laugh away the absurdity of one sexual deviance, they are confronted with an even more intimate and imaginable one, which makes them reflect on their own sexual morale and conventions. The convention of monogamous, marital sex in a closed bedroom is exposed as a lie.

Sex is used as a weapon in Albee's plays and as such it has a direct link with gender roles. Martha flirts blatantly and deliberately with Nick in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to hurt George. Tobias and Agnes in *A Delicate Balance* do not sleep in the same bed anymore and
when they have sex, Agnes complains of the fact that he never lets himself go and retreats from her at the moment of climax. She thinks he does this to spite her. Both Martha and Agnes refer to the weakening of their husbands' gender role and their dissatisfaction with this. In *Finding the Sun* Daniel and Benjamin were lovers in the past and it seems there is still enough of a spark to light a new fire between them, even though they are both in a relationship with a woman now. They do not hide their preference and drive their spouses to despair with insecurity about their sexual experiences. The presumption that men will follow their sexual drive anyway keeps the men in control in these relationships and the women on their toes. And in both *Three Tall Women* and *Occasional* the women learn about the power of sex and how to manipulate men with it. By using sexual taboos in his plays, such as adultery, homosexuality, incest and bestiality, Albee shakes his audience awake and forces them to think about the conventions that they believe in and adhere to against their better judgement.
4 Evolving Conventions: Albee’s Generations

In the fifty years that make up Albee's career things have changed in American society with regard to conventions. The general attitude towards gender roles and sex have relaxed, although Albee shows us that this relaxation is less than we think. In his plays many of the conventions that applied in the fifties and sixties still do so today. Apparently we hand down conventions to the next generation, as Marie-Anne Suizzo shows in her study of the transmission of goals and values from parents to children (Suizzo 525-526). Albee examines how conventions are passed on through generations in his own work and what the consequences are. The question whether conventions are imposed from "without" or, as Albee later concludes, from "within" is related to this. If one assumes that they are laid down by society, one would be inclined to believe in the educational transmission of conventions more than in the genetic passing on of them. This means that we should be able to see a difference in views regarding this between his earlier plays and his later plays. Going through his work from his early years to today, one can definitely see a development.

*The Zoo Story* deals with a man, Peter, whose life is framed by conventions so much that he does not even recognize his instincts anymore and has forgotten how to live 'fully'; in other words: how to take everything life presents, all its ups and downs, sad and happy moments, terrifying and soothing experiences, aggressive and animal-like drives, and simply live through them. Peter's life is regulated and ironed out, free from extremes. He thinks this is exactly how it is supposed to be and has to be woken up by an outcast, Jerry, to understand that there can be more to life than looking after his wife and children, his parakeets and cats. Society demands and Peter follows the rules. Jerry shakes him awake and tells him of the zoo: the metaphor for society in which individuals are caged. Jerry says he went there to find out more about how people co-
exist, but he understood that it "wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals" (Albee I 34). This last part explains perfectly how Albee sees conventions as the cages imposed by society, separating ourselves from what and who we really are. In other words: The Zoo Story shows us that society holds the individual's 'natural self' in a stifling check; conventions are a product of society and not of the individual.

In The American Dream handing down conventions to the next generation is explicitly dealt with. Mommy and Daddy want a child, although neither of them can explain why and how, and so they adopt one. They kill the child when it turns out that it does not do as they want. The new child that arrives during the play is an interesting specimen: its looks are wonderful, but not (only) natural, because it worked on its body at the gym; it does whatever it is told for money; it is ready to be shaped by its parents and on top of it all it is called the American Dream by Grandma in the play. In other words: the child is the ultimate convention, formed and defined as the parents please. Genetics do not play any role here, it is all about education.

