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Abstract:

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King Saud University
Faculty of Art

**The Catalyst: An Indepth Look at the Damaging Effects
of the Absent Character in Selected American Plays**

By
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A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate
Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master's Degree in English Literature

Thesis Supervisor:
Dr. Maijan Al-Ruwaili

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Riyadh
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1426-2005

Abstract

كانت وما زالت الشخصية الغائبة محط الاهتمام لدى العديد من كتاب المسرح، لما لها من أهمية درامية في إدارة عجلة الأحداث المسرحية. وتركز هذه الدراسة على كيفية استخدام الشخصية الغائبة كعامل حافز لإثارة نشاط الشخصيات الأخرى على خشبة المسرح في مسرحيات مختارة من الأدب الأمريكي الحديث. وذلك من خلال الآثار المدمرة التي يعكسها غياب هذه الشخصية على المشهد المسرحي والأحداث وربما على المشاهد أيضا. حيث سخر الكاتب المسرحي الشخصية الغائبة كأداة درامية لتعزيز و تحفيز أحداث المسرحية. وبذلك اتخذت الشخصية الغائبة حالة من الازدواجية بين الحضور و الغياب، والتي تعتبر من أبرز عناصر الأدب المسرحي.

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Dedication

To my lovely parents, I'm overwhelmed with your love and support,
may Allah always guard you.

Abstract

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I-Introduction

Since antiquity the absent character has been used as a dramatic device in Western theatre. It is employed as a means to reinforce the plot and to catalyze the action in a play. The technique seems prominent in the earliest plays, especially those written for the Athenian Festivals of the Fifth Century B.C. The character of the slain Laius haunts the actions of Sophocles's Oedipus Rex; and Jason's absent bride is a dominant character in Euripides's Medea. The gods who are so influential in Greek dramatic plots are often kept absent. The same case is reinforced in Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound, for Zeus's absence has created a very important effect in the play. Though the technique of the absent character was not widely employed in the English Renaissance drama, Shakespeare occasionally employed the technique to good effect. A case in point is Hamlet's ghost.

Nevertheless, during the Restoration, the offstage character has returned to the stage and become important in many plays. Its significance, however, has peaked during the Romantic period and the 19th century. Owing to the social factors after World War II

which had heightened human consciousness, the typical use of the absent character underwent a transformation in modern thought. The transformation was due to Man's rejection of his pathetic situation and existence. Existentialism marks the transition of Man's situation from a period of acceptance of one's surroundings to a period of questioning, rejection and despair. Suddenly, the reality of the modern Man changed from peace and tranquility to uncertain faith and doubts. An obvious modern example is Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, in which Godot's arrival is expected, but is never fulfilled.

The revival of the absent character has become structurally and thematically crucial in modern drama. For the plot, the absent character has become the moving force of the action; for the theme, it has become the focus of signification or frame of reference. Moreover, in terms of conflicts and actions in a particular play, the absent character seems to create a sense of mystery and suspense leaving, therefore, the viewer in perpetual anticipation, seeking to know this offstage character, who, often enough, turns out to be the murderer, the villain, or even the victim.

Although the absent character does not physically appear to the reader or the viewer and rarely participates in dialogue, it seems to always succeed in destroying the lives of the leading characters, who become constantly aware of its dominating presence.

Paradoxically, the sense of the absent character is so overwhelming that it becomes a presence in itself. Playwrights use the absent character as a dramatic device to enrich their plays and give them depth and uniqueness. In fact, a play without an absent character has much less appeal and less intrigue than the one with it. For example, in Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound, the absence of Zeus is so crucial to the dramatic plot; it creates mystery and suspense. Such a quality and the centrality of the absent character on the stage are clearly reflected in the selected plays I have chosen.

The actions of the modern American plays on which I focus in this study are propelled by the absence of the dominant character. Authors such as Susan Glaspell, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee have embodied the perfect example of the significance of the absent character in modern drama.

Glaspell does a remarkable job in portraying the absent character in her play Trifles. She was highly influenced by her husband, Cook, to write a play, for The Province Town Players. She admits, “I didn’t want my marriage to break up so I wrote ‘Trifles’” (Carroll: 19). Glaspell modeled the struggle reflected in her female protagonists after her struggle for a separate artistic identity.

After moving to Provincetown, Massachusetts, with her husband, Glaspell became involved in writing for their theatrical group. Here she lived in a community that had high ideals of socialism and feminism (Ben-Zvi: 160). This influence encouraged her to create female characters who desired to free themselves from the stereotypical roles into which they had been cast (Ben-Zvi: 161), and such an influence is very apparent in Trifles. Upon realizing Minnie Wright’s plight and the injustice inflicted upon her by her husband, the two women, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, take the law into their own hands. They pass the verdict: “That was a crime! That was a crime!” (Glaspell 465). Just as in public life, the women’s suffrage movement would not have had the results it

did if women had not collectively joined forces; so too are the results in Trifles. Glaspell carries this collective influence of the women over into the play.

This influence in Trifles of women's suffrage along with a more realistic apprehension of the world around Glaspell, is described very aptly by Ben-Zvi when she states: "by focusing on the cruelties of Minnie's existence, her isolation, her 'lack of options', [and] the complete disregard of [her] plight by the courts and by society," (3) Glaspell "concretizes" the position of women in her society, moving the discussion beyond abstract problems of perception (157). The playwright's tactics force recognition of "the central issues of female powerlessness ... and the need for laws to address such issues" (157). The women's arrogation of authority serves as "an empowerment"; as Ben-Zvi notes: "Not waiting to be given the vote or the right to serve on juries, Glaspell's women have taken the right for themselves" (158). Thus, the female enactment of judicial power subverts traditional concepts of law and justice (Ben-Zvi: 4).

Even though her relationship with her husband gave Glaspell new ideas, her marriage would lead to gender conflict. Susan Glaspell's life parallels much of that of Minnie Wright, the main character in Trifles. In his autobiography Homecoming, Floyd Dell writes a description of Glaspell as a young newspaperwoman. He states: "Susan was a slight gentle, sweet, whimsically humorous girl, a little ethereal in appearance, but too medieval-romantic in her views of life" (Ben-Zvi: 3). This description of Susan Glaspell before her marriage to George Cook correlates with that of Minnie Wright. Before Minnie's marriage to John Wright, Minnie "used to wear pretty clothes white dress with blue ribbons and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, ...singing in the choir" (Glaspell: 42). Both Susan Glaspell and Minnie Wright were sweet, pretty romanticists before their marriages.

Elizabeth Evans best sums up what led to the "birth" of Trifles when she states: "according to Glaspell's recollection, during their stay in Greenwich, George Cook, needing material for The Provincetown Players first season in New York, demanded that Glaspell write a play" (Makowsky: 24). Searching for ideas,

Glaspell turned to her experience as a reporter in Iowa, combining it with her feminist philosophy and her life with Cook. She credits his influence for challenging her to change her genre from fiction to drama, and to “overthrow convention” in her form and content (Makowsky: 24). The result is the play that she is best known for, Trifles.

Even though Glaspell has rich past experience, as a reporter, for a career in writing, it would be her relationship with her husband and The Provincetown Players that would allow her the opportunity to start her career as a dramatist. Then together with her husband she wrote a play which satirized the new vogue of Freudian analysis -- suppressed desires.

The Washington Square Players could not find any place for the group and as a result an impromptu performance was staged in 1915. So began the Province Town Players, a group which effectively changed the direction of American drama. Many critics believe it marked the birth of the American theatre in its modern form, especially when the plays were restaged in the old Wharf of Province Town, a building which was later converted into a make

shift theatre. The following spring further new scripts were forthcoming, among which was a play by a young writer, Eugene O'Neill.

At a meeting held in September, 1916, Glaspell and her husband decided to call the new group the Province Town Players and, at O'Neill's suggestion, called the theatre, the Playwright's Theatre, which they planned to open on Macdougall Street in New York.

Eugene O'Neill has a subsequent career of manifest importance to the development of American Drama. Still surviving as America's greatest dramatist, O'Neill baffled, confused, and infuriated his public, but always attracted them. Like George Bernard Shaw, who called O'Neill a "banshee Shakespeare," O'Neill eventually attained the ability to make audience and actors do his bidding in stupendous feats of endurance in the presentation of the multi-act five hour and longer marathons that capped the first half of his career, prior to his long "retirement" before and during World War II (Bloom: 11).

O'Neill was almost literally born and bred backstage. He was the son of James O'Neill, one of the great matinee idols at the end of 19th Century, whose endless playing of the lead role in The Count of Monte Cristo earned him a fortune. Young O'Neill had always been an avid reader and aspiring poet. He soon began writing on his own, and with his father's help, he published a slim volume in 1914 called Thirst, in addition to other one-act plays. O'Neill was not attracted to conventional dramaturgy. Instead, he shocked his audience with short plays about adultery, sordid murder, and abortion. He “wants to be an artist or nothing” (Bigsby: 16); O'Neill affirmed that he was not interested in the relationship of man to man but of man to God. Paradoxically, this did not promote any particular religion or creed, but it was truly a classic tragic concept.

American drama, with O'Neill at the forefront, achieved respect and recognition as the leading force in western dramatic art. Over the following twenty years, both during and following World War II, American dramatists maintained the dominant position while Europe recovered from the effects of the destruction and

disruption it had suffered during those six years. Immediately after the war, the American drama carried on its tradition of excellent plays. In 1946 Eugene O'Neill returned with his first play in twelve years, The Iceman Cometh, which helped to reestablish him as America's Greatest Playwright. Ten full years later, in 1956, he wrote Long Day's Journey Into Night, which told for the first time the tragic secrets of his family, permanently establishing him as a playwright of truly international importance. As Bigsby noted, O'Neill was

pulled into the orbit of that theatre and domesticated Greek classical tragedy, Strindbergian domestic drama, Ibsenesque social plays, Irish dramatic tone poems, expressionist melodramas. The church of his drama was constantly being reconstructed to different faiths, faiths which he served with total commitment, only to abandon them for others. (15)

Then appeared a new playwright, Tennessee Williams, who helped prolong American Theatrical dominance with his serious near tragic dramas.

Williams' dramatic techniques rely too often on overworked themes of decadence in the South, particularly women, strutting young studs, horribly violent deaths and mutilations, and a look at the world and its inhabitants as in one way or another depraved. He had insisted at the beginning of his career that "my interest in social problems is as great as my interest in the theatre...I try to write all my plays so that they carry some social message along with the story" (Bigsby: 33).

Williams was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, deep in the heart of the American South. He was one of the most popularly successful playwrights. His first professional success is The Glass Menagerie, a play loosely based on his own experience. Many critics in their interpretation of the play see it as autobiographical in part because of the similarities between the Wingfield family and Williams' own. Williams' mother, Edwina, was a Southern belle, and his older sister, Rose, to whom Williams was close, suffered from schizophrenia as an adult.

The Glass Menagerie has the surface qualities of realistic drama with its petty little people and their struggle for meaning and

dignity in a shoddy world, but many critics believe that Williams has actually written one of the few truly impressionistic plays. And 1959 turned out to be a significant year for the American theatre; the success of Off-Broadway opened access to new writers and audiences. Also the production of a new writer, Edward Albee, suggested the emergence of a major new talent.

With the emergence of the theatre of the “absurd” in Europe, the theatrical balance had seemed temporarily to tilt towards Europe in the fifties. However, of the playwrights considered in my study, Edward Albee is the only one whose serious career began after the advent of European absurdism. He is considered by many critics as

a post-nuclear writer...his fundamental theme is the collapse of communality, the Other as threat. The overwhelming mood is elegiac. His subject is loss, desolation, spiritual depletion...the despair, the more corrosive, the perhaps more self-regarding irony lay ahead...his was a drama which called for a renewal of

the spirit and the revival of liberal values. (Biggsby:
125-6)

Albee's response to the absurdist has given his plays a pitiless humor and an underlayer of chaos. However, the absurdist influences did not seem to discourage Albee from an active use of the absent character, but encouraged such a technique in his works.

