The American Dream

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD ALBEE

Born in Virginia and adopted shortly thereafter into the wealthy Albee family, Edward Albee never felt fully at home in his adoptive family. As he bounced from school to school throughout his teens, racking up expulsions from military academies and private schools around the country, he struggled against authority. He ultimately graduated from the prestigious high school Choate Rosemary Hall, but at Trinity College in Connecticut, he was expelled again. Albee moved to New York's Greenwich Village, a bohemian epicenter of arts and culture, where he began composing plays which criticized American society. Albee, though openly homosexual, never considered himself a gay writer but rather "a writer who happen[ed] to be gay." Nevertheless, his plays often exposed and lampooned the dark side of traditional heterosexual unions and the simmering unrest just below the surface of the idyllic American family. His best-known works include the 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which has endured as a hallmark of contemporary American theater, as well as *The Zoo Story*, *Three Tall Women*, and *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* Albee was the winner of numerous awards including the 1963 and 2002 Tony Awards for Best Play, the 1967, 1975, and 1994 Pulitzer Prizes for Drama, and a 1996 National Medal of Arts. Albee died in 2016 in his home in Montauk, NY. With lifetime achievement awards from the Lambda Literary Foundation, the MacDowell Colony, the Drama Desk Awards, and the Tony Awards, Albee remains, indisputably, one of the seminal and foundational voices in modern American theater.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early 1960s, the world was on the verge of great upheaval, poised on the brink of a series of sexual and social revolutions that would reverberate from New York and San Francisco to London and Paris. In the post-World War II landscape, America was more prosperous than ever before—but at the same time, the destruction of the war and the ushering-in of nuclear warfare had left the country shaken by its own power. *The American Dream* throws into relief the dangers of obsession with youth, conformity, and perfection in the American nuclear family, showing how dangerous the pursuit of an imagined American ideal—one that did not actually exist—would be. The play is a cautionary tale against the romanticizing of constructed "American" values, but it's also a deeply personal story—the disjointed family; the absent, mutilated child at the heart of the story; and the character of The Young Man buckling under pressure to embody ideals of youth, virility, and patriotism while privately dealing with unspeakable emotional turmoil all point to Albee's painful childhood and adolescence. His adoptive parents were distant and domineering—by many accounts, even cruel—and their stodgy, stuffy "old American" values, ties to the Revolutionary War, and upper-class lifestyle ultimately pushed Albee to rebel against the traditional path laid out for him.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Edward Albee's *The American Dream* is part of the post-World War II movement called "Theatre of the Absurd." Meant to highlight the staggering inequities and absurdities in global society, plays associated with this artistic movement use hyperreal (or surreal) settings, characters, and situations to examine the breakdown of human society. Many of the plays that were developed as part of the movement remain iconic and relevant in world theatre today, and they are frequently revived and reexamined in a contemporary context. These plays include Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and *Rhinoceros*, and plays by Jean Genet (*The Maids*), Tom Stoppard (*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*), and Harold Pinter (*The Birthday Party*). Theater of the Absurd stretches forward and backward in time as well—many identify Alfred Jarry's 1896 play *Ubu Roi* as the first major "absurdist" play, and many playwrights still working today, including Sarah Ruhl and Caryl Churchill, explore the "absurd" though their experimental dramas.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The American Dream*
- **When Written:** Early 1960s
- **Where Written:** New York, NY
- **Literary Period:** Postwar/Theatre of the Absurd
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** America
- **Climax:** Grandma tells Mrs. Barker a horrifying story which reveals that Mommy and Daddy mutilated their adopted child until it died.
- **Protagonist/Antagonist:** Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma are the play's main characters, and also one another's foils and antagonists.

EXTRA CREDIT

Mommy Dearest. The key to understanding the dreamlike and convoluted play *The American Dream* may lie in Albee's own personal history. Albee is rumored to have based the character

of Mommy on his own adoptive mother, the "tall and imposing" Frances Cotter Abee, from whom he was estranged for most of his life.

Repetition. Edward Albee's 1959 play *The Sandbox* also features four characters named Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, and The Young Man. The setting is different—the characters rotate around a large pit of sand while directly addressing the audience about the rifts in their family—but the characters' relationships to one another are much the same, and the play's absurdist setting and themes were further teased out in *The American Dream*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Mommy and Daddy sit opposite one another in large armchairs in the living room of their apartment. They are awaiting the arrival of handymen and remark upon their lateness. Mommy laments how "people think they can get away with anything these days." Mommy tells a story about going out to buy a beige hat the previous day, and Daddy listens without interest. When she ran into the chairman of the woman's club on the street, the chairman complimented Mommy's wheat-colored hat. Mommy returned to the store, livid that the salespeople had lied to her about the color of the hat, and demanded they give her one that was actually beige—but now she acknowledges that they probably just took the hat into the back room and returned with the same one, pulling the wool over her eyes twice. Daddy says, "That's the way things are today," and both he and Mommy resignedly admit that no one can ever get any real satisfaction.

Grandma, Mommy's mother, enters the living room with her arms piled high with finely-wrapped **boxes**. Mommy and Daddy ask what the boxes contain and whom they're for, but Grandma insists it's none of their business. Grandma dumps the boxes at Daddy's feet and complains that no one is coming to fix the toilet. Daddy apologizes, and says he knows Grandma is in discomfort—he can hear her "whimpering" in the bathroom at night. Grandma and Mommy chide Daddy for speaking so callously, and Grandma begins talking about how horribly people treat the elderly these days. She leaves the room to get more boxes. Mommy reminisces about how poor she and Grandma used to be and expresses how grateful she is that she married Daddy, who has allowed her and Grandma to finally feel rich. Grandma returns with more boxes, again dumping them at Daddy's feet before continuing her diatribe about how mistreated the elderly are. Grandma also accuses Mommy of being a "tramp and a trollop" who only married Daddy for his money. Mommy says she wishes she could "get rid" of Grandma by putting her in a nursing home. Her frustration mounting, Mommy wonders aloud where the people they're expecting could be. Grandma asks who's coming, but Mommy refuses to answer her. To distract Grandma, she compliments how nicely wrapped the boxes are. Grandma sighs and says that though wrapping the boxes hurt her fingers, it had to be done. When Mommy asks why, Grandma echoes Mommy's earlier refusal to answer her own question, and says it's none of her business.

The doorbell rings, and Mommy excitedly urges Daddy to answer the door. Daddy, though, seems hesitant and even fearful about letting whoever is on the other side of the door in. Mommy urges him to be "masculine and decisive" and open the door; Daddy, spurred on by the compliment, gets up and answers the door. Mrs. Barker breezes into the living room. Daddy asks her to come back another time, but Mrs. Barker refuses to leave. Mrs. Barker comments on how "unattractive" the apartment is. It's clear that Mrs. Barker is there to perform some kind of service for Mommy and Daddy, but she won't reveal what it is. Mommy and Daddy seem confused by her presence, and Mrs. Barker clarifies that she's the chairman of the woman's club. Mrs. Barker too, though, seems unable to deduce why she's come to the apartment, and she asks if Mommy and Daddy would like her to clear away Grandma's boxes. Grandma tries to speak up, but Mommy hushes her. She offers to explain the purpose of the boxes—and Mrs. Barker's visit—but Mommy won't let her speak. Grandma urges Mommy to let her speak, as the elderly are wiser than she thinks—and make up "ninety per cent of the adult population of the world." Mommy, convinced Grandma is getting bad information from the television in her room, sends Daddy upstairs to break Grandma's television. Mommy steps into the kitchen to get Mrs. Barker a glass of water, leaving Mrs. Barker and Grandma alone in the living room.

Mrs. Barker tells Grandma how lost and confused she feels, but Grandma tells Mrs. Barker she's been "here" before—not in this exact apartment, but in the presence of Mommy and Daddy. Mrs. Barker asks Grandma to tell her about the last time they all met, and Grandma demands Mrs. Barker beg her. Mrs. Barker begs, and Grandma begins telling a story. Long ago, a man and a woman "very much like" Mommy and Daddy lived in an apartment "very much like" this one and befriended a local woman "very much like" Mrs. Barker, who worked at the Bye-Bye Adoption Service. Mommy and Daddy bought a "bumble of joy" from the agency and brought it home—but as the baby grew and developed, it did things they didn't like. When the baby cried all night, they cut its tongue out. When the baby only had eyes for its Daddy, its Mommy gouged its eyes out. When the baby got older and began touching its "you-know-what," Mommy and Daddy severed the baby's hands and genitals. One day, the baby died, and Mommy and Daddy demanded their funds back from the adoption agency, as the baby hadn't helped them feel "satisfaction." Mommy and Daddy shout from the other room—they can't find the things they went into the other rooms to get. Mommy returns to the living room and asks Mrs. Barker to accompany her into the kitchen. Mrs. Barker, disturbed by Grandma's story, follows Mommy.

The doorbell rings again, and Grandma shouts that the door is open. A handsome Young Man walks into the apartment—Grandma asks if he's "the van man" who has come to take her away to a nursing home, but The Young Man admits he doesn't know why he's come. Grandma admires The Young Man's classic, "midwestern" good looks, and dubs him "the American Dream." The Young Man says he's looking for work—he'll do anything that pays, but he admits that he has no discernible talents. The Young Man says he is incomplete, and has been most of his life. He tells Grandma a horrible story: he was separated from his identical twin brother at birth, and though the two never saw one another again, The Young Man suffered periodic "agon[ies]" and eventually lost all physical and emotional feeling. Now, he is capable of only "cool disinterest"—he feels nothing, loves no one, and can't perform sexually, though he lets people use him for his body in exchange for cash. Grandma says she'll hire The Young Man, but doesn't tell him what his duties will be.

Mrs. Barker returns to the living room, saying she's unable to find Mommy or Daddy anywhere. Mrs. Barker asks who The Young Man is, but Grandma doesn't answer her—instead, she orders The Young Man to begin taking her boxes outside. The Young Man scoops up an armful and carries them out the front door. Grandma tells Mrs. Barker to come closer—she knows how she can find a "way out." Grandma whispers a secret in Mrs. Barker's ear, and Mrs. Barker applauds Grandma's wonderful idea. Mrs. Barker goes out of the room, calling for Mommy and Daddy. The Young Man finishes putting Grandma's boxes outside and asks what he should do next. Grandma tells him to help her outside and to then return to the living room and stay put. The Young Man helps Grandma outside.

Mrs. Barker, Mommy, and Daddy return to the living room. Mommy wonders where all of Grandma's boxes are, and Mrs. Barker tells her that "the van man" came to take Grandma away. Mommy grows hysterical and begins calling for Grandma. Grandma, from offstage, peeks her head into the living room and tells the audience how much she's enjoying watching Mommy cry. The Young Man reenters the living room, and Mrs. Barker presents him as a "surprise" for Mommy and Daddy. She reminds them that they've always wanted a "bumble" to bring them "satisfaction." Mommy and Daddy appraise The Young Man and tell Mrs. Barker how impressed they are with him—he's "much better than the other one." The Young Man fetches glasses and wine from the living room so that they can all toast his arrival, but when he returns, he has an extra glass for Grandma. Mommy, seemingly having forgotten Grandma, asks why there's an extra glass. The Young Man apologizes for miscounting. Mommy raises a toast "to satisfaction," and seductively volunteers to tell The Young Man all about the other "bumble" later on that evening. She says there's something familiar about him—something she can't place. Grandma steps out into the middle of the stage and, directly addressing she audience, says it's important for the play to end now—while it's still a "comedy," and "while everybody's got what he thinks he wants."

CHARACTERS

Mommy – Mommy is the cruel, domineering, self-centered driving force at the center of the play. Rumored to be based on Albee's real-life adoptive mother, Mommy has very little regard for anyone but herself. She is obsessed with her own stories—stories of her past and present, both inane and nostalgic—but cares nothing about what anyone else has to say. She repeatedly steamrolls, emasculates, and patronizes her husband, Daddy, whom she openly admits she married only so that she could "live off" his money. She berates and belittles her live-in mother, Grandma, and constantly threatens to have her carted away by "the van man" to live in a nursing home. She talks snidely about her friend and neighbor Mrs. Barker's wheelchair-bound husband right in front her, even as she chides Daddy and Grandma for not treating their "guest" well enough. Eventually, it is revealed that Mommy and Daddy, seeking to complete their family, once adopted a "bumble of joy" from Mrs. Barker's adoption agency—a baby they mutilated routinely when it acted in ways that displeased them until it "up and died." It's implied that Mommy was the mastermind behind the torture of the "bumble"—torture that began in earnest when the baby "only had eyes for its Daddy," and Mommy in turn gouged out the baby's eyes. Mommy's larger-than-life, completely narcissistic persona is symbolic of the bombastic self-obsession at the heart of American society—and on a more personal note, is perhaps Albee's way of reckoning with having had a vindictive adoptive mother who only wanted a certain kind of child. In many ways, even the more intimate reading of Mommy as a cipher for Albee's mother speaks, too, to the hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness intrinsic to the American nuclear family—a unit obsessed with broadcasting a positive collective image at the expense of its individual members.

