

PAUL ZINDEL

PAUL ZINDEL AND THE THEME OF DESOLATION  
IN AMERICAN DRAMA

BY  
MARTIN LEWIS DULMAN, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Martin Lewis Dulman, B.A. (Alfred University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor D. Duncan

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## INTRODUCTION

Paul Zindel was born in 1936 and has lived most of his life on Staten Island, New York. He received his B.S. and M.S. degrees from Wagner College and taught physics and chemistry at a high school on Staten Island until 1969 when he turned to writing as a profession.

He has already received considerable recognition as a novelist and, especially, a dramatist. His three novels, all dealing with adolescent experience, are The Pigman (1968), My Darling, My Hamburger (1969), and I Never Loved Your Mind (1970), all published by Harper and Row. In the early 1960's he received a Ford Foundation grant for playwriting at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, where The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds<sup>1</sup> was first produced in 1964. His television play, Let Me Hear You Whisper (1968), has been shown several times on educational networks. Marigolds, presently in its second year on Off Broadway, has won distinguished awards in drama including the 1971 Pulitzer Prize. His other play, And Miss Reardon Drinks A Little, opened on Broadway February 25, 1971 and is about to be toured

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<sup>1</sup>Hereafter referred to as Marigolds.

nationally. He is presently working on three screenplays, a book for a musical, and another play.

In the year of his first major literary award as an American dramatist, the aim of this thesis is to study the drama of Paul Zindel, both in theme and techniques, and establish his place within the tradition of American drama of the past fifty years. The aim of the first chapter is to describe one special aspect of American drama which characterizes that tradition. The idea of desolation has become part of the personality of American drama and is frequently a main source of what T. S. Eliot would call its "significant emotion". After examining how some of Zindel's predecessors developed that traditional theme, the second and third chapters offer a detailed analysis of Zindel's two major plays, isolating his main characteristics and tendencies as a dramatist. A brief conclusion attempts to place Zindel within the tradition of his predecessors.

I

INFLUENCES FROM A TRADITION IN AMERICAN DRAMA

Agnes

Do we dislike happiness? We manufacture  
such a portion of our own despair . . .  
such busy folk.

Tobias

We are a highly moral land; we assume  
we have done great wrong. We find the  
things.

Edward Albee, A Delicate Balance



A dominant aspect, the implications of which I will isolate and discuss, in twentieth-century American drama is the portrayal of what may be referred to as a "state of desolation". The family, often typified by the role of a mother-figure, falls into this state when it becomes crippled in its unbalanced pursuit of whatever it values to be a necessity. Such needs are usually expressed as the desire for wealth, reputation, independence, marriage, or a similar form of success. The state of desolation is usually characterized by an anguished sense of failure or guilt, and is generally intensified by some form of persecution or madness. In portraying a representative family in this way American dramatists criticize the depicted American culture. Desolation, as part of the dramatist's attitude toward what he portrays, evokes two representative tones. A caustic tone lays bare the vacuity of a cultural wasteland. Also, a sympathetic tone is associated with those who are defeated by their culture's traditional values. The art of American playwrights has itself been affected by the situation they describe, since, as Robert Brustein remarks, "the cultural climate which helped to nurture them was (and is) peculiarly uncongenial to the development of a serious artist".<sup>1</sup>

In the present chapter I propose to discuss, in chronological order of production dates, ten representative American dramas (the number is not significant for any parti-

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<sup>1</sup>Theatre of Revolt, p. 321.

cular reason) chosen because they highlight different facets of this desolation and provide the background against which the plays of Paul Zindel should properly be viewed.

(1) Elmer Rice, The Adding Machine (1923)<sup>2</sup>

This, one of the most extraordinary American dramas, uses imaginative stagecraft to depict the hypocritical necessity to be "respectable". One is respectable if one's values, as Arthur Miller writes, "fit into the pattern of efficiency . . .".<sup>3</sup> The main character, Mr. Zero, fantasizes about killing his nagging wife and seducing a prostitute whom he knew and whom his wife had forced him to convict because she was not "respectable". Numbers are his past and present which he cannot forget. They are the source of his misery and triviality. He kills the authoritative father figure of his boss after his expectations of a raise are shattered by his dismissal from his job and replacement by an adding machine. He is seen as a failure who is unaware of his own limitations.

Another pathetic murderer, Shrdlu, has murdered his mother. He ironically chokes on his sobs over the anguish he feels toward his instinctive act. He is unaware of how he has

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<sup>2</sup>All references from this play are from Seven Plays by Elmer Rice.

<sup>3</sup>"On Social Plays", in John D. Hurrell, ed., Two Modern American Tragedies, p. 45.

been restricted by his mother's fanaticism. Both men have instinctively killed the authority figure responsible for the emptiness and failure in their lives, but do not gain any insight into the limitations which have been imposed on them and to which they remain attached.

In the idyllic portrayal of paradise, where criminals and artists are entitled to stay, Zero and Shrdlu cannot tolerate the complete lack of care for the appearance of "respectability". Zero feels it a necessity to desert paradise even though he had momentarily lost himself in the festive music, dancing, and atmosphere of freedom. This pastoral splendor is a long awaited refuge from the daily trivialities and frustrations in life, even though Zero ~~again attaches himself~~ again attaches himself to the omnipotent vacuity of his past.

Zero is physically attached to an adding machine in another office when he is told that he now has to return to earth. In this exaggerated comic vision of a regimented cosmic "system" where the apparently eternal pattern of vacuity is reprocessed, Lieutenant Charles, a bulky satanic agent, tells Zero:

Why, man, they use a soul over and over again  
--over and over until it's worn out. (vii, 103)

When Charles tells Zero that he has to be reborn, the monotony and triviality of Zero's life are repeatedly emphasized:

You'll be a baby again--a bald, redfaced little  
animal, and then you'll go through it all again  
. . . You'll learn to be a liar and a bully and  
a braggart and a coward and a sneak. You'll

learn to fear the sunlight and to hate beauty.  
 By that time you'll be ready for school . . .  
 and they'll tell you lies about all the things  
 you ought to know-- . . . When you get through  
 you'll be equipped for your life work. You'll  
 be ready to take a job. (vii, 106)

After hearing this Zero is even more eager to return. Charles is also a ventriloquist who impersonates the feminine voice convincing Zero that she, Hope, will be his companion through life. Perhaps this is meant to suggest that Zero's life is an impersonation of the vacuous and satanic universal pattern afflicting all those who are helpless products of the system. This incident also implies that, when a man is only a cipher in a mechanized world, he has (in Arthur Miller's words) no "real voice in the fate of his society".<sup>4</sup> The satirical and bitter tone in each episodic depiction of cosmic vacuity continually demonstrates Zero's lack of awareness. He does not warrant a sympathetic understanding because he insists on existing in a vacuum.

(2) George Kelly, Craig's Wife (1925)<sup>5</sup>

In this play, however, a female figure who does have awareness also has the selfish desire for independence through which she brings on her fated desolation.

The character of Mrs. Craig is depicted, as Gassner

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<sup>4</sup>"On Social Plays", p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>All references from this play are from John Gassner, ed., Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre.

describes<sup>it</sup> as an "emotionally inadequate Main Street woman".<sup>6</sup> She had married to be financially independent and treats her house as if it were sacred territory, while in the process she abuses the name of wife. During conversations she moves her husband around the lavishly furnished living room like an ornament to prevent him from scratching the piano. As one of the characters sarcastically remarks to Mr. Craig:

This house is what Harriet married--she didn't marry you. (I, 180)

The only reason she keeps her husband in the house is because he is "necessary to the upkeep" (I, 178). Not until the third act does Mr. Craig begin to assert and establish himself as the masculine figure of the household when his "instinct of self-preservation" (III, 203) rebels. He gleefully smashes an ornament down from the mantelpiece. He then drops ashes onto the thick carpet, smears his footprint into the upholstered furniture, and assures one of the maids who hears the racket that she will not be blamed for the mess. He destroys his old imposed image and kills, like a jealous husband, his rival, the other household ornaments.

In the first act, a neighbour, Mrs. Frazier, is used conveniently as a parallel to what Mrs. Craig becomes and as a contrast to the way she has caused, and reacted to, her fate. Mrs. Frazier is a charmingly bland character of sixty who has been a widow for ten years. As she reflects upon her loneliness,

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., Introduction, p. 162.

she refers to it as a "premature desolation" (I, 175). This is the only time in the play the dramatist uses this phrase. "Desolation" is used once again at the end of the play as a stage direction for Mrs. Craig. "She turns desolately . . ." (III, 213) after she has been deserted by her husband. She too becomes a widow subjected to loneliness because her household has been prematurely ruined. She has abused and has lost an extension of herself. Her desolation is a retribution for the past.

(3) Sidney Howard, The Silver Cord (1926)<sup>7</sup>

The mother in this play, Mrs. Phelps, is doomed to desolation because she cannot forget the past. She creates conflict between her two sons and their women (the wife of the older and the fiancée of the younger). The stage notes describe the setting of Mrs. Phelps' living room as "cluttered with the souvenirs of maternal love" (I, 1017). The husband had died at an early age during the early part of their marriage when the children were young. The children have become substitutes for the departed husband. Though the two young women feel like intruders, the sons remain blind to the mother's intentions of disrupting their marriages. The mother gives all her attention to Dave. The two young women notice this, but Robert, the younger son, remains unaware. Robert is characterized as being far from intelligent because he is

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<sup>7</sup>All references from this play are from Arthur Hobson Quinn, ed., Representative American Plays 1767-Present Day.

easily convinced by his mother that, for him, any other woman would be merely a disillusionment.

Mrs. Phelps preserves Robert's boyishness and creates conflict between him and his future wife, Hester, which results in a decision to separate. Mrs. Phelps then goes upstairs to David's room. The setting changes to David's room which has been preserved as if he had never left, still with a single bed in it. The mother had insisted that Christina sleep in another room. A stage note describes the way in which things in David's room have been preserved, "in their old state by Mrs. Phelps in a spirit of maternal archeology" (II, 1037). The treatment of the mother becomes more clearly comic because of her sometimes sheepish and other times persistent means of manipulating David back to her. She clutters his mind with memories of maternal love to which only she seems to be sentimentally attached. She tries to teach David that:

Young wives are sure to be a little bit possessive and exacting and . . . selfish at first.  
(II, ii, 1042)

Her motherly advice and analysis are ironically comic when she also tells David to be master of his own house while she herself manipulates him back into being more her son and less Christina's husband.

That night Hester runs out of the house to escape and runs across the partially frozen pond in which she almost drowns. Both sons chase after to rescue her. The mother is

heard exclaiming "if only those boys don't catch pneumonia" (II, 11, 1049). Mrs. Phelps openly betrays her pretense of being a loving woman and becomes a more obvious figure of ridicule because of her exaggerated unreasonableness. In the final scene Mrs. Phelps desperately tries to manipulate her sons into dependency and for a moment succeeds. The two women leave the sons with their mother who is probably wishing she were "suckling them at her breasts" (III, 1057). Hester tells Robert that next time she is "going to marry an orphan" (III, 1057). At the sound of the slammed door when Christina deserts David, he suddenly realizes his mistake and the mother is abruptly left with Robert. Her moment of triumph becomes her desolation. The characterization of Mrs. Phelps' exaggerated possessiveness is treated in a tone of ridicule which is similar to the way Albee, at times, and Kopit later treat their prematurely desolate mother figures.<sup>8</sup>

Craig's Wife and The Silver Cord portray the private life of a household in which the house and the children are treated by the dominating female figure as extensions of her own personality. She has tried to manipulate the dependency

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<sup>8</sup>Albee, for example, characterizes the mother in The American Dream with imbecilic dialogue. Mrs. Rosepettle in Kopit's Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' so Sad travels with her emotionally stunted son, a venus-fly trap, a meat eating fish, and the corpse of her dead husband. These extensions of herself are an indication of the exaggeratedness of her characterization.



of these extensions on her in order to prevent a "premature desolation". It is a necessity for the female figure to maintain her role as mother to these extensions for the sake of her happiness, if not sanity.<sup>9</sup>

(4) Lillian Hellman, The Little Foxes (1939)<sup>10</sup>

The name of the play suggests a daintiness about the predatory nature of the characters. Miss Hellman's characters act as creatures affected by current social and economic conditions. Ben, one of the cheating brothers motivated by the need for more profit, remarks:

There are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country . . . and they will own this country some day. (III, 148)

The backbone of the country consists of the rivalry and greed that exist among the members and later disrupt the family. People have married for money. Greed is the dominant family trait. The preparations for a marriage of the younger generation are manipulated by the older generation either out of greed or revenge. The household is corrupt and the corruption, as implied by the dialogue, is not confined within those

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<sup>9</sup>Mrs. Venable, in Tennessee Williams' Suddenly Last Summer, is victimized by insanity when her role of mother figure is no longer needed by her son. She sees this as a betrayal. The son's ritualistic death can be seen as part of the insane and bestial persecution of the universe. The character of Mrs. Venable which is exotically symbolized by the venus-fly trap, personifies the sense of devouring maternal love. Her anguish turns inward and devours her own humanity.

<sup>10</sup>All references from this play are from (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

particular four walls. Regina, the wife of the dying patriarchal figure whose wealth is being sought after and cunningly divided before his death, tells her ill husband, Horace, the reason why she married him:

. . . Lonely for all the things I wasn't going to get. Everybody in this house was so busy and there was so little place for what I wanted. I wanted the world. Then,--and then--(Smiles) Papa died and left the money to Ben and Oscar.  
(III, 124)

The last of the honest patriarchal figures is surrounded by a household of anticipating vultures. In contrast with Regina, whom Allen Lewis refers to as "a savage, determined woman",<sup>11</sup> Birdie is, a timidly sweet, naive, character. Birdie reflects:

My family was good and the cotton on Lionnet's fields was better. Ben Hubbard wanted the cotton and . . . Oscar Hubbard married it for him. He was kind to me, then . . . Everybody knew that's what he married me for . . . Everybody but me. (III, 112)

Oscar rigidly towers over Birdie, but appears to be insecurely awkward as a father and as an anticipating legacy hunter. The morally honest people in the play possess the wealth and the morally corruptible people marry into it with nothing else in view.