The absent character is a recurring motif in his works, and his master piece, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, demonstrates it at its best. Like Glaspell, O'Neill and Williams, Albee has employed the loss of the absent character as a technical device.

Rosefeldt believes that "one major thread in the analysis of modern drama holds that modern drama is a reaction to a sense of profound loss, brought about by the death of God" (1). And many critics considered "loss" one of the major movements in modern drama; they also believed that modern dramatists were reacting to a world that had been lost or shattered. According to Valency

From Eliot to Beckett the artisans of our age speak to us in elegiacal tones as the dazed survivors of a seismic upheaval...in the 1880s there was an urgent

need to rediscover God, and this time God proved to be more than ordinarily elusive. (viii)

And Wellwarth describes modern drama as “an extended meditation on existential rootlessness... a critical analysis of man in the void... into which man was cast by the death of religion” (1). The death of religion seems to have urged modern dramatists to search for meaning, since “the reality which was once grounded in a teleological absolute has broken down into a series of fragmented illusions. The modern drama still encompasses the romantic quest for a lost Eden” (Rosefeldt: 2). This quest leads modern dramatists to search for “a nebulous missing savior figure, some mysterious and paradoxical being slouching toward Bethlehem” (Rosefeldt: 2).

Playwrights employed the device of the absent character in their art to emphasize the strength of absence. For example, in the Greek play of Oedipus Tyrannus, the story covers all the events of Oedipus' life, from his birth to his banishment. Several characters narrate the murder of Laius. But Laius is never seen or presented to the audience. As a character, he exists in the gaps or margins of the dramatic present. Yet, he dominates the action of the play, and

motivates the conflict and leads the main characters to their tragic fall. Like all characters who exist in a story but not in plot, Laius is an absent character who motivates the action of the present characters through his absence. “Then absence is all the more efficient and it shapes what is there by what is not there” (Rosefeldt: 16).

Essentially, “the absent character becomes a siphon and a magnet, an Other that becomes reflected and refracted throughout the dramatic environment. By its very nature, the absent character maintains a liminal space between absence and presence.” (Rosefeldt: 3)

The absence of the dominant character from the stage has been discussed by many critics. Yet, few have acknowledged its damaging effect on the onstage characters, and its negative impact on the audience as well.

Docherty (1983) is interested in the ways and means of the creation of the character from motivation to mobility. He focuses on the description of the character, for he asserts that the most common method of evoking an unseen character is by a direct

description by an onstage character. The descriptive passages of a character “serve to prepare or reinforce a certain semantic content, but once this meaning has been properly conveyed the description itself loses its reason for being.” In this way, a writer, Samuel Beckett for instance, “exposes the paucity of the physical description to make us see the invisible character” (Docherty: 101). He uses the physical description of the absent character to create an image in the minds of the viewer.

Although the name of the character enables him to pass the boundaries of the stage, for it asserts its identity, yet the memory of the absent character haunts the lives of the present characters. Through memory, his absence becomes more potent than the living presence. Therefore, the absent character has a very strong impact on onstage figures.

Absence by definition calls for loss and mourning. And Susan Cole (1985) suggests that “mourning ritual, like tragedy, is a performance of ambivalence on behalf of an absent presence” (9). She tackles the enactment of ambivalence in ritual and drama, by using theatrical means.

Docherty's book touches on the creation of the absent character, yet he does not discuss the dominant role of this character nor his damaging effect on onstage figures. And Cole discusses the revival of the absent character through mourning rituals. Unlike theirs, my concern is the employment of the absent character for damaging effects and as a dramatic device to catalyze the action in the selected plays.

Rosefeldt (1996) discusses many important issues. He sees the father as the new “authoritative center” of the world, after the consequences of the so called death-of-God. His study covers a wide variety of father figures, and the reasons behind their absence in modern dramas. In this way, Rosefeldt's study demonstrates the effect of the absent father on the structure of the plays and on their onstage characters. Most importantly, he shows how onstage characters struggle to “cope with the emotional, spiritual, and psychological voids created by the father's absence” (Rosefeldt: 30).

Although Rosefeldt's study is the most relevant book to my thesis, it has two limitations. It focuses on the absent father only,

and it does not discuss the aura that the haunting presence of the father creates. Such focus, however, fails to cover the sense of mystery other characters may provoke. The absence of Mr. Wright in Susan Glaspell's Trifles adds this sense to the play, leaving the audience as well as the characters aware of his haunting presence.

Carroll (1990) says that Glaspell “used the figures of an absent woman, and the site of woman's ‘incompleted work’ to express the anguish and isolation experienced by a woman whose husband has silenced her expressive desires and sense of self” (Carroll: 83). She asserts the damaging effects of the absent husband on Minnie and other onstage characters, and the impact it spreads to the viewer as well.

Ben-Zvi (2002) says that women murderers have become a fascination of abomination for many criminologists, lawyers and psychologists at the time. Henceforth, Susan Glaspell's Trifles was based upon a historical source, the Hossack case, when Glaspell was working as a newspaper reporter in Iowa.

Ben-Zvi believes that the absence of Minnie provides a clear focus on the motivation behind the murder, not the murder itself.

By leaving Minnie offstage, and by employing “expressionistic techniques” such as “the cold gothic scene”, Glaspell “externalizes Minnie's desperation and the conditions that cause it” (Ben-Zvi: 35).

Ben-Zvi also discusses the construction of Trifles in relation to the construction of the Hossack case. She believes in the victimized women, and says that “whether Margret Hossack or Minnie Wright committed murder is moot; what is incontrovertible is the brutality of their lives, the lack of options they had to [render] grievances or to escape abusive husbands” (Ben-Zvi: 38). Although Ben-Zvi recognizes the damaging effect of Mr. Wright on his wife, she believes that Glaspell stages “the potential and the usurpation of power” of women by having Minnie assume the centrality on the stage.

Although some of the previous studies have acknowledged the strength and domination of the murdered husband, none has addressed the damaging effect of the absent character as a dramatic device.

Eugene O'Neill is considered by many critics the major American playwright, and the first to explore serious themes in the theatre, and to experiment with theatrical conventions. His many plays were translated and staged all over the world; he won the Pulitzer Prize four times, and was the first dramatist to win the Nobel Prize.

His plays are seen as romantic, realistic, naturalistic, melodramatic, sentimental, cynical and poetic. Baym (1994) says that O'Neill "wanted to make plays [convey] emotions [full] of intensity and complexity" (Bloom: 12). He believes that O'Neill's characters are haunted by their past and the ghosts of those they remembered, those who influenced them, be those their younger selves or their dreams and ambitions.

Gascoigne (1967) believes that there is nothing that can revive the pipe-dreamers of O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, and "instead of feeling free, they merely become depressed" (117). He recognizes the importance of the absent character. For him, Hickey (the Iceman who ruins the lives of the pipe-dreamers) is "the prime mover."

For Eugene O'Neill, the establishment of a character was “a self-imposed reductivism, the consequence of a willed surrender of complexity and depth” (Bigby: 24). And this is very clear in The Iceman Cometh, where the group of isolated figures is “threatened by viscosity of time.” Their past is haunting them so much that they can not accept the future.

Bigby believes that Hickey represents failure and death, and “death is the Iceman, who becomes ‘a Godot’ figure.” In this sense, he freezes the lives of the pipe-dreamers, who are unable to evade their past or work for their future.

Mandle (1982) believes that the Iceman, the prominent symbol of the play, is almost always linked with women who, like him, are absent, but “bear the signs of death, sexuality and salvation” (13).

A more relevant study is Robinson's (1988); he wrote about the absent women who haunt the play's central characters and discusses their damaging effect in three plays: The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey into the Night and Desire under the Elms. He believes that in these plays O'Neill was “plagued by his mother's

ghost” (14). This article discusses how the onstage characters become consciously aware of the haunting presence of the absent character. However, his study is rather limited first to those O’Neill’s plays, and second, within them, to gender.

Berlin (1999) suggests that O’Neill’s Iceman ought to be called “Waiting for Hickey,” because in “Waiting for Godot and The Iceman Cometh the waiters are in a frozen boundary situation...in both, the art of the dramatist makes the waiting and the atmosphere of death reflected on the bedrock reality of human existence” (8). He concludes by saying that “waiting for Godot” becomes a very popular phrase to suggest the wait for anything, just like the wait for the gentleman-caller in Williams’ play.

Winn (1999) says that O’Neill created people “who held a notion of themselves that was untrue or lived a life that was inconsistent with their true nature.” Their need for pipe dreams to keep their happiness and sanity becomes a necessity. As a result “all of the characters either regain their pipe dreams or face death” (19); the pipe dream is a self-deception to escape reality. Moreover, Winn believes Hickey as well as the Iceman to be “the messiah of

death.” Hickey, death, and the Iceman are all synonymous. Their relation stems from their actual and final confrontation of reality, and extends to the same ending.

Similarly, for Diggins (1999), the Iceman symbolizes death. He says that “we are frozen in the world of liberalism that can never reach the goal of radicalism” (Diggins: 5).

Although all the previous studies have acknowledged the damaging effect of the Iceman on onstage characters, none has discussed the theatrical employment of the absent Iceman as a dramatic device to catalyze the actions of the play.

The same motif is present in the play of Tennessee Williams, “the painterly dramatist.” For Gascoigne, Williams is “the true emotional artist, spinning webs of silk from his own suffering and environment” (19). He believes in the importance of off-stage effects to orient the action in the play. One of these off-stage effects appears in The Glass Menagerie, where a thunderstorm punctuates the visit of the gentleman caller.

Jones (1988) asserts the effect of the absent father on the onstage characters. He says that what each of Amanda, Tom, and

Laura suffers from is the loss of their Father. Although he discusses the father's influences on onstage characters, Jones does not extend this feature to its destructive end.

Koprince (1994) discusses the motives behind leaving the absent characters unseen; namely, "to demonstrate the power of human relationship, and to reveal the incredible hold that one individual can have over another" (Koprince: 87), whether from a distance, or from the grave. Moreover, she suggests that the absent character is used as a device to intensify the feelings of loneliness and longing.

However close, none of the previous studies have discussed the employment of the absent Father as a dramatic device to catalyze the actions in The Glass Menagerie.

My final selected play, Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, was considered a new theatrical trend in America. Yet critics of Albee believe him to be a successor to Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill.

Vos (1973), discussing the religious significance of the play, believes that "the sacrificial death of the son brings atonement and

reconciliation at dawn on a Sunday morning” (Vos: 84). Therefore, the ritual of death is an attempt “to recapture a lost rapport with the natural cycle” (84).

Taylor (1973) believes the son to be a symbol of marriage in which the couple is united in their need to escape their fears of themselves. He suggests the importance of the absent son and its good effect on onstage characters.

Again, Kingsley (1973) believes that George and Martha have created the imaginary son to escape reality. He establishes a link between Albee’s concern with reality and illusion and Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian tragedy. Consequently, the Dionysian impulse takes no account of the individuals and may even destroy them. The absent son destroys the life of Martha and George.

Another implication of the religious significance is pointed to by Carter (1987). He suggests that “the transcendent son brings a double-edged sword to George and Martha's relationship” (2). In this way, he states the effect of the absent son on the lives of Martha and George. This basically means that the son has the

power to either bring the couple closer together or tear them apart. Closely probing the text, Carter discusses the utilization of “us” in “Jesus.” This implies the need for a sacrifice “in order to redeem the ‘us’, the barren marriage of George and Martha.”