Daddy – Where Mommy is authoritative, domineering, and self-aggrandizing, Daddy is sheepish, suggestible, and self-deprecating. Daddy is a wealthy man who tries his best to ignore his frivolous yet cruel wife's antics, going along with whatever she asks of him out of a desire to keep the peace. At the same time, Daddy is insecure about his masculinity, and often asks Mommy to confirm that he is "decisive and masculine," even as he whines and begs for her approval and her support in his decisions. Daddy is something of a hollow character—he often seems to exist only in response to Mommy and Grandma, and the few times he does speak his own mind, he complains about being surrounded by women and feeling disenchanted by the lack of "satisfaction" available in society lately. At the same time, Daddy never explains what

"satisfaction" would mean to him—he gripes about the compromised state of society without seeming to really participate in that society. Daddy seems to be the most passive character in the entire play until The Young Man comes along and mirrors Daddy's hollowness and agreeability. By framing the women characters as motivators of action, arbiters of change, and indeed the heads of their households, while framing the men in the play as husks of their former selves, Albee is toying with reversed gender roles and a redistribution of the power typically granted to men. This reversal reflects the changing dynamics in American society—and in American families—at the time of the play's composition, and is perhaps Albee's way of lampooning male fears of female empowerment.

Grandma – Though Mommy is the play's most bombastic force, Grandma is its quiet center. The only character who breaks the fourth wall to address the audience—and the only character who seems to truly know what's going on as the play descends into confusing, twisting dream-logic—Grandma is the sole keeper of her family's history. Grandma's hold on the past is symbolized in the form of the finely-wrapped **boxes** she spends much of the play moving around, seemingly in preparation to leave her daughter and son-in-law's home for good. Grandma is careful with her family's past and the horrors it contains—she wants to revere it and bring it with her, even though it threatens to hurt her. Mommy and Daddy, on the other hand, seem to have complete amnesia about their family's past. Grandma looks down on Mommy and Daddy, and in particular berates her daughter Mommy for her cruelty, greed, and narcissism. Though Grandma seems to fear being taken away by "the van man" and put in a nursing home, she chooses to leave home at the end of the play—Grandma is ultimately a stubborn old woman who wants to live her life on her terms. Grandma is the one to tell Mrs. Barker and The Young Man who they are and what they're doing in the play, and she is also the one to cut the action off in order to preserve the evening's "comedic" tone and leave all of the other characters suspended in a moment of false satisfaction. Grandma's mysterious ability to traverse the worlds of the play and the the audience is never explained—but Albee, who felt close in real life with both his grandmothers, is perhaps signaling society's failure to respect and care for its elders, and warning against the calamities that will come if America develops amnesia about its past.

Mrs. Barker – Mrs. Barker is the chairman of the local woman's club, and a friend and neighbor of Mommy and Daddy. When she shows up to the house, neither they—nor she—seem to really know what her purpose there is, and the play veers into absurdist, dreamlike territory as they all struggle to figure out how they relate to one another, and why they can't seem to remember the history of their friendship. Grandma is the one to eventually reveal that Mrs. Barker was, many years ago, the one to deliver a "bumble of joy" to Mommy and Daddy—as a volunteer at a local adoption agency, she helped them facilitate the adoption of a baby whom they later mutilated and murdered. Mrs. Barker seems to slowly remember pieces of her past after Grandma's intervention, but she moves through much of the play unsteadily; she is often uncertain and takes her cues from others. For example, when Mommy suggests Mrs. Barker make herself more comfortable by taking off her dress, Mrs. Barker does so, and spends the rest of the play in only her slip. A changeable, often airheaded cipher, Mrs. Barker seems to represent the directionless, toothless mutability of an American society which seeks to abandon its past and succumb to the empty promises of an American dream that doesn't really exist.

The Young Man – The Young Man is the last character to show up in the play, and in many ways he is the character most like a symbol. Unlike Mrs. Barker, who is aware that she has been summoned to the house but is uncertain of the reason why, The Young Man seems to have no idea what he's doing at Mommy and Daddy's house or how he got there in the first place. The Young Man is handsome but haunted, aware of his almost painfully good looks and willing to sell his body to the highest bidder. When prompted to do so by Grandma, who dubs him (based on his "midwestern" looks and charm) "the American Dream," The Young Man reveals the truth of his painful past. Separated at birth from a twin brother, The Young Man has suffered great losses throughout his life—phantom "agonies," the loss of physical and emotional sensation, and a crippling emptiness which prevents him from feeling anything but "cool disinterest." It is suggested that The Young Man's twin brother was the "bumble" Mommy and Daddy adopted and then murdered. The Young Man, then, seems to represent the hollowness of the American dream itself. The Young Man looks shiny and promising on the outside, but is completely devoid of substance on the inside. He goes along with whatever is asked of him, and will sell himself out for cash, taking on any task, no matter how debased or amoral. In the end, Grandma suggests Mrs. Barker present The Young Man to Mommy and Daddy as a surprise, giving both their visits to the apartment purpose. Mommy and Daddy welcome him warmly, stating that he's much better than the "other" bumble. Everyone wants a piece of the American dream, Albee is saying, even if they know how empty it is, and how destabilizing and fruitless the pursuit of it will ultimately be.

THEMES

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THE FALLACY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Edward Albee's short play *The American Dream*, part of the post-World War II "Theatre of the Absurd" movement, is a convoluted and occasionally dreamlike piece that satirically skewers the idea of "the American dream." A deeply personal play which draws on Albee's own dissatisfaction with his strained, painful childhood, *The American Dream* expresses Albee's desire to expose American idealism as a fallacy. Through the play, Albee argues that "the American dream"—opportunity, equality, success through hard work, and clean-cut familial bliss—doesn't exist, and never has.

The play's very title announces its primary concern: the American dream. In the 1960s, when Albee was writing this play, the idea of the American dream signified something very different than it does today. America in the postwar landscape was synonymous with freedom and opportunity; resistance against fascism and oppression; and an upward trajectory in terms of industry and innovation. Cars and homes and educations were affordable; social values were wholesome and family-focused. Societal unrest and revolution, however, were on the horizon all across the globe—and artists like Albee were determined to hold the issues, inequities, and injustices simmering just below the surface up to the light. There are many ways in which Albee skewers the idea of the American dream throughout the play, from the nuclear family who appear happy at first glance but secretly loathe one another, to Mrs. Barker, a robotic, Stepford-wife-esque neighborhood friend. Mommy talks repeatedly and rapturously about the social and economic advancement she experienced when she married Daddy solely for his riches, and though Grandma chides her daughter for such shallowness, Mommy has no qualms about her desire to advance up the socioeconomic ladder without looking back. By skewering Mommy's open selfishness—and by showing the tradeoff she made between literal financial poverty and moral bankruptcy—Albee suggests that those who pursue "the American dream" as hollowly and recklessly as Mommy does will never be satisfied. The "pursuit of happiness" is revealed to be a cruel, Sisyphean inversion of itself; happiness can never truly be reached in America, a society that only encourages its members to consume more and more.

Albee further indicts the American dream when he introduces the character of The Young Man in the play's final third. The ruggedly handsome, "midwestern"-looking Young Man shows up at Mommy and Daddy's apartment without knowing what he's doing there—but when he starts talking to Grandma, who praises his good looks and dubs him "The American Dream," the reason for his appearance becomes slightly more clear. The Young Man describes the painful life he's had so far; separated from an identical twin brother at birth, The Young Man has felt pieces of his emotional self die off slowly over the years. He feels unable to love anyone or feel anything other than "cool disinterest." The Young Man is, in his own estimation, incomplete, and he feels "nothing"—no emotions, good or bad. The Young Man's story parallels the story of the "bumble" Mommy and Daddy brought home from an adoption agency run by Mrs. Barker many years ago. When they were dissatisfied with how the baby they'd adopted was growing up, they began mutilating and torturing it in an attempt to make it conform to their ideas of how a young man should be. The Young Man's monologue to Grandma reveals that while Mommy and Daddy's "bumble"—The Young Man's twin brother—was suffering physically, The Young Man was experiencing a simultaneous emotional deterioration that he could not explain. Albee is using the disaffected, emotionally stunted Young Man to show that the American dream does not—and never has—existed. While impoverished and marginalized people have suffered in the shadows of America for years and years, those who seem to embody the American dream are impoverished in a different way. Aware that something is deeply wrong but unable to name what plagues them, they carry outwardly the hallmarks of success, health, and happiness, but when cornered are forced to admit to an underlying "agony" which renders them traumatized and disaffected.

Though "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" are literally written into the core documents and doctrines of American society, these things are, in Albee's estimation, a "dream" only in the sense that they are fleeting, unattainable, and fictitious. Albee shows, through this play, how even those who seem to embody the American dream are actually far from achieving it, for reasons that are not just personal but also structural and societal.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE FAMILY

Edward Albee drew on his own childhood traumas (as the adoptive son of parents he could never seem to impress) in composing *The American Dream*—a play which takes a less-than-generous look at the darkness and unrest simmering just below the surface of a typical American family. Given the societal and sexual revolutions looming on the horizon during the time Albee was composing the play, it stands to reason that his absurdist drama would skewer the American nuclear family and examine the impending breakdown of that unit. Through *The American Dream*, Albee argues that the institution of the American family as it exists is not just a failure, but a danger—one that threatens individuality, autonomy, and true freedom.

The individual members of the family at the heart of *The American Dream* are mired in hatred of, cruelty towards, and contempt for one another. Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma loathe one another, and yet they seem stuck together in the apartment they share—an apartment which is a kind of prison for each of them. This family is clearly broken, and yet they cling

to one another out of a futile and hypocritical attempt to preserve the façade of happiness and togetherness. Albee, whose own painful childhood and abusive family no doubt inspired the emotionally fraught funhouse-mirror world of *The American Dream*, dissects how gripping tightly to a false ideal for the sake of appearances actually harms members of families who do so—togetherness, he's suggesting, is not synonymous with happiness at all.

As the play begins, Mommy and Daddy are positioned as mirror images of one another, sitting across from each other in large armchairs in the living room of their apartment. They gripe together about the state of their home, which is in need of repairs, and discuss the problems facing modern society—namely, the moral bankruptcy and inability to ever "get satisfaction" plaguing people nowadays. They seem to look at the world in the same way and share a set of values—but when Mommy's mother Grandma enters the scene, the cracks in their family's foundation begin to show. Daddy and Mommy both patronize Grandma, making fun of her for her old age and verbalizing how much they wish they could put her away in a nursing home. Mommy is most vocal about her dislike of her mother, which seems to stem from a desire to look away from the legacy, history, and older values Grandma represents. As Mommy reminisces aloud about how she and Grandma used to live in poverty, she reveals that she married Daddy for his money, and now feels that she has a "right" to live off of him—though she doesn't think Grandma does. As the family bickers and argues over Grandma's obsession with the armfuls of mysterious, neatly-wrapped **boxes** she's ferrying from her bedroom to the living room, it becomes clear that these three people really hate each other. Mommy's constantly threatening Grandma with having her taken away by "the van man" and shipped off to a nursing home, while Daddy ignores Mommy's stories and feelings, expressing blatant disinterest in her inner world.

The resentments, small and large, that Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma feel towards one another are never fully explained—but they're at least given some context when Grandma tells a visiting friend of Mommy's, Mrs. Barker, a harrowing story from the past. Grandma couches the story in language that turns its events into a kind of fable, as she tells the tale of a family "very much like" their own—a family which adopted a "bumble of joy" that they later mutilated, piece by piece, until it died. This cruelty occurred because Mommy and Daddy didn't like the growing child's burgeoning autonomy and personality. Albee brings all of the cracks in the foundation of Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma's family to the surface through this story. By showing how Mommy and Daddy picked apart their own child—while Grandma looked on passively, aware of what they were doing every step of the way—Albee suggests that the desire to preserve an idyllic, perfect American family unit actually destroys families from the inside out. Mommy and Daddy killed their child because it wouldn't do what they wanted or behave how they thought it should—and yet they continue to prop themselves up as a viable and even happy family unit, ignoring the trauma, abuse, and violence they've inflicted on one another in the past as well as in the present.

Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma emotionally, verbally, and physically abuse one another—and the horrific story at the center of the play, the story of Mommy and Daddy's ill-fated "bumble," shows that Mommy and Daddy have literally killed in pursuit of establishing for themselves the perfect, ideal American family. Albee shows how destructive this pursuit is—and draws on his own experiences of abuse and feelings of displacement and not-belonging in order to craft a metaphorical story about the lingering effects of what happens when family members try to squeeze one another into boxes, all for the sake of appearances. Just as the larger fallacy of "the American dream" threatens society, Albee argues, so too does the concept of a tight-knit nuclear all-American family cause destruction. Both models are unattainable, he's suggesting, and trying to reach them will only bring pain and dissatisfaction to those who try to do so.

CRUELTY AND COMPLACENCY

All of the characters within *The American Dream* are wrestling with small and large acts of cruelty—acts they both endure and perpetrate. From Mommy's steamrolling, domineering emasculation of Daddy to Daddy's disregard for and disinterest in Mommy to the constant threats both of them make against Grandma—threats to have her removed from her home by "the van man"—there is no shortage of cruelty in the household depicted in the play. As the action unfolds, and Mrs. Barker and The Young Man join the fray, Albee shows how people become numb to the pain they both suffer and cause—and ultimately uses the drama to make the larger argument that complacency in the face of cruelty and violence is rotting American society from the inside out.

Through Mommy and Daddy—ciphers for all that's wrong with American society, and the play's primary arbiters of cruelty—Albee shows how cruelty and complacency, or passive indifference to cruelty, continually fuel one another as they eat away at the moral integrity of human relationships and, more largely, human society. Mommy is the play's most vocal character—and its most callously cruel individual. From her constant threats against Grandma, which express her desire to be rid of the woman who raised her, to her open admissions to Daddy that she married him solely for his money, Mommy is shameless about her narcissism and self-interest. She pretends to like her friend and neighbor, Mrs. Barker, yet she openly makes fun of Mrs. Barker's invalid husband. On top of all her seemingly quotidian and petty cruelty, Mommy is also revealed to have adopted a baby that she later mutilated and killed when the "bumble of joy" failed to live up to her expectations for it.

Grandma reveals all of this in a secretive speech to Mrs. Barker as a way of demonstrating how obsessed with perfection and "satisfaction" Mommy and Daddy both really are. Mommy's obsession with perfection and keeping up appearances is revealed, then, to be far more than superficial—Mommy was willing to stoop to the deepest, most evil levels of cruelty in order to get her way. Albee uses the character of Mommy to indict those who are ruthless, cunning, and obsessed only with their own wants—their cruel behavior, he suggests, is dismantling society and destabilizing the foundation of humanity for future generations.

Where Mommy is cruel, Daddy is merely complacent—but as the play progresses, Albee suggests that in some ways, complacency and indifference are even worse than cruelty. Daddy is shown from the opening of the action to be resigned to the fact that Mommy can and will do whatever she wants. He's uninterested in his predictably cruel wife's predictably cruel behavior, and he often tunes out her stories about her daily routines as well as her harangues against Grandma. Even when Grandma attempts to hammer home to Daddy just how bad Mommy really is, Daddy doesn't want to hear it. Daddy is emasculated and powerless, and he relies on validation and compliments from Mommy—his primary tormentor—to feel good about himself. He asks her to tell him that he's "masculine and decisive" over and over again, but within the framework of the play, he doesn't take one single action that could be described as demonstrating either quality. When Grandma recounts to Mrs. Barker the story of Mommy and Daddy's abuse of their "bumble," she points out that the abuse against the baby began when it "only had eyes for its Daddy." Grandma suggests that Mommy began torturing the child because it preferred its father—but once the abuse began, she says, Daddy joined Mommy in neglecting, mutilating, and ultimately killing the child. Daddy is passive, suggestible, and spineless—and through his character, Albee suggests that individuals who allow brutality and violence to thrive by either looking the other way, allowing themselves to be coerced into participating, or performing some combination of both are in some ways even more odious than those who are outright cruel.

Mommy's verbal slights and aggressions combine with Daddy's simpering passiveness and remote agreeability to create a home environment steeped in cruelty. How closely the apartment at the center of *The American Dream* mirrors Albee's childhood home cannot be known—but it's clear that in drawing on his own experience of cruelty on a small scale, Albee hoped to use the play to render how cruelty plays out on the larger canvas of human society. The death of the American dream and the nuclear family unit, also major themes within the play, are intimately tied to the rise of human cruelty and indifference to it—and considering how much further American society has morphed in the decades since the first performance of *The American Dream*, it seems that perhaps Albee was right to try and warn audiences about the ways in which malice, meanness, and spinelessness indeed rot societies from within.

ENTERTAINMENT AND ARTIFICE

Edward Albee's *The American Dream* is part of a movement called "Theatre of the Absurd"—plays written in the decades following the end of World War II which used heightened reality, absurdism, and breaking of the "fourth wall" between the stage and the audience to highlight the irrationality of society, entertainment, and the intersection of the two. The world, absurdist playwrights knew, was plunged into a strange and dangerous new era in the wake of the war's violence and its ushering in of the nuclear age; how, they wondered, could entertainment possibly ignore the surreality and absurdism of the present moment? As an answer to this question, Edward Albee—and other artists of the absurd—constructed dramas that deliberately called out their own artifice. Through *The American Dream*, Albee argues that there is no value in art or entertainment that hides behind itself and refuses to acknowledge the societal and existential problems plaguing the outside world.

Absurdist theatre uses ludicrous situations, larger-than-life characters, and opaque, mysterious plots to create a complicated experience for its audience. In doing so, absurdism shines a light not just on the absurdity of society, but also on how ridiculous it is to turn to entertainment as a source of escapism. Through *The American Dream*, Albee engages with all the major tenets of absurdist theatre—and, through the use of direct address, particularly in the play's final moments, makes a biting commentary about audiences' unwillingness to forgo a night of entertainment in order to think about real social issues. As the play draws to a close, Grandma has seemingly been carted away from the apartment—to Mommy and Daddy's relief and delight—while The Young Man, the handsome and well-mannered "American Dream," has come to stay. Mommy and Daddy are rid of Grandma, who acted as their historical awareness and societal consciousness, and have instead someone—or something—that allows them to think only of the bright vision of the future ahead of them. Just when Mommy mentions that The Young Man seems familiar, Grandma, who has been hiding at the front of the stage and watching the last several minutes of the action unfold, steps forward and speaks directly to the audience. She tells them it's time for the play to "wrap […] up"—it's supposed to be a comedy, after all, and to push things further might send the play into darker territory that no one wants to see.

Though the play has already confronted the death of the American dream, the collapse of the nuclear family, the effects of cruelty and indifference, and has also featured graphic depictions of poverty, starvation, physical mutilation, and emotional trauma to boot, Grandma insists it's still a "comedy"

that mustn't be pushed any further into darkness. Trauma and cruelty, Albee's saying, are so woven into the fabric of everyday American life that most Americans are willing to accept them as part of a "comedy." Pointing out that the horrors the audience has just witnessed are barely scratching the surface is Albee's way of condemning Americans for how much misery and horror they're willing to overlook, and his way of chiding them for trying to seek refuge in entertainment. Grandma tells the audience it's important to end the play at a moment in which "everybody's got what he thinks he wants." The characters may or may not be about to discover the truth of what's happening to them; Mommy and Daddy seem to have a kind of amnesia about what they did to their adopted "bumble" years ago, but the play suggests that being reunited with that bumble's twin, The Young Man, may stir them from their complacency. By having Grandma cut the action off before this point is reached, Albee is further condemning his audience: he's suggesting that they don't really want to watch these traumatized characters solve their problems. People want to watch a "comedy," even if it's a dark one—they don't want to see arbiters of cruelty be held accountable for their actions, because if audiences did want that, they wouldn't be trying to escape reality through theatre in the first place.

Albee uses *The American Dream*, a piece of theatre in the absurdist tradition, to point out the lunacy not just of contemporary American society and the indifference it shows to the major problems, but also the ridiculousness of using entertainment as a way to escape these dark truths. Through the play, Albee argues that entertainment as escapism has no value. Art's responsibility, he's saying, can and should be to throw the problems of society into relief and force people to reckon with them, rather than to let them or even encourage them to ignore the truth of the world around them.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GRANDMA'S BOXES

Throughout the play, Grandma is seen carrying multiple "neatly wrapped and tied" boxes from her room out to the living room. Over the course of the play, it becomes clear that Grandma's boxes are symbols of the past and of legacy. Grandma, as the eldest member of the family, carries the weight of her family's history, and all of the stories that are part of that history. Mommy and Daddy don't care enough to find out what's in the boxes, but Grandma cares for them carefully nonetheless. She wraps the boxes nicely, tending to their contents even though doing so gives her paper cuts and hurts her joints. Grandma eventually reveals that they contain the small ephemeral things that make up a life—false teeth, letters—and also things that should be too significant or even impossible to box up—a Pekingese dog, "eighty-six years of living." The boxes don't just contain knick-knacks, clothes, or papers—they contain all of Grandma's memories, all the lessons she's learned, and all the things she's tried (and failed) to pass on to Mommy and Daddy. The boxes are symbols of people's refusal or inability to learn from the past and make a better future, and they metaphorically relate to the desperate sociological and moral confusion, horror, and uncertainty that followed World War II—and created the "Theatre of the Absurd" movement of which *The American Dream* is a landmark piece. Because the play is also a critique of the hypocrisy and unsustainability of the idyllic American nuclear family, and because Albee shows how Mommy and Daddy have an obsession with securing the perfect, ideal child to carry on their family's legacy rather than learning from their family's difficult past, Grandma's boxes—and all that may or may not be contained within them—take on a profound symbolic weight.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Plume edition of *The American Dream and Zoo Story* published in 1997.

The American Dream Quotes

MOMMY: I don't know what can be keeping them.

DADDY: They're late, naturally.

MOMMY: Of course, they're late; it never fails.

DADDY: That's the way things are today, and there's nothing you can do about it.

MOMMY: You're quite right.

DADDY: When we took this apartment, they were quick enough to have me sign the lease; they were quick enough to take my check for two months' rent in advance... [...] But now! But now, try to get the icebox fixed, try to get the doorbell fixed, try to get the leak in the johnny fixed! [...]

MOMMY: Of course not; it never fails. People think they can get away with anything these days...

Related Characters: Daddy, Mommy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of the play, Mommy and Daddy sit in the living room of their apartment and complain about how late "they" are—the audience, hearing Daddy's speech about the untrustworthiness of the building management, assume that Mommy and Daddy are waiting on repairmen to come by. The absurdist drama has a simple-enough beginning—a beginning which covers up the strange, confusing, and bizarre events about to unfold. Mommy and Daddy are dissatisfied with their apartment, with the people who maintain it, and with the way people behave "these days." Mommy and Daddy judge everyone around them—but as the play will soon reveal, it is perhaps Mommy and Daddy who are the ones who threaten the society they seem to be refereeing in the play's opening moments.

GRANDMA: I didn't really like wrapping them; it hurt my fingers, and it frightened me. But it had to be done.

Related Characters: Grandma (speaker), Daddy, Mommy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

When Grandma comes into the living room with her arms piled high with finely-wrapped gift boxes, the play's otherworldly strangeness begins to reveal itself. Mommy and Daddy alternate between keen interest and profound ambivalence as to what's in the boxes—but every time they ask Grandma what they contain, she deflects their questions, insisting it's none of their business. Within the play, the elderly Grandma is the arbiter of history and the past—she's the sole character who seems to have a cultural memory and remembrances of her family's past. At the end of the play, she will reveal that the boxes contain the mundane things that have made up her life; as such, they are symbols for the ways in which the elder members of society (and families) are often forced to carry the burdens of the past while the younger generation ignores the lessons of history. The boxes, Grandma says, "hurt" to wrap up—but they "had to be" wrapped and preserved carefully.

DADDY: I think we should talk about it some more. Maybe we've been hasty… a little hasty, perhaps. *(Doorbell rings again)* I'd like to talk about it some more.

MOMMY: There's no need. You made up your mind; you were firm; you were masculine and decisive. […]

DADDY: Was I firm about it?

MOMMY: Oh, so firm; so firm.

DADDY: And I was decisive?

MOMMY: SO decisive! Oh, I shivered.

DADDY: And masculine? Was I really masculine?

MOMMY: Oh, Daddy, you were so masculine; I shivered and fainted. […]

DADDY: *(Backing off from the door)* Maybe we can send them away.

MOMMY: Oh, look at you! You're turning into jelly; you're indecisive; you're a woman.

