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Who Is Not Sylvia?

A Character Analysis of Stevie from Edward Albee's *The Goat, or, Who Is Sylvia?*

Edward Albee's tri-titled play *The Goat, or, Who Is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*), winner of the 2002 Tony Award for Best Play, is a theatrical gem packed with the birthday motif, the theme of arrival (in this case represented by a denouncing letter), the challenging of the great "old times" motif with their great "old promises of happiness and fulfillment." In this play the author questions the "old" fundamentals of civilization, according to which people could coexist with one another, provided they knew how to masterfully hide their ugly deeds. In return, although in a very shocking manner, the American playwright recommends we start reconsidering or rewriting the way we conceive of our lives so that it may be more flexible to our inflexible human nature. Therefore, Sylvia is everybody's goat, a metaphorical gate which our wildest desires may penetrate, potentially dissolving, or at least diminishing, the ravaging effects of our gregarious, unhealthy regimented selves.

– *To John, my love*

Edward Albee's play *The Goat, or, Who Is Sylvia?* is a theatrical gem packed with the birthday motif, the theme of arrival, and the challenging of the motif of the great "old times" with their great "old promises of happiness and fulfillment." Stevie, the female protagonist, is an emblematic contemporary character. She has been Martin's wife for three decades. She buys unusual flowers and other items because she likes the taste and smell of the ignored or marginalized other. It is the amount of violence in her that shocks us, although for Stevie her final revengeful act is justified and cathartic. Confronted with a bizarre extramarital affair that her husband is conducting – he has been secretly making love to a goat (Sylvia) – Stevie's response grows gradually and steadily. In only twenty-four hours, she experiences the whole rampaging spectrum of rage: disbelief and irritability at the discovery of this terrible news, disgust, outrage, uncontrolled fury, and, finally, the violent act of killing the goat.

Through minute character analysis, this essay invites readers to consider the limits of monogamy and devastating routine. We must reflect on the following

series of thought-provoking questions: whom exactly does Stevie *kill* and what is the cost? Her marriage? Her immature belief in unaltered long-term relationships? Her illusion that, if one knows and respects the way the game is played, one can successfully avoid being betrayed? Her civilized approaches to life's unpredictable moments? Her old image of a good wife and a respectful woman? Her empty expectations of filling out her life with unusual objects that distance her from reality?

Whatever the answer may be, should a clear one ever be unveiled, this play questions the "old" fundamentals of civilization, according to which people could coexist with one another, provided they knew how to masterfully hide their ugly deeds. Although in a very shocking manner, the American playwright recommends in return that we start reconsidering or rewriting the way we conceive of our lives in order to make it more flexible to our inflexible human nature. Therefore, Sylvia is everybody's *goat*, ready to unleash our wildest desires, potentially dissolving, or, at least, diminishing the ravaging effects of our gregarious, unhealthy regimented selves.

1 Desire: The Goat

At the beginning of the play, there is a clear sense of unity between Martin and his long-term wife, Stevie; the dialogue addresses the marital history of a husband and his wife who can finish off each other's thoughts, as if matching feelings, like other couples match their wardrobe on occasion. According to Antonio R. Damasio, "Feelings let us mind the body. . . . Feelings offer us a glimpse of what goes in our flesh."¹

MARTIN What's the matter with me?

STEVIE You're fifty.

MARTIN No, more than that.

STEVIE The old foreboding? The sense that everything going right is a sure sign that everything is going wrong, of all the awful to come? All that?²

They have been married and have shared the good and the bad for a long time and are aware that, after a certain age, there is nothing else to do but accept the unavoidable decline of old age. Still, they are not bothered by that since it is part of what is called life. They are here and now for each other, and this is much more reassuring than anything else.

1. Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994), p. 159.

2. Edward Albee, *The Goat, or, Who Is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*) (New York: Dramatist's Play Service, 2003), pp. 6–7.

When Stevie enters the door, she has a bouquet of ranunculi, which she describes as “secretive” and “too subtle for your [Martin’s] forgetful nose.”³ Intuitively, Stevie marches in the right direction, guided by her sensitive sense of smell. Then Martin reaches into his pocket to find two business cards, which he reads aloud: “‘Basic Services, Limited.’ . . . Limited to what? (the other card.) ‘Clarissa Atherton’ (Shrugs).”⁴ Stevie inquires about the identity of this woman, but Martin seems to be in a forgetful mood, since he cannot recollect who she is and what type of products are offered by “Basic Services, Limited.” Stevie does not seem to be concerned, and adds teasingly: “It does not matter, sweetie. If you’re seeing this Atherton woman . . . who smells funny.”⁵

She has detected a weird, lingering smell on her husband’s clothes (and in her house), and intuits an affair, but is not yet prepared to have her suspicions confirmed. In *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body* (2004), Sandra Pearl argues that, following Michael Polanyi’s concept of “tacit knowledge,” we develop a keen bodily awareness or the “felt sense.” This “[c]omes to us as other bodily processes come – the way sleep comes, or emotions come, or tears come – as we make room for the body to express itself.”⁶ In other words, in this particular case, along with the verbal exchange between Martin and Stevie, a strange stench lies suspended, yet flagrant.