Finkelstein (1995) suggests that “Martha is denied the right to be the main character in her own life; unable to create, she destroys” (52). She asserts that the death of the imaginary son will help her to overcome such a denial.

Herr (1995) traces the historical background of Carthage, which uncovers the secret behind the sacrifice of the son. In Carthage, “when a vow is broken, a child is sacrificed,” and “the only vow we find George and Martha have made is for silence regarding their son, and when this vow is broken, George sacrifices his son” (3).

Yet, she advances a further interpretation: “when Martha speaks of their fantasy child to others, George realizes that the situation needs to be changed He seeks to remedy a domestic crisis” (Herr: 4). Moreover, the sacrifice of the son has helped Nick and Honey too.

Kulmala (2000) suggests that the play loses the essence of its conflict and the catalyst for actions if one eliminates these absent characters. It is very interesting that he asserts the dominant role of the absent character and its “active presence.”

Though the previous studies, within their own orientations, have touched on the importance of the absent character, they, however, have not discussed the employment of the absent son as a dramatic device to catalyze the actions in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

My study focuses on the dark side of the absent character and how this absence becomes a presence that usually destroys and paralyzes the lives of onstage characters. Focusing on the selected plays, I will show that the absent character does provide a damaging effect on the characters and motivate conflicts and actions in the plays. My selection pivots on Susan Glaspell’s Trifles (1916), Eugene O’Neill’s The Iceman Cometh (1939), Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie (1944), and Edward Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962).

In the following chapter, “The Creation of the Absent Character,” I will explain how the playwrights create the device of the absent character on the stage, and evoke it through stage-props. Then in the second, “The Haunting Presence of the Absent Character,” I will discuss the damaging effects of the absent character on the onstage characters, and how they become consciously aware of its haunting presence. I will also discuss how the absent character has negative effects on the audience who end up leaving the theatre very disturbed. After that, in the third, “The Catalyst,” I will demonstrate the crucial importance of the absent character, and how it motivates and structures the actions in the play. In the final section of my thesis, I shall be able to draw the lines of the absent character’s importance, its main features, and how it serves plays both thematically and structurally.

II- The Creation of the Absent Character

In this chapter, I will attempt to explain how the playwright creates the absent character and empowers it with a strong dominant role in the play. His/her task is a very difficult one, for he/she creates a character who never appears on the stage, and assigns to it the dominant role in the play. Such a power of creation requires skill and creativity in playwrighting.

In order to characterize the absent character and to present it on the stage, playwrights confront the problem of its establishment and creation, and how to introduce the absent character into the action and the minds of the audience. Modern dramatists use different methods and devices; among the various methods three stand out: symbols, descriptions, and naming.

The use of symbols is the most common in creating absent characters. Symbols are physical objects associated with these characters. These physical objects are considered “vehicles for the conceptions of the objects, not the things that symbols directly mean” (Frank: 110). The use of these symbols is not associated

with the symbols themselves. They are used to personify absent characters on the stage, and to reveal their identity.

If we trace the etymology of the word symbol, we find that it reaches back to the Greek usage in which the term was understood to mean a kind of “tally, two pieces of coin or bone, fitted together to form a whole” (Frank: 106).

The fact that symbols help to achieve union and wholeness clarifies why the playwright uses symbols to represent the absent character on the stage; they embody the absence of the absent character on the stage. For being associated with the absent character, the symbol becomes a metonymic representation of or substitution for the character. So, the symbol is not only a crucial plot device, but a clear representation of the absent character and its world.

This process embodies the main function of symbols which are used to assert a certain idea about an object, but not the object itself. For instance, Glaspell uses the frozen preserves of Minnie as a symbol to show to what extent Mr. Wright has damaged Minnie's life. As a result, we can see to what extent a symbol clarifies the

human vision and broadens the scope of imagination and comprehension. Symbols also help in the embodiment of the absent character on the stage. For instance, the father in The Glass Menagerie haunts the onstage characters and damages their lives through the eternal smile his picture in the living room projects forth. This picture is a stage-prop, which consequently becomes a major symbol in the play. The symbol's presentation of an abstract perception helps in promoting the presence of what is not present. This is what Frank points to, "the omission of the material plays an important role in the abstract dimension; it creates a tendency to create a powerful expression and effect of the void object" (56).

In natural phenomenon, the feeling of the thunder is the feeling of the silence as just gone. In Chinese expressionistic paintings, the power of expression is maintained through the absence of the dominant images; we need the painter to express and reveal the painting's mystery. And Leonardo De Vinci deliberately uses blurred images to express the completion in his paintings; he leads the viewer to understand what he cannot see.

The symbol in Art represents a link or connector between something that is possessed, known, seen, heard, and experienced, and some other entity that is unknown, unseen, unheard, and inexperienced.

(Frank: 107)

This proves that “one of the primary functions of all art is to bring inarticulate perceptions into consciousness” (Frank: 106).

The symbol is the most common device that connects the seen and unseen objects. And the focus on absence in modern drama brings diegesis to the foreground and emphasizes the dramaturgy of that which is not presented, but which is always represented or mediated through the discourse of absence.

More than poetry and fiction which depend on an imaginative response, drama is an attempt to bring into physical presence that which is absent. It gives “visible body to what is not there” (Rosefeldt: 3). In drama, we need present characters to “see” the absent ones. In fact present characters represent the mirror upon which the absent character’s image is reflected. They extend the

absent character's imprint into everyday living by helping to complete the experience in the play.

Beside the use of symbol to represent the absent character on the stage, the playwright employs another technique, description. Description is considered "a primary vehicle of meaning, and one way or another causal links between the outer [appearance] and what it means, the inner [its function]" (Docherty: 7). Playwrights use the technique of description in a frame work "to allow us to confer meaning on the self of the being...of the character" (Docherty: 8). This technique can also manipulate our understanding and continually move us from one position to another.

The description of the absent character is provided by an onstage character, and the description gains complexity when the onstage character describes the absent character from his/her own perspective. As in Moliere's Tartuffe, for instance, the viewer has formed almost a complete picture of Mr. Tartuffe before his appearance on the stage in the third act.

Damis: your man Tartuffe is full of holy speeches...

Madame Parnelle: and practices precisely what he preaches. He's a fine man, and should be listened to. I will not hear him mocked by fools like you.

Damis: Good God! Do you expect me to submit to the tyranny of that carping hypocrite?

Must we forgo all joys and satisfactions

Because that bigot censures all our actions?

Dorine: To hear him talk--and he talks all the time--

There's nothing one can do that's not a crime.

He rails at everything, your dear Tartuffe.

Madame Parnelle: whatever he reproves deserves reproof.

He's out to save souls, and all of you

Must love him, as my son would have you do.

(Moliere: 272)

Such a description of the absent character will broaden our perspective and will create an image of the absent character in our minds. Moreover, the characterization of the absent character reaches its highest level of complexity when it is described by

several onstage characters, who view it from their own different perspectives. As a result, we as readers and audience create a new perspective of our own, not because we see the picture of the absent character on the stage, but because we feel it to be so, from the point of views or the positions that the onstage characters have placed it in.

The absent character gains its third dimensional image when the playwright gives his creation a proper name, as William Shakespeare states in A Midsummer Nights Dream:

And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name. (5.1.14-17)

It is well known that the name is “a sort of a password or passport to existence” (Docherty: 57). It is the pillar under which characterization takes place, and invests the absent character with the right of existence. The playwright empowers his/her creation with a proper name to imply its importance and to emphasize its absence. Gruber believes that “the character’s name itself functions

as a receptor for his or her particular characteristics...it allows us to hold the absent person before us" (7).

On the other hand, the playwright may leave the absent character unnamed for a certain purpose. In this case, its characterization depends on the character's role in the play. For instance, the unnamed son in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is missing as a son. The emphasis is on the loss of parenthood. Yet, the absence of the name of the son does not make the son lose its place as a dominant character in the play.

The creation of the absent character in the selected plays of my study, however, varies from one playwright to another, according to the absent character's employment in the play as a dramatic device. Starting with Susan Glaspell, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and ending up with Edward Albee, I will provide an analytical presentation of the creation of the absent character in each play.

The most widely published and best known of Susan Glaspell's work is her masterpiece Trifles; this play is tightly constructed, naturalistic in its settings, and remarkable for its

economy of means. As a newspaper reporter, Glaspell writes about precise and straightforward incidents. This experience is reflected in her writing of the play, and serves to attract the viewer's attention.

The situation that prompted Glaspell to write her first play in 1916 shows how dutifully she responded to the desire of her husband, Mr. Cook. In order to give meaning to life, Cook insisted, dramatic art should grow out of life's experiences, and "what playwrights need is a stage...their own stage" (Kulmala: 256). Therefore, Glaspell went out to the Warf Theatre, and allowed her experience to take shape on "that bare little stage." Her words describe the birth of her playwrighting career.

After a time the stage became a kitchen--a kitchen there by itself. I saw just where the stove was, the table, and the stage going up stairs. Then the door at the back opened, and people all bundled up came in--two or three men, I wasn't sure enough about two women, who hung back, reluctant to enter that kitchen. (Kulmala: 256)

On Glaspell's stage, the play, Trifles, emerged as an ironic, subversive response to her husband's demand; namely, to write a play for the Provincetown Group. Moreover, it reflects the hostility that she harbors toward Cook's manipulation of her talent:

I began writing plays because my hisband [*sic*] George Cram Cook made me [she crossed out "made me" and substituted "forced me to"]. "I have announced a play of yours for the next bill," he told me, soon after we started the Provincetown Players. I didn't want my marriage to break up so I wrote Trifles. (Kulmala: 257)

This reflective comment connects the act of play-writing with "the ambivalence that becomes noticeable in the bitter, satiric tone characterizing Glaspell's plays. The spectrum of her Provincetown Plays reflects growth toward emasculating portraits of men as well as an emerging self-awareness" (Kulmala: 20).

The play's opening immediately gives prominence to the act of writing as the curtain rises on an abandoned kitchen, an uncurtained window, a broken wood rocker chair, a loaf of bread

outside the bread box, and a dead canary that symbolizes the husband's oppressive behavior toward his wife. Susan Glaspell brings Mr. Wright's damaging effects into focus by physical representation and stage props, before presenting his character. On the stage, she employs its absence as a theatrical means, through the use of symbols, to motivate and activate the actions of the onstage characters.

Glaspell could have started her play before the murder scene but, in the spirit of Oedipus Tyrannus, she found it more effective to depict the impact of the dead husband on the characters and on the physical objects in the kitchen, rather than presenting him before the scene of the murder. In a sense, like Sophocles, she allows the viewers to become detectives and to be involved in solving the mystery of the murdered husband. In using the absent character in her play, she envisions drama as uniting the audience with a spiritual sense of common purpose, and forces her viewer to experience Minnie's undramatized life with her absent husband Mr. Wright.

In order to let the audience experience the staged events from the perspective of the Other, Glaspell mirrors Mr. Wright's reflection on the setting and on the other characters in the play. She uses onstage props and symbols to bring in his character on her stage. Starting with his last name, she intends a pun on the name of "Mr. Wright" to imply his lack of righteousness. Glaspell here is being ironic by naming Mr. Wright the man who has done everything wrong. Also, she symbolizes his oppressive behavior toward his wife with the dead canary, with a twisted neck, to show to what extent Mr. Wright has deprived her from the simplest things she enjoys. And the shabbiness of the clothes that Minnie requests, the broken rocker, and the bad stove in the kitchen are symbols used to visualize the damaging effects of Mr. Wright's character.