The play depicts the greed behind the Southern aristocracy, but is, as Ben suggests, applicable to other American households because it presents the social and economic state

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<sup>11</sup>American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre, p. 107.

of health of the nation. Wealth seems to be the cure-all to Regina's fears of a "premature desolation". She has been an unloving wife, a selfish mother to her daughter, Alexandra, who seems to have become a morally upright character without the benefit of maternal love. Alexandra prefaces her rebellion against the mother with the remark:

Addie said there were people who ate the earth  
and other people who stood around and watched  
them do it. (III, 152-153)

The husband has died and has tried to manipulate situations so that Regina does not inherit the wealth. Though she manages to get the money, she is rejected by the daughter. As a consequence of her greed and cunningly acquired financial independence her "premature desolation" consists of a fear of her daughter's open and determined defiance.

(5) Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie (1944)<sup>12</sup>

A retrospective attitude is utilized to depict the son's wilful rebellion against the mother's household and his sense of guilt for leaving the mother and his injured sister in desolation. When Tom leaves, the Wingfield apartment is no longer a refuge, but a heartbreak house. The Wingfield apartment is a refuge, as Allen Lewis observes:

. . . peopled by the hurt and the haunted,  
surrounded by evil in ugly forms. The victims

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<sup>12</sup>All references from this play are from (New York: New Directions, 1966).

do not rise in splendid opposition, but retreat more deeply into their aberrations.<sup>13</sup>

Amanda, the matriarch of the household, relives her days of gentleman callers, and regrets having married the father who deserted her, Tom, and Laura. She remembers the time she could have been rich and famous. Her Southern aristocratic past had not prepared her for the St. Louis alley future. She ironically tells Tom:

. . . the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it! (v, 55)

She tries to act as if the world of the past were in control of the present. The way she treats Laura is as if her past were Laura's present. In her relationship with Tom who pays the rent as a father figure, the two of them argue as if Tom were married to her. No doubt she bores Tom the way she did her husband. When the gentleman caller appears, she acts as if she were the one expecting him. When the lights are cut off, she ironically asks Jim if he "can tell a burnt out fuse?" (vii, 84). Though she sees Jim as a type of superman, she restricts the life and will of her own son:

Jim  
Sure. I'm Superman!  
Amanda  
Now, Thomas, get into this apron! (vii, 87)

To Laura the household is a refuge from the destructiveness of the public world, which intrudes upon her privacy when Jim enters and which has the destructive powers to trans-

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<sup>13</sup>American Plays and Playwrights, p. 64.

figure freakish uniqueness into something transparently ordinary, as evidenced when Jim accidentally breaks the glass unicorn. The character of Laura is somewhat depressing and not very interesting. Her only emphasized character trait is her fragility, which tends to encourage too much sympathy.

In contrast, Tom, as a substantial source of comedy, contributes a detached and cynical point of view, which lifts the play out of its sometimes embarrassing sentimentality in its rhapsodic evocation of times past. The character of Tom is dramatic, realistic and dimensional as the rebellious son who argues, defies, and wounds his mother's point of view. He satisfies his personal sense of necessity by joining the Merchant Marine which is a characteristic masculine expression of a sense of adventure. He forfeits his duty to the household and leaves the family in fear of economic and social depression. Throughout the play his motivating drive is to get out of the two-by-four confinement of the household without removing a nail from the coffin. But Tom is not a magician. When he evades the crippling effect of the household and drifts from city to city, he cripples himself with the memory of the home, which in retrospect suddenly becomes comforting. His enactment of desertion parallels the father figure's expression of freedom, but the guilt within his memory is like an extension itself of the mother's household of memories, preventing the past from withdrawing its effects and thus inhibiting freedom.

A household of memories, as previously staged in The Silver Cord, is atmospherically staged in The Glass Menagerie. The stage is used as a stage when the narrator directly speaks to the audience, and as a room in the household when the atmosphere of memory is evoked. The apartment, like memory itself, is set apart from reality, and on stage, as the directions note, takes the shape and position of memory in the mind, set in the "rear of the building", like a "cellular living unit", and is "entered by a fire-escape" (i, 3). The effect of memory is presented on stage by the use of shafts of light on various areas, the use of music, the use of transparent settings,<sup>14</sup> and the use of the character, Tom, who undisguisedly "doubles" as the son and as the one-man narrator chorus,--a technique later used by Arthur Miller in A View from the Bridge.<sup>15</sup> In his production notes, Tennessee Williams calls The Glass Menagerie a "memory play".<sup>16</sup> It seems as if this term is used by Williams first, to describe

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<sup>14</sup>A transparent setting is also effectively employed in Death of a Salesman. Perhaps that is not used as an effect of memory, but as an evocation of a sense of transparency between the boundaries of Willy's imagination and the incidents occurring in the present.

<sup>15</sup>This technique refers to the use of the lawyer as commentator and participant between time past and present. Though the technique is similar, the effect is different in that the lawyer seems to be more of a detached spokesman purposefully uninvolved.

<sup>16</sup>p. ix.

a product of the playwright's memory of personal experiences with its evidences of autobiographical data as well as possibly autobiographical wishes; secondly, as referring to the techniques by which it creates an emotional atmosphere of memory through sights and sounds on the set of the Wingfield apartment; thirdly, as referring to his use of a person as narrator and commentator on the exterior of the set and as character on the inside of the set; and fourthly, to describe a method of characterization which works by revealing the memories of the characters, particularly Tom's and his mother's. In retrospect it seems as if the term "memory play" can perhaps have a fifth significance. There are several comments and attitudes in the play which date it as referring to a certain specific period of American life. The Glass Menagerie can be seen as a memory of the attitudes that were absolutes in American society during the 1930's. These are incorporated into the play predominantly through the character of the gentleman caller. Tom, as narrator, remarks on the function of the gentleman caller as "the most realistic character in the play . . ." as well as "the long delayed but always expected something that we live for" (i, 5). One of the attitudes that date this play is the serious treatment of the gentleman caller as a person motivated by wealth and power and as a personification of cultural values. Nelson sees the possibility of the gentleman caller being played for laughs, as a farcical character, because of his jingoistic language

and sense of superior confidence.<sup>17</sup> The play does manage to present a sense of the ironic in Jim in that there is a discrepancy between his past image as a likely Presidential success and his present condition as a warehouse worker with Tom. The irony is extended in that Jim still believes in the values which already seem to have defeated him. In the play his success has been crippled. In retrospect he seems to be the crippled image of success. The gentleman caller is what Willy Loman sees his sons to be. The gentleman caller is the young character Albee personifies as the "American Dream" in the play of the same title.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the reason why Jim is treated with seriousness is because he functions as a poetic representation of the characters' inner desires and stands in contrast to the Wingfield household as a welcomed intruder. He can be seen as a representative product of the standard and domestic, which in the course of

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<sup>17</sup>Tennessee Williams, see Nelson's discussion of The Glass Menagerie, pp. 94-121.

<sup>18</sup>The young man in Albee's American Dream is a divided self. His sense of incompleteness is seen as an extension of the vacuity in the family which adopts him. He is a sympathetic character because he is aware of the sense of permanent loss within him. He is helpless because he is damaged. He is damaged because he is a representative product of the vacuity of life in which he was born and bred. A more vacuous character appears in The Sandbox who is referred to as "the angel of death". He seems to be more of a personification of the imbecilic vacuity exhibited in the characterization of the married couples in both plays.



American drama seems to have been analyzed and expressed through either vulgar exaggeration or realistic presentation as vacuously true to life. Perhaps Jim's appeal in the play is not only an aspect which dates it, but also an effect of a "memory play" in which past attitudes seem to be not only transparently distinct but also comparatively inverted in value to present ones. At the end of the play the character of Tom moves from the atmosphere of memory into the carnival world of movies, bars, and dance halls. This parallels Williams' progression into A Streetcar Named Desire. It remains unclear to me why Nathan begins his review of this play with:

The play, which might well have been titled The Glass Menagerie, . . . <sup>19</sup>

because the atmosphere in this play is one of lust. Perhaps The Glass Menagerie can be seen as a preface to A Streetcar Named Desire. Tom enters into and explores an inverted world peopled with inverted minds. It is an inverted world because the transparent glass of life has been stained with color. The people live in the present and those who live in the past cannot survive. The people are not motivated by wealth and power, but by desire. It is not a world of stored up frustrations or dutiful obligations, but of unrepressed emotions and gratified personal necessities. This world is visible from the Wingfield apartment. All one has to do is to look

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<sup>19</sup>"Review of A Streetcar Named Desire", in Hurrell, ed., p. 89.

down.

(6) Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)<sup>20</sup>

In the heat of the summer in the carnival city of New Orleans where this play is set, Blanche Du Bois retreats into the bathroom to cool herself off. From the other side of the door Stanley, who is waiting to use the facilities, can hear Blanche singing:

Say, it's only a paper moon,  
Sailing over a cardboard sea--  
But it wouldn't be make-believe  
If you believed in me! (vii, 99)

The song is appropriate for her because it sounds as if it could be her plea to the world for understanding. It could also signify Williams' technique to reinforce his point of view of her character. In The Glass Menagerie Tom, as narrator, begins by addressing the audience directly with:

. . . I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. (i, 4)

Blanche is like the stage magician giving illusion as truth. She comes to her sister Stella's house thinking she can withdraw from the world where she seduces men for a living. But the first man she meets is Stanley Kowalski. Even at a time when she compels herself to withdraw from desire, Stanley is most desirable to her. Taylor observes that Blanche disrupts

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<sup>20</sup>All references from this play are from (New York: New American Library, n.d.).

Stanley's routine.<sup>21</sup> Surely, it seems as if they both disrupt each others' habits. Stanley's solid, tempting, unpretentious sexual omnipotence, and his attractively bestial lust is sensed by her immediately. As Porter remarks:

Williams tends to carry a good thing too far and, by overstepping the bounds, tends to resemble his heroine.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps Williams does become a little carried away with creating an atmosphere of lust in the virile capabilities of Stanley Kowalski. He first enters the set carrying a package of raw meat which he flings at Stella who is pregnant with his child. Blanche refers to him as having "big, capable hands" (ii, 43). Blanche tells Mitch, "that man is my executioner!" (vi, 93). The object of her desire is also the object of her destruction. Blanche only sees the element of lust in Stanley. This is what he gives to her and what tortures her into persecution. Blanche had not wanted reality but magic (ix, 117). Stanley, by raping her of her illusion, stuns her with reality through his magic. Clurman writes:

. . . she is not insane when she is committed to the asylum. She is an almost willing victim of a world that has trapped her . . .<sup>23</sup>

As a victim of both, Blanche is trapped between desire and persecution. Blanche and Stanley are creatures of suddenness.

<sup>21</sup>"The Dilemma of Tennessee Williams", Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>22</sup>Myth and the Modern American Drama, p. 173.

<sup>23</sup>"Review of A Streetcar Named Desire", in Hurrell, ed., p. 93.

The word "suddenly" seems to be important in Williams' vocabulary. Though Blanche and Stanley are creatures of suddenness, he is unpretentious and incapable of hiding instinct, whereas Blanche camouflages her desire with respectability. As Nelson suggests, being possessed with desire is shown to be associated with the guilt of disrespect and persecution.<sup>24</sup>

Blanche deteriorates visibly from respectability to a victim of lust. The plantation from which she had come, Belle Reve, had become a degraded place, deteriorating over the years due to the male ancestors exchanging "the land for their epic fornications" (ii, 43). The respectable way of life had become degraded through desire. Blanche had buried father, mother, and cousins at Belle Reve which Stella had left to marry Stanley. Belle Reve is the abandoned household and Blanche had been the last to leave it. Her actions now seem to be an imitation of the process of deterioration of the former household. It seems as if Blanche feels compelled to ruin herself because self-deterioration proceeds through desire. Blanche acts like a mother figure when she visits Stella and tells her:

You're all I got in the world, and you're not  
glad to see me! (i, 20)

She then tries to make Stella feel guilty for leaving the household. Because of Blanche's jealousy, she can only see

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<sup>24</sup>Tennessee Williams, see Nelson's discussion of A Streetcar Named Desire, pp. 121-141.

Stella's motivation for marriage as sexual. This is evident when she reprimands Stella for deserting the household:

Where were you! In bed with your Polak! (1, 27)

Blanche now tries to corrupt the making of a new household. These motives are concealed under her need to be believed in. She has to be thought respectable otherwise she becomes a creature of suddenness. Mitch, who thought he could be happy with Blanche, saw in her what she wanted to see in herself. He believed in her illusion of respectability. After Blanche's attempt to corrupt Stella's marriage like a possessive mother restricting her child, she is stripped of her illusions, evidenced by the rape. In an inverted world self-fulfilment is attained through self-destruction.

(7) Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman (1949)<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to Williams' highly charged atmosphere of lust in which his creatures of suddenness become desolate when their illusions are stripped away, the tone of this play becomes subdued and solemn when the motivation for success is questioned and seen as a failure in a society which defeats its own people. The play seems to concentrate at times on an almost pathetically standard and sentimental domestic situation, but achieves a significantly broader vision when it becomes clear that each particular in the play

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<sup>25</sup>All references from this play are from (New York: Viking Press, 1970).

is, in itself, capable of being expanded beyond the four transparent walls into the inherent consciousness of society. It would be ironic to refer to Death of a Salesman as the most successful American play, since the concept of success is the villain of the play. It may be more tactful to praise it as a great American drama mainly because of the way in which it questions the validity of accepted cultural values and reveals them to be inherent cultural flaws.

In one of Willy's imaginary flashbacks, Ben tells him of a time when, as young boys, they went with their father cross country on his wagon selling flutes which he had made. The inventiveness of the father is implied because he made these musical gadgets and was successful. The father is described as having a pioneer spirit and a wild heart. He seems to have treated his family in the same rugged manner in which he handled his flutes,<sup>as</sup> when Ben refers to the time the father tossed the family into the wagon. His father and the profession of making and selling could represent an aspect of the cultural heritage. The country Willy has inherited has become a culture of gadgets. One of its cultural values seems to be a boyish fascination with gadgets. Howard, Willy's young boss, mentions he had been up all night with his new machine which has recorded his childrens' voices that also sound like mechanical language. The use of gadgets reveals a preoccupation with the mechanical and a lack of interest in human affairs. Willy also mentions that his father had died when he was young

so that he had grown up without one. Linda can be seen as more of a mother to Willy than a wife. In a way, Willy is Linda's third son. Even the somewhat annoying repetition of certain speech patterns like "gee" verbally characterize Willy's boyishness.