Of all the five senses, smell is, without a doubt, the most potent; it penetrates our nostrils and, thus, directly – that is, not mediated – enters our bodies. Sight may be enhanced or distracted by an object that interferes with our visual spectrum; touch may be altered by the fabric of our clothes; hearing may be distorted; and taste may be a conflation of sensations (e.g., sweet, sour, and bitter). Smell manages to “insinuate” itself into our lives, whether we want it to or not. This is probably why Stevie keeps controlling the décor, image, and fragrance of her private place by buying rather unusual flowers. She is a woman of subtle, decadent approaches, but, beneath them, of calculated needs. She has observed that her husband does not return home smelling like corn, peaches, or tomatoes after his countryside escapades. His smell has an uncanny dimension.

Finally, a letter confirms her suspicions. But even under these shocking, disturbing, and unsettling circumstances, she appears to be organized, and, frankly, plays her role (the betrayed wife) with an overdose of almost inhuman dignity. The

3. Albee, p. 6.

4. Albee, p. 8.

5. Albee, p. 8.

6. Sondra Pearl, *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body* (Portsmouth: Cook Heinemann, 2004), p. 2.

day she receives the news constitutes an interruption in her otherwise minutely scheduled life.

STEVIE [*to Martin*] Let's not pretend he [Ross] never wrote you the letter; let's not pretend I didn't get it in the mail today – nice that: no electronic nonsense – and let us not pretend that I did not read it. . . . And let us not pretend that Ross does not tell me that you are having an affair with . . . how does he put it? 'An affair with a certain Sylvia. Who, I am mortified to tell you. . . .' He does get flowery, doesn't he!⁷

As part of her characterization, Stevie likes special flowers and the slow *ingestion* of each word she hears or reads. Interestingly, when her life has been derailed by an awful disclosure, she has time to quote from the incriminating letter. It is as if she were wearing gloves, or put them quickly on because she did not want to tarnish her image and name. For an irreversible instant, these are *only* Ross's words, and, through some sort of magic or suspension of disbelief, she has escaped the danger they carry.

STEVIE Stay away from me; stay here. You smell of goat, you smell of shit, you smell of all I cannot imagine being able to smell. Stay *away* from me!

MARTIN I *love* you!

STEVIE You *love* me. Let's see if I understand the phrase. You *love* me.

MARTIN Yes!

STEVIE But I am a human being; I have only two breasts; I walk upright; I give milk only on special occasions; I use the toilet. . . . How can you love me when you love me so much less?⁸

Her last remarks, bitter and ironic, disguise the fact that passion is something as fast as a shooting star, which makes us act foolishly, and, eventually, leaves us dumbfounded and nostalgic. Passion is rooted in the cavities of the flesh, while the acts of remembering, denying, or confronting it belong to the intellect's precipices. Since their marital status and wholeness have been altered, we may suggest that, metaphorically speaking, while Martin experiences the carnal form of the passion, Stevie suffers its consequences. Frighteningly, this *is* a shared experience, except that each partner sinks their teeth into the messy situation from the opposite end!

7. Albee, p. 24.

8. Albee, pp. 24–5.

Stevie must have read the letter alone many times before performing it in front of her husband. This is the reason why she knows when to be highly theatrical and stop, and when to read it flatly, without any . . . passion. She thinks that if she were in front of a real audience, she would have to build up the momentum by transferring to them her feelings of pity, anger, and disgust. Without wanting to, she has become a “goat” herself, as in the prototype of the ancient Greek theater. Stevie is now under the full, ruthless marital spotlight, working on her inflections, gestures, facial contortions, and so on to prove her stubborn refusal to offer the same *old* repertoire to her husband; instead, she surprises him with theatricality or the new quality of her personality. As Morris Berman explains, “Central to Jungian psychology is the concept of ‘individuation,’ the process whereby a person discovers and evolves his self, as opposed to his ego. The ego is a persona. . . . our understanding of ourselves through the eyes of others. The self, on the other hand, is the true center, our awareness of ourselves without outside interference.”⁹ Interestingly, Stevie’s persona and self are interchangeable; few details are provided about this woman because the rhythm of the plot requires sharp, rapid scenes. There is, literally, no time to spare for in-depth, laborious descriptions of events, reactions, and characters.