Julia in A Delicate Balance has stepped into four marriages and will probably get married again, because she has been taught by her parents that that is what one does. The convention has been passed on to her and she sticks to it, even though she and the rest of the world see that marriage really does not suit her. In this play Albee clearly sees conventions and their restrictions as something society imposes on the individual. The characters feel they cannot but adhere to the conventions and succumb to the system. Harry and Edna, Agnes and Tobias's friends, seek refuge in their friends' house, because they are terrified at home. They cannot explain what the terror is exactly, but they know it is enough to run from their house. They are the same as Agnes and Tobias; "Our lives are ...the same", Edna says (Albee II 119). Agnes, however, knows very
well where this terror comes from. At the end of the play she explains how the system of conventions, the rules and regulations that we live by is like the day and our animal side, our non-reasonable nature is like the night: "...the wonder of daylight, the sun...I wonder if that's why we sleep at night, because the darkness still...frightens us? They say we sleep to let the demons out... all our logic gone awry, the dark side of our reason. And when the daylight comes again... comes order with it" (Albee II 122). She also says that Harry and Edna's staying with them is not so much the problem, it is the fact that they have brought "disease" with them. This disease is the terror that Harry and Edna experience. Harry and Edna have a difficult time living up to expectations and they sense that the conventions may be stifling, yet they cannot pin down exactly what the problem is themselves. They merely know they are restless. Agnes realizes what it is and calls it a "disease" (Albee II 109); something that should be cured and is fought with 'order'. The conventions that we live by should not be feared; this fear is a disease. What comes naturally to us, our nature, is best hidden. It should remain in the dark and we should close our eyes to it.

Albee's personal history says much about his views on heredity, since he was adopted and he has been concerned with questions about his origin 'in his life and his work again and again' (Gussow 23). His adoptive parents created Edward, as it were, and taught him all about the conventions that applied in their time. His parents' world, WASP and upper class, was something he came to distrust deeply due to an unhappy childhood in which he was merely an asset to be moulded according to needs and expectations. The conventions that they passed on to him have been put up for discussion in his plays since his first one, The Zoo Story. The play that seems to reflect much of Albee's personal life and views on conventions and their consequences is Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. It deals with a WASP couple that 'create' a child and that is stuck in a dysfunctional marriage based on illusions which are brought on by the couple itself because of
just those conventions that they cannot adhere to. They will not pass on those conventions, whichever way, because they do not have any children at the end of the play. Martha's father, the personification of WASP upper class conventions whom George characterizes as "two hundred years old" (Albee I 180), had hoped that Martha would produce an heir whom he could "groom ...to take over...sometime, when he [would] quit" (Albee I 207). In other words: conventions are taught. All hopes that George and Martha's world could have for Nick and Honey as substitute heirs are lost, because they will not produce any children either. George's distrust of Nick's field of study is significant in this respect too; he refers to biology as the business of "rearranging the chromozones" and "making everyone the same" (Albee I 177). His question whether Nick believes "people learn nothing from history" (Albee I 178) suggests that Nick is an advocate of the 'nature' theory: if one wants to change society, one should work on the genes, for they determine people's behaviour. This makes George his counterpart and a supporter of the 'Agency'-theory. In terms of evolution, George worries about the future of Western society when biologists have made everyone the same, whereas in his view we can learn from our mistakes. Yet George is not presented as a hope-inspiring character, what with his unhappy marriage based on lies and illusions.

Seascape, written in 1975, is more concerned with genetics than any of Albee's previous plays. In it two lizards come out of the ocean and plan to live on the shore from now on. They encounter two human beings and what follows is mutual probing and testing to see what the other species is really made of. The mere fact that there are two different species on stage suggests that each is what it is through genetic make-up. The lizards come out of the sea, creating the Darwinian link with the human species: 'we' have evolved from 'them'. The surprising similarities in behaviour and thoughts between the lizards and the humans on stage then suggest that 'we' have become what we are through genetics.
This does not mean that from then on Albee changed his views in his plays. The characters in *Finding the Sun* (1983) struggle with conventions imposed by society as opposed to their natural inclinations. The same goes for the subsequent plays *Marriage Play* (1987) and *Three Tall Women* (1991). *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?* (2003) is an interesting play in this respect in that it shows both views alongside each other. Martin crosses all conventional lines when he starts an affair with a goat and has to face conventional society in the shape of his wife and son as a result. Something is lacking in his conventional life, so he seeks refuge with the goat, representing nature and natural elements that have disappeared from Western society. In that respect conventions are definitely not a part of his 'genetic makeup'. On the other hand it is striking that his affair with Sylvia answers to all the conventions that go with what human beings understand to be 'love'. She has a name as if she were a person, she "loves [Martin]" (Albee III 603), "there [is] a connection" (Albee III 599) between Martin and her, they 'go to bed together' because they "[want] each other very much" (Albee III 601) and it is all about her "soul" (Albee III 602). Martin says that he believes "...we all [are] ...animals" and thus the link with genetics is made. It is in our nature, apparently, to love and bond the way we do. Conventional love has a genetic origin, just as in *Seascape*.

