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Une anatomie du sacrifice dans le théâtre
d'Edward Albee et de Michel Marc Bouchard

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An Anatomy of Sacrifice in Plays by
Edward Albee and Michel Marc Bouchard

par

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COMPOSITION DU JURY

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Ce mémoire a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes :

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RÉSUMÉ

Une anatomie du sacrifice dans le théâtre d'Edward Albee et de Michel Marc Bouchard se veut une étude sur l'interprétation et l'intelligibilité des morts sacrificielles dans un contexte moderne et séculaire. Le questionnement moteur de ce projet concerne l'interprétation des gestes sacrificiels dans des pièces de théâtre qui sont d'elles-mêmes des représentations sémantiques du sacrifice pour les spectateurs et les lecteurs. L'hypothèse centrale de ce mémoire propose que malgré sa représentation dans un contexte social aujourd'hui considéré par plusieurs comme étant davantage moderne et séculaire, le sacrifice est compréhensible et plus facilement interprétable lorsqu'il est agencé à des symboles sacrés ou religieux. Les pièces de théâtre du corpus incluent The Zoo Story et Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? par Edward Albee ainsi que Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique et L'histoire de l'oie par Michel Marc Bouchard. Ni Bouchard ni Albee ne sont reconnus comme étant des dramaturges explicitement religieux ou théologiques. Néanmoins, ils semblent significativement faire référence au sacrifice et à ses allusions dans leurs œuvres. Ce mémoire se penche également sur l'histoire du sacrifice en explorant différentes perspectives de quelques auteurs dont Terry Eagleton, P. Bottinelli et Georges Bataille.

Le travail conclut que l'interprétation du sacrifice en tant qu'échange où un objet est relégué au nom d'une valeur plus précieuse (mais indéterminée) devient plus facilement intelligible si cette valeur présente une certaine connotation religieuse ou sacrée.
ABSTRACT

An Anatomy of Sacrifice in Plays by Edward Albee and Michel Marc Bouchard analyses the potential interpretations and intelligibility of sacrifices performed in a modern, secular context. The guiding question of this work has been how to interpret the apparent gestures of sacrifice presented inside dramas and as semiotic representations of sacrifice before an audience. The confirmed hypothesis of this study is that the central sacrifice presented in each play is intelligible to the degree that it implies a sense of a religious or sacred code. The dramas of the corpus include The Zoo Story and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by Edward Albee, as well as Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique and L'histoire de l'oie by Michel Marc Bouchard.

Although neither Bouchard nor Albee is known for being explicitly religious, the analysis of the plays of the corpus demonstrates the significance of their frequent use of images or motifs of sacrifice. The thesis also provides research into the history of sacrifice and reflection on related theories by scholars such as Terry Eagleton, P. Bottinelli and Georges Bataille.

The work concludes that sacrifice in each of the dramas is a means of exchange wherein a precious or cherished object is surrendered in favour of a higher value which, while remaining ultimately indeterminate, through the performance of the sacrifice takes on an aura of the sacred.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers a reading and interpretation of the performance of sacrifice in plays by American author Edward Albee and Québécois playwright Michel Marc Bouchard. Throughout the analyses, the guiding question has been how to interpret the apparent gestures of sacrifice presented in the plays of the corpus and the plays themselves as semiotic representations of sacrifice before an audience. The central hypothesis of this study is that despite a modern, secular context, the sacrifice presented in each play is only intelligible if it implies a sense of the religious or sacred code. This study of the performance of sacrifice in The Zoo Story, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, by Albee, and Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique and L'histoire de l'oise, by Bouchard, demonstrates that some sense of sacred values is required in order for a sacrifice to be intelligible for the characters of the play as well as for the audience of its presentation—even in a modern, secular social milieu.