When she reads the letter, and stops every now and then, the manufactured, impromptu theatrical illusion keeps her temporarily out of danger, as she casually interprets a script received in the mail. Before performing it to others, she *must* dig underneath each word’s context, just as, comparatively, directors do with their actors in tiring rehearsals. Furthermore, the information that she has just got is mediated by two absentees: Ross, the one who wrote the epistle, and Sylvia, Martin’s mistress. Their absence turns out to be productive for a woman like Stevie, who is bright enough to seize the opportunity, and make this a profitable, winning argument for herself. With these two absent, she is at liberty to perform the letter in the way *she* wishes; that is, there are no outside voices or interpretations, and, therefore, there is only her exclusive take on the incriminating news. This is a test of her skill as an actress, a chameleon quality of which Martin was not aware, not even intuitively. This is also her test as a director since she wants to produce an *ad-hoc*, reversed *mise en histoire* of how things started, that is, to put them in words, to fix them in these verbal, more or less, equivalents of our internal turmoil. Finally, since she has been betrayed, this represents her chance to interpret a “goat-song,” if we consider the literal translation of the Greek word *τραγωδία* (*tragōidia*), from which we have tragedy.

9. Morris Berman, *Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), p. 78.

The first manifestation of her anger is lexical (a forte on her marital resume), and until she decides how to restore the couple's lost balance, Stevie shows what she is currently *asked* to endure. Words are not similar to carnal passion – irresistible, but nonetheless transient. Words build up a wall in front of our passion because we are prevented from taking action by uttering them, and then thinking about them. Therefore, words make us pause in what we are doing; moreover, “[i]n speaking, the act that the body is performing is never fully understood; the body is the blindspot of speech, that which acts in excess of what is said, but also acts in and through what is said.”¹⁰ Stevie is a virtuoso in terms of grammatical and verbal correctness. In the middle of hearing the disturbing details, she does not accept that Martin's use of language has gone astray, too. She wants to hear the bad news in perfect English, which makes us wonder if she is not more concerned about language than about her relationship.

MARTIN It was a therapy place, a place where people went to . . . talk about it, about what they were doing. . . and with whom.

STEVIE *What!* Not *whom!* *What!* With *what!*¹¹

MARTIN And I was driving out of the town, back to the highway, and I stopped at the top of a hill. . .

STEVIE Crest.

MARTIN What!? Who *are* you?

STEVIE You stopped at the crest of a hill – on it, actually.¹²

If so far Stevie has been preoccupied with maintaining the neat homeostasis of her household (and of her marriage), the cheating episode, in contrast, puts every doubt in motion and implodes their apparently perfect union. She is an acclaimed architect's wife, and the pillars that have been sustaining their relationship had to collapse to reveal the inadequacy of the version of love we call marriage, and, what is worse, its aggravation when probed into – like a dissection – by an affair.

Just as we know little of our mind, what dangers it concocts, or what tricks it plans to play on us, we do not actually know much about Stevie either (for one thing, she is a sophisticated, urbane woman, whose profession is never disclosed, should she have one). Albee creates her in a rather implicit way, by letting us gather piece after piece of information about her personality. She lives in a world of re-

10. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 11.

11. Albee, p. 32.

12. Albee, p. 38.

spected, socially constructed manners and an established status quo, both of which she has been working hard to bring to her vision of perfection.

STEVIE I was out shopping today – dress gloves, if you want to know. I still wear them – for weddings and things. . . and then to the fish people for shad roe.¹³

When she arrives home at one point, there is a letter waiting for her; her first reaction after reading the name of Martin's mistress, Sylvia, is quite notable: "Oh, God, I thought; at least, it's someone I don't know; at least it's not Ross's first wife."¹⁴ In her attempts to rewind her day, she is maniacally precise about the items she purchased, although they are insignificant right now. As she reads further into the letter, she even starts laughing.

STEVIE Do you know what I thought after I'd read the letter? . . . Well, I laughed, of course: a grim joke but an awfully funny one. . . . Some things are so awful you have to laugh – and then I listened to myself laughing, and I began to wonder why I *was – laughing*. . . . And just like that (snaps her fingers) I stopped; I stopped laughing. I realized – . . . ah, shit! I've fallen off a building and I'm going to die; I'm going to splat on the sidewalk. . . it was awful and absurd, but it wasn't a joke. . . . And so I knew. And next, of course, came believing.¹⁵

She is face to face with a cruel, post factum cheating dichotomy: step one, knowing, followed by step two, believing. As we move deeper into the layers of this affair, we find Stevie inquiring about the choice of name of Martin's pleasurable *object* Sylvia, and that presents us with yet another level of her personality, sarcasm and erudition.