Related Characters: Mommy, Daddy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74-75

Explanation and Analysis

One of the play's major themes is the breakdown of the idyllic American nuclear family unit. Albee skewers gender roles and relations, and the toxic ways in which men and women insult and destabilize one another—and the entire bedrock of the American family as society knows it. In this exchange, Daddy harbors reservations about opening the apartment door to his and Mommy's mysterious guests—Mommy first attempts to motivate him by calling him firm, decisive, and masculine. When he falters, even after all her praise, she calls him a "woman" as the most hateful insult she can summon. Mommy and Daddy often trade off throughout the play as they engage in cruelty and complacency in the face of cruelty—here, Mommy is her dominating, steamrolling self while Daddy is meek, complacent, and submissive. Albee is lampooning society's fears of powerful women, while at the same time showing that there are very real threats to the illusion of the picture-perfect American family that society would like to believe still exists.

MRS. BARKER: Can we assume that the boxes are for us? I mean, can we assume that you had us come here for the boxes?

MOMMY: Are you in the habit of receiving boxes?

DADDY: A very good question.

MRS. BARKER: Well, that would depend on the reason we're here. I've got my fingers in so many little pies, you know.

Related Characters: Mommy, Daddy, Mrs. Barker (speaker), Grandma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

When Mommy and Daddy's guest Mrs. Barker arrives, the play takes a giant leap into the absurd. Mrs. Barker refers to herself not as "I" but as "we;" she is a friend and neighbor and the chairman of the local woman's club, but at the same time, it becomes evident that she is indeed the person Mommy and Daddy have hired to come to their apartment (though they seem to have amnesia as to when, how, and why they hired her the moment she walks through the door.) Mrs. Barker herself is unaware of why she's come, and the absurdity of a group of characters who have come together onstage with no evident purpose or goal plays into Albee's mission of exposing theatre and entertainment more generally as empty artifice in the face of real social unrest.

MOMMY: All his life, Daddy has wanted to be a United States Senator; but now…why now he's changed his mind, and for the rest of his life he's going to want to be Governor…it would be nearer the apartment, you know.

Related Characters: Mommy (speaker), Mrs. Barker, Daddy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief passage, Mommy describes—for the first time in the play—Daddy's ambition to be in the United States government. This goal of Daddy's is never mentioned again after this brief exchange with Mrs. Barker—it would seem that Daddy's desires to be a senator or a governor are completely arbitrary, interchangeable, and empty. Albee is using this moment to point out that often the people in charge in America are people like Daddy—weak, directionless, amnesiac, and morally bankrupt. They want power for its own sake and set goals accordingly, but the goals themselves are meaningless. Albee is using the play to skewer major societal institutions in America—family, marriage, "the American dream" itself—and in this passage, he lampoons the American government as well.

MOMMY: Oh, I'm so fortunate to have such a husband. Just think; I could have a husband who was poor, or argumentative, or a husband who sat in a wheel chair all day… OOOOHHHH! *What* have I said? What *have* I said?

GRANDMA: You said you could have a husband who sat in a wheel…

MOMMY: I'm mortified! I could die! I could cut my tongue out! I could…

MRS. BARKER *(forcing a smile)*: Oh, now… now… don't think about it…

Related Characters: Mrs. Barker, Grandma, Mommy (speaker), Daddy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92-93

Explanation and Analysis

Edward Albee uses the brief exchange above—in which Mommy cruelly makes a mean statement about Mrs. Barker's wheelchair-bound husband—to show the profound differences between the two characters, and the invisible rules of engagement which seem to bind them. Mommy is self-obsessed, unruly, and irreverent; even in the company of a guest, she can't seem to force herself to shove away her horrible personality and be polite. Mrs. Barker, however, has the opposite problem: when her hostess says something cruel and horrible, she can't seem to switch off her ingrained politeness and speak up for herself or her husband. Albee is pointing out that his characters are merely stock people, tools of his trade as a playwright. Within the confines he's given them they don't have much agency or wiggle room, and they are bound to his will—much as, he suggests, real people are helplessly in thrall to the fiction of the American dream.

MRS. BARKER: *Please* tell me why they called and asked us to come. I implore you!

GRANDMA: Oh my; that feels good. It's been so long since anybody implored me. Do it again. Implore me some more.

MRS. BARKER: You're your daughter's mother, all right!

GRANDMA: Oh, I don't mean to be hard. If you won't implore me, then beg me, or ask me, or entreat me… just anything like that.

MRS. BARKER: You're a dreadful old woman!

GRANDMA: You'll understand some day. Please!

Related Characters: Grandma, Mrs. Barker (speaker), Mommy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

When Mrs. Barker and Grandma are left alone onstage together for the first time, Mrs. Barker seeks advice from Grandma—she is the only person in the play thus far to genuinely ask Grandma's advice. Grandma, who is used to being ignored, taunted, and shamed by Mommy and Daddy nearly constantly is so grateful to have someone actually pay attention to her that she tries to milk the moment for all it's worth. She tells Mrs. Barker that one day, she'll "understand" why Grandma needs this validation, and urges the woman to implore, beg, and entreat her. Grandma is the arbiter of the past and history within the play, and yet no one seems to draw on her knowledge—Mrs. Barker asking her for help is both a balm and a drug to Grandma, who feels powerful, however briefly, once again. Through this moment, Albee suggests that history might be a powerful teacher, if only it didn't go ignored most of the time.

GRANDMA: Weeeeellll . . . in the first place, it turned out the bumble didn't look like either one of its parents. That was enough of a blow, but things got worse. One night, it cried its heart out, if you can imagine such a thing.

MRS. BARKER: Cried its heart out! Well!

GRANDMA: But that was only the beginning. Then it turned out it only had eyes for its Daddy.

MRS. BARKER: For its Daddy! Why, any self-respecting woman would have gouged those eyes right out of its head.

GRANDMA: Well, she did. That's exactly what she did. But then, it kept its nose up in the air.

MRS. BARKER: Ufggh! How disgusting!

GRANDMA: That's what they thought. But then, it began to develop an interest in its you-know-what.

MRS. BARKER: In its you-know-what! Well! I hope they cut its hands off at the wrists!

GRANDMA: Well, yes, they did that eventually. But first, they cut off its you-know-what.

Related Characters: Mrs. Barker, Grandma (speaker), Daddy, Mommy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Barker begs Grandma for a "hint" as to why she's come to Mommy and Daddy's apartment, Grandma begins telling her a story about a couple "very much like" Mommy and Daddy who adopted a "bumble of joy" from an adoption agency run by a woman "very much like" Mrs. Barker, many years ago. As Grandma gets into the story, she describes the horrible ways in which Mommy and Daddy punished their bumble for growing up differently than they wanted it to. The macabre mutilations and vindictive attempts to physically control the child by depriving it of its own body parts are gruesome and cruel—and as Grandma relays the story, it becomes clear that she was complicit in Mommy and Daddy's cruelty, even if she was only a complacent witness. The speech's macabre nature is part of the absurdism of the play to be sure—but it's also part of Albee's attempt to point out the futility and decadence of trying to escape the problems of the real world through art and entertainment.

GRANDMA: My, my, aren't you something!

YOUNG MAN: Hm?

GRANDMA: I said, my, my, aren't you something.

YOUNG MAN: Oh. Thank you.

GRANDMA: You don't sound very enthusiastic.

YOUNG MAN: Oh, I'm... I'm used to it.

GRANDMA: Yup . . . yup. You know, if I were about a hundred and fifty years younger I could go for you.

YOUNG MAN: Yes, I imagine so.

Related Characters: The Young Man, Grandma (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

When The Young Man arrives at Mommy and Daddy's apartment, he is, like Mrs. Barker was, confused about why he's there or how he's gotten there. As she introduces herself to The Young Man, Grandma voraciously takes in his attractive physical features. Given that Grandma will, in just a moment, dub the good-looking, blonde, healthy-seeming, classically "Midwestern" Young Man "the American Dream," her statement about being "a hundred and fifty years younger" takes on new meeting. The play was written in or around 1960—which means that a hundred and fifty years before then would have been the year 1810. The American experiment was, at that time, new and untested—having secured independence from England fairly recently, there was still a sense of pride, patriotism, and unimpeded possibility. The American Dream began to evolve—but the pain, suffering, violence, and genocide that occurred in pursuit of that dream would also begin to erode the meaning of the words "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

GRANDMA: Boy, you know what you are, don't you? You're the American Dream, that's what you are. All those other people, they don't know what they're talking about. You . . . you are the American Dream.

Related Characters: Grandma (speaker), The Young Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

When Grandma dubs The Young Man "the American Dream," it's seemingly a compliment. She's commenting upon his good looks—his clean-cut exterior, his "Midwestern" carriage, his muscled frame. His exterior is exquisitely American—but as The Young Man will soon reveal, he is a wreck on the inside, transformed by the many indescribable and strange traumas he's suffered. As Albee develops the parallels between The Young Man and the concept of the American dream, Grandma's comment seems less like a compliment and more like a curse. Like the concept of the American dream, Albee suggests, The Young Man has been hollowed out from the inside by the traumas of someone he's never even met. Others still find him attractive, beautiful, and comforting—but he knows that he is an unfeeling fraud unable to give people what they want. He is looking for odd jobs to make money, willing to do anything to make a buck including sexual favors—he's advertising himself as cheap and attainable, when really, what his customers are getting is a facsimile of a person. The American dream, Albee argues, works just the same way; it takes people in with an illusion of perfection, only to draw them into a shallow, unfeeling inner life.

YOUNG MAN: I have suffered losses . . . that I can't explain. A fall from grace . . . a departure of innocence . . . [...] Once ... it was as if all at once my heart. . . became numb . . . almost as though I . . . almost as though . . . just like that . . . it had been wrenched from my body . . . and from that time I have been unable to love. Once [...] I awoke, and my eyes were burning. And since that time I have been unable to see anything, anything, with pity, with affection . . . with anything but . . . cool disinterest.

Related Characters: The Young Man (speaker), Grandma, Daddy, Mommy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114-115

Explanation and Analysis

As The Young Man tells Grandma the sad story of his life, he describes being "torn" at birth from an identical twin brother. Though the two never met again, The Young Man has always been profoundly aware of this loss—and has suffered further personal "losses" of his own. In light of Grandma's story about the adopted "bumble" that Mommy

and Daddy tortured, mutilated, and eventually killed, the "losses" (both physical and emotional) The Young Man has suffered make a lot more sense—but to him, he is unable to understand what has slowly been chipping away at his body and soul all his life, leaving him unable to feel anything but "cool disinterest." Albee uses the metaphor of The Young Man and the twin or "bumble" to suggest that while American society devolves into violence, greed, and narcissism, the American dream as a concept too decays and erodes. On the outside, it still seems attractive and attainable—but as the systems that support its possibility atrophy, its promises turn hollow and empty until it is nothing but a cheap façade hiding a horrific reality.

YOUNG MAN: I have no emotions. I have been drained, torn asunder... disemboweled. I have, now, only my person... my body, my face. I use what I have... I let people love me...I accept the syntax around me, for while I know I cannot relate... I know I must be related *to*. I let people love me... I let people touch me... I let them draw pleasure from my groin... from my presence... from the fact of me... but, that is all it comes to.

Related Characters: The Young Man (speaker), Grandma, Daddy, Mommy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

As The Young Man continues his monologue, he describes the profound alienation he feels as a result of his emotional "disembowel[ment.]" The Young Man—a stand-in for the concept of the American dream, as well as the fiction of the perfect American family—reveals that he is hollow and completely indifferent to the way others use him and perceive him. The "fact of [him]" pleases and attracts people—but he is unable to reciprocate their love, lust, or interest. The American dream as a concept, Albee is saying, is a hollow sham—a glittering ideal which draws people in only to disappoint them and treat them with indifference. The gleaming promise of America, Albee suggests, can never be attained—the country is built on broken systems of inequity and injustice, and the fallacies that keep American society functioning are a series of trick mirrors with nothing propping them up.

YOUNG MAN: All the boxes are outside.

GRANDMA *(a little sadly):* I don't know why I bother to take them with me. They don't have much in them... some old letters, a couple of regrets... Pekinese... blind at that... the television... my Sunday teeth... eighty-six years of living... some sounds... a few images, a little garbled by now... and, well... *(she shrugs)* ...you know... the things one accumulates.

Related Characters: Grandma, The Young Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

Grandma, in preparation for leaving the apartment, calls upon The Young Man to help her carry the finely-wrapped boxes she's been keeping in the living room out of the house. Grandma has been protective of the boxes themselves, and equally secretive and possessive about what they contain. Now, after dangling the information in front of Mommy and Daddy (and by proxy the audience) for the entire play, she reveals what they contain—they hold the entire history of her life, the "accumulate[d]" possessions of her many decades of living. Grandma is confirmed, in this short speech, to be the arbiter of the past. She is the only one who holds onto items from her life, the only one who considers her own personal history (and her family's history), and the only one who isn't amnesiac or disoriented when she considers any moment but the present one.