Edward Albee, one of the most renowned modern figures in American theatre, emerged at the forefront of the absurdist movement in the USA. As Anne Paolucci explains in From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee: "[...] he is the best product to date of the 'theatre of the absurd' (not excluding the French dramatists who launched it). His search for a new dramatic language is part of a deep-rooted instinct to find adequate expression for the existential dilemma at the heart of the modern experience" (5). Martin Esslin includes him as one icon of absurdist theatre in his book The Theatre of the Absurd because Albee questions the foundations of American culture: "[...] Edward Albee [...] comes into the category of the theatre of the absurd precisely because his work attacks the very foundations of American optimism" (225). Also, in "Albee's Early One-Act Plays: 'A New American Playwright from Whom Much is To Be Expected,'" Philip C. Kolin describes Edward Albee as being "credited with changing the course
of American theatre history [...] he incorporated techniques and ideas from the absurdist plays of European playwrights such as Beckett, Genet, and Ionesco" (16-7). Similarly, in Parodied Ritual in the Plays of Edward Albee, Kathleen Sullivan describes Edward Albee as "unquestionably the major playwright in the United States in the last quarter of a century. Of American plays, Albee's work ranks second only to O'Neill's for generating critical studies" (1).

Being much younger, more recent and therefore less internationally renowned than Albee, Michel Marc Bouchard is still an icon in Québécois literature who emerged with acclaimed plays during the 80s. Bouchard has written more than 25 plays since 1979 and several of his works have won awards and have been adapted for television and films (Taylor R4).

Neither Bouchard nor Albee is known for being explicitly religious or theological although they both seem to make frequent use of images or motifs of sacrifice in their plays which is remarkable in an era dominated by secular, postmodern literature. However, the use of religious symbolism is essential to the meaningful representation of sacrifices in front of an audience. As Bottinelli notes in Le sacrifice et sa valeur objective et sociale, the notion of sacrificial death is known to be fundamentally linked to the religious (7). Interestingly, the four plays of the corpus have been depicted as filled with religious icons—mainly Christian. The different sacred values and religious symbols of the plays help readers assess the importance and the meaning of sacrifice. With this project, I concluded that to be intelligible, sacrifice must imply a sense of the religious even if it is presented in a secular context. In other words, considering that today, in a modern, secular context, people would only understand sacrifice as being contextualized within a pseudo-religious frame, there is still a sense of sacredness in our culture since we still use religious symbology as a means to make sense out of sacrifices.
Each of the four plays in the corpus includes an example of sacrifice in a modern or secular context. Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* casts only two protagonists. Jerry is a lonesome person who approaches a stranger, Peter, reading a book on a park bench. The two characters eventually go through a one-act tête-à-tête which ends up with the death of Jerry impaling himself on a knife held by Peter. The ending of the play leads us to question the significance of Jerry's death, and concludes, in general terms, that it is a sacrifice done in the name of love and altruism.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the imaginary son of a couple is sacrificed in a parody of the Catholic immolation of Christ. As the most famous of Albee's plays, this drama introduces us to the world of Martha and George who have invented an illusionary child. At the end of the play, George decides to "kill" that child in the fashion of a ritualistic mass of the dead. This sacrifice appears also to be carried out for love and reconciliation between Martha and George.

In Michel Marc Bouchard's *Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique*, the sacrificial death of the Countess de Tilly is presented to us as a sacrifice on behalf of her son Vallier. In the sacrifice scene, the Countess accepts to be partially buried and then strangled by her own son. In an interview published by the *Toronto Star* in 1996, Brent Carver, the actor who played the Countess in the movie adaptation of the play, remarked that "the Countess's death scene [is] a very vital scene" (D6). In "The Corpse Lies in Lilies: The Stage, the Screen, and the Dead Body," André Loiselle elaborates on Carver's comment saying that "the oxymoron 'vital death' can make sense given the strong Christian imagery present in both versions (play and film), imagery that can lead to an interpretation of mortality along religious lines as a deception that seemingly marks the end of one's life but in fact represents its true beginning" (129). At the moment of her death, the Countess explicitly refers to the martyr of Saint Sebastian and thus
makes Christian symbols and values resonate in the play. Filled with allusions to Christian symbology, *Les fleuves* presents the sacrifice of a loved one as the ultimate gesture of love.

Finally, Michel Marc Bouchard's *L'histoire de l'oie* published in 1989 presents a sacrifice made on behalf of a god. The play tells the story of a young child, Maurice, who creates himself an imaginary world where he and Teeka, his pet goose, escape whenever Maurice needs to forget the violence and physical abuse his father makes him suffer. Maurice and Teeka are best friends but at the end of the play, Maurice, breaks the neck of Teeka in a gesture that can be interpreted as an offering to his deity, Bulamutumumo the god of the jungle. With its treatment of hereditary violence, the play questions the apparent cruelty that seems to be necessarily implied by the equation of sacrifice.