STEVIE Why do you call her Sylvia, by the way? Did she have a tag, or something? Or, was it more: Who is Sylvia, Fair is she that all your goats commend her.¹⁶

The lines allude to William Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. As Luis Fernando Midence Diaz reminds us,

The song represents Proteus's failed attempt to gain Silvia's affection over that of her banished Valentine. It is also a clear betrayal of his friendship to

13. Albee, p. 26.

14. Albee, p. 27.

15. Albee, p. 28.

16. Albee, p. 31.

Valentine, for Proteus has sworn he will give Silvia all of Valentine's letters during his time in exile. In *The Goat*, Stevie's inquiry . . . makes reference to Proteus's song, suggesting both a wooing and a betrayal. The wooing is denoted by Martin's sexual relationships with Sylvia, while Stevie's perception of having been demoted to be loved as much as an animal stands for her betrayal.¹⁷

However, Sylvia is and will remain offstage throughout the play. This empowers Stevie to take the action into her own hands, and decide where to direct her lamentations and/or self-pride. All of a sudden, she finds herself tuning an unmelodic "goat-song" that has landed undesired on her lap. "The essence of theatre," Peter Brook writes, "is within a mystery called 'the present moment.' 'The present moment' is astonishing. Like the fragment broken off a hologram, its transparency is deceptive. When this atom of time is split open, the whole of the universe is contained within its infinite smallness."¹⁸ For the time being, we leave Stevie to mentally split open her husband's trespassing in order to clarify the direction of their now officially broken marriage (which she feels morally obliged to mend).

2 Rejection: Who Is Sylvia?

Earlier during their confrontation, Stevie had asked Martin if he loved her. To his affirmative answer, she produces her indignation: how could he love her if she has so little to offer him? When we revisit this passage, we might perchance imagine an operating theatre, and envision love bleeding on the table, since one of its ribs has been violently disjointed from the rest. Stevie and Martin approach love like two surgeons who *have* to be as precise as possible when cutting, when removing the affected and foul-smelling tissues, and then sealing everything back together into a healthy whole. However, this risky "open love surgery" reveals that "speech is already a separation. . . . There is no privileged self-knowledge, and other people are no more closed systems than I am myself."¹⁹

Thus, Martin indirectly provokes Stevie to resuscitate her erotic desires, which she has forgotten while occupied with beautifying her house. Stevie is in a

17. Luis Fernando Midence Diaz, *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia? A Performance at Miami University* (MA Thesis, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, 2007), pp. 14–15. Via *OhioLINK*.

18. Peter Brook, *The Open Door: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre* (New York: Parthenon Books, 1993), p. 97.

19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Collin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 393.

place where her pleasures are less erotic and more casual, like buying ranunculi, shad roe, and dress gloves. Over the years, she has refined her protocol of accumulating goods, thus proving that “[e]very day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.”²⁰ One may wonder what Martin’s purpose in her life is, and how she makes him daily visible to herself. Does she treat him like an object that has been in her household’s *collection* for more than three decades, an antique of sorts? No answers are even adumbrated by Albee. One hint of an imbalanced state of urban affairs might be alluded to, though, when Martin is, ironically, head over *hills* (!) in love with the landscape he discovers outside the city. His temporary sexual rejection of Stevie may be correlated with his nausea for urban monotony, cacophony, and secluded *joie de vivre*. He has been involved in the urban landscape all his professional life. Not only that, but also, as Ross reminds us, he “[b]ecame the youngest person ever to win the Pritzker Prize, architecture’s version of the Nobel.” In addition to his latest achievement, he has recently been “[c]hosen to design the World City, the two hundred billion dollar dream city of the future.”²¹

“Translated into everyday life . . . disenchantment,” for Berman, means that “jobs are stupefying, relationships vapid and transient, the arena of politics absurd. In the vacuum created by the collapse of traditional values, we have . . . a general retreat into the oblivion provided by drugs, TV, and tranquilizers. We also have a desperate search for therapy.”²² In the middle of his affair, Martin submits to therapy sessions because he wants to find out what attracts *others* to commit adultery, since, he implies, we are an adulterous species. Sooner or later we cheat at least once at a “game” of life. During the therapy sessions, he meets severely traumatized and abused people, whose return to life means zero tolerance toward lies and pre-fabricated, non-applicable serial social ethics.