As a father, Willy is seen as a failure. He has failed with his sons because he has given them impersonal advice. He has drummed into their consciousness the necessity and the desirability of being a success. He has wanted his sons to emulate him in their deeds and worship him in their thoughts. As a result, the household has become affected by the worthlessness of the distorted dream of success. Willy has been something of an influence on Happy who has easily attained the fruits of national culture, such as wealth, independence, deceit, and loneliness. With Biff, Willy has been less of an influence and less of a father. He has been more like a coach to his star player or a boss to his top worker. Willy's imaginary flashbacks reel out the vividness of the sights and sounds of Biff taking care of Willy's car as if he were taking care of Willy. He raises Biff shoulder high in retrospect because he had all the makings of a good salesman. The way in which Willy had spoken to his sons about the business of salesmanship reveals the pedestal on which he hoped his sons would see him, the interrelatedness between business and sports, and the inherent savagery in the cult of being successful;

Knocked 'em cold in Providence, slaughtered 'em  
in Boston. (I, 33)

When Biff had needed and had most confidence in his father, it was at a time when the father was away from home and business, betraying both. From the moment Biff had desperately needed to idolize his father, the father as a figure had fallen and had become an obvious fraud in the eyes of his son. Biff had seen sudden deterioration and was no longer going to be boxed in with the rest of the family in Willy's illusion of success.

New high-rises of urbanization are closing in on Willy's house. The street is lined with cars and there is no fresh air. The people inside are boxed in with their dreams. Tools, lumber, and peace of mind are what Willy wants. It is too late for changes. There is no room to build, and as Linda tells him, "Nothing will grow any more" (II, 72) in the back garden. Willy is proud of the work he had put into building his little house. As a physical structure it shows no cracks. But as a traveling salesman he lives more in his car. His house to him is more like a monument to his name. The relationships between members in the little monument and in business are breaking down like the mechanisms inside. As a father, Willy has boxed in the development of his sons. Happy is well enough adjusted not to protest or even be aware of the nature of the problem. Biff has become maladjusted because he had been favoured for what turned out



to be the wrong reasons. Biff finds himself boxed in an office for a moment trying to please his father by "knocking them dead":

Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be? What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am! (II, 132)

Though the speaker is Biff, the thoughts and the words describing the situation are Willy's in appropriateness but not in consciousness. Willy could never speak those words though they expressly seem to be written for him. Willy's self is defined by his profession. He sells and then sacrifices both. He is too boxed in to what he has built to see that he wants to get out.

Linda, the one for whom Willy had built his little monument, is more like a custodian than a manager of the monument. She does not help situations. As a mother and wife she keeps disinfecting the household with Willy's dreams. When situations almost seem attainable and the possibility of achievement makes things look brighter, the family becomes somewhat comic. Whenever there are plans being made or discussed Willy tells Linda to stop interrupting the boys' plans. All the males stick together and the mother seems to be treated like an outsider. Willy gives professional advice to his boys and Linda cheers him on by worshipping him for what he represents, much as he worships Biff and as he wanted his sons to worship him. The mother is the one who constantly

keeps filling everyone up with dreams and feeding them hope. In the stage notes at the beginning of Act Two, Willy drinks his cup of coffee and Linda is "filling his cup when she can" (II, 71). In almost every flashback Willy remembers or pictures Linda carrying a bundle of wash. She darns socks in front of Willy's eyes and does not realize the significance of her betrayal. She efficiently makes sure that Willy has his armor for success with him when he goes to speak with Howard: glasses, handkerchief, and saccharine. She also makes sure that Biff has his comb with him. Though other machines may be breaking down in the household, surely Linda is the best multipurpose machine in the entire house. Willy, though, is a machine visibly breaking down; a machine which has been programmed by luck, personality, and wealth. Charley remarks:

A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (Requiem, 138)

Willy was a product of his culture which addicted him to its values. Perhaps as reassurance, Willy wanted to be worshipped by Biff. Out of desperation the only way Willy believes he could achieve this is to commit suicide. Ben appears to give him the final encouragement to greatness. The inheritance he leaves Biff is not the cultural values he inherited from a father he had never known, but insurance money he risked from a culture he knew too well. The idea of insurance money as inheritance is pathetically ironic because Willy's ideal had been established on the idea of success, luck, and person-

ality, whereas the inheritance is the result of death and bad luck. His death frees the household. The sons are now free to do what they desire. The last instalment has just been paid on the house. Linda, now a widow, is the only one who suffers defeat.

(8) Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night (1956)<sup>26</sup>

Characters of the Tyrone family who seek refuge in their summer cottage suffer self-defeat and despair because their need to be unified with the past is only satisfied through memory. The characters and the mood of the play gradually sink into despair as the members of the family become more drunk with the need to satisfy their sense of unity with the past, while the present atmosphere becomes more oppressively dreadful. Brustein observes that the play:

. . . moves forward in time and backwards in memory simultaneously . . . <sup>27</sup>

Like the motion of the sea underneath a ship, the waters retreat while the vessel moves forward. The progression of the play is toward something dreadful. Throughout the play this expectation hangs in the air like fog.

Act one begins immediately after breakfast at the family's summer cottage. The play begins, as Brustein

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<sup>26</sup>All references from this play are from (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).

<sup>27</sup>Theatre of Revolt, p. 31.

suggests, with a sense of "recovery".<sup>28</sup> There is casual talk of the father's bargain cigars, the mother's reducing, Edmund's summer cold, and the father's habit of buying land. Mary comments:

Thank heavens, the fog is gone. (I, 17)

But in the night the foghorn had sounded and had kept her awake all night. The husband becomes interrelated with the forbidding sound of the foghorn when Mary casually remarks

You were snoring so hard I couldn't tell which was the foghorn! (I, 17)

When the sons enter there is a sense of increasing tension.

There are arguments between the father and the sons:

Tyrone

The only thanks is to have you sneer at me for a dirty miser, sneer at my profession, sneer at every damned thing in the world--except yourself.

Jamie

That's not true, Papa. You can't hear me talking to myself . . . (I, 32)

As Jamie implies, there are boundaries of awarenesses existing among the characters in the family. As the play progresses these boundaries become transparent when inner revelations are spoken within the refuge of the imagination of the character rediscovering the moment of unity in the past.

The sound of Edmund coughing, like the sound of the foghorn, prevents the mother from escaping into her imagination. The family's character traits and afflictions are

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 353.

interrelated.<sup>29</sup> When she hears Edmund coughing the stage directions note:

She springs to her feet, as if she wanted to run away from the sound, and goes quickly to the windows at right. (I, 42)

Mary looks out the window and sees Tyrone talking to respectable neighbours. She describes the way he acts in public comically:

They bowed to your father and he bowed back as if he were taking a curtain call. (I, 43)

Like the function of the imagination, the house makes the mother feel "cut off from everyone" (I, 44). She tells Edmund that the summer cottage is not a home to her. In the house she feels confined and secluded which is the same effect that her imagination has upon her. She accuses the family of not having faith in her or understanding her. Though the family is aware of her addiction to dope she still conceals from herself that such an awareness exists.

The second act progresses toward lunch, with the liquor bottle being brought out for consumption. The tone of despair is also intensified:

Mary

None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realize it, and once they're done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever. (II, i, 61)

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., see Brustein's discussion on characters affecting others through time, pp. 329-351.

When Mary reprimands the father for being late for lunch, what underlies the reprimand is her desire for a real home and his carelessness about such matters. Mary emphasizes that he "doesn't understand a home" (II, i, 61). In the next scene, following the afternoon meal, the stage notes describe the entrance of the mother and father:

He is not with her as he was in the similar entrance after breakfast . . . He avoids touching her or looking at her. There is condemnation in his face, mingled now with the beginning of an old weary, helpless resignation. (II, ii, 71)

The mother gradually becomes more detached in manner and separates herself from the rest of the family as she forgets the present in the rediscovery of the past. She emphasizes the need for understanding and excuses the father for not being able to provide this:

He's not to blame. If he'd been brought up in a real home, I'm sure he would have been different. (II, ii, 81)

Just as Mary harps on the significance of home and understanding, Tyrone repeatedly accuses his sons of betraying the Catholic Church and losing their faith. The father mentions that he had bought his wife an automobile so that she could enjoy travelling. The idea of travel seems to be predominantly masculine and in opposition to the feminine idea of home. The mother recalls the past when she left the home to travel with the father because he was lonely which was the time Jamie had given the baby the measles. When she lost the baby it seems as if she also lost her faith:

I never lied about anything once upon a time.

(II, ii, 93)

. . . the Blessed Virgin Mary forgives me and  
gives me back the faith in Her love and pity

I use to have in my convent days . . . (II, ii, 94)

Her imagination needs the drugs to protect her from the pain of understanding the desolation in which she lives. Only a drugged feeling provides a needed refuge because, unlike the family, it is the source of connection and not disappointment.

By evening the mother has withdrawn deeper into her childhood. She mentions:

I really love fog . . . It hides you from the  
world and the world from you. You feel that  
everything has changed, and nothing is what it  
seemed to be. No one can find or touch you  
any more. (III, 98)

In contrast she adds:

It's the foghorn I hate. It won't let you alone.  
It keeps reminding you, and warning you, and  
calling you back. (III, 99)

She wishes seclusion within herself in order to rediscover her dreams of being a nun and a concert pianist. But like the home which is marked by the father's neglect, her present state is symbolized by her "crippled fingers" (III, 104). The journey is one of self-deterioration. Just as the sons are disappointments to the father, Mary remembers that she was a disappointment to her mother who wanted her to become a nun. Out<sup>of</sup> her present shame she adopts the belief that:

Only the past when you were happy is real.  
(III, 104)

Whenever the foghorn sounds, its effect is to bring her back

to reality where she sees herself as:

a lying dope fiend reciting words!  
(III, 107)

In the final act Edmund, in a drunken state, remarks on the fog outside the house and the way it makes him feel alone and withdrawn peacefully into a needed refuge. Tyrone and Edmund, after arguments, meet in reconciliation and reveal to each other their past moments of unity. To the father this happened when he was cited as the best contemporary actor. This also coincided with economic success. To Edmund it was when he experienced a feeling of unity with nature:

For a second you see--and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble on toward nowhere, for no good reason! (IV, 153)

Home is nowhere in the fog at the end of the play. The household fades into the background. The disputes among the three men cease as all watch the mother unconsciously tormented and apparently crippled by her own imagination recapturing the vision<sup>30</sup> of the Blessed Virgin smiling on her when she "was happy for a time" (IV, 176). Like fog, the mother's refuge within herself satisfies her need for connection with a feeling of faith, peace, and meaning. But like the foghorn's solitary moan of despair her visible isolation from the rest

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<sup>30</sup>"The ecstatic vision of wholeness is only momentary . . .", *Ibid.*, p. 355. However, I would like to add that the effect is not momentary as evidenced by Mary at the end of the play.



of the family silences them into defeat.

(9) Jack Gelber, The Connection (1959)<sup>31</sup>

As in Long Day's Journey into Night, it is a necessity for Gelber's characters to seek refuge in a "sense of connection"<sup>32</sup> with the source of their desire, which almost becomes a source of destruction for one of them. The theme of addiction seems to become a metaphor for the addiction of American society to its own cultural values. Like Death of a Salesman, Gelber's play questions cultural values by implying that everyone is addicted to the legal drugs of prosperity. The Connection has been considered avant-garde mainly because of its self-conscious techniques of improvisation and because of its theme and realistic presentation of drug addiction. The characters intentionally act as drug addicts rather than as stage figures. Brustein believes that:

By providing his downbeat characters with more dignity, and self-awareness than the characters of most American drama, Gelber has managed to transcend the limitations of his subject.<sup>33</sup>

The characters seem admirably individualistic because they justify what they are doing by drawing metaphorical parallels between their withdrawn world and the outside dollar society,

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<sup>31</sup>All references from this play are from (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

<sup>32</sup>"On Social Plays", p. 43.

<sup>33</sup>"Junk and Jazz", in Brustein, ed., Seasons of Discontent, pp. 25-26.

and by contributing, in every way possible, to the undramatic quality of the play. The sense of the dramatic is evoked, ironically, only when the character who is most addicted becomes most afflicted when he builds up a tolerance and then injects an overdose which almost kills him. Addiction is an expression of a relationship between a person and the values afflicting him. Even though he derives a "sense of connection" from them, they appear only to connect him with desolation.

Most of the addicts do not strive to survive. They spend their time either sleeping or playing jazz, which evokes the sounds of a desolate atmosphere. The motif of sleep contributes to the idea of the passivity of their lives and the regression into a helpless state which is derived from drugs. The jazz acts as a type of communicative lullaby and the mouthpiece on the trumpet suggests a pacifier. The play goes on to nowhere, which reinforces the atmosphere of desolation evoked by jazz.

In the play's rejection of everything standard in subject and conventional in dramatic expression it becomes a part of the desolation it exposes. In The Connection desolation seems to serve a major role as an unseen mother figure existing in the jazz and smoked filled atmosphere cradling the outcast children who need to be connected to her. The characters are seen, of course, as social outcasts, but they are also outcasts in the sense that they are dislocated from themselves in the image they present of doing nothing and

being nothing but addicts. Like the foghorn in Long Day's Journey into Night, the jazz sounds of desolation beckon the character to seek refuge in a "sense of connection", which again as demonstrated by Leach, overcomes him and silences him into defeat.

(10) Edward Albee, A Delicate Balance (1966)<sup>34</sup>

This is chosen as the last play to be discussed in this chapter because it is closest to Zindel's work not only in point of time but also in the way it dramatizes desolation. We are shown a household of characters tormented by the emptiness of their lives. Images of the house as a cave and as a place of darkness suggest the primitiveness of people who are anguished by a sense of loss permanently felt throughout their lives. When Brustein condemned A Delicate Balance as constituting "an emptiness that no amount of activity can fill",<sup>35</sup> he was unconsciously defining the sense of desolation which the play successfully conveys.