The controversy of meaning implied by sacrifices and sacrificed victims is not young in the history of literature and drama specifically. As a means to illustrate this, one might recall George Bernard Shaw's play, *The Devil's Disciple*, first produced in 1897, which Shaw described as a melodrama. That play was harshly received by the British critics and according to the playwright, many seemed to misunderstand the entire work and its meaning. In that play, the main character, Richard Dudgeon, also known as the devil's disciple, accepts to be mistaken for another character, the Reverend Anderson, who must be hanged by the imperial guard during the U.S. rebellion at the end of the 18th century. Most critical receptions of the play misunderstood the fact that in the drama, Dudgeon accepts to sacrifice his life for somebody he did not especially like for a reason that is not love nor typical altruism. Indeed, most critics dismissed that interpretation and argued that Dudgeon must have been at least in love with the reverend's wife in order for him to be motivated to sacrifice his life.

However, responding to critics, Shaw argued that his intentions were not to have Dudgeon sacrifice his life for love nor any altruist value, "that he would have done as much for any
stranger—that the law of his own nature, and no interest nor lust whatsoever, forbade him to cry out that the hangman's noose should be taken off his neck only to be put on another man's" (Shaw 27). As Pat Carr notes in Bernard Shaw, "Unfortunately, while Shaw was diligently keeping the sacrifice-for-love cliché out of the play, he also failed to establish any other possible motivation for sacrifice. Richard's insistence that he does not love Judith, but does not know why he was willing to die for Anderson, is not plausible enough" (98). Shaw complained,

But then, said the critics, where is the motive? Why did [Dudgeon] save Anderson? On the stage, it appears, people do things for reasons. Off the stage they don't: that is why your penny-in-the-slot heroes, who only work when you drop a motive into them, are so oppressively automatic and uninteresting. [...] Need I repeat that the theatre critic's professional routine so discourages any association between real life and the stage, that he soon loses the natural habit of referring to the one to explain the other? (27-8)

To imagine a character that literally sacrifices himself just for the sake of it was hard to swallow for the audience. It might have been Shaw's real intention when he wrote the play but it is hard for the audience to relate to that thought. One might be rather led to interpret Richard Dudgeon's sacrifice as an act of generosity, as a sacrifice guided by an idealistic belief system. In G.B. Shaw: Creative Artist, Homer E. Woodbridge is forced to conclude that Richard Dudgeon's "[...] motive is simply a generous human impulse; he has come to respect and admire the parson's honesty and magnanimity" (46). In brief, Shaw's The Devil's Disciple is only one case where critics seemed to have a problem understanding the sacrifice that the author wished to present.

From a general perspective it seems that sacrifice is easier to understand when it is contextualized with religious symbology implying sacred or religious values. In the four plays
of the corpus, the interpretation of sacrifice for a sacred value is well depicted and the sacrifice is carried out following the rules that it has always followed since its first appearances in ancient cultures. People still sacrifice for their own gods and values.
An Examination of the Origins of Sacrifice

In Origins of Sacrifice, Edwin Oliver James writes that "In these days of specialization it is only possible normally for one man to speak with anything approaching a voice of authority on one subject, and unfortunately the rite of sacrifice as a universal phenomena belongs to many departments of research, in most of which I can lay no sort of claim to first-hand knowledge" (vii). Sacrifice indeed overlaps many fields of study. Over time, many scholars of various fields have approached the notion of sacrifice or attempted to give their interpretation of the concept such as Nietzsche, William Robertson Smith, James George Frazer, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Loisy, Marcel Mauss, Carl Gustav Jung, Georges Bataille, Marcel Griaule, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Northrop Frye, Georges Gudsof, René Girard, Luc de Heusch, Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton and many others.