MARTIN It was a therapy place, a place people went to . . . talk about it, about what they were doing . . . and with whom. . . . And most of them had a problem, had a long history. The man with the pig was a farm-boy, and he and his brothers, when they were kids, just. . . *did* it. . . *naturally*. . . . The lady with the German Shepherd. . . it turned out she had been raped by her father *and* her brother when she was twelve, or so. . . continually raped, one watching the other, she told us. . . The man with the goose was. . . hideously ugly – I could barely

20. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), p. 225.

21. Albee, p. 13.

22. Berman, p. 17.

look at him – and I suppose he thought he could never – *you* know. . .²³

Love, as an abstract concept, as well as a universally binding force, has thus been blown up into microscopic bits. We have perhaps “killed” love because we transformed it into a commodity that we all must have *rapid* access to, and which, in return, should require minimal emotional efforts from us. We have turned love into a product; there are several material ways to “indicate” our love: fluffy bears, heart-shaped chocolate candy, pre-arranged “romantic dates/dinners,” jewelry, gift certificates, all void signifiers for an excessively employed word. What cannot be avoided, though, is that love, like old age, faces its own collapse.

Even though Stevie must have analyzed the connotations of love from all existing angles, nothing can possibly allay her distress, as she tries desperately to erase the fatidic day from her memory and marital history.

STEVIE I want the whole day to rewind – start over. I want the reel to reverse: to see the mail on the hall table where Billy [her son] has left it, then *not* see it because I haven’t opened the door yet – not having gotten the fish yet because I haven’t left the house yet because I haven’t gotten out of our bed yet because I haven’t *waked* UP YET. But. . . since I can’t reverse time. . . Yes, I *do* want to know. I’m reeling with it. Make me not *believe* it!²⁴

In the rejection module, she is fully awake, not on stage as an actress any longer, but behind the curtains, covered in embarrassment, since Martin has tailored her a frivolous, see-through (fishnet stocking) costume. She experiences contradictory, mixed reactions. She does not want to believe what is going on because she relies on the shield of lies that we have created to somehow protect us from too tough and/or unbearable moments of life. We have developed these existential props to keep us up when we are feeling down. “Make me not believe it” may be also read as a compound form, that is, “to be” and “to live,” as long as we cannot escape going through passages of intractable pain to validate their irritating, *insomniac* presence.

If Stevie was resourceful in avoiding confrontation before, now she feels cornered by the factual rejection, and must find out why it happened. By doing so, she opens the perverse series of *why’s* that never truly have answers, but are nonetheless summoned up when we are in despair – literally disjointed from a former version of ourselves: Why do I have cancer, doctor? Why did my only child die? Why is

23. Albee, pp. 34–5.

24. Albee, pp. 29–30.

there little comfort to pain? Why have I been betrayed? Why is there no medicine for broken, smashed-into-pieces feelings/states of mind? Why did a series of bombs erase the physiognomy of my native town? Why? Why? Why? If we linger enough on the last sound, there is one final aural moment: *why-y-y* morphs itself airborne into “I,” and we are thus back into the loop where the first personal pronoun reigns supreme. According to Pearl, “[w]hen we contract or enter a [blank zone] we enter . . . ‘the murky zone.’ We often experience being in this zone as uncomfortable. We are in a place of not knowing, a place of confusion or emptiness which can feel overwhelming.”²⁵

As soon as Stevie breaks free from her series of *why*'s and their murky zone, she acknowledges that we make use of sex to experience pleasure, just as we use our legs to move, our arms to hold an object, our eyes to see, and so on. All these are bodily tools through which we obtain what we want most of the time. Regardless of this astonishing revelation, she remains confused about what “belonging” is. To whom or what do we belong: To ourselves? To others? To God? To nature? To society? From a material point of view, we are part of nature, as, one day, we will be “recycled”; relationally, to others; spiritually, to any manifestations of God; collectively, to society; and intimately, *probably*, to ourselves. There is too much chaos and pressure which lead us to simultaneous, exhausting movements that have different vectors. Perhaps by belonging to so many, we spread ourselves too thin, too soon.