Nevertheless, his definition needs to be supplemented with another aspect of Albee's treatment of desolation. A passage from Arthur Miller's "Tragedy and the Common Man" expresses an additional significance:

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<sup>34</sup>All references from this play are from (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Simon and Schuster of Canada, 1967).

<sup>35</sup>"Albee's Old House", The New Republic (October 8, 1966), p. 36.

The quality in such plays that does shake us, however, derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.<sup>36</sup>

This fear is an important aspect of desolation in Albee's play in which a character is intimately involved with a deep personal fear of desolation along with a compulsion to overcome emptiness.

A Delicate Balance presents an almost comic situation in which the household of Agnes and Tobias becomes overcrowded with people, who feel it is a necessity to be there for reasons that relate directly to their fears. The thirty-six year old daughter, Julia, returns home after her fourth divorce only to find another couple, Edna and Harry, occupying her room in the house. Out of a fear of being dispossessed she desperately tries to dispossess the intruding couple, who have come to seek refuge from the loneliness of their own neglected lives. The house is in a state of anguish because there is rivalry between sisters (Claire, Agnes's younger sister, is in love with Tobias), rivalry between daughter and the parents' friends, and rivalry between Agnes and Tobias over their defined roles in the household. These conflicting relationships contribute to Agnes's predominant mood of despair because they are a direct source of her anguish.

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<sup>36</sup>In Hurrell, ed., p. 39. I have referred to Miller's essays because of their illuminating significance in American drama.

Nevertheless, there is also a definite sense of comedy in the relationships between these characters. Claire drinks a little and she becomes drunk with sarcasm as she tells Julia:

You're laying claim to the cave! Well, I don't know how they'll take to that. We're not a communal nation, dear; giving, but not sharing, outgoing, but not friendly. (II, ii, 100)

When Agnes is exasperated by the reversal of sexual roles implied in Claire's characterization of feminine masculinity or masculine femininity, she tells Julia as Tobias enters:

Your mother has arrived. Talk to him!  
(II, i, 67)

Harry and Edna appear to be pathetically comic in their timidity when they offer themselves for adoption by the household as representations of:

. . . madness, should it come by . . .  
uninvited. (I, 21)

The loss which the characters cannot replace and with which they torment themselves originates long ago in the death of the son, Teddy. Agnes remembers:

I thought Tobias was out of love with me--or, rather, was tired of it, when Teddy died, as if that had been the string. (II, ii, 109)

Agnes also mentions that Teddy's birth made Julia feel unwanted and that it seemed to be more of a relief than a loss to her when her brother died. His birth originally made Julia feel dispossessed. Now, as an extension of her fear and recreation of the past, the intrusion of the other couple is manipulated

to seem as if Julia again is being threatened with dispossession. People in the house are not only guests, but also recreated substitutes of the past. When there are too many replacements the balance of order moves toward anguish. Each visitor has the burden of trying to fill in the emptiness, which relates to the tormented vacuity within Agnes and Tobias.

The role of the mother figure is connected with the idea of balance, since the maintenance of a sense of balance is her main objective. Agnes tries to evoke control and endurance in herself as well as in others:

I shall . . . keep this family in shape. I shall maintain it; hold it. (II, ii, 88)

Julia remarks to Agnes:

Well, you are the fulcrum and all around here,  
~~the double vision, the great balancing act . . .~~  
 (II, ii, 91)

Each character loves or needs someone else, but none really interrelates with all. It is a household of strangers.

Agnes tries to overcome her sense of emptiness by controlling the patterns of relationship among others. The basic pattern of action in the play is simply that of characters who sense danger in their fear of emptiness and seek refuge in the house of Agnes and Tobias, where they contribute to the anguish. Agnes sees her own vacuity in the others who act as extensions of her anguish:

. . . we see ourselves repeated by those we bring into it all . . . (II, ii, 90)

Agnes wants to remember the past which gives her a sense of

wonder:

I'm not a sipper tonight; I'm a breather: my nose buried in the glass, all the wonder there, and very silent. (I, 20)

She reminisces to Tobias:

. . . I remember, when it was a constancy how easily I would fall asleep, pace my breathing to your breathing, and if we were touching!  
(III, 130)

When she contemplates the past she sinks into despair and exposes the uselessness she feels:

I lay in the dark, and I . . . revisited--our life, the years and years . . . [A woman] expects to be alone one day, abandoned by a heart attack or the cancer, prepares for that.  
(III, 136-137)

At the end of the play she realized that it is the desolation in time and the vacuity within herself that control the pattern of events in time:

Everything becomes . . . too late, finally.  
(III, 169)

The personal limitations of the characters control the desolation afflicting them. Desolation incorporates an incomplete life, failure to understand one's own limitations, and the anguish of this knowledge. Edna realizes her fears have controlled her needs:

It's sad to come to the end . . . so much more of it gone by . . . than left, and still not know--still not have learned . . . the boundaries, what we may not do . . . not ask, for fear of looking in a mirror. (III, 168-169)

Tobias stammers indecisively as he sits and watches the anguish and despair afflict people in his house. It is

his problem to decide who to ask to leave his primitive cave.

He wants to let things pass. He refers to Edna and Harry:

. . . they're just . . . passing through.  
(II, ii, 96)

He wants to forget the past:

When will it all . . . just go in the past  
. . . forget itself? (I, 32)

He too feels a sense of loss within himself:

Agnes  
Well, my darling, you are not young now,  
and you do not live at home.

Tobias  
Where do I live?

Agnes  
The dark sadness. (III, 135)

Darkness contributes to the idea of tormented vacuity:

Harry  
It was like being lost: very young again, with  
the dark, and lost. (I, 55)

Claire describes the house haunted by desolation:

The different breathing and the cold, when every  
bed is awake . . . all night . . . very still,  
eyes open, staring into the dark? (II, ii, 125)

Each room within the house represents an extension  
of the person who sleeps in it and signifies the role which  
he has to perform. As Claire remarks to Julia:

It's . . . the room. Happens you were in it.  
You're a visitor as much as anyone, now. (II, ii, 99)

Home is a place for the dispossessed in which they seek refuge  
from their own feelings of helplessness. Claire asks Julia:

Are you home forever, back from the world? To  
the sadness and reassurance of your parents?  
Have you come to take my place? (II, ii, 100)



Being displaced from a room is like being torn away from a role. When Edna and Harry leave the house it is as if Agnes and Tobias have symbolically rid themselves of the vacuity which was tormenting them. The intruding couple personified the fears and incomplete needs in Agnes and Tobias. They leave because Julia, who is not needed any more, has returned. In a sense, Agnes and Tobias dispossess their fears in order to house their dispossessed needs. The play ends with a sense of recovery as if the "demons" (III, 175) in the night have been expelled and the couple have been reunited. But the sense of recovery from desolation is as fragile, or as the play suggests, delicate, as the sense of recovery at the beginning of Long Day's Journey into Night.

It is now time to turn our attention, in the context of the preceding discussion, to the main object of this study, the plays of Paul Zindel.

## II

### THE VISION AND THE VOID

For a second you see--and seeing  
the secret, are the secret. For  
a second there is meaning. Then  
the hand lets the veil fall and  
you are alone, lost in the fog  
again, and you stumble on toward  
nowhere, for no good reason.

Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night

The title, The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds,<sup>1</sup> suggests, as Time remarked, "arch avant-garde whimsy".<sup>2</sup> In fact it refers simply to the title of a scientific experiment which is the source of the play's major metaphors. The play is about mutation through hereditary change. Its metaphors link humanity with animals and vegetables in a vision expressed by Tillie--the saintly figure of the play--a vision of the interrelatedness of all organic matter. Tillie's experiment demonstrates, as her character itself does, the essential goodness of mutation. The play seems to criticize the cultural value of normalcy as something restricting and damaging, and to recognize the potential value and beauty inherent in its oppsite.

The Hunsdorfer household, Beatrice and her daughters Ruth and Tillie, live in a state of clutter which reflects the mother's confused state of mind. Her effect on her daughters is shown throughout in terms of both heredity and environment, so that the characters in the play are constantly related to its scientific metaphors and appear to be acting out an experiment which is a human counterpart of Tillie's. Though these metaphors may at times be somewhat obtrusive, Newsweek's critic was right to realize that the play "is

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<sup>1</sup>All references from this play are from (New York: Dramatist Play Service, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>Kalem, "Cave of Terrified Mutants" (April 20, 1970), p. 88.

ultimately concerned with life and the goodness of the mind".<sup>3</sup> What this vague praise seems to imply is that the critic thought the play was optimistic in the triumph of some form of intelligent goodness. In contrast with Tillie's aspiring vision, the play depicts the degenerated state of a household marked by the mother figure's desolation from which she never recovers.

An initial response after seeing the set for Marigolds might be to wonder if any acting could be done in the midst of such confined clutter. All types of objects collected together under one roof overwhelm the humans in the living room and kitchen areas of the home, a converted vegetable store. The walls are wood and the room is filled with empty cartons, boxes, newspapers, clothes, dishes, and other utensils. But the room has a character of its own. As the stage directions note:

The unsightliness of the room must be further qualified to be that unsightliness which deprives its character from stark daylight. In all fairness to the occupants it can be pointed out that after twilight, when shadows and weak bulbs work their magic, the room becomes interesting. ("The Setting", 5)

It is a room of faded and unmatched things housing school books with coffee cups, a rabbit cage with a back scratcher, a hotplate on which a kettle sits steaming before the play begins, an old crippled woman as a boarder, a mother whose

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<sup>3</sup>Kroll, "Fighting for Life" (April 27, 1970), p. 64.

mind is represented by the setting, two daughters each with different seeds of hereditary mutation within them, and a telephone the use of which will be discussed later. In back at stage center is a window partly covered up with paper. Daylight is still able to penetrate, but as the stage notes read, "passers-by cannot see in" ("The Setting", 5). There is a wooden staircase leading up to the second landing which can be used effectively as a platform for the brief scenes in the second act at the school auditorium.

Tillie's opening speech establishes a tone of transcendental mystery which contrasts with the mother's harsh and banal tone; introduces the unseen character of Mr. Goodman, the teacher, who is almost a mythic figure in the play; and imagistically conveys the dominant theme identified with the character of Tillie. While sitting on the floor holding a rabbit, she remembers an experience which has become a vision:

TILLIE'S VOICE (Recorded). He told me to look at my hand for a part of it came from a star that exploded too long ago to imagine. This part of me was formed from a tongue of fire that screamed through the heavens until there was our sun. And this part of me--this tiny part of me--was on the sun when it itself exploded and whirled in a great storm until the planets came to be. (The lights in the room begin to fade up slowly.) And this small part of me was then a whisper of the earth. When there was life perhaps this part of me got lost in a fern that was crushed and covered until it was coal. And then it was a diamond millions of years later--it must have been a diamond as beautiful as the star from which it had first come. (The tape begins to fade and Tillie cont-

inues the speech) Or perhaps this part of me got lost in a terrible beast, or became part of a huge bird that flew about the primeval swamps. And he said this thing was so small-- this part of me was so small it couldn't be seen--but it was there from the beginning of the world. And he called this bit of me an atom. And then he wrote the word, I fell in love with it. Atom. Atom. What a beautiful word. (Pause. Telephone rings. The lights in the room fade up.) (I, i, 7)

The first word of the play is "he". This is significant because there are no male characters in the play. The only speaking parts are those of the mother, the two daughters and briefly, Janice Vickery. "He" then probably refers to the teacher, Mr. Goodman. The critic for The Saturday Review thought Tillie, in the opening speech, was remembering a time when her father and she were close.<sup>4</sup> This is highly unlikely, since throughout the play Tillie never mentions her father but always contrasts her mother with Mr. Goodman. Her experiment with growth is encouraged by the teacher, whereas the mother restricts and inhibits such growth. In this respect, Mr. Goodman can be seen as a father figure. He is not present on stage, but his presence is felt. What Mr. Goodman encourages Tillie to perceive is a world of concepts. It is a part immune to the mother's influence. She discovers within herself the stability and beauty of the indivisible atom of her personality which unites her with all other living matter. The concept of heredity transmitting

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<sup>4</sup>Hewes, "The Half-Life" (May 2, 1970), p.12.

gifts, talents, and germs, from one generation to another, is represented as a natural transmission of energy from one living source to another in a process of creation. Transmission of characteristic traits is the concern of Tillie's experiment which parallels her own inner recognition. The characteristic trait of the atom is consistently utilized throughout the play. As an indivisible particle, an atom can exist alone and is capable of remaining unchanged. In combination with other matter it has the innate power of doing good. These major traits of the atom are paralleled by Tillie's responsiveness to Mr. Goodman's ideas and her passivity in the mother's household. The opening speech investigates the explosively creative nature of the vision. In contrast, the explosively destructive nature of the household is investigated as it intrudes upon Tillie's privacy.

Tillie's opening speech is interrupted by the ring of the telephone. It is primarily used in the play to signify disruption and invasion of privacy. The use of the telephone was recognized by Time when it remarked, "the ring of the telephone is like a scream that petrifies . . ." <sup>5</sup> The stage notes also make the point:

Unit should ring. A second phone should be concealed on the set and connected with the on-stage phone. They should both ring together. The ring must be an "intrusion" on the privacy of this room. ("Live Sound Effects", 54)

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<sup>5</sup>Kalem, "Cave" (April 20, 1970), p. 88.