It is quite obvious that Mr. Wright succeeds in Minnie's absence from the stage; he pushes her to kill him. And she is accused of being a murderer. Consequently, it becomes useless to present Minnie on the stage, and she has no role to play. She becomes like "a loaf of bread outside the bread box" (Glaspell: 36). Yet, Glaspell employs the theatrical absence of Minnie to indicate

the damaging effect of the murdered husband. Mr. Wright succeeds in creating mystery and suspense in the actions of Trifles, his role almost surpasses the power of the playwright herself. Actually Mr. Wright does play it right; he prepares the setting and activates the actions of the play. Thus the pun on Mr. Wright's name and the term playwright strengthen the active presence of Mr. Wright on the stage; he works like a professional playwright indeed. Glaspell evokes the character of Mr. Wright by using a direct description from Mrs. Hale.

Mrs. Hale: ...did you know John Wright, Mrs. Peter?

Mrs. Peter: not to know him; I've seen him in town.

They say he was a good man.

Mrs. Hale: Yes--good; he didn't drink, and kept his word as well as most, I guess, and paid his debts. But he was a hard man, just to pass the time of the day with him--(*shivers*) like a raw wind that gets to the bone. (Glaspell: 42)

Mr. Wright succeeds in affecting the senses of Mrs. Hale. She senses his presence and starts shivering as soon as she

mentions his name. He reminds her of the “raw winds that gets to the bone.” This emphasizes the strong effect of Mr. Wright’s presence in the minds of the onstage characters.

The same effect can be seen in Eugene O’Neill’s The Iceman Cometh; just as Mr. Wright is a raw wind which freezes and gets to the bone, the absence of the Iceman petrifies the lives of the pipe-dreamers, paralyzing them between a past they wish to escape and a future that seems to lead to nothing but disaster. They believe that the revival of the Iceman will change their aimless lives, yet his coming only shatters their hopes.

The Iceman freezes the pipe-dreamers and paralyzes their movements and actions on the stage in the same way Mr. Wright occupies the actions of the detectives and the onstage characters.

Bigsby believes that the establishment of a character, for Eugene O’Neill, was “a self-imposed reductivism, the consequence of a willed surrender of complexity and depth” (24). “O’Neill was the playwright who turned American theatre away from the sensationalism of the nineteenth century, and guided it toward the concerns and techniques of modern European writers” (Maufort:

55). He explored the possibilities inherent in the practices of the symbolists, the expressionists, and in the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. From all the great Europeans, O'Neill takes the focus on invisible forces and puts that interest and concern at the centre of his art. Such a concentration enables him to employ the absent character as a theatrical device in his plays (Maufort: 55).

These concerns have caused him to turn to the theatrical device of the absent character. In employing the absent character in his The Iceman Cometh and Desire Under the Elms, Eugene O'Neill uses one of the more direct techniques; he places on stage physical objects associated with the absent characters.

In The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill explores a very painful emotional terrain where the group of isolated figures is "threatened by viscosity of time" (Bloom: 16). Their past is haunting them; therefore, they cannot accept the future. They create pipe dreams to accept their reality and escape their destination, death. And they wait for Hickman to celebrate Hope's birthday every year. For the pipe-dreamers, Hickman represents renewal and rebirth. He comes

for this particular event every year to revive the spirits of the pipe-dreamers, to give them hope and to ease their lives with illusions.

Many critics have acknowledged the importance of the play, and Shaughnessy describes the state in which O'Neill wrote the play:

For many years frozen into Nietzschean coldness and Strindbergian, in the end the iceman melted. In wrenching effort to bring forth the play, the playwright had wept so profusely that, as his widow recalled, ridges were etched into his face each day as the work continued. Even so, he maintained thematic fidelity: the results were vintage O'Neill. (Bloom: 54)

The play opens in a back room of Harry Hope's saloon.

Larry, one of the pipe dreamers, describes the place as:

No chance saloon. It's Bedrock Bar, the End of the line Café, the Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller! Don't you notice the beautiful calm in the atmosphere? That's because it's the last harbour. No one here has to worry about where they are going next; because

there is no further they can go. It's a great comfort to them. Even here they can keep up appearances of life with a few harmless pipe dreams about their yesterdays and tomorrows...(O'Neill: 23)

Each of the characters has his life behind him, and each finds consolation in an alcoholic stupor in the Saloon. The dominant character is the Iceman, yet his presence is never embodied on the stage. Thus, he becomes an influential outside force which determines the trajectory of the pipe-dreamers.

Although the absent character in the selected plays of my study does not engage in a dialogue of its own, it nevertheless appears through stage props, or is alluded to in the discourse of the play. Despite similarities between the Iceman and Mr. Wright, O'Neill's representation of the Iceman as an absent character differs from that of Glaspell's protagonist. Both Mr. Wright and the Iceman do not engage in a dialogue of their own, yet each is presented through a particular concept. Glaspell presents Mr. Wright through stage props and symbols, and O'Neill presents the Iceman through the concept of time.

It is very significant that O'Neill evokes the Iceman in relation to the concept of time; it freezes the pipe-dreamers. For all of them, time is a wall, a barrier at which the pipe-dreamers claw helplessly, trying to reach and improve their pasts. It is very appropriate that O'Neill should name his protagonist "the Iceman." O'Neill's choice of that particular title implies certain connotations, especially the name of the Iceman and the biblical term cometh. Therefore, the title alone intensifies the actions of the play. However, he is not an Iceman; for the pipe-dreamers, he represents hope which never arrives. Iceman implies coldness. For

in the time period of the play, before there were electric refrigerators, people owned ice boxes, which kept food cold by keeping it in an enclosed space with large blocks of ice. The ice was delivered by the Iceman, who traveled from door to door. (Bloom: 49-50)

Although the role of the Iceman in those days was very beneficial for every one since ice in hot weather is much needed, this Iceman did more harm than good. He damaged the lives of the

pipe-dreamers, and shattered their dreams of satisfaction and happiness. O'Neill is being ironic when he calls his protagonist the Iceman, because the name stands for exactly what the Iceman represents: stillness and paralysis. He is being ironic in that, instead of the Iceman being of service to the people, he is bringing destruction with him. This destruction could be detected in the way in which he freezes and paralyzes the lives of the pipe-dreamers. In fact, the saloon where the pipe-dreamers are kept waiting looks like the ice-box the iceman serves in those days.

Although O'Neill's use of irony is not as apparent as Glaspell's Wright, he succeeds in creating a protean character, the Iceman. Both playwrights master the art of irony in depicting the names of their protagonists. Glaspell's Mr. Wright never did a right deed in his life, not even after his death. He abuses his wife, Minnie, and succeeds in excluding her from the stage. He also leaves the onstage characters in perpetual awareness and fear. O'Neill's use of irony surpasses Glaspell's. His is very complex and challenging. The Iceman does not help the pipe-dreamers, he

rather destroys them. In this way, O'Neill perplexes the viewer's mind and distracts his attention.

Furthermore, in western culture, coldness and winter are associated with death. This gives the Iceman a new identity, "the messiah of death". He activates the hope for death in the minds of the pipe-dreamers. He "symbolizes the arrival of death, and not simply the carnal relief [that he is their savior]." In fact, his arrival "only reinforces Nietzsche's dictum: a joke is the epigram on the death of a feeling" (Diggins: 3).

And in her article "O'Neill's Iceman: Another Meaning", Delma Eugene Presley discusses the employment of the meaning of the term "Iceman." She found a reference for the term in the Dictionary of American Underworld Lingo. According to which the "Iceman" "refers to 'any official or inmate whose promises are not to be relied upon.' The secondary meaning is: 'One who makes ostentatious gifts of worthless or trivial things'" (387). This explains why

the inhabitants of Harry Hope's saloon wish for a
messiah, but their hopes are without foundation.

Hickey's promises are "not to be relied upon." Indeed, his "ostentatious gifts" of joy, meaning, and, finally, death are "worthless and trivial." (Presley: 388)

In fact, Larry Slade states this truth about Hickey at the end of the play. He laments

Be God, there's no hope! I'll never be a success in the grandstand--or anywhere else! Life is too much for me! I'll be a weak fool looking with pity at the two sides of everything till the day I die! (*With an intense bitter sincerity*) May that day come soon! (*He pauses, startledly, surprised at himself--then with a sardonic grin*) Be God, I'm the only real convert to death Hickey made here. From the bottom of my coward's heart I mean that now! (O'Neill: 195)

Hickey let the pipe dreamers live in death; the opening stage direction of the fourth act emphasizes this point:

There is an atmosphere of oppressive stagnation in the room, and a quality of insensibility about all the people...[they] are like wax figures. (O'Neill: 158)

Moreover, in her book O'Neill, Mandle comments on O'Neill's discussion of the role of the Iceman in the play as follows:

The iceman of the title is, of course death...I don't think O'Neill ever explained, publicly, what he meant by the use of the archaic word, "cometh," but he told me at the time he was writing the play that he meant a combination of poetic and biblical "Death cometh"-- that is, cometh to all living. (Mandle: 14)

Therefore, Hickman (Hickey) might be considered a mirror image that reflects the personality of the Iceman. He is a salesman too, and he is described as "a false god, a fraudulent savior, for he wanted to bring peace to his friends, but instead brought them despair and the smell of death" (Winn: 13). His importance hinges on the fact that he "points out the dishonesty of the characters' dreams, asserting that they poison people's lives, it is Hickey himself who carries the poison of reality that brings death to their dreams...he kills their spirits and their will to live" (Winn: 13).

Unlike his employment of the absent character in The Iceman Cometh, O'Neill's technique becomes very clear in Desire Under the Elms. O'Neill uses stage props to evoke the character of the mother "Maw" who has died. He displays her dinner bell and implements. However, O'Neill goes beyond this straightforward device to evoke Maw metaphorically; for her lingering spirit is manifested by the trees that overhang the Cabot house. And there is a clear contrast from the very beginning: "the green of the elms glows, but the house is in shadow, seeming pale and washed out by contrast" (O'Neill: 629).

Maw's high activity makes her one of the dominant characters in the play. Her husband, Ephraim, admits her impact: it is like "somthin", and she is "dropping off the elms, climbin' up the roof, sneakin' down the chimney, pokin' in the corners" (O'Neill: 632). She pervades and destroys like any one of the absent characters in my selected plays.

Another method of evoking the absent character is a direct description provided by a single onstage character. This technique gains complexity when the onstage character brings mixed feelings

to his description. Moreover, the absent character gains even more complexities when it is described by several onstage characters. In this respect, Maw receives the highest level of complexity, for she is described by five onstage characters, all of whom see her from different personal perspectives.

Although Maw is dead, O'Neill suggests that she lives on in combination with natural phenomena. Her power reaches from beyond the grave in combination with the forces of Nature, heredity, and memory. Maw avenges herself against Ephraim after her death through her haunting presence. She is evoked for the audience through combinations, the first of which seems to be a union between her spirit and the force of Nature. O'Neill's directions for the stage setting clarify this combination:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house.

They bend their trailing branches down over the roof.

They appear to protect and at the same time subdue.

There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their

intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. (O'Neill: 629)

This view reveals Maw's other aspects; she is also evoked in combination with the force of heredity. Eben, her son, incarnates and doubles her: ringing the dinner bell as she had once done, and then serving food for his brothers. To underscore this mirror image of Maw in Eben, O'Neill has Eben say "I am Maw," and lets him describe to his brothers how he senses Maw's life within his. He cannot accept her absence, because her absence leaves a vacuum that propels the dramatic action and urges him to double her.