MOMMY: Why... where's Grandma? Grandma's not here! Where's Grandma? And look! The boxes are gone, too. [...]

MRS. BARKER: Why, Mommy, the van man was here. [...]

MOMMY *(Near tears)*: No, no, that's impossible. No. There's no such thing as the van man. [...] We... we made him up. Grandma? Grandma?

DADDY *(Moving to MOMMY)*: There, there, now. [...]

(While DADDY is comforting MOMMY, GRANDMA comes out, stage right, near the footlights)

GRANDMA *(To the audience)*: Shhhhhh! I want to watch this.

Related Characters: Grandma, Daddy, Mrs. Barker, Mommy (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121-122

Explanation and Analysis

As Mommy and Daddy return to the living room from other parts of the house after Grandma's departure, Mommy becomes hysterical and emotional. Mommy has spent the entire of the play antagonizing Grandma—telling her that her opinions are stupid or unwanted, trying to keep her silent, and threatening her with removal to a nursing home by "the van man" whenever she steps out of line. Now, though, that Mommy believes "the van man" has really come to take Grandma away, she becomes irate and upset, exposing the hypocrisy at the core of her family and—Albee suggests—at the core of all such outwardly "perfect" families. Grandma, however, has not gone far—she's left the apartment building, broken the fourth wall between the stage and the audience, and is now watching her daughter's breakdown voyeuristically and almost joyfully from the wings. Grandma is the only character with a connection to the past—and indeed the only character able to break the fourth wall, talk to the audience, and look at the action of the play as the fiction it is. Albee uses Grandma to engage in a trope common to theatre of the absurd—breaking down barriers between art and life to point out the artificial nature of entertainment, and the absurdity inherent in trying to escape life through art and entertainment.

MOMMY *(Herself again, circling THE YOUNG MAN, feeling his arm, poking him)*: Yes, sir! Yes, sirree! Now this is more like it. Now this is a great deal more like it! Daddy! Come see. Come see if this isn't a great deal more like it.

Related Characters: Mommy (speaker), Grandma, Mrs. Barker, Daddy, The Young Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

As Mrs. Barker presents The Young Man to Mommy and Daddy as a "surprise" replacement "bumble," Mommy appraises The Young Man like he's a piece of meat or property. Mommy, who has had apparent amnesia about the entire incident with Mrs. Barker and the last "bumble" that she and Daddy mutilated years ago, now admits that she thinks The Young Man is "a great deal more like" what they wanted in the first place. The Young Man—an attractive but empty husk of a person who admits he feels nothing, loves no one, and has no personality or soul—is exactly what Mommy and Daddy have wanted all along. Albee's mission in this passage is twofold: he's both indicting some cruel parents for the unrealistic and arbitrary expectations they have of their children, and he's satirizing Americans' obsession with an ideal "American dream" that doesn't in fact exist—or at least doesn't exist as they imagine it to.

MOMMY *(Moving to the tray)*: So, let's— Five glasses? Why five? There are only four of us. Why five?

YOUNG MAN *(Catches GRANDMA'S eye; GRANDMA indicates she is not there)*: Oh, I'm sorry.

MOMMY: You must learn to count. We're a wealthy family, and you must learn to count.

YOUNG MAN: I will.

Related Characters: The Young Man, Mommy (speaker), Grandma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Barker introduces The Young Man to Mommy and Daddy as their special "surprise," Mommy suggests the group all toast to The Young Man's arrival. The Young Man goes to the kitchen to fetch some wine and glasses—but he returns with five, an extra on the tray for Grandma, who is waiting in the wings watching voyeuristically as the action unfolds without her. Mommy, who was just crying over Grandma's departure a few moments ago, now seems to have completely forgotten about Grandma—it's suggested she's done so willfully, and is urging The Young Man, Daddy, and Mrs. Barker to do the same. Without Grandma around, there's no one advocating for the importance of history and past events—and no one to challenge Mommy and Daddy's blind obsession with the present. The Young Man seems to consider doing so, but he quickly gives in to Mommy, demonstrating again how the American dream has little practical power to stand up for what's right.

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

Related Characters: Grandma (speaker), Mrs. Barker, Daddy, Mommy, The Young Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

In the play's final moments—while Mommy, Daddy, Mrs. Barker, and The Young Man descend into chaos and debauchery—Grandma steps onto the stage to call the action to an end. She declares that the play has been a "comedy," and that in order to keep it that way, things must "wrap" up immediately. The play's incredibly dark moments and confusing atmosphere are decisively uncomedic, but in naming it a comedy, Grandma is making an ironic statement that infantilizes the audience. She calls things to a finish "while everybody's got what he wants," harkening back to Mommy and Daddy's rampage of a quest in pursuit of "satisfaction." No one, Grandma says, is truly satisfied in this moment—but everyone thinks they are. This demonstrates Albee's thematic theory that there is no "American dream" and no perfect American family—satisfaction, contentment, and the pursuit of happiness are all fallacies.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

In the living room of a quintessential American home, Mommy and Daddy—a married couple in their middle age—sit together in their armchairs. They wonder what can be keeping "them"—they are expecting guests who are late. Daddy doesn't seem surprised by their guests' lateness, and neither does Mommy. Daddy says "that's the way things are today," and Mommy agrees. Daddy complains that long ago, when the two of them signed the lease on this apartment, "they" were "quick enough" to collect his money, but now that Mommy and Daddy are tenants, they can't get help fixing the icebox or the doorbell or the toilet. Mommy laments that "people think they can get away with anything these days… and, of course they can."

Mommy and Daddy have several complaints about the way society is run lately. They seem to remove themselves from these complaints—their family isn't the problem, only other people. The hypocrisy at the heart of a sentiment like this is one of the major driving forces behind Mommy and Daddy's characters, and the play as a whole.

Mommy begins telling Daddy a story about going out to buy a new hat the previous day, but Daddy is clearly not paying attention. Mommy orders him to pay attention to her and listen to her story, and he swears he's "all ears." Mommy restarts her story and talks about going to buy a new hat, but rejecting all the colorful hats the saleswomen at the shop showed her. She pauses her story to check and make sure Daddy is listening by quizzing him on what she's just said. Once she's satisfied that he's been paying attention, she continues, and urges him to keep listening.

Mommy's narcissistic obsession with the importance and value of her own stories stands in stark contrast against her husband's near-total indifference to what she has to say. What's more, it's obvious that he's not really paying attention, but Mommy doesn't care—she only cares that he puts on a show of listening, which hints at the play's argument about the superficial nature of "perfect" families.

Mommy says that the salespeople finally showed her a "lovely little hat" she did like. When she asked what color it was called, the salespeople replied that the hat was beige, and Mommy bought it. Mommy then walked out of the store wearing the hat on her head, and ran into the chairman of the woman's club on the street—the woman whose husband is in a wheelchair. The chairman complimented Mommy's "wheat-colored hat." Mommy insisted that the hat was beige, but the chairman laughed and insisted it was wheat before suggesting that the salespeople at the store "put one over" on Mommy. Mommy states what a "dreadful woman" the chairman is.

The strange story Mommy tells about her hat shopping introduces the play's absurdist bent—and also shows just how shallow and self-obsessed Mommy is. There's hardly a difference between "beige" and "wheat," but the idea that she's been slighted or shortchanged somehow angers Mommy tremendously and triggers her cruel remarks towards the chairman.

Mommy says that she returned to the hat shop to complain that they'd sold her a "beige" hat when really it was wheat-colored. Mommy blamed the "artificial light" in the shop, made a "terrible scene," and demanded the salespeople bring her a truly beige hat. After the salespeople retrieved one from the back of the store, Mommy went outside to check the new hat in the natural light, determined it was beige, and bought it. Daddy clears his throat and suggests that the salespeople simply sold Mommy the same hat they'd sold her originally, and Mommy laughs and says that "of course" they did just that. Daddy laments that "that's the way things are today," and says that one can never get any real "satisfaction." Mommy protests that she did get satisfaction at the hat shop, and Daddy agrees that she did.

Even as Mommy tells her story, Daddy points out how absurd the entire structure of it is. The miniscule difference between "beige" and "wheat" and the idea that in the end, Mommy willingly allowed the salespeople to not once but twice pull the wool over her eyes shows that it's not about correctness for Mommy—it's about power. Her victory here is clearly an empty one, which suggests how impossible the "satisfaction" of the American dream more broadly really is.

Mommy asks why "they" are so late, and Daddy complains that he's been trying to get the leak in the toilet fixed for two weeks. Mommy says it's a shame that while she can get satisfaction, Daddy cannot. Daddy says he doesn't want the toilet fixed for his sake, but for Grandma's. Mommy sadly states that Grandma cries lately every time she goes to the bathroom, because the worsening leak makes her "think she's getting feeble-headed." Daddy reiterates that they must have the leak fixed soon. Mommy, exasperated, wonders aloud why "they" are so late—Daddy retorts that when they "first" came to the apartment, they were actually early.

The idea of "satisfaction" figures hugely in Mommy and Daddy's strange, fractured relationship. Both of them struggle to feel satisfied in their lives, in their marriage, and in their home—and yet they maintain that the satisfaction they desire is just within reach. Albee's making a comment on the self-delusion that goes into maintaining an American family and pursuing "the American dream."

Grandma enters the living room from the hallway, carrying many "neatly wrapped and tied" **boxes** of various sizes. Mommy asks Grandma what she's carrying, and Grandma replies that they're exactly what they look like—they're boxes. Grandma asks where she should put them. Mommy asks what they're for, but Grandma replies that "that's nobody's damn business." Mommy suggests Grandma put the boxes down next to Daddy, and Grandma promptly dumps them on and at Daddy's feet. One they've all fallen, she tells Daddy she wishes he'd get the toilet fixed. Daddy says he wishes "they" would come to fix it—he and Mommy, he says, often hear Grandma "whimpering" when she uses it.

This passage introduces both the character of Grandma and the play's central symbol—her boxes. Grandma and the boxes both represent the ways in which American society tries to erase its own past, or willfully forget its history. No one pays attention to Grandma's wisdom, symbolized in physical form by the boxes she has carefully wrapped (perhaps to make the hard truths contained within them more palatable) and is now trying to literally dump on Mommy and Daddy.

Mommy chides Daddy for saying such a "terrible" thing to Grandma, and Daddy apologizes. Grandma says she's going to get the rest of the **boxes**. Before leaving the room, she states that she probably "deserve[s]" to be talked to in such a way—everyone talks to old people "that way." Daddy apologizes again. Grandma says it's important for people to be sorry—when people apologize, those they're apologizing to have their "sense of dignity" restored. Without a sense of dignity, Grandma believes, civilization is doomed.

Grandma is fully aware of how Mommy and Daddy are always trying to hush her up, disregard her, and strip away both her dignity and autonomy. She tries to warn them of what they're doing, and what effect their actions might have—but they do not listen to her. By referring to civilization more broadly, Albee hints that this kind of cruel, complacent behavior isn't just an interpersonal problem; it's one that affects the fate of the entire world.

The elderly, Grandma says, are subject to horrible mistreatment. People snap at elderly people, she says, and so the old become deaf so they don't have to hear other people talking to them so cruelly, or otherwise they take to their beds in order to retreat from the world. Grandma shuffles off to get the rest of the **boxes**.

Grandma is angry about the way she's treated, but she nonetheless resigns herself to being spoken to and handled in such a cruel way by her own family members. She even attempts to joke about how bad the elderly have it—this will become important later, when Grandma is revealed to have been attempting to preserve the comedic aspects of the play in spite of mounting misery and doom.

Daddy once again says he feels sorry for Grandma, and is sad to have hurt her. Mommy brushes Grandma's speech off, insisting the woman is senile and "doesn't know what she means."

Daddy has some qualms about how he's treating Grandma, revealing that there's some kind of moral conscience within him—but Mommy steamrolls right over him.

Daddy points out how nicely Grandma has wrapped the **boxes**. Mommy says that Grandma has always wrapped boxes nicely—when Mommy was a little girl, the two of them were left very poor after Grandma's husband died. Grandma used to wrap a box of lunch for Mommy every day; Mommy took the box to school, but never opened it when the other children opened theirs. The box was full of leftovers from dinner the night before, but Mommy wanted to forgo eating them herself and bring them back home to Grandma. Grandma used to love eating "day-old cake."

Mommy is aware of her roots, and she remembers just how poor she and Grandma once were. She even speaks nostalgically about the many sacrifices Grandma made for her, and the things they did for each other so that the other could survive. This passage is a bit out-of-character for the self-absorbed Mommy—but its purpose is to show that for all her willful amnesia about certain parts of her past, Mommy is aware of who she is, where she comes from, and what she's doing. She's also experienced something of the positive aspects of family life, but in the present, she's so fixated on maintaining a "perfect" life that she completely disregards Grandma's genuine love for her. Through Mommy's attitude here, Albee makes the point that fixating on having an ideal nuclear family will only destroy the bonds that do exist.