3 Revenge: Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy

In trying to cope with the awful and absurd news, Stevie explains to Martin that she has been somehow waiting for something to disturb their rather peaceful marital balance, for a moment that she refers to as a “jolt” and, at other times, as a “lessening”:

STEVIE We all prepare for jolts along the way, disturbances of the peace, the lies, the evasions, the infidelities. . . . We prepare for. . . things, for lessening, even; inevitable. . . lessening, and we think we can handle anything, whatever comes along, but we don't know, *do* we! Something can happen that's outside the rules. . . . Death before you're ready to even think about it – that's part of the game. A stroke that leaves you sitting looking at an eggplant, the week before had been your husband – that's another. Emotional disengagement, gradual, so gradual you don't know it's happening, or sudden – that's another. You've read about spouses – God! I hate that word! – ‘spouses’ who all of a sudden start

25. Pearl, p. 54.

wearing dresses – yours, or their own collection – wives gone dyke. . .
but if there’s one thing you don’t put on your plate. . . is bestiality. . .
The fucking of animals! No, that’s one thing you haven’t thought about,
one thing you’ve overlooked as a byway on the road of life, as the old
soap has it.²⁶

The passage portrays a sharp and mature Stevie, who has her lucid epiphany, when she admits publicly the destructive and/or misleading nature of the unconscious desires that lurk lewdly in the folding of our intertwined triad of *sum–cogito–sentio* (Latin for “I am–I think–I feel”). When we were children and wanted “the world” for ourselves, our parents’ warning came immediately; they taught us manners by introducing into our vocabularies two words that guide our adult life: ‘greed’ and ‘selfishness.’ On the other hand, when as adults, we want to collect or possess many things, there is no one to whisper to us a reminder about morals (since, like Martin, we tend to forget the demarcation between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ when we are obsessed with our needs). As grown-ups, we depend on our individual system for justifying what we like or want and, whether or not that makes any sense whatsoever, it does not seem to revolt us. An affair may be our contemporary understanding of a quixotic adventure: we all know, *theoretically*, this is not something we should do, but we somehow manage to fall into its steep trap.

By the end of the play, just like her famous violent counterpart, Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, Stevie has her hands stained with blood. But, unlike her theatrical violent predecessor, Stevie is aware of the (apparent) purpose of her crime and equally fascinated and satisfied with what she did. Unwilling to think in advance about the consequences of her next act, Stevie believes that, by killing Sylvia, she will end her husband’s unorthodox affair, and that is what really matters to her. The last part of the play finds Stevie in her vengeful state of being, where she needs to do justice for and by herself.

STEVIE [*To Martin*] We are both too bright for most of the shit. We see the deep and awful humor of things go over the heads of most people. . . . Fall out of love with me? Fine! But tell me you love me and an animal – both of us! – equally? The same way? . . . That you can do these things and not understand how it. . . SHATTERS THE GLASS? How it cannot be dealt with – how stop and forgiveness have nothing to do with it? . . . You have brought me down to *nothing!* . . . and, Christ!, I’ll bring you down with me!²⁷

26. Albee, pp. 28–9.

27. Albee, pp. 43–4.

This represents her climactic moment, when she is not scared of the implications of the verb 'to believe,' like before. She has laughed, refused to accept the news and tried everything to avoid the ugly truth. But now she has reached the stage when what happened would not be erased or reversed up to its inception point, and, then, magically rerouted. She feels reduced to nothing, so she tries to figure out how one should act when one is nothing. Stevie remembers that, at some point during Martin's confession, she broke china from her invaluable collection. Without being able to anticipate the imminent irony, she pleasurably reduced those precious and expensive artifacts to nothing. She deflected her anger on objects that could not reciprocate her gesture. Stevie is a mature Alice who does not find Wonderland, but instead enters through a broken, shattered glass, where illusions are destructive, spouses cross lines vulgarly, and the hypocrisy of love is, at last, unmasked.

Now Stevie begs us to look at her and notice the nothingness that lies beneath all human aspects and relations. But her point of view is not nihilistic. Her discovery has *nothing* to do with a premeditated *cancellation* of who we are, but is, on the contrary, an embrace of the mysterious digit zero that separates being from non-being, ruptures from flows, sensuality from norms, desires from concepts, and being-in-the-body from embodying-a-status-quo. Only when she is zero and journeys carelessly through the shattered glass, does she accept herself as a mature woman, where love itself has become nothingness.