Maw also appears in the memories of several characters; her image flickers and mutates as she is filtered through the temperaments and needs of those who remember her. Her stepsons decide to leave the farm because they see her as a victim. For them Maw was "good't everyone"; they assure themselves that they, like her, are victims of their father's enslavement.

When Ephraim, the father, appears, the audience sees Maw through a different perspective. To him, Maw was "soft and simple," and desirable because of her "purty." She tried to be hard,

but failed at it. He believes that Maw had limited intelligence and needed leadership; she admired strength, but she did not possess it (O'Neill: 633).

Unlike Maw, the absent father in Williams The Glass Menagerie is not dead, yet he haunts the onstage characters through his absence. And Williams employs this device of the absent character in a very artistic way. The father is the dominant character in the play. His very absence and his haunting presence make him a central character in the play.

Williams evokes Mr. Wingfield, the father, first by displaying his image in a lighted photograph overhanging the family's living-room, and facing the audience:

A blown-up photograph of the father hangs on the wall of the living room, facing the audience, to the left of the archway. It is the face of a very handsome young man in a doughboy's First World War cap. He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say, "I will be smiling for ever." (Williams: 4)

The father haunts the onstage characters through this stage-prop which becomes a presentation for the father's character on the stage.

Then, in the opening monologue, Tom, the narrator, describes him by focusing exclusively on the manner of his departure:

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than life photograph over the mantel. This is our father who left us a long time ago. He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town... the last we heard of him was a picture post-card from Mazatlan, on the Pacific of Mexico, containing a message of two words-“Hello- Goodbye!” and no address. (Williams: 5)

Obviously, Mr. Wingfield's importance stems not from his character, as is the case of Mr. John Wright in Trifles, but from his role as the father; he has not even been given a proper name. In

other words, his absence is his presence, for “the father is indeed a seminal figure in the drama of absence since fatherhood is closely connected with absence...the father is felt strongly in his absence” (Rosefeldt: 5). Sigmund Freud believes that “maternity is proved by evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis, based on an influence and a presence” (Freud: 114). Unlike motherhood, fatherhood is authenticated through absence. He is usually absent from the family, working outside to support them.

The paternal figure plays a major role in the child’s life, and this is what happened in The Glass Menagerie. The characters believe that the father is known through his absence, not his presence as is the case with the mother. However, the absence of the father in Williams’ play affects the life of the family in a very destructive way.

Like the absent characters considered in this study, the absent father’s presence is embodied through onstage props and symbols such as his records which Laura has taken over, his old “over-sized” bathrobe, and the dress which Amanda was wearing

when she first met him --“she wears a girlish frock of yellow voile with blue silk sash” (Williams: 53).

Like Minnie, who “used to wear pretty clothes and be lively, when she was Minnie Foster, one of the town girls singing in the choir” (Glaspell: 40), Amanda is haunted by the past and cannot cast off its fetters. She lives in a world of paper lanterns and moonlit lakes. As we can see, both Minnie and Amanda used to live a happier life before their marriage. Their transformation has been subjected to their husbands’ abuse. Obviously, the embodiment of the presence of the absent characters on the stage clarifies the treatments of the husbands.

Although Williams provides

Dramatic dialogue and sensory images... to create a clearer picture of his unseen characters, [he] chooses to go one step further. Adopting his most inventive technique, he repeatedly makes use of surrogate figures--or doubles-- in order to portray those characters who do not appear onstage. (Koprince: 88)

Thus, the strongest evocation is Tom, the narrator, who seems to “follow in [his] father’s footsteps.” The harder Amanda tries to turn Tom into an idealized version of her husband, the more he turns into his actual father. In fact, Amanda is fully aware that her son will escape and abandon them just like his father. In the third scene she criticizes Tom for reading D. H. Lawrence, writing poetry, jeopardizing his job, and going to the movies.

As Robert Jones says,

She wants Tom to give up his less-than-practical dreams and become a steady provider for the family, a role that her husband should have played. (32)

Tom is a mirror image that reflects his father’s personality. He does admit it; “I descended these steps of this fire-escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father’s footsteps” (Williams: 96).

Jim O’Conner, the gentleman caller too, might be considered another mirror image reflecting Mr. Wingfield’s personality. He is an attractive gentleman caller who is in certain ways reminiscent of Amanda Wingfield’s faithless husband.

Genial and appealing, with a boyish smile that recalls the father's own grinning portrait...[he] devastates the family by abandoning them when they desperately need him. (Koprince: 88-9)

The employment of the absent character appears also in The Rose Tattoo, the “only one of Williams’ major plays to have a happy ending” and which many critics believe that it “in many ways, tells the story of [Williams’] meeting Frank Merlo [his lover]” (Bloom: 13). In this play, the absent character is the father, Rosario della Rose. Williams presents his character on the stage through a display of a photograph, in which he looks like “Valentino-- with a moustache.” He is a truck driver who was killed while “smuggling drugs under a load of bananas” (Williams: 99).

The title of the play suggests love and passion, and Williams’ stage setting starts with the cottage of Rosario. There is “a rose- patterned wallpaper... a rose-colored carpet,” and his daughter’s name is Rose. Moreover, after his death, Rosario’s haunting presence looms over the stage through the bottle of ashes

in the shrine, the ashes of his cremation. All these stage props and the proper name of Rosario enable Williams to succeed in presenting his absent character on the stage, and create an aura of awareness around the life of Rosario's wife Serafina and his daughter Rose.

Rosario's absence implies the loss of masculinity and patriarchy. He leaves his victims disoriented and unbalanced. The action of the play traces the effects of Rosario's death on his widow. Serafina has made of her grief a false religion, and defied the Catholic priest who came to scold her. Moreover, she is ruining the life of her daughter; as a village woman reports,

She got the daughter lock up naked in there all week.

Ho, ho, ho! She lock up all week.. naked.. shouting
out the window. (Williams: 99)

Rosario and Mr. Wingfield are absent from the stage, they exist on the minds of the onstage characters and the audience. And since their identities are revealed through symbols and descriptions, the characterization of those absent characters become a very difficult task.

Williams' absent characters have a complexity which is seldom noted. When a given character is absent from the stage, it only exists in the words of the onstage figures. For the audience, then, the absent character is revealed in the interplay of thoughts and feelings on the stage. As these thoughts and feelings culminate in complexity, so does the complexity of the absent character. This effect adds complications to the characterization of the absent character and the onstage characters.

Edward Albee's employment of the absent character almost surpasses Glaspell's, O'Neill's and Williams'. Of the playwrights considered in my study, he is the only one whose career began after the advent of European absurdism. Yet, his response to the absurdists has prompted him to employ the absent character in his masterpiece Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Albee employs the absent character as if it were a real person. The absent characters discussed previously are actual dramatic ones, be they dead or alive, whereas here the absent character is fully imaginary. This imaginary son, is not a real person, it is a fictional character, which is created by George and

Martha. Yet, this does not diminish the active use of the absent character. Such a dramatic construct is an improved version of the absent character covered by this study; it is dealt with here because it is similar to the technique employed in the creation of the absent character, and it casts a new light on Albee's use of it.

The imaginary son, needless to say, is an influential character in the play; its absence is never embodied on the stage, since he is an imaginary character. This son suits the world of George and Martha, since

They inhabit a city of words...their verbalization is indeed a response to their terror of silence in which the real questions will assert themselves. (Bloom: 143-4)

They fear pain, and they retreat into oblivion and myth. George and Martha express a self-consciousness of their selves in relation to their absent son. They are "unable to have children, they have conspired to create a fantasy child, designed to cement their relationship, to compensate for a delinquent reality" (Bloom: 141).

Unlike Trifles, Desire Under the Elms, and The Glass Menagerie, Albee's play gives us a different sense of the employment of the absent character. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, he provides the imaginary son with a powerful effect. This powerful effect on the onstage characters empowers the employment of the absent character as a theatrical device in the play.

Though unreal, succeeds in destroying the lives of George and Martha in much the same way Mr. Wright and Maw succeeded in their respective roles.

In the artificial world founded by the couple, George and Martha, there are no real satisfactions, and they escape to the world of words and create the son in an imaginary realm. "The most poignant moment in the play occurs when Martha reveals to us the emptiness and loss she feels when, childless, she is an out cast at sex-segregated faculty parties and is tempted to mention their imaginary son" (Finkelstein: 55). She says,

I FORGET! Sometimes...sometimes when it's night,
when it's late, and...and everybody else is...talking...

I forget and I...want to mention him... but I HOLD
ON... I hold on... but I've wanted to...so often.
(Albee: 237)

Albee presents the imaginary son on the stage through the shotgun, a weapon. This indicates two things; George and Martha create the son as a protection against reality, which is symbolized by the gun; but since this gun is a false one, it implies the vanity of their hopes and conspiracy.

This imaginary son succeeds in capturing the couples' minds and in haunting their lives. Its importance is crucial. Bigsby has called the son a weapon with which George and Martha fight; Richard Amacher considers the child the symbol of a dead relationship. And Anne Paolucci maintains that the child is a symbol of Martha's failed hopes for George (Bigsby: 23).

It is very interesting that George and Martha have blown life into their imaginary son, as if it were a real one; the meticulous description brings him to life. It becomes a subject of debate and discussion between the couple.

Martha: and I was young, and he was a healthy child,
a red, bawling child with slippery firm limbs.

George: Martha thinks she saw him at delivery.

Martha: ...with slippery, firm limbs and a full head of
black fine, fine hair which oh, later, later, became
blond as the sun, our son.

George: he was a healthy child. (Albee: 265)

At this point, the audience does not know that the child is imaginary; therefore, these speeches strengthen the audience's investment in fantasy. Albee succeeds in misdirecting not only the audience but also the guests, Nick and Honey. This adds credit to the haunting presence of the imaginary son on the onstage characters and the viewer as well. Albee uses the technique of the absent character to imply a presence and to elevate the consciousness of the onstage characters and the audience as well.

The student of modern American drama can observe that the playwrights, considered in this study, have succeeded in the creation of the absent character in their plays. They provide a physical presence of the absent character on the stage, which "acts

as mirror by which other characters' identities are reflected and by which the audience comes to know the truth about the controversy brewing beneath the conflict of the play" (Kulmala: 7).

III- The Haunting Presence of the Absent Character

Ghosts are believed to be the procreators of the grave. They emblemize a kind of ambivalence in which we fear and desire; what we fear in particular is the revenant and the haunting ghost, and what we desire is the extending of the life of a dead person beyond the moment of death. Thus the remembrance of the dead urges the mourners to assume a mode of existence, which leads them to express their need through different means; “symbolic stage settings, expressive costumes, special make up, props, mimetic or stylized gesture and movement, dialogue (antiphonal exchange)” (Cole: 11). This performance of ambivalence reflects their need to fill in the void of the dead person, and to embody his/her absence. Such a performance emphasizes the very essence of theatre, mimesis; it is mimetic in a sense that theatre is a mere double of life; it is on the stage that the union of thought, gesture and action is reconstructed.

This effect can be seen in the device of the absent character; it works through invisible power and inhabits a state of ambivalence, it descends from above as if the absent character

were a ghost. And some dead persons, as Kristian Smidt states in her article “Shakespeare’s Absent Characters,” “can exert their influence without having actually to appear as ghosts, as [Ibsen’s play] Ghosts clearly demonstrates.” (397) Through this ghostly invisible power the absent character will be able to create mystery and suspense which paralyze the lives of the onstage characters.

The playwright legitimizes the human need for ghosts by enacting the paradox of embodied absence on the stage, creating phantoms of life. Such a creation emphasizes the Aristotelian catharsis, which is invoked as the hallmark of tragedy. The evoking and purging of pity and fear are the expression and release of ambivalent feelings, especially those feelings which death and ghosts call forth. This tragic performance immortalizes the body of the absent character by giving it over to the ghostly image which it animates.