Mommy remembers that all the other children at school always thought she wouldn't open her lunchbox because it was empty, and she was embarrassed—the other children believed she "suffered from the sin of pride." They believed themselves better than Mommy, and so always generously shared their own lunches with her. Mommy expresses gratitude that though she used to be very poor, ever since she married Daddy she's been "very rich"—and even Grandma gets to "feel rich."

After a brief moment of almost benevolent nostalgia, Mommy slides once again into open greed and self-interest. She sees Daddy not as a partner, but as a host she can leech off of in order to sate her superficial dreams of being wealthy and powerful.

Mommy says she wishes she could put Grandma in a nursing home—she "can't stand" watching the old woman do all of the cooking and cleaning around the house. Daddy points out that Grandma likes to do these things, since they keep her moving and make her feel like she's "earn[ing] her keep." Mommy points out how selfless she was in only bringing along Grandma to live off Daddy after their marriage—most women, she says, would have brought along her their whole families. Daddy says he feels "very fortunate."

Mommy brought Grandma to live with her and Daddy so that Grandma could "feel rich"—Mommy wanted to feel good about doing someone a favor. Now, though, Mommy hates being reminded of her past. Albee is commenting on the tug-of-war between nostalgia and amnesia when it comes to American history, and the failures of American society.

Mommy keeps talking, describing how she has a "right" to live off of Daddy's money, considering she often used let him "get on top of [her] and bump [his] uglies." Mommy seems to be looking forward to the day Daddy dies, so she and Grandma can inherit all of his money and live by themselves—unless someone puts Grandma in a nursing home before that. Daddy says he has no plans to put Grandma in a nursing home, and Mommy exclaims that she wishes "somebody would do something" with the woman. Daddy tells Mommy to be grateful that she's "well provided for." Mommy calls Daddy her "sweet Daddy," and Daddy says he "love[s his] Mommy."

Albee is lampooning the destructive but codependent relationship between Mommy and Daddy—and, by extension, the flaws in the foundations of all American families. Mommy and Daddy's behavior with one another is odious—they infantilize one another, debase one another, and openly air their cruelties and flaws while purporting to love one another. It's also telling that they fixate on using the familial names "Mommy" and "Daddy," even though at this point in the play, there's no sign that they have any children; the names are themselves another form of artifice.

Grandma comes back into the living room carrying more **boxes**. Again, she dumps them all at Daddy's feet, and then she says that's all of them. Daddy remarks how nicely they're wrapped, but Grandma replies that after his comment about her "whimper[ing,]" he's going to have a hard time getting back on her good side. Mommy chides Grandma for talking that way, but Grandma yells at Mommy to "shut up." Grandma accuses Daddy of having no feelings or empathy. She explains that old people make "all sorts of noises," and often can't help them.

Grandma, Mommy, and Daddy are trapped in a circular spiral of resentment. Grandma hates Mommy and Daddy for ignoring and undermining her, and does things to try to get them to notice her, while Daddy sheepishly tries to keep the peace and Mommy continues stoking discord. In a way, they present a twisted version of idealized family bonds; they're very closely connected to one another, but these family ties bring only pain.

Daddy says he's sorry again, and Grandma accepts his apology—she says she knows Mommy is the one who "makes all the trouble." She tells Daddy he never should have married Mommy, who used to be "a tramp and a trollop" and hasn't improved with age. She tells Daddy that even when Mommy was a little girl of eight, she used to talk about her dreams of marrying "a [r]ich old man." Grandma says she warned Daddy about Mommy and "her type." Mommy, hysterical, begs Grandma to stop, reminding her that she's her mother, not Daddy's—Grandma asks how someone as old as her could be expected to remember such a thing.

Grandma is not on her daughter's side, not in the least—she openly hates not just who her daughter has become, but seemingly who she's been all along. Grandma seems to have much more sympathy for her son-in-law than she does her own daughter, showing that Grandma's moral center isn't easily swayed. She's willing to stand up to anyone to expose the cracks in the foundation, even her own flesh and blood—and even if those cracks extend back to Mommy's own childhood being raised by Grandma.

Mommy tells Grandma that she's ashamed of her. Grandma retorts that Mommy should've "gotten rid" of her "a long time ago" if that's how she feels, and had Daddy put her in a home or set her up with a business somewhere far away. Grandma says that Mommy always wanted her around so that she could sleep in Grandma's room "when Daddy got fresh." Grandma says she thinks that now, Daddy's the one who'd like to sleep with her. Mommy insists that Daddy, who's been "sick," doesn't want to sleep with anyone. Daddy confirms Mommy's statement, and says that he doesn't even want to sleep in the apartment—he just wants to "get everything over with."

The constant tension between Mommy's and Daddy's desire to send Grandma away and Grandma's insistence upon staying is about to come to a head. Grandma's preparation of the boxes suggests she's packing up to leave—and as the play progresses, Albee will explore what has brought Grandma to the point where she actively wants to get out of the apartment rather than stay in her daughter's den of lies any longer.

Mommy, as if reminded that they're expecting people, asks where "they" could be and why "they" are so late. Grandma asks "who" is coming, but Mommy replies that she already knows. Grandma protests that she genuinely doesn't, but Mommy retorts that it "doesn't really matter." She redirects the conversation, pointing out again "how pretty" the **boxes** Grandma wrapped are. Grandma says that she hated wrapping the boxes—doing so hurt her fingers and "frightened" her, but nevertheless "it had to be done." Mommy asks why it had to be done, but Grandma says it's none of Mommy's business.

Mommy cycles rapidly between open contempt for her mother and fawning, infantilizing kindness meant to distract Grandma. Grandma and Mommy are keeping things from one another, further destabilizing the foundation of their family as they attempt to play power games with each other.

Mommy tells Grandma to go to bed, and Grandma protests, saying she wants to stay in the sitting room and "watch." Mommy again insists Grandma go to bed. Daddy interjects and urges Mommy to "let" Grandma stay up and "watch," since it's barely noon. Mommy softens and acquiesces, agreeing that Grandma can watch as long as she doesn't say a word. Grandma says it won't be a problem for her—"old people are very good at listening."

Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma are momentarily distracted from their own drama by the reminder that something else is about to come into their space. The desire to "watch" something new unfold is Albee's way of calling out the voyeuristic desires of his own audiences.

The doorbell rings, and Mommy joyously announces that "they" have arrived. Grandma asks if "the van people" are at the door to "take [her] away." Daddy tells Grandma not to worry about such things, but Grandma replies that Daddy shouldn't feel too comfortable—Mommy would have him "carted off too" and feel no remorse. Mommy tells Daddy to ignore Grandma and accuses Grandma of being ungrateful. The doorbell rings again. Mommy warns Grandma dangerously that she'll "fix [her] wagon" and then orders Daddy to answer the door. Daddy is hesitant—he says that perhaps they should "talk about it some more." The doorbell rings a third time, and yet Daddy doesn't move to answer the door.

Daddy and Mommy know what's on the other side of the door, but Grandma does not. This is one of the rare instances in the play where Grandma—the arbiter of history and the past—is more in the dark than her daughter and son-in-law. Whatever's happening soon, Daddy is hesitant about it, but Mommy is excited.

Daddy says, once again, that he'd "like to talk [...] some more" with Mommy about what's going to happen. Mommy, though, tells him there's no need—he has already been "masculine and decisive" and made up his mind. Mommy reassures Daddy that he was right—whatever is about to happen "has to be done." Daddy asks Mommy to reassure him several more times that he was "firm" and "decisive" in making this decision, and begs her to confirm that his behavior in doing so was "really masculine." Mommy fawningly says she "shivered and fainted" because of how masculine Daddy was.

Daddy doesn't remember the process of making the decision about whatever's going to happen in their home today—and he doesn't really seem to care about remembering it. He only wants to be reassured that he was "masculine and decisive" when he made the decision. Albee is using Mommy and Daddy's dysfunctional, shallow relationship in order to lampoon the ways in which many people of his time feared subversions of gender roles might play out.

The doorbell rings once more, and Daddy announces that he is going to answer the door. Mommy remarks "WHAT a masculine Daddy" he is. As Daddy approaches the door, though, he slows down, and wonders if they can send whoever's at the door away. Mommy chides Daddy for "turning into jelly" and behaving like a "woman." At this remark, Daddy bucks up and implores Mommy and Grandma both to watch him open the door. Mommy insists they're watching, but Grandma says she isn't, and looks away. Daddy opens the door, and Mrs. Barker walks into the living room. "Here they are," Daddy announces triumphantly.

Daddy's hesitation to allow outside forces into their home seems to symbolize his fear of letting other people see what his marriage, home, and family are truly like beneath the surface. Mommy, however, does what she always does: alternatingly compliments and berates Daddy, confusing him to the point at which he bends to her will.

Daddy urges Mrs. Barker to come in and make herself comfortable—though she's late, he says, they were expecting her to be. Mommy urges Daddy not to be rude, and tells Mrs. Barker that they've been sitting around talking about how hard it is to "get satisfaction these days." Mommy tells Mrs. Barker how happy they all are that she's here, and asks if she remembers them—she was here once before.

The confusion in the atmosphere deepens with the arrival of Mrs. Barker. Mommy and Daddy seemed to be waiting on handymen coming to fix some things in their apartment, but the arrival of a friend and neighbor doesn't seem to disorient or surprise Mommy and Daddy. This odd turn is perhaps the strongest hint yet that the idea of "the American dream" is full of dark twists.

Daddy asks Mrs. Barker if she could perhaps go away and "come back some other time," but Mrs. Barker replies that "we're much too efficient for that." Mommy urges Grandma to say hello to "them." Grandma insists she can't see anyone. Mrs. Barker approaches Grandma and says "we're here," but Grandma again says she doesn't recall having ever met Mrs. Barker.

Mrs. Barker's strange referral to herself in the first-person plural shows that she's part of an organization, though its origins and purpose remain mysterious. Grandma's confusion—out of place, as she's so often the only one with a clue about anything—deepens the mystery.

Daddy asks Mrs. Barker to sit down, and she does. Mommy offers her a cigarette and a drink, and asks if she'd like to "cross [her] legs." Mrs. Barker refuses the drink and the cigarette, but crosses her legs. As she does so, she remarks upon what an "unattractive" apartment Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma live in. Daddy tells Mrs. Barker that he was just complaining to Mommy about all the things wrong with the place, and Mrs. Barker says she already knows—she was listening outside the whole time. She says she's "very efficient," and has to "know everything" in her line of work.

Mrs. Barker, Mommy, and Daddy trade snide aggressions, slights, and insults as they sit down together in the living room. Mrs. Barker seems to acknowledge that she is an actress in a play who has been waiting in the wings to make her entrance the entire time, but then she further deepens the mystery about who she is and what she does by making veiled references to her efficiency and line of work.

Mommy and Daddy ask Mrs. Barker what she does, and she replies that she is, obviously, the chairman of Mommy's woman's club. Mommy seems confused at first, but then agrees that Mrs. Barker is, indeed, the chairman. Mommy apologizes for not recognizing Mrs. Barker in the "artificial light" of the apartment. Mommy remarks that Mrs. Barker has a hat just like the one she herself bought the other day—Mrs. Barker laughs and says her hat is different, because it's cream. Mommy tries to argue, but Mrs. Barker accuses Mommy of forgetting who she is. Mommy apologizes with great deference, and asks if Mrs. Barker is comfortable. She suggests she remove her dress. Mrs. Barker takes her dress off and remarks that she does indeed feel more comfortable in just her slip.

The trope of confusion and disorientation followed by obsequious agreement to avoid making a scene or rocking the boat will repeat itself throughout the play, forming an ongoing indictment of people's tendency to gloss over things that are complex or difficult to understand. Mommy doesn't want to seem like she's not in the know, so she pretends to have realized who Mrs. Barker was all along—when clearly something is off.

Daddy says that he's blushing and going "sticky wet." Mrs. Barker says she wants to light up a cigarette, but Mommy says firmly that there's no smoking in the house. She asks Mrs. Barker to tell her why she's come over. As Mommy paces back and forth around the room she steps on several of Grandma's neatly-wrapped **boxes**, agitating Grandma, who begins muttering about the boxes. Daddy asks Grandma if Mrs. Barker is here because of the boxes, but Grandma says that's not what she meant.

Though Mommy just offered Mrs. Barker a cigarette a few moments ago, after Daddy expresses—with vulgarity and a lack of restraint—his sexual interest in Mrs. Barker, Mommy tells Mrs. Barker there's no smoking allowed. This turn reveals their ostentatious hospitality to have been only an act—like much of their other interactions.