As Peggy Phelan argues poetically,

Once upon a time, words were magnificent laborers. . . . Much to everyone's surprise it seemed that the more we asked words to do, the more extraordinary and expansive they became. . . . Then one day, a terrible accident occurred. No one really knows what caused it. But suddenly words *sank* like stones. . . . [Words] *were sick of everyone believing so much in them*. It was hard to be the object of faith, trust, love, for so many people. *The words had been asked to carry everyone's history and dreams*. The words fell apart, split, in the users' bodies. As the words cleaved into obstinate fragments, the users' bodies became scattered, nervous, symptomatic. The breaking words broke the people's bodies.²⁸

Thus, words have passed through a broken surface, too, where – among other relics – they met Stevie's conjugal annulment. Her violent act is of a fascinating quality because it can be interpreted as the symbolic "killing" of our inhibitions,

28. Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 6–7 (my emphasis).

lies, unfulfilled promises and irrational standards of living. Lady Macbeth kills along with her husband, and, thus, they become partners in crime. Stevie kills *because* of her husband. Therefore, the crimes lead to opposite conclusions and messages. Lady Macbeth discovers the loneliness and futility of what has remained from her life. Eventually she goes insane, as a punishment for her crime, and starts seeing an indelible bloodstain that she will try desperately to wash off. Put differently, she lives in times when a crime, a misdemeanor had to be atoned for. Stevie, on the other hand, writes the last scene in her husband's episode of infidelity and, along with it, concludes the phase of their adult, monotonous marriage. Whatever comes next in their lives could be *either good or bad, constructive/destructive, moral/immoral, together/separate*, as they belong to an "alternative generation," constantly too tired and somewhat indifferent to the choice.

STEVIE [*To Martin*] Why are you surprised? [She just killed Sylvia] What did you expect me to do? . . . She loved you. . . you say. As much as *I* do.²⁹

Stevie eliminates Sylvia because she cannot accept a "jolt" between herself and her husband. To Sue E. Cataldi,

Phenomenologically, as we are being emotionally dis-positioned or displaced (de-bordered and re-bordering), we feel the danger as well as the fear, the loss together with our grief. . . . What we cannot experience or sense is where, *precisely*, these 'cross overs' take place – 'where' the loss 'becomes' my grief, for instance, or 'where' his anger has intermingled and crossed over into my feelings of fear toward it. But this is just the 'occluding edge' of the chiasm, the 'blind spot' at work. There is still the Flesh of the world between us.³⁰

We cannot experience a complete empathy with another, since we are not in the other's body and mind. There is a much needed breathing space between us. From a theatrical point of view, there are no villains in this play, because the message is quite blunt: if we dare to blame anyone/anything for an injustice we have suffered, we implicitly blame ourselves, too. Even though there is a "Flesh of the world between us," there are nonetheless "currents" of guilt we must assume to-

29. Albee, p. 55.

30. Sue E. Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth and Flesh: A Study of Sensitive Space. Reflections upon Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Embodiment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p 115.

gether. Stevie thinks she is partly at fault for what has happened to Martin. *But* she refuses to live with him *and* vicariously add his pleasurable object to her collection.

In commenting on Arthur Rimbaud's famous, "One evening, I sat Beauty on my knees; and I found her bitter, and I abused her,"³¹ Arthur C. Danto remarks that "[t]he abuse of beauty is the symbolic enactment of an offense against morality and, hence, in effect against humanity."³² If love equals beauty, then Stevie must destroy its fake innocent look. She lives in a period where we dream that everything is pain-free, where solutions must be found instantly so that we do not feel uncomfortable in any way. Our inhibitions, taboos, and spiritual hierarchies are signatures of a remote, inactive past. What is then left for us to taste, experience, and indulge in? We have elaborated an intricate, self-attacking system of beliefs according to which, regardless of our actions, there will always be a solution, or an analgesic to heal our wounds. This thinking discloses how much we count for ourselves, and how we have consciously surrendered to becoming nothing and no-body.

Put differently, we increase the intensity of our pain verbally. The more we think about it, the more we are in pain because of our neuron assemblies. Does this mental trick work for desires, too? The more we think about them, the more we are obsessed with them? Is the contemporary human mind unleashed? Could we blame science for this state of affairs? As Jane Bennett points out, "Modern science practices first induce the expectation of a telos and then flatly refuse to fulfill it; science first whets our appetite for completion of purpose and then insists that no final satisfaction is attainable."³³

Stevie is aware, too, of this defect, of this contemporary imperfection, but does not want to go in that direction because then everything will collapse *without* a chance of recovery. The more she uses her intellect to come up with a reasonable excuse and explanation, the more lost she would be. In other words, the more she thinks about this "goat" (a sticky, monosyllabic word), the more she feels disconnected from reality, entangled in a maze-like absorption of life, its residues, erratic norms, collective, media-produced, impersonal desires, and so on and so forth. At the moment, all she wants to fix is *her* shattered conjugal glass.

31. Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), p. 39.

32. Danto, p. 40.

33. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), p. 61.