The haunting presence of the absent character is an act of visiting and inhabiting a state in the form of ghost or another supernatural being, which seriously affects the reaction of the inhabitants of this state. They live a very horrible life, aware of its

haunting presence. Consequently, such a presence leads to a permanent destruction and damage. Whether the absent character is dead or alive, real or imaginary, it succeeds in creating an abnormal condition. This condition is the funerary ritual; it is abnormal because “it is believed that under certain conditions a dead body is withheld from the normal process of corruption, is re-animated” (Cole: 10). In this way, the reanimation of the dead body creates a haunting presence that propels the actions of the onstage characters. Although the body is dead, yet it is deadly, it is tragically present.

The absent character in my sample of selected plays is almost like “a dead body” who occupies a state of the abnormal condition. According to Cole, this abnormal condition of the dead is “a kind of vampirism” (6). The absent character is the vampire which haunts the play. It becomes a blood sucking parasite that drains the life of each and every character in the play, and eventually destroys the lives of the onstage characters.

It is quite obvious that the absent character has been created to serve a further purpose in the play, adding mystery and suspense

to the action. The absence of the main character from the stage builds an aura of awareness which haunts the lives of the mourners, the onstage characters, and the viewer. It is like an invisible man, whose steps are heard all over the stage, and who needs to wear a hat to specify its place. A play portrays characters in pursuit of an objective. A character's objective will vary according to the playwright's demands and needs, because the playwright endows the absent character with a certain role to serve a particular purpose, to help in motivating the actions of the onstage characters.

However, the visibility of the absent character enables it to create an unimaginable damaging effect on the onstage characters and the viewer, because its presence causes nothing but destruction to the onstage characters, and an emotional disturbance to the viewer. Such an effect surpasses the effect of any of the onstage characters for many reasons. The fact that it can take any form at any time zone, while the onstage character cannot, has strengthened its ability of haunting its victims. Its presence is like that of a ghost, who creeps in without notice. This leaves the

onstage characters and the viewer in perpetual confusion and awareness.

Glaspell's Trifles is a very good evidence for the reanimation of the dead body on the stage. The play has portrayed the haunting presence of Mr. John Wright. The spirit of the murdered husband roams the stage, and creates a powerful effect that appears on the setting of the play. His haunting presence dominates in the kitchen which becomes abandoned, gloomy and chaotic:

unwashed pans under the sink, a loaf of bread out side
the bread-box, a dish towel on the table-- other signs
of uncompleted work. (Bigsby: 36)

In Trifles, characters' names are important. They show to what extent Mr. Wright has "minimized" Minnie and eventually excluded her from being presented on the stage. This minimization is already anticipated in the very act of marriage which is supposed to be an act of procreation and continuity.

Adopting the husband's surname in marriage deprives the woman of her identity. And this is what John Wright has done to

Minnie; Miss Foster becomes Mrs. Wright. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are not given first names. The role that society has cast them in is one that is defined by their husbands. Mrs. Peters, who is married to the Sheriff, is viewed in those terms, not as an individual. The County Attorney even says “a sheriff’s wife is married to the law” (Glaspell: 43), and Mrs. Peters herself tries to fulfill that role, saying “the law is the law.” She tries to reinforce that identity until she is faced with the brutality of what John Wright has done to Minnie. Moreover, Mrs. Peters says “I know what stillness is. The law has got to punish the crime, Mrs. Hale” (Glaspell: 45). Mrs. Peters now has become different; she adopts a new perspective in Minnie’s case.

The best example of the importance of names is the image of Minnie Foster. “She used to wear pretty clothes and be lively when she was Minnie Foster...she wore a white dress with ribbons and stood up there in the choir and sang” (Bigsby: 42). Before her marriage to John Wright, Minnie used to be “kind of like a bird herself, real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and fluttery” (Bigsby: 44). When Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter find Minnie’s bird

cage in the cupboard, they do not at first realize the importance of this evidence, but they later note that the dead bird has its neck “twisted to one side.” The comparison here is between Minnie and the bird. The bird is caged just as Minnie is trapped in the abusive relationship with Mr. Wright. Figuratively, he strangles the lively spirit of Minnie as he has strangled the bird. When Mr. Wright kills the bird, he destroys the last bit of personality that Minnie has held for herself. This process of abusive minimization takes some thirty years and culminates in the very first name of Minnie.

Thirty years ago, Mrs. Wright was Minnie Foster; she used to sing in the choir, wear pretty clothes, and be lively. After marriage, she starts to suffer the terrible isolation and loneliness forced upon her by a cruel and malicious husband. The shabbiness of the clothes that Minnie requests, the broken rocker, and the bad stove in the kitchen demonstrate Mr. Wright’s unwillingness to provide basic warmth and shelter for his wife. Again,

his objection to a telephone, Mr. Hale’s initial reason for his visit and the reason for his discovery of the crime, are unquestionably further deterrents on the

part of the husband to his wife's communication with the world and the validation as an individual. (Ben-Zvi: 73-4)

This image of Minnie Foster is a strong evidence to prove the damaging effect of John Wright upon his wife before he died. He abuses Minnie by denying her her personality and individuality, silencing her like Ovid's Philomel, and driving her to murder him by systematically breaking down her lively spirit that existed before they married. Eventually, he deprives her of playing her role in Trifles. Glaspell finds it more effective to exclude Minnie from the stage, to show to what extent the husband has damaged her life.

It is quite obvious that John succeeds in destroying Minnie's life, and eventually in her barring from the stage; her presence becomes invalid, and she has no role to play. Yet, Glaspell employs the theatrical absence of Minnie as a stage prop to indicate the damaging effect of the murdered husband.

Through identification with the oppression experienced by Minnie, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters establish a point of contact between Minnie and the viewer. Glaspell uses conventional indices

of femininity, such as the disorderly kitchen scene, as a strategic way of focusing the viewer's attention on the damaging effects of Mr. Wright. In calling attention to the ways of oppression and abuse, Glaspell turns the viewer's concern to the haunting presence of John Wright. He hovers upstairs in the bedroom like a roaming ghost who creates horror and fear.

The murdered husband never appears on the stage, not even his dead body, yet he has codified his haunting presence in the chaotic setting, Minnie's absence, and the disturbed viewer. The play begins with the viewer being very disturbed by the knowledge that a murder has taken place; but towards the end of the play, the viewer's reaction has changed completely. One's sympathies start to shift to the murderer, Minnie, instead of the victim, her husband.

Like Mr. Wright, Maw plays a major role in O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms. She haunts the lives of the onstage characters after her death. In this play, O'Neill has resorted to the use of myth, adopting the structure of classical tragedies. Desire Under the Elms is reminiscent of the circumstances of the story of

Phaedra and Hippolytus, and in Abbie's murder of the child appears the dim outline of Euripides' Medea.

The use of the myth affords the artist both the necessary artistic control to explore his subject and the means of generalization. (Gassner: 61)

O'Neill has created characters that are endowed with the necessary motivation to enact the myth. Due to her haunting presence, the dead mother, Maw, has motivated the actions of the onstage characters. Her presence is associated with the force of nature, symbolized by the elms. Thus, O'Neill tries to create an outside force that permeates the world of the play in such a way that the onstage characters are affected by it. He employs the trees as a very strong symbol of the mother, to show to what extent Maw, the absent mother, has affected the setting of the play and the onstage characters. For the boys, Maw was a source of inspiration. She is like the elm trees which symbolize life and continuity. She empowers them even after her death. The elm trees stand for protection and are often planted in tainted areas to warn off others

against danger. Therefore, O'Neill describes the environment of the drama to emphasize the power of Maw:

Two enormous elms are on each side of the house.
They bend their trailing branches down over the roof.
They appear to protect and at the same time subdue.
There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing,
jealous absorption. They have developed from their
intimate contact with the life of man in the house an
appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over
the house. (O'Neill: 629)

The absence of Maw has empowered her haunting presence, which affects the onstage characters' actions and motives. It motivates the escape of her sons-in-law, Simon and Peter. Her figure and torture have haunted their lives, and urged them to escape the enslavement of their father Ephraim. For them Maw was "good t' every one," but their father, like Mr. Wright, victimized her with hard work and roughness.

Therefore, Ephraim's sense of guilt embodied Maw's haunting presence on the stage, so she descends from the trees and haunts the lives of the onstage characters. He believes that she is

droppin' off the elms, climbin' up the roof, sneakin'
down the chimney, pokin' in the corners. (O'Neill:
653)

She pervades the stage, avenging herself for Ephraim's enslavement and abuse. She destroys his life; his sons, Simon and Peter, have abandoned him and left the farm, after stealing his money. Eben's bitterness is also sharpened by the obsessive love for his dead mother; he is also in the habit of talking to his deceased mother, asking for guidance and swearing vengeance. Moreover, when Abbie kills her child, Ephraim's new baby boy, Maw has avenged herself against Ephraim by becoming the motivation of infanticide. She deprives him of his patriarchy and fatherhood, and for him "the house got so lonesome-an' cold--drivin' me down t' the barn--t' the beast o' the field" (O'Neill: 669). In her death, Maw seems to have lost the passivity that

cursed her in life. She engineers a union between Abbie and Eben that leads to the play's climax, the murder of the Cabot heir.

The most effective impact of Maw, however, is upon her son Eben. His memory of his mother causes him to attack life around him, to accuse his father of her death. Eben's obsession with Maw leads him to recreate her, ringing the dinner bell as she had once done, and serving food to his brothers. He tells them "I am Maw," and describes how he senses Maw's life within his. He says:

doin' her work--that made me know her, suffer her
sufferin'--she'd come back t' help--come back t' bile
potatoes--come back t' fry bacon--come back t' bake
biscuits--come back all cramped up t' shake the fire,
an' carry ashes, her eyes weepin' an' bloody with
smoke an' cinders same's they used t' be. She still
comes back--stands by the stove thar in the evenin' ...
(O'Neill: 633)

Obviously the graphic descriptions have enabled O'Neill to personalize Maw's character on the stage, and to create strong

damaging effects on the onstage characters. Moreover, O'Neill succeeds in leaving the viewer in perpetual awareness of Maw's presence. The viewer becomes aware of the consequences of oppression and injustice, and sees also to what extent this oppression has empowered the figure of Maw to carry out revenge not only against Ephraim but against all onstage characters.

In Williams' The Glass Menagerie, the dominant character is the father, Mr. Wingfield, who is the major figure in the idealized past as described by Amanda. He left his family after he "fell in love with long-distance," which causes the loss of the father's position in the Wingfield family. But his loss will never be accepted, nor overcome. He descends from his picture and haunts the stage through his smile in the "blown-up photograph," which is hung on the wall of the dining room.

The complicated effects of the absent character on the onstage characters are better shown in this play. The absent father Mr. Wingfield leaves behind varying effects that lead to psychological destruction. His haunting presence has driven his wife and children into fantasy lives. Due to his absence, he has

caused a permanent disability to both his son, Tom, and his daughter, Laura, preventing them from living a normal healthy life. Laura plays with glass animals, and Tom alternates between trips to the movies and dreams of high adventure. He even has fantasies of going to war, which is “when adventure becomes available to the mass! Every one’s dish not only Gable’s” (Williams: 34).

Like Mr. Wright and Maw, Mr. Wingfield acquires an element of mysticism, which creates an aura of awareness and suspense. His youthful look with his ever lasting smile in the photo roams the stage and haunts the lives of the onstage characters. Eventually, Amanda, Laura and Tom retreat to their fantasies and block their future, thinking of nothing but him. They become involved in building up layers of illusions to escape the haunting presence of their absent father.