Mrs. Barker asks if she can assume that the family "had us come here for the **boxes**." Mommy asks if Mrs. Barker often receives boxes. Mrs. Barker says that sometimes she receives baskets, but only receives boxes "under very special circumstances." She apologizes for not being able to give the family a better answer. Daddy says it's a very interesting answer, but Mommy laments that it doesn't help them at all.

Mrs. Barker seems uncertain of why she—or the unseen, perhaps still-to-arrive members of her organization—have been called to Mommy and Daddy's. The fact that everyone gathered is confused about what their purpose is points to the existential directionlessness in American society that Albee wants to call out.

Daddy says he's feeling some "qualms." Mommy asks where he's feeling them, and he says he's feeling them around where the stitches from a recent operation were. Mrs. Barker apologizes for not having been more sensitive towards Daddy. Grandma mutters that Mrs. Barker could have asked how Daddy was feeling. When Mommy tells her to "dry up," Grandma remarks that "old people" are "dry enough." She says no one listens to old people's complaints "because people think that's all old people do."

The language of the play begins to devolve into a sort of free-association pattern. Daddy is feeling qualms not in his mind but in his body—and Mommy and Mrs. Barker begin discussing the surgery he recently had which might be contributing to his strange feeling. Grandma continues talking about the injustices the elderly face, but no one is, at this point, listening to her—her asides seem to be just for the audience.

Mrs. Barker asks Daddy what was wrong, but Daddy insists he just had a regular operation. Mrs. Barker tells Daddy he's lucky. Mommy says that though Daddy has long been dreaming of being a Senator, he now wants to be a Governor, so that he can be closer to the apartment. Daddy says that things are okay now, except that he "get[s] these qualms now and then."

Mommy suddenly talks about Daddy's political ambition—something that hasn't been spoken about or even hinted at yet. This abrupt aside perhaps points to Albee's desire to illuminate how the very people who are eroding America's potential seek to control it.

Mrs. Barker says she has a younger brother who's ambitious, just like Daddy. He runs a newspaper called *The Village Idiot* and has a wonderful sense of humor. Mrs. Barker says that her brother has a "dear little wife," and often tells anyone who will listen all about her—he can hardly greet someone without mentioning that he's married. Mommy and Daddy remark how lovely that is to hear, and Mrs. Barker says she thinks there's "too much woman hatred" in America these days.

Through Mommy and Daddy's relationship—and now through Mrs. Barker—Albee is making fun of society's focus on preserving and raising up heterosexuality and unions between men and women. Even though couples like Mommy and Daddy clearly hate each other, and are in fact perhaps destabilizing society through that unfettered hatred, society nonetheless denigrates and demonizes other sexualities and other kinds of relationships.

Grandma tries to speak up and say something, but Mommy urges her to be quiet, and tells Mrs. Barker to ignore Grandma because she is "rural." Daddy suggests Mommy let Grandma speak up, but Mommy says that "old people have nothing to say," and even if they did, no one would listen. Grandma retorts that middle-aged people like Mommy and Daddy think they can do anything—but in reality, they can't do anything as well as they used to.

Mommy continually aims to silence Grandma—but Grandma insists on speaking out and retaliating. Albee is personifying America's past through Grandma and its present through Mommy and Daddy, and he uses the three of them to demonstrate the antagonism and self-hatred at the heart of both American society and the strict ideals of American families.

Daddy says he wishes he weren't surrounded by women. Mrs. Barker seconds his opinion. Grandma speaks up and asks if, since she "hardly count[s] as a woman" anymore, she can say her piece. Mommy decides to let her. Grandma says that the **boxes** have nothing to do with why Mrs. Barker has come to call. Daddy seems to have trouble remembering Mrs. Barker's name, and he asks her repeatedly to reiterate what she's called. He asks why she's here, and Mommy says, "because we asked them." Grandma offers again to explain why the boxes are here, but Mommy snaps at her and tells her no one is interested in the boxes.

Things are devolving further and further. Even as Grandma tries to elucidate some of the mysteries within the home, Daddy and Mommy remain almost willfully confused or in the dark about what's happening right under their noses as a result of actions they themselves have taken in the past. This complacency only makes their confusion more complete, and Albee uses them as an example of how such behavior will have absurd and destructive consequences.

Daddy yells for Grandma and Mommy to stop fighting. Mommy suggests Daddy call a van and have Grandma taken away—it's too crowded in the apartment, and Grandma is taking up space with her many **boxes**. Grandma calls Mommy dull, and Mommy accuses Grandma of being ungrateful for all the things she and Daddy have done for her. Mommy tells Mrs. Barker that just the other night, Grandma called Daddy a "hedgehog." Daddy urges Mommy to leave Grandma alone.

The family descends into sniping and chaos in front of their guest. Albee is showing how even though Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma may appear like a strong, united family unit, there are so many fissures within that they'll lob any insult at each other and bring up any old grievance just to hurt one another.

Grandma says she knows why Mrs. Barker has come. Mrs. Barker says she wishes Grandma would tell her. Daddy says Mrs. Barker is here because he and Mommy "called them." Mrs. Barker says she's still "puzzled" by why she's here, and needs some "help" figuring out what they need from her. Mommy says that they can't give Mrs. Barker any help—not with "the way you can't get satisfaction" these days.

A hallmark of absurdist theatre is, of course, confusion and absurdism. In bringing a group of characters together on stage and allowing them to admit they have no idea what they're doing there, Albee is exposing theater and entertainment as artifice—and also symbolically pointing to the confusion and absurdism that mark American society.

Mrs. Barker calls Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma a "jolly" family. She says she's been "knee-deep" in work lately with all her committees. Grandma asks if anyone has heard about the new figures which show that "ninety per cent of the adult population of the country is over eighty years old." Mommy calls Grandma a liar and accuses her of getting bad information from television. Mommy tells Daddy to go upstairs and break Grandma's television, and Daddy wearily goes out of the living room and heads upstairs. Grandma warns him he'll never find the television.

Even though Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma are doing nothing but sniping, arguing, and bossing one another around, Mrs. Barker's politeness and agreeability are so ingrained that she cheerfully comments on their "jolliness." The obvious absurdity here suggests that all superficially "jolly" families might be just as broken beneath the surface.

Mommy remarks what a great husband she has—Daddy isn't poor or argumentative or in a wheelchair. Mommy is instantly mortified by what she's said and apologizes profusely, but Mrs. Barker forces a smile and tells Mommy not to worry about what she's said. Mommy asks Mrs. Barker if she wants to have some "girl talk." Mrs. Barker asks for a glass of water, and Mommy tells Grandma to get it, but Grandma refuses. Mommy threatens Grandma, telling her she'll have her "taken away in a van," but Grandma says she's too old to be frightened. Mrs. Barker says she's going to faint if she doesn't have some water soon, and Mommy reluctantly gets up and exits the living room to go get her some.

Mommy's cruelty and self-obsession are so profound and ingrained that she's unable to be polite even in the presence of a guest. Mommy and Mrs. Barker are in many ways polar opposites—Mrs. Barker can't seem to turn her politeness off, while Mommy can't muster any at all. They are alike, however, in that they can't figure out what their purpose is. Through these two, Albee suggests that neither selflessness nor self-interest is helpful in solving problems; only genuine engagement with real-world issues will make a difference.

Mrs. Barker and Grandma are alone in the living room. Mrs. Barker says she feels "lost" and has no clue why she's here now—or why Mommy and Daddy insist that she's been here before. Grandma says that she was here before—not this apartment exactly, but in Mommy and Daddy's home. Mrs. Barker tells Grandma she believes she can trust her, and begs her to tell her why Mommy and Daddy "called and asked us to come." Grandma remarks how good it feels to be begged for something, and tells Mrs. Barker to beg some more. Mrs. Barker begs.

Grandma is the only character in the play who seems to have any consciousness that stretches back into the past. As such, she's tasked with reminding Mrs. Barker of why she's here—and of the fact that she's been here before. Grandma is so unused to anyone actually paying attention to the information she tries to share that she somewhat cruelly demands Mrs. Barker beg her for more, so that she can feel useful for the first time in a long time.

Grandma tells Mrs. Barker that the most she can do for her is give her a "hint." She begins telling a story, and says that about twenty years ago, a man and woman "very much like" Mommy and Daddy lived in an apartment "very much like" this one with an old woman "very much like" Grandma herself. There was a local woman "very much like" Mrs. Barker who did lots of "Good Works," including working as a volunteer at the Bye-Bye Adoption Service. One afternoon, Mommy and Daddy went to the agency asking to buy a "bumble of joy," as they couldn't have one on their own.

The terrible story Grandma begins to tell can, in the absurdist world, be taken literally. But on a symbolic level, Grandma is telling the story of three people whose greed, selfishness, and need for control has bound them together in a kind of purgatory. Mommy, Daddy, and Mrs. Barker once shared blame in the destruction of an innocent "bumble" in the name of making a perfect family—a crime which Albee, himself adopted by parents who he felt were always disappointed in him, cannot forgive.

The woman who was "very much like" Mrs. Barker, Grandma says, sold the married couple a "bumble" of their own—but things didn't work out well for them, or the baby. Grandma glances out into the hall, and says she needs to speed up her story, because she's going to be "leaving soon." The bumble, Grandma continues, didn't look like either of its parents, and it "cried its heart out" day and night. When the baby "only had eyes for its Daddy," the baby's mother gouged its eyes out. When the baby discovered its "you-know-what," they cut off its genitals and then its hands. As Grandma tells the story, Mrs. Barker isn't horrified or upset—rather she congratulates the parents in the story for how they handled their troublesome "bumble."

Albee uses the story about the bumble to show how people like Mommy and Daddy—narcissistic, morally bankrupt individuals who think only of themselves and their present moment—can ruin the lives of others and destabilize the very foundation of America. Just as Mommy and Daddy have no regard for Grandma, who represents the past, they had no regard for their bumble, who represented the future. People like Mommy and Daddy don't care about their country or their society, about human good or human suffering—they only care about themselves and maintaining their ideas of how things should be.

As the child grew older, it offended its parents more and more, and they continued to mutilate and neglect it. Eventually, the child "up and died," and the parents resented the child for having gone and died after they'd paid for it. So, Grandma says, the parents called up the woman who "sold them" the bumble, demanding their money back, since they'd never gotten "satisfaction."

Mommy and Daddy saw adopting as a child as a way to get "satisfaction," just like Mommy saw buying a hat as a way to get satisfaction. They didn't care about the child's life—they only cared about their own pursuit of some invisible, impossible dream of happiness, a happiness that doesn't actually exist.

As Grandma concludes her story, Daddy calls from upstairs and says that he can't find the television. Mommy shouts back that she can't find any water. Grandma laughs, muttering that she'd tried to warn them that everything was hidden. Daddy shouts that he can't even find Grandma's room. Mrs. Barker admires Grandma's ability to hide things. Mommy comes back into the room and chides Grandma for being a "troublemaker," but Grandma assuages her by telling Mommy that she'll soon be "out of here." Mommy says that she's "sick and tired" of Grandma, and just might send her away in a van.

Mommy and Daddy want to stick their heads in the sand and hide from the mistakes of their past—so Grandma hides some things from them as a way of retaliating. It's telling that she's able to hide even something as obvious as an entire room; through these details Albee shows that ignoring some parts of reality will eventually make it impossible to perceive anything real at all.

Mommy tells Mrs. Barker to follow her into the kitchen to find a glass of water and get away from Grandma. Mrs. Barker tells Mommy she's not being very polite to Grandma, but Mommy reminds Mrs. Barker that she's a guest, and stalks off into the kitchen. After a moment alone with Grandma, Mrs. Barker tells Grandma it's been nice talking with her, and stands up to go into the kitchen. Grandma asks Mrs. Barker not to tell Mommy about the "hint"—the grotesque story—Grandma has told her. Mrs. Barker replies that she won't say anything—she's still processing the story and thinking about whether it "applies to anything." Mrs. Barker admits to being stunned by the parallels between the characters in the story and herself, Mommy, and Daddy, and says she'll have to "mull" things for a while. She goes into the kitchen, leaving Grandma alone.

Mrs. Barker seems deeply affected by the story Grandma has told her—but so unwilling to believe it's really true that she insists on "mull[ing]" it over for a while to see if it rings true to her, even though she already has her answer. People don't like to be reminded of the past, and the mistakes they've made in their lives—but Grandma is determined to make the others reckon with history and its consequences, no matter what.

Grandma remarks on how "awful" the way younger people talk to older people is—but then says she supposes there's not much one can say to an old person "that doesn't sound just terrible." The doorbell rings, and Grandma shouts for whoever's on the other side to "come on in." A handsome young man enters, and Grandma tells him he looks like a "breath of fresh air." She asks if he's "the van man," and if he's come to take her away to a home. The Young Man says he doesn't know what Grandma's talking about.