The mother, Beatrice, enters to answer the phone call from Mr. Goodman. In retrospect her first action can be seen as an attempt to connect herself with the outside world. Because of Goodman's apparent concern for the girl, the mother changes the subject of the conversation a few times. She ironically characterizes herself:

You were by the lobster tank and I was by the  
frozen foods. (I, i, 8)

The other daughter, Ruth, is alluded to during the conversation:

. . . you're the first teacher that's ever taken  
the trouble to call me as a preventative measure.  
. . . The others call you when the damage has  
been done. (I, i, 8)

Ruth suffered from a breakdown and now experiences epileptic fits. She is a visibly damaged person. The staging of the epileptic fit is a manifestation of the mother's effect on one of the daughters, while the effect on Tillie has been to make her awkward. The mother will not let Tillie forget about her awkwardness. As she reminds Mr. Goodman:

. . . she isn't a pretty girl--I mean, let's be  
frank about it--she's going to have her problems.  
(I, i, 8)

The mother is concerned with Tillie's future:

There will be some place for her in this world  
(I, i, 9)

she says reassuringly to Mr. Goodman, though it is apparent she has doubts as well as plans about Tillie's future:



. . . we'll get you a job down at the five and ten cent store. And if you don't do so well with the public we'll fix you up with some kind of machine. (I, v, 27)

Tillie passively endures her mother's attempts to manipulate her life which are clearly motivated much less by loving concern than by a selfish fear that her daughter's awkwardness will be laughed at.

As Beatrice puts the phone down, Tillie places the rabbit back into the cage. She is metaphorically enacting the concept of the household as a prison. The mother does not realize the harm she is doing in her attempt to prevent further embarrassment to her own withered self-respect. Nor does she realize that she is the cause of the damage. She finds it disturbing to have been questioned by Tillie's teacher. She sees it as an invasion of her privacy. Her arrogance only increases and is directed toward Tillie:

Oh, you're sick all right, the exact nature of the illness is not fully realized, but you're sick all right. Any daughter that would turn her mother in as the administrator of a concentration camp has got to be suffering from something very peculiar. (I, i, 9)

Tillie, partly oblivious to this criticism and sarcasm, then tells her mother of the experiment of radioactivity on which she anticipates working with Mr. Goodman. The mother is oblivious to Tillie's experiment. She makes several ironic statements, one of which is in response to Tillie's current enthusiasm:

If you would've warned me I would've gotten dressed to kill and gone with you today. (I, i, 10)

The statement is ironic because this is what materializes later when Tillie presents her experiment at the public gathering at school which the mother is asked to attend.

Ruth now enters. As the stage notes describe, she wears a tight sweater. Throughout the play references are made to her breasts to indicate that her sexuality governs her mind. She states:

. . . I remember because my blouse wasn't all buttoned. (I, i, 12)

A few scenes later Beatrice remarks:

Where's Ruth? She's probably running around the school yard in her brassiere. (I, v, 26)

When Ruth first enters she asks:

Do you have Devil's Kiss down there? (I, i, 10)

She is preoccupied with her own sexuality. She is a comic figure in the play because of her sluttishness. Ruth is also identified with her mother. She shares her mother's cosmetics, scratches her back, and smokes her cigarettes. These two damaged females share the realm of "Devil's Kiss". Both are embarrassed when Tillie's awkward appearance is laughed at by the outside world, here represented by the public in the school auditorium. The mother remarks:

I don't like the idea of everyone laughing at you because when they laugh at you they're laughing at me. (I, i, 12)

The mother's state of confusion is evident in Ruth. Not only

does she not have a mind of her own, adopting the beliefs of the most popular side, not only is she swayed by public opinion very much like her mother, but she is also characterized in language as having been influenced by the illogical clichés of advertisement when she spurts out to her mother:

I wish you'd make up your mind. If you'd switch back to Kools it might be worth it . . . (I, i, 13)

Ruth tells her mother that the school record:

. . . says that I exaggerate and tell stories  
and that I'm afraid of death and have nightmares  
. . . (I, i, 14)

She is possessed with the hereditary deficiencies transmitted by her mother in the form of fears. She will later enact one of the nightmares she shares with her mother. Crippling fears and creative visions are alternately exposed in the development of the play. They exist together within the house and are personified by the daughters as extensions of Beatrice's past and present view of life.

The second scene begins with Tillie again, now preparing her experiment with the plants. Her experiment and the play progress simultaneously. Her recorded voice speaks about the creative explosiveness of atoms:

In front of my eyes one part of the world was becoming another. Atoms exploding, flinging off tiny bullets that caused the fountain, atom after atom breaking down into something new. And no one could stop the fountain . . .  
(I, ii, 14)

The idea of living matter creating other organic matter stands in contrast with the mother's later remark:

I swear money makes money. (I, ii, 16)

In this scene Tillie becomes identified with her experiment and the mother with the concept of "half-life". The mother makes another ironic remark when she sarcastically tells Tillie:

. . . I've always wanted . . . a living room  
planted with marigolds that have been exposed  
to cobalt-60. (I, ii, 16)

In relation to the title, the daughters represent the marigolds and the mother's effect is equivalent to cobalt-60. The effects are radioactive in the sense that they cause a sterile view of life. Beatrice asks, "what does half-life mean?" (I, ii, 16). After this question, the silent character of Nanny makes her first appearance. The stage notes read:

~~She is utterly wrinkled and dried, perhaps a~~  
century old. Time has left her with a whisper  
of a smile--a smile from a soul half departed.  
(I, ii, 15)

Nanny appears to be a decayed living body with a dying soul. Her appearance in answer to Beatrice's question identifies her with the concept of half-life and the sterile outlook which Beatrice tries to impose on her two daughters.

If Ruth is associated with the mother's conscious world, Tillie is associated with Nanny's. Just as Tillie can ignore the household by living in a private world of the mind, Nanny is said to be "oblivious to her environment as if it wasn't there" (I, ii, 16). Nanny's passivity is almost an immobility. Her silence is the way she responds

in waiting for death. She is a prime source of income for the family. She represents a natural half-life damaged by time in contrast with Beatrice whose desolation represents a premature half-life. But Nanny is a gentle character. Her stage presence has a type of silent wisdom and quiet beauty. Though she has no words to speak, her character is presented in the way she relates to the household. Only Beatrice mocks her:

You know if someone told me when I was young  
that I'd end up feeding honey to a zombie I'd  
tell them they were crazy. (I, ii, 17)

Beatrice has had a number of diseased people as boarders in her household. Her business complements her vision of the world. She is jealous of Nanny's daughter-- "Miss Career Woman of the Year" (I, ii, 17)--who has forfeited her mother for independence. In her frustration at playing nurse to a household of sick people, she probably wishes she could identify with a woman who has made a success out of her life instead of cursing her self-inflicted discontent. It is tormenting for Beatrice to accept herself as a failure. She reminisces about the many things she could have done. She could have been a dancer, a real-estate agent, a beautician, or an owner and operator of a tea shop. Such occupations become the disguises in which her talents could have served society. She pictures herself as deprived of these opportunities and dwells on the realization that she has become a victim of her own confusion and disability:

Do you know everything I ever thought I'd be  
has exploded, (I, ii, 18)

and now feels compelled to victimize others, as in her  
treatment of the rabbit:

And the first thing I'll do is get rid of that  
rabbit. (I, ii, 19)

She fears for her reputation:

What kind of an idiot do people take me for?  
(I, ii, 19)

and sees herself as dead matter:

Marry the wrong man and before you know it he's  
got you tied down with two stones around your  
neck for the rest of your life. (I, ii, 18)

This is how she sees her two daughters:

I got one daughter with half a mind; another one  
who's half a test tube; half a husband-a house  
half full of rabbit crap; and half a corpse!  
That's what I call a half-life, Matilda! Me and  
cobalt-60! (I, ii, 19)

The marigold plants have visibly grown in the begin-  
ning of the third scene. The word "mutation" is first intro-  
duced into the development of scientific metaphors to suggest  
their human counterparts. Beatrice admits to Mr. Goodman on  
the telephone:

. . . I'm afraid that at this very moment I don't  
know what a mutation is. (I, iii, 20)

This can be seen to suggest that she admits her lack of self-  
knowledge and understanding of her own daughters. Tillie  
and Ruth have been treated as if they were mutations by being  
constantly reminded of their abnormality and restricted in  
their development. Beatrice next reveals her jealousy in the

disguise of concern;

It's about those seeds you gave Matilda. She's had them in the house for a while now and they're starting to grow. Now she tells me they had been exposed to radioactivity and I hear such terrible things about radioactivity that I naturally associate radioactivity with sterility, and it positively horrifies me to have those seeds in my living room. (I, iii, 20)

Her concern would indicate that she is jealous of seeing the effect of the father figure's personality grow within Tillie. Beatrice complains to the father figure that the seeds he had given the daughter are now visibly growing. Her fear of their sterilizing effect is ironic. Whereas Beatrice has contributed to the mutated aspect of Tillie's character, it is the father figure who has given her growth. The mother fears the tragedy of her own influence:

. . . I just thought prevention was better than a tragedy. (I, iii, 21)

By giving Tillie the seeds, the father figure acts as a type of prevention against a damaged life in which a sense of incompleteness gradually devours one's sense of humanity.

In the following scene, the "tragedy" of a damaged life is dramatized by Ruth's epileptic fit and the mother's past memories. This scene, in relation to the treatment of abnormality in the play, is effective because it manages to be strangely beautiful as well as frightening. We see Beatrice sharing with her daughter her youthful dreams, but also sharing the sense of adult disillusionment which has prevented Ruth from experiencing such dreams for herself. We see

Beatrice protecting the child she has damaged. At the time of the fit, the audience can still recall the word "prevention" spoken by the mother only a moment before. Staging an epileptic fit is delicate stage business, though it also may be more dramatically disturbing than to have it occur off stage and be reported. Ruth now visibly exhibits "devils kiss" by acting possessed. There is a storm in progress which heightens the atmosphere. A strong and vivid presence of abnormality is felt. Beatrice, seeing the abnormality, becomes maternal by trying to comfort her daughter. Though she may treat Ruth too much like a little girl in trying to bring her back to a state of awareness, she nonetheless convincingly appears as a compassionate and responsible mother. There is a black-out. They find a flashlight which Ruth uses to shine on different areas of the house while she begins to recreate incidents that led up to her damaged state. This creates an atmosphere of fear congruous with the intensity she feels. In order to relax Ruth's nerves, the mother begins to tell her story of when she was a little girl and helped her father sell vegetables in the wagon, singing "Apples! Pears! Cucum ...bers!" (I, iv, 23). While she tells her story Ruth shines the flashlight on areas which were part of the vegetable store during Beatrice's childhood and her father's life as vegetable salesman. The use of the single flashlight integrated with Beatrice's past memories does manage to reconvert a place of fear and abnormality into a room in which happier lives had



been led, and the people in it for that moment also seem as if they had changed:

--my mama had been dead for years--and then he'd take a nap on the old sofa that used to be. . . .  
 (Beatrice points U.R., Ruth shines the flashlight where she points) . . . there! (Ruth returns the flashlight shining on her and Beatrice's faces.)  
 And while he was sleeping I hitched up the horses and went riding around the block waving to everyone. (I, iv, 23)

With the light shining in her face, the mother recalls the time when she had been publicly accepted. Then the father caught her stealing the wagon and embarrassed her in the middle of the street. She recollects these incidents with humorous detachment:

You would have loved him, Ruth, and gone out with him on the wagon . . . all over Stapleton yelling as loud as you wanted. [I] bet he'd still be selling vegetables around town. All that fun and then I don't think I ever really knew what hit me.  
 (I, iv, 24)

She has exercised her freedom and been treated as well by her father as he had treated his vegetables. She had been as natural and fresh as the source of her father's livelihood and received as much public attention selling them. She was selling her own image and receiving public recognition. When she sang out the items on her bill of goods she chanted their names as if she were singing some youthful song of joy.

A awkwardness, a damaged state, and a fear of being laughed at were never a reality when the father was alive. When the father died, youth and spontaneity were drained from her life. Her father could no longer protect the vegetables and she

feared the responsibility of preventing them from spoiling. When the father died the source of goodness in her life was lost and the livelihood could not continue, nor her protected state. Her present fear of her damaged children and her fear of her own damaged life are a result of her fear of the vegetables spoiling when her father had become ill and died. Beatrice remarks as to the reason of her marriage:

. . . Papa got terribly sick and he begged me to marry so that he'd be sure I'd be taken care of.  
(I, iv, 24)

Her marriage had proved that her source of protection and goodness could not be replaced. As a result of her early desolation the children have suffered and have inherited her fears of failure. Beatrice then tells Ruth of her recurrent nightmare. It begins like a child's fairy tale. She envisions herself as a young princess who is riding on the father's shinier-than-usual wagon drawn by white circus horses. The wagon is:

. . . filled with yellow apples, grapes and green squash. You're going to laugh when you hear this. I'm wearing a lovely gown all covered with jewels . . . and my hair is piled up on top of my head with a long feather in it . . . (Ruth shines the flashlight down over Beatrice's head.) and bells are ringing, huge bells swinging on a gold braid strung across the back of the wagon . . .  
(I, iv, 24-25)

Both Ruth and the mother recreate the sound of the bells in harmony and Beatrice sings out the final, "APPLES! PEARS! CUCUM...BERS! (Silence)" (I, iv, 25). The chanting of the fruits and vegetables is done sweetly and melodiously

creating in sound the peace and order the mind has recreated in memory during a night which began in terror. Beatrice is telling a nightmare. The end is terror. She continues:

And then I turn down our street and all the noise stops. This long street with all the doors shut tight and everything crowded next to each other and there's not a soul around. And then I start getting afraid that the vegetables are going to spoil . . . and that nobody's going to buy anything, and I feel as though I shouldn't be on the wagon, and I keep trying to call out. There's not a sound. Not a single sound . . . Then I turn my head and I look at this house across the street . . . I see an upstairs window . . . the curtains slowly part . . . And I see the face of my father. (Pause. Ruth shines the flashlight into Beatrice's eyes.) (I, iv, 25)

The end of the dream terrifies the mother because it prophesies a damaged life. It paints a picture of isolation, fear, and death. The business of selling the vegetables had been associated with life and security, now death is linked with profit. Her fear of the damaged vegetables correlates with the fear of self-ruination. The beautiful dream becomes mutated into nightmare. As the light shines on her, Beatrice is faced with the truth of her existence similar to the end of her dream. Her memory expands to the point where her life begins to contract. She is faced with the vividness of failure, which imprisons her in a void-like desolation contaminating the household.