Not only is it the Wingfield family who becomes obsessed with the loss of Mr. Winfield, but also Williams himself proves that the damaging effects of the father has lasted even after the play; Williams succeeds in making it “a memory play.”

The absence of the father is so overwhelming that it becomes a presence in itself. Feeling the strength of Mr. Wingfield's presence, some directors have been compelled to bring him onstage as a witness to the action. At Moscow's Maly Theatre in 1982, this is what director Yanovska had done when he brought Wingfield on the stage at regular intervals, sometimes having him repeat lines after his wife and children (Bloom: 50). This emphasizes the presence and the strength of Mr. Wingfield, the absent character.

As we have observed, the absent character is a liminal figure, halfway between being missing and present, life and death, past and present. He occupies a presence that is always being deferred. This absent character may be dead like Mr. Wright in Glaspell's Trifles and Maw in O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, or a live like the Iceman in O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh and the father in Williams' The Glass Menagerie, or an imaginary character like the son in Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? All of these absent characters are moving toward presence. They are employed as technical devices in order to activate the actions of the onstage characters, and haunt their lives. They are being created

through a series of simulations, such as metonymic substitutions, iconic representations, psychological displacements or doubles to impose everlasting damaging effects on the lives of the onstage characters.

The last absent character to be considered in my study is the imaginary son in Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? who has succeeded in destroying the lives of Martha and George. They live in New Carthage and have created the son as an escape from reality, a projection of their own frustration. Ancient Carthage was a scene of a tragic love story, a place condemned by St. Augustine, and a symbol of impending destruction. But most importantly, it is the site of a tophet, a child sacrifice precinct. The activities in the tophet at ancient Carthage parallel the climax of the play when George "kills" his phantom child, a deed required in ancient Carthage (Herr: 2). As Herr explains,

The Phoenicians, and especially the Carthagians, whenever they seek to obtain some great favor, vow one of their children, burning it as a sacrifice to the deity, if they are especially eager to gain success.

There stands in their midst a bronze statue of Kronos [the Greek equivalent of Ba'al Hamon, the main god of the Tyrian-Carthagian pantheon], its hands extended over a bronze brazier, the flames of which engulf the child. When the flames fall upon the body, the limbs contract and the open mouth seems almost laughing, until the contracted body slips quietly into the brazier. (2-3)

Due to this imaginary son, the life of the couple, George and Martha, becomes unbearable. Their relationship becomes unhealthy; their conversation becomes impolite, full of insults and accusations.

As if commenting on his own sexual failure, George, however, accuses Martha of her sexual advances on their imaginary son:

He couldn't stand you fiddling at him all the time,
breaking into his bedroom with your kimono flying,
fiddling at him all the time, with your liquor breath on
him, and your hands all over his.... Our son ran away

from home all the time because Martha here used to corner him. He used to run up to me when I'd get home, and he'd say, "mama's always coming at me." That what he'd say. (Albee: 120-21)

George also claims that the child "threw up" because of Martha's overly close, almost Oedipal, fixation with "mothering" him, even bathing him when he was sixteen years old (Albee: 124).

The story of a loving child who loved and needed her, of the kind mothering she was deprived of, shows the psychological conflict Martha suffers. And both "George's...weakness...and my...necessary greater strength" (Albee: 222), George's weak presence as "the shadow of a man flickering around the edges of a house" (Albee: 226), become sins inscribed in the couple's fantasy life.

When George finally "kills" his son, he projects onto him his ancient guilt of killing his parents, for his son's way of dying exactly parallels the story of the car accident which, presumably, killed George's father. George believes that he has, at last, atoned for his deed. In ancient Punic Carthage, in times of war or other

social stress, the citizens of the city would sacrifice their children in a field outside the city called the Tophet. Here in New Carthage, thousands of years later, as if in a stage of war, something similar goes on.

George changes Martha's behavior by sweeping away its very foundation, by changing her beloved son into the pagan scapegoat who bears away all the twisted, hateful history they have both constructed around the imaginary son. As this imaginary son prevents them from leading a healthy normal marriage, George at last banishes the restless spirit who has so haunted his relationship with his wife, Martha. This son bears away much of the parents' tortured past, making their life a fresh slate.

At last, the fantasy of George and Martha's "son" is exposed. And this is not because their son has "died"--his death could easily perpetuate the myth. It is rather the fact that Nick and Honey come to understand that there never was or could have been a child of George and Martha.

Nick: (*To George; quietly*): You couldn't have . . .
any?

George: We couldn't.

Martha: (*A hint of communion in this*): We couldn't.

(Albee: 34)

However, this is shown to be a potentially good event because it has destroyed the game that was keeping George and Martha apart. It is implied that the downward spiral of their life together may have changed direction. Their "son" is "killed" in an automobile accident, "on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a . . . large tree" (Albee: 266). This chaotic event ends the game and moves George and Martha closer together-- a first step on a long road to recovery.

When George and Martha destroy that child they destroy whatever illusion they have made in reaction to a reality that has been responsible for the loneliness they feel. It is quite obvious that the couple's "verbalization is indeed a response to their terror of a silence in which the real questions will assert themselves" (Bloom: 144). They create the imaginary son to escape their reality,

yet it becomes the threat that haunts their lives. It damages their lives and drives them to kill him in order to face reality.

In this way we find that the absent character has succeeded in creating an abnormal condition, in which the onstage characters perform a ritual of mourning. They mourn the absent character whose image haunts their lives and immobilizes them, barring them from living a normal healthy life.

This play in particular proves most the damaging effects of the absent character. The absent character has been created in the beginning to bring happiness and joy to the couple; towards the end of his creation, the imaginary son brings nothing but unhappiness, sadness and despair. And life could not have gone on without killing him twice: once in his creation, and then in acknowledging his unreality. The Iceman, Maw and Wingfield should have been killed in the same way if life were to be enjoyed.

IV- The Catalyst

In chemistry, scientists use a certain substance, a catalyst, to activate or speed up the chemical reaction in an experiment. The catalyst enters the reaction to activate and energize the chemical substances to produce a new chemical substance.

In the plays I have selected, the playwright employs the absent character as a theatrical means to activate the action. Similarities between the function of the absent character in a play and the function of the catalyst in the chemical reaction materialize in two essential ways: both are employed to activate or speed up the action, and both do not change after fulfilling their function.

The catalyst for these playwrights reminds one of how T. S. Eliot has described the mind of the poet, using nothing other than the function of the catalyst. Eliot states that

When the two gases...are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless, the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is

apparently unaffected has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself. (Eliot: 2)

Here, Eliot believes that the mind of the artist works as a catalyst in the process of the creation of literature. The poet's mind is the activating energy, which mechanizes the process of creation and production.

In the selected plays of my study, the absent character is the catalyst who motivates and activates the action among the onstage characters. I consider it to be the effective energy that generates the driving power of the plot, and just like the poet's mind, it helps create and advance the actions and reactions among the onstage characters.

In Glaspell's play Trifles, the absent character is Mr. John Wright. Without his murder, there would be no action and no play at all. In this play, Minnie is accused of killing her husband Mr. Wright, who has tortured her and suppressed her humanity. His absence is the main reason behind the gathering of the County

Attorney, Mr. and Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peter. In this way his absence has affected the onstage characters, the atmosphere of the play and the setting. Through this employment of the absent character as a theatrical means, Glaspell endows her play with a moving force. And this force generates the haunting presence of the absent character.

Through his absence, Mr. Wright motivates the actions of the onstage characters. We find that the County Attorney, Mr. Hale and the Sheriff have spent most of the time of the play investigating the crime; on the other hand, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are gathering some clothes for Minnie. It is quite obvious that all the onstage characters become involved and energized by the absence of Mr. Wright. Moreover, his absence has banished Minnie from the stage, and led to her accusation of a horrible crime, which might lead to her death.

Mr. Wright also succeeds in changing Mrs. Peters consciousness and point of view; she changes the sheriff's wife from being sympathetic for her husband's position to identifying with the accused woman, Minnie. Early in the play, Mrs. Hale

sympathizes with Minnie and objects to the way in which men are “snoopin’ round and critizin’ her kichen” (Glaspell: 39). In contrast, Mrs. Peters shows respect for the law, saying that the men are doing “no more than their duty” (Glaspell: 39). By the end of the play, Mrs. Peters has joined Mrs. Hale in a conspiracy of silence, lied to the men of law, and hid a major evidence in the play, the bird’s cage. This also proves that Mrs. Peters has gained insights into the damaging effects that Mr. Wright has imposed upon his wife Minnie.

Glaspell starts her master piece with the creation of an absent character who dominates the play and its onstage characters; she also points to its effects upon the setting, the atmosphere, and the other characters. She ends the play with the transformation of Mrs. Peters, the involvement of the County Attorney, Mr. Hale and the Sheriff in the case, and the absence of an important character, Minnie, from the stage. All these actions have been motivated by the absence of Mr. Wright. In this way, all the onstage characters react to Mr. Wright’s absence.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, we find that "the absent father has not only been killed without obtaining the last rites of the church, but his mourning rites have been cut short by the wedding feast of his murderer" (Rosefeldt: 21). The world in Hamlet is in confusion and chaos because a father has been murdered and his mourning rituals have not been fulfilled. The absence of the father has left the onstage characters in a state of torture and bloody murders. He avenges himself on everyone in the play and damages every life for being deprived of a hero's death (dying as a warrior in war) and of his mourning rituals. He diminished the social order of the kingdom through his absence. His absence weaves the lines of the plot in a mimetic chain of murders; Hamlet kills Claudius, he also kills Polonius then Leartes, and finally Hamlet himself.

In this way, the absence of the father compelled Hamlet, the son, to double him. He avenges his father against everyone in the play, and acts on his father's commands. As Cole states,

In the last act [Hamlet] repossesses the name with which he first addresses the ghost; he engages in (mock) single combat with a rival as his father did

with Fortinbras, dying like his father-- poisoned by Claudius-- he becomes in his final passage the military royal presence prefigured by the ghost. (43)

Almost the same thing happens in Glaspell's Trifles; the world of the play is in confusion and chaos. The absence of a proper funeral ritual has deprived Mr. Wright from his rightful presence in the funerary rituals of his body. For "the time of mourning is the last time together for the dead and the living, who share some condition between life and death" (Cole: 27). This implies the meaninglessness of his existence, in which he becomes anything except a human being. He haunts the stage and the onstage characters to avenge his murder. He becomes the dynamic force in the play; he propels the dramatic action and determines the fate of the onstage characters.

Mr. Wright's domination over the play is empowered by his absence from the stage. Glaspell endows him with a power and a popularity he could not have had during his life time. Therefore, she employs his absence from the stage as a theatrical means to energize and activate the actions of the onstage characters. Since

absence has “a gravitational force, drawing the other characters to the physical and psychic aspects left by the protagonists” (Rosefeldt: 149), we find that Mr. Wright, as well as all the absent characters considered in this study, magnetizes the onstage characters to the stage, traps them within his web, and creates his mystical aura around them. This gravitational force works like the electrical force between the electrons of the atoms of substances in chemistry.

Absence is surely a form of silence; and silence is highly important to drama. According to Bigsby,

The theatre is unique in its silences... in the theatre silence is not merely kinetic potential. It may teem with meaning. We are used to the notation “silence” in a Beckett or Pinter play, but Susan Glaspell and Eugene O’Neill were fully alive to the possibility of reticence forty years earlier. (4)

Like Glaspell’s Trifles, or indeed Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, The Iceman Cometh works on the same principle of absence. Its central character never appears, yet the actions of the

drama are driven by the search for the absent character, the Iceman. Its absence has left an emptiness and a void in the lives of the onstage characters; as a result, they double the Iceman by creating and believing in their own pipe-dreams. Each one of the onstage characters tries to fulfill his pipe-dream, and the doubling of the Iceman urges them to do so. They are compelled to believe that the fulfillment of their pipe-dreams will come true, if the iceman does come.