4 A Conclusion: Sketches toward What Love May Be

In the title of this essay appears a negation – who is *not* Sylvia? – since I believe Albee’s play elicits hard (to admit) truths from all couples. Otherwise, we would be too far away from what this playwright searches for and eventually comes across: the *tamed* and lame animal within us. We learn to follow rules, and, little by little, we get domesticated by them, losing the appetite to try something new. We fear that for doing so we would be judged, mistreated, rejected, or labeled. We are not exactly free if we are afraid, are we? Therefore, to deny what has happened to Martin, Stevie, or both of them as a couple, would imply disregarding what monogamous love is. Why does love become a boring friendship in long-term couples, and why don’t we address this danger? Why, over the years, do we stop being thrilled or excited, and why does everything seem like a catastrophic reoccurrence? This *couple’s* Sylvia “[r]eminds us how much we humans are, in Haraway’s inspired formulation, a ‘companion species.’”³⁴

Nonetheless, some critics have noted that this play brings into analysis a dysfunctional couple, but if that were true, then Albee would, indeed, have spoken about a real, and not a metaphorical goat. Undoubtedly, *that* would have been disturbing! There is nothing dysfunctional in this couple unless we consider how deeply they have positioned themselves in cushioned lies that probably created a gap between them long before this disaster. Now they are in a dead-end situation, incapable of reviving their marriage or rekindling their passion. Elizabeth Grosz reminds us that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,

Freud [argues] that the organism attempts to keep the quantity of energy or excitation as low as possible. . . . There is an entropic principle internally directing the organism towards simplicity and quiescence, impelling it towards death. Life can be seen, on this Freudian scenario, as the limited deferment or delay of the death drive, a detour of death through the pleasure principle.³⁵

Although initially developed to stress the gradual slowing down of our physicality, I contend that, since love is in us, like pollen on flowers, the concept of quietude may be applied to love, too. Our pleasure principles, or what we call love, encounter the lessening of their functions and abilities.

34. Una Chaudhuri, “‘Of All Nonsensical Things’: Performance and Animal Life,” *PMLA* 124.2 (2009) 520–525, p. 524.

35. Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 201.

Comparatively, there is an object that resides in us, a half-revealed object of passion, quest, and intrigue (that we tend to ignore). According to Gilles Deleuze, “I *must* have a body, it’s a moral necessity. . . . I must have a body because an obscure object lives in me. . . . The mind is obscure, the depths of the mind are dark, and this dark nature is what explains and requires a body.”³⁶ Furthermore, there is a *goat* in each and every one of us. The Aberdeen Bestiary defines it as “an animal [that] chooses, *capere*, to live in rugged places.” The goats “[l]ive in high mountains and can tell if men approaching a long way off are hunters or travellers.” Finally, “[t]he goat has very sharp eyesight, sees everything, and recognises things from a long way off . . . and picks up good grass from bad grass.”³⁷ In human terms, what is described above is called “instinct”; we know when to ward off danger, and if somehow we miss the warning signs, we have an inborn capacity to welcome disaster as part of our flesh ontology.

On the other hand, love has become insufficient to describe what we want. Yet, this is not exactly tragic. It is the inception of a phase when who we are fails to be defined. What validates us in the digital era is what makes us feel good. Not moral, but good, since our post-post-postmodern human nature indicates an inclination toward Epicureanism and its myriad manifestations. In trying to explain the sort of exalted experience Martin has been having with Sylvia, he says: “It was as if an alien came out of whatever it was, and it . . . took me with it, and it was. . . an ecstasy and a purity, and a . . . love of a . . . un-i-mag-in-able kind, and it relates to nothing *whatever*, to nothing that can be *related to!*”³⁸

Stevie *kills* Martin’s relation to nothing because, paradoxically, she needs to have a clear “road” on the hills and slopes of a shattered life. She has already intoned the goat-song, mimetically sacrificed the goat, what else remains for her to do? She invites Martin to hide together with her for a while beneath the skin of the goat, now fully aware that we rise and fall sexually like *old* empires. This is why she has now exhausted her D.R.R. marital syndrome, where D stood for desire, R for rejection, and the second R for revenge. Beneath the still warm goat-skin, she possesses a novel perspective on love, and ponders what remains after revenge and a series of shocks. Her answer may be “repose,” a third R in this imaginary series, because that, too, relates to zero, nothing (and is intimately related to the principle of rest).

36. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 85.

37. *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, ed. Michael Arnott, *Historic Collections*, University of Aberdeen Homepage, accessed 4 April 2012 <<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/translat/14r.hti>>.

38. Albee, p. 39.