Scene five contrasts the mother's void with Tillie's vision. The house has quieted down. Nanny is seen drinking a glass of beer alone. Tillie enters, arms full of marigold

bags and books which she awkwardly drops. She takes the rabbit out of the cage and feeds it, then holds it next to Nanny's face. The whiteness of the rabbit next to the paleness of Nanny's face evokes an image that encompasses the whole of Tillie's vision. Beatrice now is throwing paper, boxes, and clothes from over the railing on the second landing. She wears a depressing-looking robe and drinks from a bottle of whiskey kept in the pocket. Her temper and frustration have reached the tantrum state and she ironically pronounces:

. . . and I hate a house that vibrates.  
(I, v, 26)

She threatens to suffocate the rabbit. She tells Tillie to get rid of the marigolds. In the height of her aggressively threatening discontent, Ruth storms into the house boasting her pride at being Tillie's sister. The mother learns that Tillie's experiment is to receive public acceptance and recognition. To her this means only an invasion of privacy and the fear of being rejected. The telephone rings again, inviting her to attend the school function, and the mother fears the passing of judgment by the outside world. Thus she is the last to be proud of Tillie and accept her for what she has accomplished. Her loss of faith in humanity is transmitted into a loss of faith in her offspring. In the previous scene a sense of division contrasted Beatrice's past and present view of life. In the final part of this last scene in the

first act the sense of division contrasting Beatrice and Tillie approaches reconciliation.

In the first act, the development of scenes has been structured according to the contrast and similarities between the mother and her daughters. The object which helps to contrast the characters as well as to fix them is the rabbit. The way in which each of the characters responds to the rabbit is a means of characterization. The rabbit remains on stage practically throughout the performance. (One of the check list items appended to the play for the property men is to make sure the rabbit cage is cleaned between acts.) The rabbit is treated differently by each member of the household. To Tillie, it is part of the living world of organic matter and is something to be loved and protected. Ruth refers to it as Peter, and later uses it as a means of bribery. To Beatrice, it is an object, like her daughters and Nanny, to be looked after, and appears to her to be an obsessive threat. In contrast with Tillie, Beatrice sees the rabbit as decayed organic matter which correlates with her damaged vision of the world. She constantly refers to its droppings. She can only see it as a "compost heap" (I, v, 27). It is to each what each one sees in it and ultimately what each woman sees in herself and the world. The rabbit is a clever means of displaying everyone else's character and at the same time remaining innocently a rabbit. In the second act, before Tillie is forced to give the rabbit to Ruth, she mentions:

He belongs to all of us. (II, i, 33)

He does belong to all of them because we are meant to see a type of uniqueness in it that exists in every member of the household at one time or another. It is later to be suffocated by Beatrice in an act symbolic of protection mutated into victimization.

The setting for the second act is the same as for the first except that the furniture has been rearranged to make the room seem less cluttered. The title of the play, which is the title of Tillie's experiment, is hand printed on a large sectional piece of cardboard resting on top of a table in full view. There are also printed sub-topics of "The Past; The Present; The Future". Tillie is awkwardly dressed for the ceremony. The stage notes comment on the girlishness of her costume:

. . . clothes which are clean but too girlish for her awkwardness. She sports a large bow.  
(II, "The Setting", 30)

In contrast, Ruth wears too much make-up and a tight fitting sweater. Tillie's public recognition has given some life to the household. The atmosphere is chaotic but excited, because of the preparation for public judgment. Ruth, in fact, is merely in the way at the beginning of the first scene. She had scratched her mother's back in the first act. Now she brushes out Tillie's hair which the mother had combed. She does these acts of servitude in order to win acceptance for herself, to get cigarettes from the mother, and Peter from

Tillie. Ruth seems to acquire more of her mother's characteristics. Tillie gives Ruth the rabbit in order to prevent her from calling Beatrice the name by which she was known in her school years, "Betty the Loon". When Ruth takes the rabbit, she promises to it:

You don't have to worry about me turning you in  
for any old plants. (II, i, 34)

Ruth feels as if she had been forfeited by the mother for Tillie. Her pride in Tillie has quickly changed to jealousy. It is the type of jealousy which she has derived from her mother. Beatrice enters from the landing. Her costume is described in the stage notes:

She is an example of those women who idolize a  
fashion style when they're too young to assume  
it, and only after decades find themselves able  
to buy and effect the style on their own person,  
though now it be a thing of the past. (II, i, 35)

In her dress she has apparently tried to recreate the past, probably when she idolized her father in her youth and received public acceptance. She has prepared herself by preserving an old faded image. Such is the way she has dressed Tillie who evokes a sense of Beatrice's own past. The mother feels nervous and proud, and more significantly, respect for herself. She has even shown interest in Tillie by showing interest in the experiment. Ruth has been avoided and is told by the mother to remain at home for the evening. Then Beatrice makes a forewarning and ironic remark insulting the school:

If you're just a little bit different in this world they try to kill you off. (II, i, 37)

It is an ironic sequel to the mother's character as depicted in the first part of the play. She seems to have changed after sincerely realizing Tillie's uniqueness. It is a forewarning comment because Ruth now reminds her mother of how other people regard her. Out of a sense of rejection, Ruth takes over the mother's destructive role. When Ruth complains about being left behind, the mother tells her:

Now you know how I felt all those years you and everybody else was running out--because there was always me to watch over that fifty-dollar-a-week corpse. (II, i, 37)

Ruth has now been inflicted with Beatrice's fears and responsibilities. The mother is about to leave her caged existence for the first time in the play. As she is about to walk out the door, Ruth lashes out:

Good night, Betty the Loon. (Beatrice stops as if she's been stabbed . . .) (II, i, 38)

Ruth, out of cruelty, skins her mother down to the bones of her fears. The mother falls into a more drastic relapse.

In the brief second scene the lights shine on the skeleton of a cat. This is Janice Vickery's experiment, rivalling Tillie's, and it projects an offensive image of cruel death. In her expository remarks, Janice talks about the cat as if it were a plastic model:

. . . but I did want to tell you how long it took me to put this thing together. (II, ii, 39)

Like Beatrice, she associates herself with non-living matter.



As a rival to Tillie, Ruth has done to the mother what Janice has done with the cat.

The scene returns to the household where Beatrice is calling the school to leave a message:

. . . Tell them Mrs. Hunsdorfer called to thank  
them for making her wish she was dead . . .  
(II, iii, 40)

She has been, in a sense, killed off by the school and by her own kind. Her outraged hostility is directed toward the destruction of the rabbit. When she kills the rabbit she commits the ultimate crime of genocide by killing that atom of life shared by the entire race of mutants. Yet her act can also be seen as an extension of what she has already done to her offspring to warrant Ruth's desperate revenge.

In the brief fourth scene, Tillie explains her experiment with mutations to the school audience which the theatre audience has now become:

The seeds which received moderate radiation gave  
rise to mutations . . . The seeds closest to the  
gamma source killed or yielded dwarf plants . . .  
(II, iv, 42)

Her description of the natural events which occurred in her experiment can also be seen to indicate a logical explanation for the mutated behavior of her mother and Ruth. Tillie's experiment wins, probably less on account of its scientific value than because of her beliefs. The two were always synonymous.

The scene returns to the household where the mother

gets on with her work oblivious to her daughters. She has torn the paper off the windows. She plans to open her house to the public as a tea shop. She will turn it into a business. She tells Tillie in a business-like tone of voice:

You'll work in the kitchen, you'll learn how to cook and you're going to earn your keep, just like any other business. (II, v, 43)

Ruth soon finds the rabbit has been killed. The death of the rabbit symbolically parallels the mother's symbolic killing of Ruth who has symbolically destroyed her mother's self-respect. Ruth undergoes another epileptic fit, which seems almost as if it were her punishment. This time the mother pays no attention to Ruth, whom Tillie tries to take care of. Her loss of the maternal instinct now changes her into something mechanical. As the stage notes read:

She inspects each napkin, folds it once, making a triangle, and piles them on the D. end of the table . . .  
If a napkin does not pass inspection, she drops it to the floor. (II, v, 44).

Killing the rabbit also symbolizes the killing of the atom within herself. Beatrice had almost lost faith in humanity until Tillie's recognition began to change her. But now she becomes as dead as the matter she had seen in the world. Inwardly she is as dead as Nanny appears to be externally. When Tillie holds the dead rabbit and says:

I'd better bury him in the back yard.  
(II, v, 44)

her mother remarks:

Don't bury the towel. (II, v, 44)

The word "desiccated" appears in the stage notes describing Nanny's entrance in the final scene. "Desiccation" seems to be an appropriate comment on the mother's final condition and her effect on her daughters. In contrast with Tillie's closing statement of:

Atom. Atom. What a beautiful word. (II, v, 45)

Beatrice dryly exclaims:

I hate the world. (II, v. 45)

The second act has continued to contrast Tillie's vision with Beatrice's void. But the brevity of the scenes has helped to contribute to a quickened pace which heightens the sense of a dramatic progression toward a permanent resolution. The play progresses through contrasts to something dreadful for the mother and affirmative for Tillie. There has been no struggle or change in Tillie, so that her final affirmation is expected. The mother's sense of permanent loss, toward which the play has progressed, is more dramatic and forceful.

As a symbol of her desolation, the household imprisons the mother within her own void. Though her memory tries to recapture a unified vision of the past, she fails because she has lost faith in humanity. She had become disconnected from the source of life when her father died and progresses toward a mechanical existence when her anguish over a life of failure devours her own humanity. Her loss of a unified

vision is apparent in her children who also can be seen as symbols of her desolate life. As Ruth relapses into epileptic fits, Beatrice relapses into an awareness of her own emptiness. Tillie's vision of a source of life preserved within all living matter has given her faith in humanity. Though she herself is an extension of the household and a product of desolation, her vision has served as a refuge from it. Though Tillie remains unchanged by the mother's desolation, she does not remain untouched. She has been affected by the awkwardness the mother has feared and by a sense of compassion which the mother permanently loses. Tillie has inherited Beatrice's former vision engendered by a father figure. Ruth inherits the mother's present void. Beatrice has become a divided self, as seen by the contrast between her two daughters. Tillie nurses the marigold seeds into growth, enjoys seeing them become flowers, and accepts each type of irregularity as a unique mark of beauty. Ruth bribes Tillie to give her Peter as part of her strategy to take revenge on her mother. For her, Peter remains a chore and Nanny a punishment. The difference between the two daughters is as sharp as the difference between Beatrice's past and present view of life. Her life has also been divided from her vision. Nanny appears to represent the face of the void to which the mother sees her own life attached. The rabbit is symbolic of the source of life which she destroys within herself. Her desolation is total and incurable.

### III

#### THE DEMENTED VOID OF FORMLESSNESS AND WASTED TIME

The helpless are the cruelest  
lot of all; they shift their  
burdens so.

Edward Albee, A Delicate Balance

Paul Zindel's second<sup>1</sup> play, And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little,<sup>2</sup> opened to unfavorable reviews. Most of the critics felt that the play lacked point and coherence. They felt that some of the scenes were unnecessary and that the dialogue was improbable. A few extracts from their reactions to the first performance will illustrate the confusion they felt. The critic for Time was perhaps the most confused;

. . . the plot, point, purpose, and direction of the play seem to have been lost.<sup>3</sup>

The<sup>critics</sup> could not agree about who the central character was and almost all agreed that Zindel seemed only to be dealing with the surface. Douglas Watt wrote:

. . . he can't make up his mind where to place his sympathy.<sup>4</sup>

Clive Barnes commented:

Mr. Zindel decides not to develop it but to describe it . . . there is no progress, no movement.<sup>5</sup>

Both Barnes and Walter Kerr sensed the unlikelihood of

<sup>1</sup>Miss Reardon is Zindel's third play. Before Marigolds was produced the playwright had written, A Dream of Swallows (1964), which closed after one performance. Apparently, there is no trace of the script, since the playwright destroyed it in fire. The unpublished script of Miss Reardon has survived to the extent that it has not been burned by its author, though it has been scorched by disapproving criticism.

<sup>2</sup>Hereafter referred to as Miss Reardon. All references to this play are from Ms.

<sup>3</sup>Kalem, "Overdrawn Account" (March 8, 1971), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>"Miss Reardon Drinks a Little--So Would You in This Layout", New York Daily News (February 26, 1971), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup>"Theater: Reardon Sisters Arrive", New York Times (February 26, 1971), p. 29.

circumstances and dialogue in the play:

. . . throughout the whole play there is a pervading air of unreality.<sup>6</sup>

And:

It is difficult to believe in what these people say to one another.<sup>7</sup>

--Walter Kerr records:

In fact, there is a curious sense in which all of the people in And Miss Reardon Drinks A Little seem to be performing for one another, putting on shows that conceal whatever is truly going on in their heads.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter is intended to demonstrate that the play's apparent incoherence in form and content is deliberate. The critic for The Boston Globe observed that beneath the bitchy dialogue, the stage gimmicks, and the sarcastic and satirical humor is a seriousness portrayed on the level of the comically vulgar. He suggested that the play's concern is with:

. . . the question of how we survive life with some measure of dignity, how we overcome the disappointments and the possibility of madness.<sup>9</sup>

The intentional discrepancy between the serious questioning and the vulgarity of content creates the play's apparent incoherence in its form. In a sense, the form of the play is

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>"Peculiar People, All Right, But What About Them?", New York Times (March 7, 1971), Sec. II, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup>Kelly, "Theater: Reardon Sisters Arrive", in New York Times (March 2, 1971), p. 28.

as self-destructive as its characters.

To begin, the title of the play suggests rumor, and the idea of rumor is significant in it. Miss Reardon is filled with rumors, differing only in degrees of dementedness, which combine to illustrate the destruction of reputation and the pointless wasting away of people's lives. Much in the play seems an utter waste of time and the observer does walk out feeling as if he had been a part of a demented void of formlessness and wasted time. But the intelligence of the play never falls or stoops to the level which it depicts.

The play is divided into three acts which present a continuous action. This continuity heightens the impression of realism, while the seemingly haphazard nature of the action makes the play seem vague and formless. The curtain rises on the dining and living room area of the apartment in which Catherine and Anna Reardon live. There is even a well furnished sitting room a step down behind the central living room area. Every detail is realistic down to the ruler which Catherine uses to stir her Manhattans. The set suggests that teachers can afford to live comfortably and represents the kind of apartment which most members of the audience will probably return to when they leave the theatre. There is no symbolic representation in the setting. Nothing is cluttered. Everything seems calmly in order. The chairs look ready to be sat in, the appliances wait the touch of the switch, and the door stands locked but ready to be opened for visitors. It looks



like an apartment in which it would be nice to visit and dine. In all its compact and utilitarian readiness, the Reardon apartment typifies the height of middle class comfort.