In the continuing absence of the Iceman, who is considered the savior of the onstage characters, we find that these pipe-dreamers have succeeded in presenting the Iceman on the stage. And its presence can be witnessed through many aspects in the play; the setting is the first to be considered. As early as the first act of the play, we observe how the absence of the Iceman has haunted the atmosphere of Hope's bar. It becomes pale, dirty and dusty. There is also an impression of immobility by keeping the changes in the visual stage picture to a minimum. The first and the fourth act, for instance, have the same setting with a small but

significant change in the placement of the chairs, a change that only emphasizes loneliness and emptiness (Bloom: 48).

Most of the time all the characters are on stage, sitting lonely in their chairs; they are waiting for the Iceman to come, and easing their time by drinking, sleeping and sitting. It is quite obvious that the absence of the Iceman has immobilized the onstage characters not only physically but also intellectually. Consequently, the creation of the pipe-dreams is a means to enact the Iceman on the stage. The pipe-dreamers move further into a complicated maze of illusions and a distorted search for the dream fulfiller, the Iceman. In this way, O'Neill formalizes the structure and the setting of the play to suit the pipe-dreamers' demand.

Sternlicht believes that

In the late plays, O'Neill's characters seek oblivion through alcohol, through memory or through narrative, repeating the story of their lives as though thereby to create those lives. They hold the real at bay. Their capacity for self-deceit is matched only by their need to be believed, to be taken for what they

presented themselves as being. To perform is to be.

(21)

Along with the predominant absence of the Iceman, The Iceman Cometh reflects a strong ambiguity for the Iceman.

The cumulative verbal patterns of the play – repeated references to the barroom as a morgue, the atmosphere as funeral, the characters as ghostlike – have established a context in which a birthday celebration *can* become a funerary ritual, a collective response to a collective death. (Cole: 161)

The pipe-dreamers believe the Iceman to be their hope and their savior, yet he becomes the destroyer who shatters their lives and dreams, since their hope of survival is nothing but a mere illusion. Obviously, the Iceman motivates the deeds of the onstage characters and becomes the pivot around which the actions of the play are propelled. In this way, the Iceman becomes the catalyst and the dynamic force that energizes the actions and inactions of the play. Its effect surpasses the borders of the stage to overwhelm

the viewer's reaction to the pipe-dreamers, thus becoming more attentive, fearing to be affected by the absence of the Iceman.

In Desire Under the Elms, the absence of Maw also motivates the actions in the play. Her absence creates an aura of dreadful fear; her spirit haunts the lives of Ephraim and her sons-in-law. She catalyzes the actions through her vengeance and guilt, she urges the sons to react against their father's enslavement and injustice. She is a protean character, for she is the mother and the destroyer who ruins Ephraim's life.

This pattern of the catalyst, the absent character, along with its dynamic force, is also central to the dramatic structure of Williams' The Glass Menagerie. The play is built upon more than the poignant plot of illusion and frustration in the lives of the onstage characters. The absent father has given this play a further significance by haunting the lives of the onstage characters, and creating a void which is never filled. The father, Mr. Wingfield, has shown "his central position as an ironic viewer and a constant source of reference for other family members. Although absent, he is a 'fifth character' who propels the actions of the other

characters” (Rosefeldt: 40). And his enlarged photograph, which the spotlight occasionally illuminates, reminds us of his dominant role in the formation of the dramatic structure.

We find traces of the absent father everywhere in the play. Tom, his son, is haunted by the eternal smile of his father; he is compelled to double the role of Mr. Wingfield, and fill the void of the absent father. The worn out phonograph-records of the father, that his daughter Laura is condemned to play, become “a painful reminder” of him. Amanda, his wife, lives in the past. Jones notes that her life

has actually stopped at the time Mr. Wingfield left. She now tries to recreate the past through nostalgic remembrance of her life before Mr. Wingfield disappeared and by forcing her children to play roles that recall to the present an idealized version of their father. (29)

That she has not seen her husband growing old and ugly helps Amanda to preserve her romantic image of him. She could not accept living without retreating from the harsh reality of

depression to illusion; she attempts to recreate the past into the present. She even recognizes that their situation is so desperate, but she could not accept her children, Tom and Laura, as they are. So,

In discarding the real father's part, Tennessee Williams found it necessary to endow the mother with some masculine practicality, thus giving Amanda Wingfield an exceedingly complex personality...the only way Amanda can live with ugly reality is to retreat into her memories. (Bloom: 34)

All of the above proves the central importance of the absent father, who energizes the onstage characters and catalyzes the actions of the play.

The last play to be considered in this study is Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Like O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh, the play is constructed specifically around the absence of the son and its symbolic function as a representation of hope and stability. Again, as in O'Neill's play, the actions of the play are driven by the creation of this absent son. George and Martha, cherishing this state of illusion, believe that they are happy and satisfied.

Along with the predominant presence of the absent character, the imaginary son in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? reflects, as all my selected plays do, a strong ambivalence towards this absent character. George and Martha, in the continuing absence of the son, find themselves urged to bring the son into presence by creating a mental image:

Unable to have children, they have conspired to create a fantasy child, designed to cement their relationship, to compensate for a delinquent reality. But in fact the child becomes a divicive principle, claimed as an accomplice by both George and Martha. (Bigby: 141)

It is quite clear that the imaginary son does catalyze the actions of the play, and “cement” the couple’s relationship; yet when it becomes a haunting “divicive principle,” it forces the couple to sacrifice their illusion, the imaginary son. They are redeemed by this sacrifice because “the exorcism of the crippling ghosts of their past [is] symbolized by the phantom child” (Bigby: 146).

The imaginary son works like a fury which destroys the lives of Martha and George. At first, they comfort themselves for the unhappiness of their marriage by imagining a perfect union in the person of a son. This imaginary son grows up under their care and affection up to the age of twenty. It has motivated the life of the couple for almost twenty years. It has become the aim and the hope of their relationship.

Consequently, the thematic illusion, the main theme of the play, is also activated by this imaginary son, which is itself a further illusion. Honey, the couple's guest, for instance, had an imaginary pregnancy; her imaginary child doubles the imaginary son of George and Martha. Again the viewer never knows whether the story of the bargain boy is about George or whether it is even true. Also there are other mysteries involving other secondary absent characters; does Martha's father really not care for her? Does a faculty member actually fall dead in the cafeteria? Is Honey's father a saint or a hypocrite? Having read the play carefully, one tends to assume the worst.

Albee's employment of the absent son as fully imaginary is a technique to endow the play with suspense and mystery. As Ruth Meyer states:

Reality... is a painful interpretation of verifiable fact and imagination, with the fact of the mind often far more real than that of the body. When Martha accuses George of not knowing the difference between truth and illusion, he admits "no, but we must carry on as though we did." (Bloom: 69)

The imaginary son is just a mere illusion, which helps to associate the meaning of the actions on the stage with "even the most ancient of human rites, with the implied but appropriate fusion of fertility, bacchanal, and witchery" (Maccants: 162). It is an illusion which is created to ease the couple's pain, but it destroys their lives and shatters their dreams. When the imaginary son is first mentioned in the early part of the play, it is only a subject for an argument. And George warns Martha not to bring up "the bit about the child," and when she does, he becomes angry. Later on, they start blaming each other over the mistreatment of the

child, which has harmed the child most; is it Martha's incestuous attempts to seduce the child or George's professional failure for being the dean of the university of Carthage? Then George begins to speak of Martha's attack on the boy, which infuriates her to recreate the story of the son.

As the play progresses toward the final act, the imaginary son turns into a destructive force; and images of death increase in number, especially after that climactic moment in which George threatens to kill Martha. Although the imaginary son has a double effect, constructive and destructive, its main function remains to catalyze and motivate the actions of the play. And this is clarified in the final act, which works

as an exorcism of their childish guilts and illusions while it also suggests that George, and perhaps all the characters, take on a new knowledge and responsibilities. The truth or illusion game no longer interests George; he recognizes that one must act as though reality could be defined. On the death of the phantom son, the embodiment of their ghosts, they

must put the past away and, in the uncertain light of dawn, face reality. (Taylor: 64)

The imaginary son was the couple's "spiritual mask, the perpetuating marrow of their actions, just as the American Dream may be considered a social mask, and religion a cosmic mask. Through all these, destructive, even horrible deeds have been committed under the guise of positive intention" (Maccants: 177). Thus this son becomes the dominant power by whom the onstage characters are energized.

These examples show that the absent character is the crucial figure in the selected plays. In relation to its absence, the onstage characters are lost and confused; they live in a constant search for a double of the absent character. Its absence leaves a vacuum that propels the dramatic action to create a replacement for it on the stage. (Rosefeldt: 43)

This urge for such a double springs out from the chaotic state in which the onstage characters are left. In this way, the employment of the absent character as a theatrical means helps in facilitating the aim of the author in creating tension and suspense.

It is clear that the absent character becomes the moving force and the dominant character around whom the actions and the onstage characters revolve; actually the absent character succeeds in being the puppeteer who controls the repetitions and destinies of the onstage characters.

In fact, the absent character becomes “a siphon and a magnet, an Other that becomes reflected and refracted throughout the dramatic environment” (Rosfeldt: 3). He or she is a protean character who may personify different roles and shape what is there by what is not there. In modern drama, the absent character is no longer a sacred figure or a God; its absence becomes a haunting presence for the onstage characters and the audience. The playwrights considered in my study have succeeded in employing its haunting presence as a technical means to activate and catalyze the actions in their plays.

V- Conclusion

Having surveyed the use of the absent character as a dramatic device in my selected modern American plays, I have found out that the American dramatists have succeeded in employing this technique as a catalyst. It seems to have enabled the playwrights to create successfully appealing plays.

The absent character in these plays is used intentionally. It is created to serve a certain motive and an important role; it is constructed to unify place, time and actions through its invisibility. And since theater is built on the idea of absence, the role of the absent character becomes apparent most through drama. Drama is the most important genre of literature which has the ability to present absence on the stage; it visualizes full dimensional images and bodies through mimesis. Here actors on the stage present images of absent originals, and mimic and imitate voices and gestures of real people.

It is true that playwrights and novelists try their best to create real characters, but the playwright alone has the ability to personify a body that can express and show. Through stage directions, the

playwright enables the viewer to see images of real life. Again performance on the stage enables the audience to read more than words, to read the body language of actors. Also it crystallizes the damaging effects of the absent character on the onstage characters.

Through theater, the absent character becomes a protean character who can occupy any state of being and personify any object. It may project its image on the setting, the atmosphere and even on the faces of the onstage characters. It succeeds in creating a horrible aura of awareness, and invades the lives of the other characters as well as the viewer; these characters are enlivened in perpetual awareness of its death-like presence. The haunting presence of the absent character captures the minds of the onstage characters and affects their movements and actions; they become obsessed with its mysterious present absence. Consequently, the absent character urges the onstage characters to act as puppets in its hands, and work unconsciously under its commands.

The playwright creates this puppeteer to catalyze and activate the actions of the play. Gradually it becomes the dominant

engine that energizes the stream of consciousness and thought of the play.

Starting with Mr. Wright in Trifles, Maw in Desire Under the Elms, the Iceman in The Iceman Cometh, the father in The Glass Menagerie, Rosario in The Rose Tattoo, and the son in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, I have found out that through their absence, those characters use different methods to invade the stage; they also succeed in catalyzing the actions of the selected plays on the stage. Their absence really serves the plays both thematically and structurally.

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