Even when Grandma is sort of able to get through to someone—Mrs. Barker—she still feels she's receiving "terrible" treatment from everyone around her, especially her own family. Grandma's so low that when she believes "the van man" has come for her, she's almost excited.


Grandma admires The Young Man's good looks, and he tells her he's "used to" such comments. Grandma says that if she were "a hundred and fifty years younger," she might try to flirt with him. She openly ogles his muscles and tells him he ought to be in movies—The Young Man says he knows how good-looking he is, but he isn't in any hurry to try to get work in Hollywood despite living on the West coast. When Grandma admires The Young Man's face, he exasperatedly admits that he has "insultingly good-looking" features and a "typical American" look complete with "honest eyes" and a "wonderful smile." Grandma tells the Young Man that he's "the American Dream."

As Grandma appraises The Young Man and declares him "the American Dream," Albee's critique of the shiny but flat American ideal emerges. As Grandma and The Young Man continue talking, it will become clear that he's not what he seems to be—and neither is "the American dream" as society understands it. Nonetheless, it's appealing enough that just about everyone buys into it—just as The Young Man is appealing enough to draw even crotchety old Grandma in.


Mommy shouts into the living room from the kitchen, asking who has rung the doorbell. Grandma tells her that "The American Dream" is here. Daddy's voice can be heard, asking what everyone's shouting about—Mommy calls to him and tells him to pay Grandma no mind. Daddy shouts that he still can't find Grandma's room, or Mrs. Barker.

While the other characters run blindly through the house, disconnected and disoriented, Grandma (who may or may not have purposefully distracted them all) gets to learn the secrets of the American dream. Tellingly, it's only apart from her nuclear family that she's able to find out these truths; again, the rigid family unit turns out to be hollow and useless.


The Young Man asks who else is home, but Grandma tells him not to worry about it. She asks The Young Man what he's doing here and he replies that he's looking for work—he will do "anything that pays" to get some money. Grandma wonders if there's anything The Young Man could do to help out around the house. She says that Mommy and Daddy have been in a "quandary" lately, and The Young Man might be able to help. The Young Man asks if Grandma has any money to pay him; she says she has more money than The Young Man would know what to do with.

The Young Man looks, to Grandma, like the American dream personified. She's excited to see him—but is quickly realizing that he's not what he seems to be. He's desperate, hollow, and disaffected—something is very wrong, and it already seems that even the living embodiment of the American dream may not be able to help this fractured family.

Grandma beckons The Young Man close to her and tells him a secret: though Mommy and Daddy think she hasn't left the house in eight years, she recently snuck out to enter a local baking contest under the false name "Uncle Henry." Grandma won the competition with her recipe—Uncle Henry's Day-Old Cake—and was rewarded twenty-five thouseand dollars. The Young Man is visibly impressed.

Grandma's story shows that she's used the traumas of her past—for example, having to eat the day-old leftovers from Mommy's lunchbox—as a way of securing her own autonomy. Albee is showing that the past has instructive value, if only we agree to put our pride aside and let it.


Grandma tells The Young Man that he looks familiar, and he agrees that he is "a type." Grandma asks The Young Man why he said he'd do anything for money, and he declares that he has "no talents at all" aside from his wholesome, handsome appearance. He is "incomplete," and must "compensate." Grandma asks The Young Man to elaborate, and The Young Man agrees to confide in her, because "very old people have perceptions they keep to themselves."

The Young Man is the only character in the play who truly sees, understands, and appreciates Grandma. Even through his own brokenness, he's able to give her the time of day—something none of the other characters do, in spite of the fact that whatever "incomplete[ness]" they feel is entirely a product of their own self-obsession and greed.

The Young Man explains that he was born alongside an identical twin brother. The two had an almost symbiotic relationship, and The Young Man recalls feeling his twin's "heartbeats [...] in [his own] temples." The two were "torn apart" when they were very young. Though The Young Man never learned what became of his brother, as the years passed, he himself began to "suffer losses." His heart has grown numb, his eyes have dulled and stopped allowing him to see with pity or affection—he doesn't feel anything at all but "cool disinterest." His groin suffered "one specific agony" and ever since he has been unable to physically love another person. All he has left are his good looks and lithe body. Now, he lets people touch him and draw pleasure from him—all the while resigning himself to the fact that he is incomplete and feels "nothing."

The Young Man's long monologue about his tragic past symbolizes how the American dream has been hollowed out, "torn apart," and stripped of its former glory. It still looks shiny enough—but in reality, there's nothing behind its alluring façade. The cruelty, selfishness, greed, and narcissism of American society has rendered the American dream empty and useless; it's been thoughtlessly dismembered just like Mommy and Daddy dismembered their "bumble."

Grandma compassionately tells The Young Man that she once knew someone very much like him. Grandma tells The Young Man that he has found himself a job. He asks her what his duties will be, but before she can answer, Mrs. Barker comes back into the living room. Grandma tells The Young Man that he'll have to play things by ear—Grandma has to "go into [her] act" again now.

Grandma seems to drop her "act" when she's alone, or with just The Young Man—around everyone else, though, she feels she needs to play a part.

Mrs. Barker walks into the living room, lamenting that she can't find Mommy or Daddy anywhere. She asks who The Young Man is, and Grandma introduces him as "the van man." Mrs. Barker indignantly asks The Young Man how dare he cart "poor old" Grandma away. The Young Man looks at Grandma and she nods at him. He turns back to Mrs. Barker and tells her that he only does what he's paid to do. Mrs. Barker apologizes for meddling.

The Young Man is disaffected and disconnected to the point of unresponsiveness—he's only able to take his cues from others. He can't—or doesn't—lie, and in this moment, his honesty seems to shock Mrs. Barker into submission. At this point, it's almost as though Grandma is directing the play itself, coaxing The Young Man to act out his part.

Grandma points to all the **boxes** scattered on the floor and asks The Young Man to take her things out to the van. The Young Man agrees and begins scooping them up. He takes them out the front door, and as he does, Mrs. Barker remarks that the van man who took her own mother away years ago "wasn't anything near as nice as this one." Grandma expresses surprise that Mrs. Barker had her mother taken away, but Mrs. Barker asks if Grandma had her own mother taken to a home. Grandma admits she can't remember whether she did or not.

The Young Man is the only one who has any interest in helping Grandma with her boxes. Meanwhile, the absurdist cycle of coincidences, repetitions, and bouts of amnesia continues as Grandma tries to recall a part of her own past—and fails.

Grandma tells Mrs. Barker she needs to talk to her about the "dilemma" with Mommy and Daddy—Grandma believes she has found "the way out" for Mrs. Barker. The Young Man reenters to get the rest of the **boxes** and take them out. Grandma pulls Mrs. Barker in close and whispers in her ear. It's not clear what Grandma says to Mrs. Barker, but whatever it is, Mrs. Barker remarks that it is a "wonderful idea"—she is surprised Grandma came up with it, considering how old she is. Mrs. Barker says she's going to find Mommy and Daddy right away. She heads out through the hall, calling for Mommy and Daddy. Grandma urges her to say goodbye, as the two won't see each other again. Mrs. Barker bids Grandma goodbye.

Grandma seems to be the only one who is able to figure out what everyone's purpose in the play is. She gives Mrs. Barker a way to get out of the prison of Mommy and Daddy's apartment—a place that seems to be literally shapeshifting to box them all in. Mrs. Barker is the only character other than The Young Man to really listen to Grandma and follow her advice, showing that there's still a glimmer of hope for the past's ability to remain relevant and unforgotten, if only people will listen to its warnings.

Grandma is alone for a moment, but soon The Young Man comes back in to tell her that all of the **boxes** are outside. Grandma says she doesn't even know why she's bothering to take them with her—they only have some old things in them, like letters, her television, and "eighty-six years of living." The Young Man asks if he can call Grandma a cab, but she insists she can "take it from here." The Young Man asks Grandma what he should do now—she tells him that he should stay here, and things will soon "become clear." Grandma looks around the room one last time, and then The Young Man takes her by the arm and shows her out to the elevator.

Grandma has painstakingly wrapped the boxes, but now that it's time to take them with her, she second-guesses whether her efforts were worth it—she knows that the past can be an unwieldy burden, no matter how nice it looks on the surface.

Mrs. Barker, Mommy, and Daddy reenter the living room. Mrs. Barker tells them that "the whole thing's settled." Mommy and Daddy express their relief. Mommy looks around and asks where Grandma and her **boxes** have gone. Mrs. Barker tells Mommy that "the van man" came for her. Mommy seems startled and says that's impossible—"there is no van man." Mommy hysterically begins calling for Grandma. Daddy tries to comfort her, but she grows more and more upset. Grandma peeks her head into the living room from offstage, whispering to the audience that she wants to "watch" Mommy cry.

Though Mommy has spent the entire play threatening to have Grandma carted away, when she realizes that her mother is gone, she breaks down. Grandma somewhat cruelly relishes the chance to watch her daughter miss and mourn her—another dig at the kind of voyeurism that Albee argues the audience exhibits. Albee is trying to show that when it comes to the past, history, and collective memory, people don't know what they've got until it's gone.

The Young Man enters the room, and Mrs. Barker welcomes him in, declaring him a "surprise" for Mommy and Daddy. Mommy is confused, but Daddy reminds her that they wanted a "bumble" and some "satisfaction." Mommy's sadness transforms into delight. Mrs. Barker introduces The Young Man to Mommy and Daddy, and Mommy circles The Young Man, appraising and poking at him. She tells Daddy that The Young Man is "a great deal more like it."

Mommy and Daddy are excited about The Young Man as their new "bumble"—even though he's not a bumble at all, but rather a grown-up, hollowed-out shell of a man. People don't want to work for the American dream, raise it up, and tend to it—they want it without working for it, and without thinking too hard about what they must sacrifice and endure for it.

Mommy thanks Mrs. Barker profusely, and Mrs. Barker says she'll send a bill in the mail. Mommy suggests they all toast The Young Man and celebrate his arrival. The Young Man says he'll go to the kitchen and get some drinks. Mommy points him in the direction of the kitchen, and as he exits through the hall, she remarks to Mrs. Barker that The Young Man is "much better than the other one." Mrs. Barker says she's happy that everything's been "straightened out." Mommy expresses her gratitude that they've at last figured out why they sent for Mrs. Barker in the first place.

Mommy and Daddy purport to be grateful for The Young Man's arrival, but they already treat him like a servant and dehumanize him through the callous way they talk about him in comparison to his dead twin. The American dream itself, Albee is saying, is a commodity people take for granted, rather than an actual set of values they work towards. The same goes for perfect family units; people only want the appearance of having the ideal family, rather than the true experience of forming and maintaining one.

Mommy asks what The Young Man's name is, but Mrs. Barker tells her to call him whatever she likes—maybe even "what [she] called the other one." Mommy asks Daddy to remind her what they did call the other one, but Daddy can't remember.

Mrs. Barker, Mommy, and Daddy all see The Young Man as a commodity with no agency—a quick and dirty replacement for the "bumble" they rejected years ago, whose name they've already forgotten.

The Young Man reenters with a bottle of wine and five glasses. As Mommy counts the glasses, she's confused—there are only four of them there. The Young Man looks offstage at Grandma—who is still watching from the wings—and apologizes for counting incorrectly. Mommy urges everyone to take a glass, and then raises her glass "to satisfaction." Mommy drinks, and then tells The Young Man that some time she'll tell him about all the trouble they had with "the other one," once Mrs. Barker—who's responsible for the trouble—has left. Mommy sidles up to The Young Man and tells him suggestively that she can share the story "later tonight." The Young Man tells her that would be "very nice." Mommy tells The Young Man that there's something familiar about him—something she can't quite place.

The confused, amnesiac quality that has marked so much of the play has now affected Mommy and Daddy's memories of Grandma. Just moments ago, Mommy was hysterical over her disappearance—but now seems to forget that she ever existed at all. This shows how willing Americans are, Albee believes, to forget the past (and even their own deep family connections) when it's convenient. Mommy, Daddy, and Mrs. Barker continue to spiral into debauchery and moral failure as they begin drinking and Mommy tries to seduce The Young Man she's just adopted.

Grandma steps out into the open and addresses the audience, telling them that "about wraps it up." The play is a comedy—and to keep it that way, things had better not go any further. Grandma says she'd like to leave things as they are now, "while everybody's got what he thinks he wants." She bids the audience goodnight, and the curtain falls.

Grandma's final address to the audience is a kind of intervention. Perhaps speaking as Albee's authorial intrusion, she patronizes the audience by suggesting they don't want to—or can't handle—seeing anything too dark, or getting to experience any real resolution.

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