But even if sacrifice has been examined from different perspectives, there seems to be an agreement that the origin of religion is sacrifice: "Un fait se trouve impliqué dans toutes les théologies sur l'origine de la religion, c'est le sacrifice. Il y a une telle importance qu'il paraît en être au fond l'âme. Qu'en un point quelconque de l'horizon un culte s'organise, le sacrifice aussitôt se profile en relief" (Bottinelli 7). Synthesizing the theories of certain scholars who have focussed their research on sacrifice, Claude Rivièrè notes that Edward Burnett Taylor "[. . .] fut l'un des premiers théoriciens à lancer l'idée que le sacrifice était un prototype de toutes les pratiques religieuses qui se développeraient ultérieurement. [. . .] cette pratique traduit une soumission aux dieux par le biais d'un don" (428). In fact, people of different cultures, societies and religions have performed sacrifices of all kinds for a variety reasons. In The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion, James George Frazer relates many situations where human sacrifices were needed. For instance, sometimes gods needed sacrifices to maintain their power and protect their worshippers. In certain cultures, goods could be used to bargain with the gods
who promised some favour in return. Occasionally a sacrifice implied a sacrificial victim who was offered as a scapegoat for some motive such as the expiation of guilt or sin.

In any case, sacrifices can be separated in two categories: bloody and unbloody sacrifices. Unbloody sacrifices concerned bloodless oblations which took the form of different objects offerings to the gods. In terms of bloody sacrifices, animals could be sacrificed but human beings were also part of that category.

The two chief kinds of sacrifice, the bloody and the unbloody, were suggested to mankind by nature itself, and were thus known in the earliest times. To which of the two historical priority is to be conceded can scarcely be decided. For the greater antiquity of the unbloody sacrifice equally good grounds can be offered as for that of the bloody sacrifice. The earliest historical mentions of sacrifice found in the Bible would make them coeval, for Cain as the husband-man offered the fruits of the field, while his brother Abel as the shepherd offered bloody victims. ("Sacrifice," New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia)

Human sacrifices were performed for a number of reasons that were mainly linked to the religious. In an article published by the National Post in 1999, "Sacrifices at the Temples of Doom," Journalist Heather Pringle quotes researcher Elizabeth P. Benson on the matter: "'In the past, people thought they could change the world by ritual' [. . .] 'This was how you controlled the world, how you had enough food for your people. And a human being was the most important offering you could make'" (A17). Human blood was of the highest value in ancient cultures as Edwin Oliver James explains:

[. . .] blood was the essence of life [. . .] [and] by the primitive law of association, any substance resembling blood, like red ochre, had a similar significance and potency. Therefore [. . .] blood, or its equivalent, being the vehicle of life and
consciousness, was employed as a revivifying agent. [...] This explains why blood became one of the most important and potent vehicles in effecting intercommunion between the sacred and human order, and of consolidating tribal relationships. (32-33)

Today sacrificial death and its imitation still takes place in the context of different religious rituals:

Human sacrifice, in the context of religious ritual, still occurs in some traditional religions, for example in muti killings in eastern Africa. Human sacrifice is no longer officially condoned in any country, and such cases are regarded as murder. Some people in India are adherents of a religion called Tantrism (not to be confused with Tantric Buddhism); most either use animal sacrifice or symbolic effigies, but a very small percent of them still engage in real human sacrifice. [...] Even groups of the richest and most powerful people in the world still gather for an annual mock human sacrifice of an effigy at the Bohemian Club in California. In Western cultures no human sacrifice occurs beyond murders committed by serial killers or the largely unsubstantiated Satanic ritual abuse. [...] Modern Muslim terrorist suicide bombers as well as Japanese kamikaze pilots can also be claimed to be examples of human (self-)sacrifice. ("Human Sacrifice," Wikipedia)

Those types of sacrifices might still occur today but they are mainly part of a religious context and are justified by religious beliefs and established sets of values.

But as demonstrated through the plays of the corpus, the notion of sacrifice still has significant importance in a modern, secular context. As Botinelli notes in Le sacrifice, "Que le sacrifice soit un élément essentiel de toute religion, de sorte que l'on ne puisse l'éliminer sans
éliminer la religion elle-même en tant que rationnelle, nous en tombons d'accord. C'est donc le problème de la valeur rationnelle du sacrifice qu'il s'agit d'examiner" (Bottinelli 63).
The Definition of Sacrifice

In *Le bouc émissaire*, and *La violence et le sacré*, René Girard suggests that sacrifice appears generally as a way to solve a problem such as the escalation of violence or an unresolved conflict. Without dismissing Girard’s research, one difficulty with that vision of sacrifice for neophytes is that sacrifice could be too easily confused with murder in certain situations, especially in the field of tragic theatre. In a rather general perspective, sacrifice is also considered a means to destroy or abandon something dear in order to attain a higher objective or value that is judged more important. The notion of transcendence is not estranged to the theory of sacrifice. For example, in *Théorie de la religion*, George Bataille explains that sacrifice "opère comme la mort, en ce qu'il restitue une valeur perdue par le moyen d'un abandon de cette valeur" (66). In *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton offers a similar vision of sacrifice adding the notion of suffering to it:

[. . .] sacrifice, like revolution, concerns the demand to yield up what you see as unutterably precious—in Abraham’s case, his son—in the name of some even greater value; and there is never any telling whether the bargain will prove worth it. It is this moment of crisis or aporia, when you cannot not choose yet cannot do so without unbearable loss. (60)

A sacrifice is a sort of exchange, it is accepting to lose something that is dear to you in order to gain something that is judged more valuable. Both Eagleton and Bataille refer to the importance of a value, something almost sacred that motivates the sacrifice: "Car la valeur n'est pas, nous le savons, perceptible en elle-même et elle reste invisible à nos yeux de chair. Unique critère du réel et de la vérité, elle est donc autre chose qu'une vue ou une pure spéculation de l'esprit" (Bottinelli 77).
In addition, sacrifice and its contractual side—implying the relinquishment of something in the name of a highest value—is only characteristic of human beings. Animals killing each other do not sacrifice:

[Le sacrifice] se présente à nous avec un caractère moral, car il est le signe que l'on renonce volontairement à quelque bien—matériel ou spirituel, n'importe—en vue d'une conquête plus haute et préférable [the sacred value]. Il implique conscience et réflexion et il ne saurait, par suite, se confondre avec l'impulsion purement émotionnelle ou avec le vertige mental. L'animal ne sacrifie pas. L'instinct l'arrache simplement à sa vie individuelle afin de promouvoir la continuité de l'espèce, en vertu d'un élan biologique qui le domine. Le sacrifice proprement dit n'apparaît que chez l'homme. (Bottinelli, 63)

As George Bataille explains, "Sacrifier n'est pas tuer, mais abandonner et donner" (Bataille 66). We could see human sacrifice as working as a contract, as some "give to receive" action. Hence, when sacrifice implies a loss of life as it is the case in three plays of the corpus, it is not necessarily a murder. The fact that sacrifice relates to a practical exchange, to some utilitarian perspective motivated by a value system distinguishes it from murder. In "Le théâtre du sacrifice: réflexions sur le tragique dans quelques pièces de Sam Shepard," Élisabeth Angel-Perez underlines the difference between murder and sacrifice:

C'est bien de sacrifice au sens authentiquement religieux qu'il s'agit dans les pièces de Shepard, car le meurtre y est pensé davantage comme échange que comme éradication unilatérale, davantage comme tentative de retenir la chance (ou le divin, par exemple) que comme solution finale per se ou encore comme un sacrifice morbide, qui s'effectuerait dans une perspective de vengeance. (108)
As Angel-Perez notes, a sacrifice is not a murder when you stress the word "religious" behind it.
CHAPTER 1: The Performance of Sacrifice in Two Plays by Edward Albee

Edward Albee: Moments in the Life of the Playwright

Edward Albee was born on March 12, 1928. He was two weeks old when he was adopted by his millionaire parents, Reed and Frances Albee. He became acquainted with theatre very young since his father was an American Vaudeville producer (Kerjan, Albee 6). During most of his youth, Albee lived a wealthy life which meant being accompanied by tutors and servants: "Pendant son enfance le jeune Edward est très gâté. On l'entoure de gouvernantes, de précepteurs. Frances, entichée d'équitation, lui fait donner des leçons de manège qu'il exècre. Chaque matin, un chauffeur conduit l'enfant dans une Rolls-Royce à quelque école pour aristocrate" (Kerjan 8).