Catherine Reardon first enters from the kitchen through a swinging door in the rear of the dining area. She is preparing a dinner and carries a tray of glasses and liquor into the living room area. The rumor in the title is immediately substantiated. It is cocktail time on this October evening and a visitor is expected judging by the number of glasses Catherine brings out. The door buzzer sounds a moment later and Catherine unlocks the door to find the first uninvited visitor, Mrs. Pentrano, who is the wife of the superintendent of the apartment building. Ceil, Catherine's older sister, who is expected for dinner, is a superintendent on the Board of Education. The public and the private worlds are thus paralleled by titles which define people by what they do. Catherine is not pleased to see the superintendent's wife, nor is she pleased by the prospect of a visit from the superintendent of education:

I'm sorry but I'm in a state of dishabile. Also,  
my bitch sister's coming for dinner. (I, 1)

Mrs. Pentrano, like any curious neighbor, investigates the state of the household. She mentions the lock on the door newly installed at Anna's request. The locked door to the Reardon apartment suggests the attempt to lock the reason of Anna's ill health within the private life of the sisters. Like

rumors, the private news cannot avoid being leaked out into and devoured by the public world. According to Catherine:

She (Anna) genuflected before it. (I, 1)

The idea of fanaticism suggested by genuflecting before the locked door is developed with Anna's character. As Catherine sees it, the household offers Anna a type of cloistered sanctuary from the public world. Catherine resents intrusion upon private life and tries to conceal Anna's wounded reputation. Appropriate to the motif of concealment, Mrs. Pentrano tries to sell Catherine some cosmetics. Catherine replies:

I don't need anything unless you've got bottled resurrection. (I, 2)

Catherine corrects Mrs. Pentrano's pronunciation of words and snaps out one-line jokes about the inability of the cosmetics to conceal, like a skin softener which makes her feel as is she had "just swam the Hudson" (I, 2). The imagery of cosmetics suggests the idea of something ugly or poisonous to reputation being concealed beneath the surface layer of placid appearances. The buzzer sounds again announcing the entrance of the delivery boy bringing the groceries which include raw chopped meat, which Catherine conceals from Anna in a candy box. The rumor of Anna's illness centers around her supposed sexual assault on a young boy who is her student. This incident needs to be concealed from the public. Anna in contrast with Catherine has turned into a vegetarian. In order to have Anna remain in the house with her, Catherine has to pretend

to be a vegetarian. Catherine conceals her desire for raw meat from Anna just as Anna has concealed her desire until it had erupted into a scandalous situation on which rumor could feed. The delivery boy mentions that he is in Anna's class:

that was one of the classes she acted a little sick in. (I, 4)

Catherine remarks to the boy:

you have the face of a boy that would do gruesome things. (I, 5)

The function of the delivery boy seems to be more than incidental. His minor momentary stage appearance adds more pieces of information to the general pattern of rumors. He delivers to Catherine the object of her desire which she conceals from Anna and which Ceil later smears over Anna's face as a foreshadowing of betrayal.

The correction of mispronounced words becomes forced when Mrs. Pentrano confuses "lebonons" with "lesbians" (I, 6). She heard two women fighting in the alley at night, and Catherine corrects her when Ceil enters. The timing of the word with Ceil's entrance is obvious, but yet Ceil's entrance is dramatically forceful. She is a tall woman of authoritative stature and is business-like in her mannerisms even in the way she "dismisses Mrs. Pentrano" (stage notes, I, 6). She recalls the "Miss Career Woman of the Year" whom the mother in Marigolds had resented. Ceil's entrance is more significant because it marks her return to the household after seven

months of absence. During her absence the sisters' mother has died, Anna has supposedly assaulted a student and become a vegetarian, while Catherine seems to have taken over the role of mother and become possessively overprotective towards Anna as "child". Beneath the bizarre pattern is an incident quite traditional in American drama, that of a "father figure" returning home to restore order. The rivalry between the sisters evokes a sense of similarity in the rivalry between the family members who have existed in their past. The sisters inherit their family roles from the past and also assume such roles out of their own needs and fears. The restoration of order by the father figure in this household is accomplished through Ceil's <sup>suggested</sup> commitment of Anna to a mental institution. This appears as a threat to the mother figure who is trying to prevent a fated desolation. Though the characters appear to relate to each other as sisters, their concealed roles as family figures contribute to the play's sense of dementedness and also give the play some sense.

Much of the sarcastic humor concerns Ceil's masculinity which supports her role as father figure. Ceil mentions that she had intended to call the household during her seven month period of absence. Catherine, in her hostile and sarcastic tone bites back with, "super-intended" (I, 7). Catherine calls Ceil a, "powerhouse of a sister" (I, 8) and informs her that:

. . . the faculty has nicknamed you this year  
 . . . "superman". You have finally transcended  
 womanhood entirely. (I, 8).

It seems as if much of Catherine's anger is not so much due to jealousy of Ceil's status as directed against her indifference to the rest of the family. It also seems as if Ceil's absence from the household has allowed her to become a success in the public world. She has deserted her past as head of the household in order to become head of the Board of Education. Catherine calls the school "demented" (I, 8) and remembers a "family-living" teacher at the school who committed suicide due to marital problems. Both the public and the private worlds are shown to be demented. Catherine remarks on their neighbors who include a man who beats his wife for having sex with the Fuller Brush Man and another wife who beats her husband for having sex with the Fuller Brush Man. Integrated with the idea of dementedness expressed through the humor which one perhaps might check oneself for laughing at, is the motif of bestiality expanding the idea of epicene-type women. While Catherine nibbles on the raw chopped meat she comments on the teachers at the school, introducing the animal imagery into the play:

That whole pack of academically defunct eternally  
 matriculated and fuckingly overpaid nuts . . . (I, 9)

Catherine then reminds Ceil of the time Anna was in Rome finding mangy-looking cats and giving them fondness until one of them buried its teeth into her wrist down to the bone. Catherine

describes their table mates on ship during their voyage:

table of stag matrons who were so desperate they were sprinting after the busboys like Piranha in evening gowns. (I, 11)

Chatherine tells of the pleasure Anna had found in the pain of the fourteen needles in her stomach as anti-rabies shots after the cat's assault. The behavior of her students in class is as if they were all possessed with canine madness. Ceil asks why the students do deliberately nasty things to Anna. Catherine answers the Superintendent of the Board of Education:

. . . you've got us teaching condoms in kindergarten, positions in the third grade, abortion in the sixth--perverts, nymphos, satyrs, and succubi in the eighth--if you ask me it's a wonder our kids aren't balling in the aisles. (I. 12)

~~The boy whom Anna supposedly has assaulted~~ is described by Catherine in a sarcastic tone as if all sympathy were directed toward the child and there were a witch hunt for Anna:

The nicest biographical detail on his grammar school record was that in the third grade he was caught pissing in a doll . . . he's taken dope, sold porno . . . and winks a lot as he walks around with his fly open. (I. 13)

Catherine's remarks have revealed a tone of distorted humor. An outraged seriousness is concealed beneath the gruesome imagery of dementedness in both public and private worlds and in both youth and age. "Demented" is surely, a key-word in the play.

The conversations have alternated between information concerning Anna's history of her breakdown and questions as

to why Catherine eats raw meat. But Catherine answers Ceil, most likely as a conscious interjection of Zindel's awareness of the theatrically static nature of the play:

Hold your water-you're rushing the story.  
(I, 11)

Since Anna has become a fanatic vegetarian, Catherine has to abide by a new code of living in the household. Nevertheless, her desire overpowers her faithfulness to the code and she eats the raw meat out of a candy box. Anna's fanatic habits are commented upon in Catherine's humorous remarks perhaps to imply her detached devotion to Anna's new religion and to justify Catherine's betrayal and concealment of her hidden desires. Anna's obsession with protecting smaller creatures is integrated into the distorted humor of the play, as when Catherine remarks:

It isn't bad enough we're paying over two hundred bucks a month for a co-op with cockroaches, I have to have a sister who acts as lifeguard for them. (I. 14)

Just as Anna acts as a guardian of life over insects, Catherine too acts in her role of mother figure as a guardian over the life of Anna, who, as the play reveals, is ultimately treated like an insect by her other two sisters in their roles as mother and father figure.

Anna first appears in the middle of the first act. She quietly joins her sisters while Catherine is telling Ceil about the time Anna was a child on a ferris wheel and had yelled. Anna continues Catherine's speech in a way which

fixes her in the role of the child:

And I told them to stop--stop the machine.  
(I, 14)

The idea of Anna as a child is reinforced when she kneels beside Ceil and asks for forgiveness as a child to an authority figure:

. . . what a disgrace I've been to you breaking  
down the way I did. (I, 15)

At the moment when Anna cries for forgiveness she has a gun concealed in her bathrobe pocket. The next moment she claims to be looking for the weapon out of an intense fear of it. But there are, in retrospect, subtle indications that Anna knows where the gun is and plans to use it. She remarks to Ceil:

-----It could kill someone right this minute.  
(I, 16)

and continues, perhaps with an intentional pun:

So I don't want it around, can't you get that  
through your skull? (I, 16)

Anna disrupts the surface order of the household by throwing objects around in a desperate search for the gun she claims to fear but later uses twice. Visually, her fanaticism is seen disrupting the household. She mentions the time when her class had thought of all the possible ways of death. Her imagination has become demented by the thought of how easy it is to die:

. . . and somebody else's uncle fell into a  
cement mixer in the Bronx and ended up as  
part of a bridge. (I, 17)



She has brought her fanaticism into the public world of the class room while sister Catherine tries to conceal it behind locked doors. Catherine's attack on Ceil shows that she does not know where the weapon is. She remarks:

Ceil, when mother died and you ramshackled this place for every piece of worthwhile silver, linen, and glassware you could lay your hands on, did you also suck up Mother's pistol? Because if you did suck up Mother's pistol I wish you'd give it back so I can melt it down in front of Anna. (I, 15)

This attack on Ceil's greedy parasitic actions prefigures Anna's symbolic killing of the figure of authority for deserting the household and for draining it of its possessions. Anna remembers reading the Bible to her mother and refers to her death as a gradual process of wasting away:

She'd have me read it when she was atrophying--  
(I, 18)

Anna's cult of vegetarianism also correlates with her fear of emaciation. Catherine too eats raw meat for the protein in order to satisfy her need for nourishment. The idea of wasting away through improper nourishment seems to be a dominant theme of Miss Reardon implicit in the damaged state of the household after Ceil's absence, and the wasting away of society's moral integrity and general intelligence.

The process of wasting away has origins in Anna's childhood when the father had deserted the household. Ceil's absence is a symbolic re-enactment of the past and Anna's seemingly puerile fixation approximates a direct effect. Anna

remembers she could never see her father because she was too young but remembers her mother warning the other two sisters in a whispering tone when they went to visit him:

. . . remember, girls, don't miss the bus back, and don't go with him if he tries to take you anywhere, and don't let him touch you between your legs, and then after you've finished smiling and after you've grubbed everything you can get, get right back on the bus and all the way home remember what a bastard your father is . . .

(I, 19)

The gun incident is a conflict between Anna and Ceil because Anna has not forgotten what the mother had told the other sisters. Because of the past, Anna's sense of injury is aimed against Ceil and in defense of Catherine. Their father had betrayed the household when Anna was a child. In her present "childhood" she regards Ceil as the betrayer and the reason why there is canine madness in the household. Ceil had married Catherine's intended husband as the father in the past had deserted the mother. Anna remarks:

. . . couldn't you smell what she was doing.

(I, 25)

With the audience's knowledge of their past, the present becomes a symbolic repetition of it. Without the awareness of the past the three sisters behave in appearance as Catherine concludes:

. . . like Lebonons Indian-wrestling under your window. (I, 26)

The function of the ubiquitous past creates the symbolic representation of the present, explains and justifies the seeming-

ly incidental scenes and unlikely conversations, and is unified with the entire structure of the play's continuous action. The idea of the pestiferous state of society is fostered by the use of rumors. The second act introduces outsiders in the persons of a seemingly "average" couple. The revelation of their true character thus serves as an emphatic comment on the canine madness and wasted life which characterize their society.

At the sound of the door buzzer at the beginning of the second act, Ceil conveniently exits to the bathroom because she does not wish to see visitors. During the second act the bathroom is a popular place to go while someone else spreads rumors about the absentee's character. Fleur enters. Fleur wears a fur wrap and awkwardly promenades about the area like an unwanted visitor. In her public life she is a child guidance teacher at the school. It is because of rumor that she has come to see both Anna and Ceil, her boss. Fleur wastes time by talking about daily activities. Her banality is predictably humorous and its offensiveness is toned down by her ignorance. Anna acts like a child receiving a present when Fleur gives her a gift from the rest of the faculty. In the school, according to Fleur's remarks, the practice of gift-getting is based on the demented idea that the greater the illness, the costlier the gift should be. She mentions the gift which her husband Bob brings when he later enters the

circle of banality as its spokesman. Meanwhile Fleur chats on about the death of God. Because she is not interested in anything other than herself and her own advancement by opportunistic means, she changes topics as easily as she switches allegiances with gas stations because one offers mugs. Within seemingly pointless conversations the demented beliefs and damaged faith of Fleur are revealed. Anna then tells a story, a past experience, when she had depended upon another teacher, named obviously Faith, a crippled teacher, for a ride to work. Anna used to watch:

. . . her twisted leg search the gas pedal.  
(II, 7)

One day they almost ran over a little puppy, but the car had stopped in time. Anna continues the story:

. . . the puppy decides to go back the way he came  
. . . then this big trailer truck comes zipping  
along right there, right out my window and I yelled  
out: No, Puppy! No, Puppy! And the truck driver  
sees what's going on and he jams on his brakes, but  
the front wheels come to a stop right on the back  
half of this little puppy, squirting his guts across  
the road . . . I let out a scream, and the little  
puppy is still alive, his legs rammed out toward me,  
his eyes looking right at me . . . and then the  
truck moves ahead and the back wheels go right over  
the puppy's head and paw and the rest of it, and  
there's only this little wet spot on the road . . .  
(II, 7)

This gruesome story is told at length while Fleur eats zucchini. It is a poignantly morbid description of cruelty in the slaughtering of innocence as an incidental daily occurrence. It is a dramatic moment in the play because of the detailed account of unintentional cruelty. Anna is still the child

on the ferris wheel yelling for the machine of cruelty to stop. The presentation of Fleur eating during the description emphasizes her indifference and insensitivity to the type of persecution with which Anna is identified. Fleur is an opportunist parasitically living off the injured reputation of Anna. In a world of crippled faith, Fleur is the personification of that authority which guides school children as well as herself with the scent of opportunism.