Albee's question regarding educational or genetic passing on of conventions appears again in one of his latest plays, *Homelife* (2004). This first Act, which was added to *The Zoo Story* after nearly fifty years, was written to give more insight into Peter's life before that fateful meeting with Jerry in the park. It tells of Peter's marriage to Ann and it is she who presents us with Albee's shift in focus. Peter and Ann decided at the start of their marriage that they wanted "a smooth voyage on a safe ship", "a pleasant journey, all the way through" (Albee IV 20). They agreed that they wanted to live by all the conventions that go with Western marriage in the
twenty-first century. Yet Ann senses that this life of conventions is not what she wants. She wonders if there is not more to life and, more importantly, if Peter does not feel the same. She says that "deep down [she is] ...less than [she thinks she is]" (Albee IV 20). Of course, she refers to the animal inside her, just as many characters in Albee plays did before her. Her ultimate question is whether Peter "has it in [him]" (Albee IV 20). By asking this she first implies that Peter does not have this animal side to him and that his wish for a safe and calm life is natural to him. This then suggests that perhaps conventions are not merely taught, but also form a part of our genetics. With this Albee puts the focus on the individual and his own nature for the first time. Up to that point he always made society a part of the opposition, but here it is more a question of the individual and his own makeup. He has Peter reply with a story about how he raped a girl at a student party once and how that shaped him into the conventional man that he is. So there is an animal in Peter; he merely hides it, on account of a bad experience. Ann confirms the educational theory of handing down conventions by stating that even though we are animals, "we can have it bred out of us - learned away" (Albee IV 24). Yet Albee does not leave it at this; he draws the individual back into focus by having Ann reflect on herself: "It's me I sense I'm not happy with - not entirely. And I never know exactly what it is; something ...other" (Albee IV 24). She does not automatically make herself a victim of 'the system', but lays responsibility at least partly with herself. The problem of society versus the individual's responsibility and role in the creation of conventions is not as easily solved anymore for Albee. It is as if Albee comments on his own earlier work and fine-tunes the point of view he took in it. He evaluates the stance he presented in The Zoo Story and clarifies and refines it.

For whatever the origin of conventions in American society, Albee is and has been clear about where he thinks they will take us. In Stretching My Mind he wonders whether this
civilisation "is one of those bizarre civilisations that may be on its way downhill before it has ever reached its zenith" (Albee VI 193). This sounds pessimistic and in many of his plays American society's evolution is definitely doomed. George and Martha's line ends just as Nick and Honey's does in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. Neither couple produces children. If George and Martha stand for the Washingtons and thus represent America in general, this means that American society will not continue to exist. A Delicate Balance proclaims the same fate with Julia's failure to keep her marriage afloat and have children as does All Over: "Let the line end where it is ...at its zenith", says The Wife (Albee II 349). In Seascape the lizards want to return into the ocean out of disappointment, which is a gloomy message in itself, but they are persuaded to stay and give it a try by the humans Charlie and Nancy. Albee himself is not sure whether this will result in a happy ending: the lizards have become "subject to us, to humanity. Are we going to destroy them?" (Albee VI 98).

Albee's view of our own evolution to what we have become is not simply a matter of 'progression' in the positive sense of the word. In Finding The Sun Edmee says that she "would love to be able to walk into .. the water, ... down the grade, enter, submerge, walk about, reverse and march right back to my starting point ..." (Albee II 236). Perhaps it would be best if we tried again, is what Albee seems to say here, because we have made a mess of things. And in Homelife Ann and Peter come to the conclusion that eventually Western society causes its own downfall: "But who will eat us?", Peter asks. And Ann answers: "We do that ourselves. We eat ourselves - all up" (Albee IV 26). All this does not mean that Albee is a pessimistic naturalist. Although Ibsen and Chekhov were a great influence on him and his work (Gussow 136, 345), he does not share their gloomy world view. In Stretching My Mind he says on the subject of optimism: "If I were a pessimist I wouldn't write" (Albee VI 98), meaning that the plays may seem to end in doom, but that this is deceptive. As stated at the beginning of this thesis, Albee's goal is to hold a
mirror up to people and confront them with their behaviour, asking them to change their ways if they do not like what they see. If he were a pessimist, he would not bother doing this. He is merely showing people the destructive qualities of conventions if not 'handled with care'. In that sense the plays are more of a warning than a foreboding. This ties in with his view of art:

I hold that we are the only animal who has invented and uses art as a method to communicate ourselves to ourselves. And I am convinced that this has a great deal to do with evolution. ... We developed the need and the ability to be able to hold an accurate mirror up to ourselves, to observe ourselves, to observe our behaviors, ... intentions and there from came evolutionary development of art. (Albee VI 202).
Conclusion

Albee's belief that theatre makers have an obligation to renew their art form and hold a mirror up to the audience to evoke change has led him to experiment with form and content throughout his career. He also sets the audience the task of engaging in a performance with an interested, open and sympathetic mind. His use of Hamlet's mirror and the agreement he makes with his audiences are a combination of a traditional and an avant-garde view of theatre, which results in a canon that has kept scholars, critics, theatre makers and audiences busy for years. With regard to form one could say that the elements that Albee uses to confront his audiences with their own conventions and their effect (vaudeville, direct audience address and language tricks) have by now become customary in theatre conventions to the extent that the task that he sets a playwright no longer seems prominent in his latest plays. His latest works do not show any explicit experimentation with form in the sense that they either follow all the modern day theatre conventions (direct audience address, frugal settings), or they fall back into the same categories that his earlier experimentations comprised. This, however, may serve as evidence that he has been of great influence on the theatre world, since what he does is no longer 'new' and "we are reminded of the need to consider seriously his contributions to the theater" (Gainor et al. 1563). His attempt at renewal comes and has come much more in his handling of conventions through plot.

He has always been critical of America's conception of conventional roles, whether they be parental or marital, and our conception of sexuality and its accepted forms. His plays often involve social taboos that illustrate perfectly how conventions work. He has always tested audiences on their ideas of mother- and fatherhood, peeling away the veneer of total commitment, love and care and exposing sometimes insurmountable conflicts of personal
interests and societal expectations. His portrayal of marriage has always been a harsh one based on confrontations between people trapped in social conventions, who, as a result, resort to a life of illusions and lies. Albee's starting point is usually the accepted convention; audiences are then gradually drawn to realize that socially unaccepted feelings, anxieties, instincts and desires lurk beneath that social varnish and the rot and decay that follow are really a result of the insulating qualities of the conventional layer. Through his use of theatrical conventions he exposes the mendacity of social conventions.

Albee's realisation that conventions may not necessarily be imposed by society, but could very well be created and enforced by the individual him- or herself has resulted in a gradual focus on identity and the individual's responsibility for his or her actions and choices and a shift in view from conventions being trained to them coming naturally to people.

From *Three Tall Women*, in which A, at the end of the play, speaks about herself in the third person and stresses the fact that she can survey the whole of her life and all the choices she made, to *Homelife*, in which Ann explicitly asks her husband if he has it in him to be an animal from time to time, suggesting that perhaps individual people may differ in the extent to which they cover up or even have an animal side: Albee's plays are more and more concerned with the choices that the individual makes and their consequences. This development in Albee's plays culminates in his latest work *Me, Myself & I*; not only does the title stress the theme of identity and individualism, but also the characters and the plot revolve around the individual and his or her responsibility. The brothers, significantly named OTTO, otto, and Otto, represent two (or three) sides to the same person and struggle with the concept of identity. The mother cares nothing for conventions and is called to answer for the choices that she made and the father simply runs off after a short appearance when he does not like the
things that he is confronted with. This play is all about how personal choices shape the individual.