Very soon we know that the young Albee developed a rebellious personality which was not encouraged in his social milieu, especially not by his mother who was very strict. As he clashed with the family decorum, Edward Albee was predestined to collide with the theatre establishment of the second half of the 20th century. Very early he started to write to shock. One consequence of his rebellious temperament was that not less than three schools—even the military school—expelled him. As Kerjan notes in Le théâtre d'Edward Albee:

[...]. à douze ans, il est renvoyé de la Rye County Day School où aucun résultat brillant ne l'a fait remarquer, et inscrit à Lawrenceville, New Jersey, où l'élève moyen se transforme en enfant terrible. Il y reste deux ans et demi et se fait expulser pour refus d'assister aux cours. [...] Tout s'aggrave encore lorsqu'on l'envoie de force à l'école militaire de Valley Forge qu'il déteste immédiatement [...]. (Kerjan 23)
After that period, once he had received a one-hundred-thousand dollar inheritance from his grandmother's will, Albee became involved in literary circles of New York City's Greenwich Village after having left his adoptive parents (Bottoms, Introduction 2): "C'est alors la ronde des petits métiers qui semble indispensable à la formation de l'homme de lettres américain, accompagnée des non moins indispensables discussions littéraires qui se poursuivent très tard dans les cafés de Mac Dougall Street" (Kerjan, Albee 10). It is within that social context that Edward Albee would create his first widely-acclaimed work, The Zoo Story.

As Martin Esslin notes in The Theatre of the Absurd, Albee’s work gave birth to American absurdist drama attacking the American establishment (225). In his introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee, Stephen Bottoms explains that during his career Albee was "Determined to keep experimenting with form and content, [and he] resisted the temptation to settle into a predictable, easily marketed dramatic style" (4). He was seen as one of the leaders of a new theatrical movement in America. Albee himself expressed that "Bad theatre is theatre that doesn't do anything to you, that leaves you the same way you came in. I would rather be a disturber than a pacifier" (qtd in Prokosh). In the manner of Esslin, Peter Nesteruk explains in "Ritual and Identity in Late-Twentieth Century American Drama" that Edward Albee was at the root of the rebirth of American theatre which tended to be a therapeutic form of drama:

Albee is, perhaps, the paradigm case of this rebirth of American drama in the late fifties and early sixties in that his drama is both nihilistic and crusading, destructive in content yet morally optimistic in intent. The optimistic, even utopian, tenor in his work signals the move towards a therapeutics of authenticity in drama. A key feature of American avant-garde drama of the sixties and seventies, this concern with therapeutics or "cure" aimed to replace inauthentic
stereotypical and existentially-limiting social roles with the "real" or "true" Self (be it black, female, gay, lesbian or just essentialist human). (45)

Albee is indeed an incontournable of the theatre of the fifties and sixties when society was slowly adopting more liberal values. As Philip Kolin notes in "Albee's Early One-Act Plays: 'A New American Playwright from Whom Much is to be Expected,'" from the first production of The Zoo Story, Albee was established

as the enfant terrible of the American theatre, attacking the cherished myths of his own country and theatre. [. . .] particularly The Zoo Story and The Death of Bessie Smith, pummelled American conformity with scathing satire and ideological fervor. Albee's targets were materialism, racism, artificial values, complacency, lack of communication, and the debilitating effects of illusions [. . .] Albee's one-act plays called America to be self-reflexive at the start of a decade in which the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, the Watts riots in Los Angeles, the Vietnam War, and the Stonewall protests of gays and bisexuals would all force the nation to confront its failings. (16-7)

Nonetheless, as a controversial icon, Albee would still claim in an interview with Stephen Bottoms that historicising his plays and framing them in a social context is nothing less than futile:

Most of my plays are not tied to time, particularly. I can't think of one of them that needs to be—well, The Death of Bessie Smith of course. That's 1937 and set in Memphis, but beyond that I can't think of any of them that need to be tied to a time. Virginia Woolf, clearly, is taking place in the sixties, because there's references to a number of events in the thirties and forties. But I don't even like there to be a note—"1962"—or anything like that. You should just let it float.
[...] I don't think they are beholden to specific dates. They're not historical plays, they're not costume plays. I'm always deeply troubled when I'm talking to a costume designer who wants to figure out the way people dressed in 1962. It's ridiculous! (234)

Nevertheless, no piece of art is necessarily immortal and every play is unavoidably bound to reflect a certain historical period or social context. Edward Albee has, in general, very well adapted himself to time and history through his art since the shock value of his play has evolved with the taboos of society over time.