Bob enters next to give Anna the gift of leather gloves which she throws across the room in disgusted rejection. Ceil enters and sedately explains Anna's feelings about cruelty to animals which had been dramatized in her previous description of loss of faith in the goodness of the world.

Bob proves himself to be vulgar and loud. Perhaps intentionally, the presence of this couple makes Ceil seem to be less of a villain than she is seen to be by Catherine and Anna. Bob is money-conscious and argumentative. As Fleur defines him:

He's in glass. In Pawling glass, the medium-priced glass you probably heard of; not too cheap--not too expensive. (II, 12)

Other characters have been defined by whatever they actively do. Bob is defined by what he is statically in. This would suggest that he is enclosed in his own transparent mediocrity and his own boastful exaggerations:

I've got the Virgin Islands and I make a good buck.  
(II, 12)

Throughout the evening he embarrasses Fleur by being himself. As the last character to arrive, Bob is even more unaware of the background with which the audience has become familiar. He and Fleur have entered the household separately. They also try to destroy each other's reputation separately, and they do not depart together either. Their relationship is as loveless as it appears to be bizarrely comic. As Bob mentions to Fleur, the only thing he has to call his own is his vulgarity:

You have methodically and expertly taken control of all choice and behavior in my life except my bladder and bowels. (II, 17)

As a couple representing an extension of the public world, their accusations against each other point out not only their own character limitations but also the lovelessness and vulgarity of a society in which reputations are targets for cruelty.

The second act is cluttered with talk and most of the talk is directed against reputation. All the seemingly unnecessary rumors contribute to the gruesome image of a society infested with canine madness. All of the rumors are of equal unimportance though, to be sure, they do vary in degrees of viciousness. Much of the action during the latter part of the second act centers around Bob's obnoxious insistence on being a somewhat fatherly pimp for Anna in order to get her out of the house and "into the swing of things" (II, 23). Bob wants to put her back on that ferris wheel. The

second act closes with Catherine's suggestion that Anna show Bob the family album. As a curtain line, it rings with humor since the audience is now aware after the first gun incident that it is waiting in the family album to be used again. The audience has been let into the secret of the family album's purpose. Their awareness of this also helps to isolate the intruding couple.

The opening of the third act particularly emphasises the continuity of action. As Bob comments on the insanity of the sisters' mother, Anna fires the blank pistol at him. This action no longer appears as the stage gimmick it had seemed to be in the first act. The second gun shot loses its comic appeal and shock value, but not its significance. Only Fleur and Bob are ignorant of the meaning of Catherine's suggestion. Firing the pistol at Bob also seems to be the only way to stop his unwelcomed offers of aid. Both the audience and the Reardon sisters become observers of the moral contagion exhibited in the couple representing the public. The husband and wife are at claws with each other and the harder they try to destroy each other's reputation, the more desperate, pathetic, and banal they both seem to become. Their continual arguments add to the apparent formlessness of the play, but also contribute to the sense of wasted time and wasted lives in a society wasting away. Their intrusion makes the Reardon household appear less abnormally insane, though not free from the influence of moral contagion. Fleur leaves on the note that Anna be

put away for treatment. Her suggestion is hypocritical and ironic in view of the way she and Bob are presented in the play. The entire second act is devoted to their exhibition as to why they should be put away for treatment.

The three sisters return to acting their roles in a family situation while talking of past memories of when their mother was alive. Anna and Catherine laugh when they think about the times they rushed home from school to tell their mother of the rumors in the public world. They laughed then and thinking about the old stories makes them laugh again. In the past rumors were told in private about experiences in the public world. In the present, as has been revealed, rumors are told in the public world about private lives in order to damage reputation. The public, as depicted in the second act, has become more vicious and vulgar. It has lost its sanity and has made Anna lose her faith and now her reputation. The fact that reputation seems to be the greater loss of the two is a further indication of society's deteriorating and distorted values. But as Catherine and Anna laugh about old stories, Catherine notices the stern solemnity of Ceil. Antagonism toward the authority figure increases. Ceil is accused of being miserly:

. . . made certain you didn't have to touch a penny in your bank account. (III, 9)

At the time of the mother's burial:

. . . a casket you picked out that wouldn't waste a second getting her corpse back to ashes. (III, 8)



Ceil strongly and harshly defends herself:

Our lives are not around this table anymore.  
(III, 7)

As the father figure, Ceil defends her own sense of having been injured by the family:

Any thing I did you made me do from years of gnawing at me . . . you and her and mama. (III, 8)

When Anna remembers the time they were sisters she identifies both herself and Ceil as wounded animals. This appears again in her language to Ceil:

. . . you must have forgotten the sounds in the dark of our rooms . . . the quieting of the wounds by which we could be traced. (III, 7)

But Anna's antagonism toward Ceil becomes more desperate when she blames Ceil for renouncing her role as a sister:

Tell us, Ceil--in this marriage--this regeneration of yourself in marriage--in that great distance you've traveled from Mama's table--why is it I'm looking into your eyes and see you're still a cripple? (III, 7)

Anna accuses her of surviving at the expense of wasting away the household by her act of betrayal. Anna, in a sense, accuses Ceil of assuming the role of the absconding father. In the height of her anger Ceil smears the raw chopped meat over Anna's face. It is a dramatic moment of animalistic savagery. Yet the representation of this act of cruelty to Anna in the form of physical and psychological torture is symbolic of an act of betrayal. By utilizing the meat Ceil betrays Catherine who in turn will be seen by Anna as having betrayed her. The incident becomes more real, gruesome, and

physically cruel than the two previous incidents on the stage when Anna fired blanks from the pistol. The father figure completes the process of wasting away the household with an act of murderous intentions, symbolic of killing the child after disrupting the family. For an audience aware of Anna's neurosis the incident seems as physically brutal as murder and more of an actual happening than Anna's previous symbolic killing of the father figure. Ceil betrays Anna by committing her to an asylum. Anna's future absence from the household is metaphorically associated with the death of the child since, in the play, absence has been correlated with a death-like state.

In answer to the critics' complaints about incoherence and lack of direction in Miss Reardon, I hope to have shown that the play is both coherent and purposeful in its progressive revelation of concealed desires, betrayal, and the wasting away of individuals, the household, and the society. While preserving a wholly natural continuity of time, place and action, the play none the less effectively brings past and present together and shows their effects on the Reardon sisters, evoking their inherited roles as family figures, which are depicted consistently throughout. The point of view in the play is ultimately neutral toward each of the three sisters as sisters, but is in sympathy with Catherine, in her role as the mother figure. The point of view does consistently expose and isolate the intruding couple and identify them with the

play's social criticism whose scope is thus broadened to comment on the dementedness of society as a whole. Similarly, the form of the play, or rather its formlessness, can be justified as a reflection of an incoherent world. The second act especially, in its illustration of wasted lives, comes dangerously close to striking the audience as a waste of time. But Ceil does need the second act in order to gain respect and dignity as a sister by contrast with the isolated couple. According to Zindel:

The most admirable trait in Ceil is that she insists on survival; for me she is the most important character.<sup>10</sup>

Each of the three sisters is right in her own way and is justified by her private sense of survival. Yet in their roles as family figures sympathy would seem to be directed toward the innocent victim of cruelty, which is Catherine. As the mother figure it is she who has been deserted by the father figure and been forced to witness the symbolic killing of the child and the disruption of the household.

Yet, if Zindel does believe Ceil to be the most important character, perhaps we are meant to see both Anna and Catherine as helpless in relation to Ceil and, in a sense, cruel in the way they shift their burdens. For example, Anna is a burden to Catherine who has to conceal her desires which are later exposed by Ceil and seen by Anna as a betrayal. Anna

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<sup>10</sup>See, Gussow, "Zindel's 'Miss Reardon' Had Lengthy Evolution", New York Times (March 2, 1971), p. 28.

is a burden to Ceil who is forced to return home because Anna, in her helplessness, lets her reputation be ruined. Catherine is a burden to Anna by betraying her and a burden to Ceil by evoking the past. Ceil will not allow herself to remain helplessly attached to the past or allow desolation to waste away her life. Returning to bury the household, she commits murders which are an expression of her own will to survive.

This examination of Zindel's second play suggests that it is a more thoughtful work than it first appeared to be. Only time and further productions can show whether its seriousness can be effectively realized in the theatre.

## CONCLUSION

Stammering is the native eloquence of  
us fog people.

Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night

It will be clear that the foregoing interpretation of Zindel's plays aligns them closely in point of theme with the plays discussed in Chapter I. In this conclusion it becomes essential to consider to what extent Zindel should be regarded as a derivative dramatist and to what extent he may be said to have illuminated the "state of desolation" in an original way.

To establish that an author belongs to a tradition is not necessarily to label him derivative. Admittedly, no one familiar with American drama can read or witness Zindel's plays without experiencing a sense of déjà vu. The basic situation of a household restricting the lives of the people within; the possessive role of the mother figure and characters damaged by the past, by their own limitations, or by unworthy cultural values; stage effects which evoke an atmosphere of memory, are all, to some extent, to be found in the works of American dramatists. One is reminded, for example, of Williams' helpless victims, Miller's use of memory and view of cultural inheritance, as well as Albee's caustic humor. One is also reminded of O'Neill's passage, "Stammering is the native eloquence for us fog people . . ." (IV, 154), which can be seen to express a basic condition in which most characters in American drama exist, and an activity by which they attempt to overcome their condition. As his predecessors have done, Zindel also relies upon this pattern.

What we look for in a new dramatist is some evidence

of his ability to shape and to draw new insights from established themes and conventions and express them in his organization of his dramatic material. Zindel provides a statement concerning his approach toward writing his plays:

When I have gained a certain quantity of experience which begins to shape itself into something secret and interesting, . . . when I find a way of condensing it interestingly to myself, and my characters are full-blown within myself, and I have a suspicion of a vision those characters will have toward the end of the play, then the excitement and the necessity of wanting to clarify that vision gives me the energy to work indefatigably.<sup>1</sup>

In Marigolds, the clarity of vision is evident. The theme, characterization, imagery, and dialogue closely interrelate to bring a unified vision of life into focus. Furthermore, the dialogue in particular, reveals the author's detachment from his subject matter. Characters are portrayed through their own remarks with an irony of which they are usually totally unaware. There is perhaps an even greater degree of detachment in Miss Reardon. It is difficult to sympathize wholly with any character. Anna who has a seemingly attractive vision of life is satirized almost as much as her eldest sister. Ceil who is manipulated to seem like a villain for most of the play at the end of the play suddenly receives a pat on the back from Zindel for her determination. Zindel has no single character in either play who functions as his exclusive mouthpiece. The plays as a whole express his point

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<sup>1</sup>See Flatley, "Zindel: And Gamma Rays Did It!", New York Times (April 19, 1970), Sec. II, p. 5.

of view.

The opening phrase of the last quotation, "when I have gained a certain quantity of experience", suggests another aspect of originality in Zindel's plays, namely that they are to some extent autobiographical. He writes:

'Marigolds' is that kind of story that just sort of pops right out of you, because you've lived it, . . . <sup>2</sup>

It is not the concern of this thesis to speculate about the relationship of Zindel's plays to his personal life. However, we may accept this admission that he has written out of his own experiences. Nevertheless, unlike a few of his predecessors who also have written from personal experience, Zindel does not fashion this material in the pose of a persecuted artist, but manages to remain in control of his subject matter so that the vision inherent in the play itself is not overshadowed.

Zindel is a writer who feels an obligation to say something new in the theatre. His immediate contemporaries, in his opinion, fail to do this:

I feel that the playwrights are failing. They seize on the most obvious problems and present them in a scientific, journalistic manner, gleaning from the surface. They are titillated by the obvious and they fail to articulate the atomic age. Arthur Kopit failed to accomplish anything for the poor Indians or for anyone else in 'Indians'. Sam Shepard merely mentions obvious problems in 'Operation Sidewinder', without adding

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



any understanding, any new insight.<sup>3</sup>

Particularly significant is Zindel's urge to make a positive statement, to suggest some meaning in life, and not to abandon the drama to an expression of either facile pessimism or a sense of "the absurd":

I am virtually desperate for some sign, for any bit of hope or reason to make being a human sensible. In each of my plays, there is an attempt to find some grain of truth, . . . <sup>4</sup>

Marigolds, especially, can be seen as an expression of this desire. In this play an affirmative view of life is credibly presented through a balance of contrasts. The use of scientific imagery to identify character articulates compassionately the potential good as well as the possible damage to humans of living in the atomic age.

At the age of 35, with only two plays to his credit, Zindel has not yet reached the point in his career when his achievement or development can be properly assessed. We are aware that the critics have had some reservations about the quality of one of his plays. But, I hope to have shown why I believe Zindel's first two produced plays are well made, and how they can be seen in connection with the dramas of his predecessors. As Clive Barnes points out in his original review of Marigolds:

It . . . is precisely one of those plays that seems easy enough to write, even though the

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

history of dramatic literature unnoticeably  
rides upon the fossil-remains of so many  
writers who have tried to write them.<sup>5</sup>

This period of his early recognition may perhaps come to be  
seen as a first bloom of a new mutation in twentieth-century  
American drama.

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<sup>5</sup>Clive Barnes, "Theater: Gamma Rays on Marigolds",  
New York Times (April 8, 1970), p. 32.

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