The idea that conventions are a part of our nature is presented clearly in *Seascape*, where both lizards and humans adhere to them. The lizards have to be taught about terms / words and their meanings, but the concepts themselves to which these words refer are not strange to them. As a matter of fact, the characters exchange conventions, as it were. This means that, since there are two species involved here, conventions are part of our nature. *Marriage Play* shows a similar development and this is best explained with the help of the playwright who influenced Albee's most: Samuel Beckett. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Albee's *Marriage Play* end similarly: Vladimir: "Shall we go?" Estragon: "Yes, let's go." [They do not move.] (Beckett 905) and: Jack: "I'm leaving you." Gillian: "I know you are." [They sit; silence; no movement.] (Albee III 306). The difference is in the use of the plural and the singular, which suggests that in Albee's case this is an individual problem and not a general one.

*The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* is slightly different in this respect. It deals with the individual who fights against the system and struggles with (his own) nature. Martin searches for 'something' outside of his nicely regulated, conventional life and ends up having an affair with Sylvia, a goat, who could well represent 'nature' against the 'conventions' represented by Stevie and Ross. When, in the end, Stevie murders the goat, she cuts away this natural element, forcing Martin to live by conventional rules. This then is a play that focuses on the individual, yet not in his struggle with himself, but with the system and socially accepted norms. On top of that it explores theatrical conventions of tragedy, since it redefines the classical interpretation of the 'goat song' (Gainor et al. 1565).
Albee's earlier work refers less to the individual's fight, but more to the pressure of conventions on Western society as a whole. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George and Martha's marriage breaks down under the pressure of expectations and conventions put on them by their environment. The fact that their mere names refer to historical American figures supports the idea that this is not about the individual but about society in general. The characters and the plot in *The American Dream* represent American society as a whole and reveals the deceptive quality of the conventional 'dream' and its implications for that society. The caricature-like quality of the play prevents an individualistic interpretation. In both plays Albee shows that what "everybody wants" is really only what everybody "thinks he wants", as Grandma puts it at the end of *The American Dream* (Albee I 148). He explains how this will affect society if people do not wake up to the illusory character of these wishes. In *A Delicate Balance* Albee does not zoom in on one character, but instead shows us two similar couples, representing the American family in general dealing with the paralysing and terrifying qualities of conventions that are passed on from generation to generation simply because that is what is expected.

The development in Albee's work becomes clearly visible in one of his latest plays. He has come full circle in his career with his creation of *Homelife*; the 'Act' which was added to *The Zoo Story* in 2008. With this addition he commented on his own first work and its basic ideas. The shift in focus as explained earlier is nicely tied up with the story of Peter, the character that appears in both acts. In *The Zoo Story*, in which Peter's 'honor' is represented by an iron, man-made, bench, the question is whether he wants to stick by his conviction that 'people can't have everything they want', whereas in *Homelife* the focus turns to the question whether Peter even has an animal inside him or whether the conventions that he lives by are natural to him. The question in this play is significantly linked with sex; that very natural phenomenon
in people's lives. The shift in focus is exactly what Albee has gone through in his career and it is significant that the latter part emerges as a prequel to his first play. It is as if Albee has realized that he should have asked himself this question first, before getting into Peter and Jerry's fight in the park. Therefore his choice to write this as a play to come before The Zoo Story is, in hindsight, a logical one. Peter and Jerry really represent two sides to one man and the question whether Peter 'has it in him' is answered in what has now become the second Act: Yes, he has it in him, but the stifling character of conventions push 'it' to the background and prevent Peter from leading a full life. The conventions themselves, which Albee addresses in his plays, have not changed much. Family conventions are still his main focus. Albee's aim to renew himself with the plays that he writes is therefore not achieved. The upper-middle class, however, which Albee addresses in his plays, has changed in the sense that it is no longer only white, nor only Protestant. This leaves enough room for Albee to expand his territory and experiment with a new make-up of his audience. Multiculturalism might well provide a new perspective on the conventions that Albee deals with and give him new material to work with towards his goals. Apparently, though, he can still stir audiences with his work, which is telling with regard to both the character of the conventions that are dealt with in his work and the audiences that attend productions of his plays. Albee, however, remains optimistic with regard to people's capacity to change: "If I were a pessimist, I wouldn't write" (Albee VI 98). This means he believes we have it in us....
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Appendix: Plays and Related Topics

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