On the other hand, I agree that the art of Edward Albee treats many issues and themes that could be interpreted as trans-historical. In "Edward Albee: A Retrospective (and Beyond)," Anne Paolucci identifies Luigi Pirandello as a transtextual inspiration for Edward Albee, particularly regarding the themes that both playwrights have emphasized in their respective work:

From the beginning of his career, it was clear that Albee had struck a rich vein in the challenging new medium mapped out by Pirandello, and others. His focus from the outset was on moments of crisis, "rites of passage": marriage, death, separation, the inevitable change of human relationships, the search for a secret sharer and the anguish of isolation. These elusive mysteries are at the heart of Albee's dramatic art. (22)

Edward Albee was raised in a dominantly white Christian culture and although he is certainly not an explicitly religious writer, he, like many others, was definitely influenced by biblical narratives. The playwright himself is quoted as saying: "I begin to suspect that I put an awful lot more Christian symbolism into my plays than I am consciously aware of [...]" (qtd in Rutenberg 231). In fact, many of Edward Albee's play have been analysed in terms of their religiosity and representation of Christian iconography. As Lilian Kerjan notes in her analysis of
Albee's plays: "Dans toutes les pièces à composante religieuse, qu'il s'agisse de Zoo Story, de Virginia Woolf ou de Tiny Alice, on constate qu'Albee utilise non seulement le rituel liturgique, mais également le langage propre des prières, et que les allusions à la Bible foisonnent—ce qui en soi n'a rien d'étonnant de la part d'un auteur anglo-saxon" (180). Born and raised in a Christian society, as Kerjan notes, it is not surprising that an author would be influenced by the grand narratives and how writers could consciously or subconsciously reinterpret those works in their craft. In "Edward Albee: A Voice in the Wasteland," Robbie Moses explains that

The religious foundation of Albee's plays is both conscious and unconscious and is Roman Catholic particularly and Christian generally. His plays contain many overt Biblical and theological references that indicate he is concerned with man as both flesh and spirit. The Peter-Jerry parallels to Church-Saviour in The Zoo Story establish Albee's unswerving commitment to the finite and the infinite. Beside George's recitation of the Requiem Mass in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, the names of the characters connote the secular and the divine. (38)

In the scope of this research, we can hypothesize that if religious connotations are in the plays of Edward Albee—which at first glance appear to be set in a secular or modern setting—then chances are that sacrificial deaths or parodies of religious sacrifices could be as well represented in the dramas.

Beside the potential religious inspirations of Albee, one aspect of the authors' life that is not often treated in his biographies is his homosexuality. Albee became considered as a marginal writer because he used to shock his audiences and raise controversies. The fact that he is a homosexual writer would probably reinforce that image of marginality, especially in the late fifties when he started to become famous. Albee's characters who are being sacrificed in his
plays, such as Jerry in *The Zoo Story* for instance, could represent the romantisation of the marginal individual being sacrificed for some idealistic value. As Kerjan notes,

> Le théâtre d'Oscar Wilde à Noël Coward, de Genet à William Inge, et même jusqu'à Tennessee Williams, s'est toujours enrichi de l'importante contribution des homosexuels. D'abord parce que cette création est une rébellion contre l'ordre établi, qu'elle dérive du principe de plaisir et veut nier le principe de réalité. Plus que tout autre, le théâtre de l'homoexuel reflétera la persécution de l'individu anomique par la société [...]. (Kerjan, *Le Théâtre d'Edward Albee* 12)

"Gay bashing" is after all an expression that was born to represent a reality that some people were living. However, as Philip Kolin notes:

> Mixing earthy naturalism and alienating, absurdist effects, *The Zoo Story* has received a bewildering variety of interpretations ranging from being seen as a homosexual pass, to an admonition not to talk to strangers in Central Park, a Christian allegory about Peter denying Jerry (Christ) three times, and an attack on fragmentation, isolation, or lack of communication. (18)

Edward Albee and his art rose with the revolution of American theatre at the beginning of the sixties. As a figure of controversy, the playwright has often been noted for his attack on the establishment and his critique of modern culture and social values. From questions of religion to sexual orientation, as Kolin comments, "Albee wanted to shake up American complacency" (17).
*The Zoo Story: An Idealistic Sacrifice in Central Park*

The one-act play *The Zoo Story* launched Edward Albee's career. Surprisingly, it was not in the United States that the play first received unanimous acclaim but in Berlin, at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt where it was produced in 1959. The writing of this first widely-acclaimed play might have been inspired by Albee's work in New York just before he became famous. As Stephen Bottoms explains in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Edward Albee*:

> Drawing on the relative poverty of his own life at the time, and on his experiences while working in "the city of people" as a Western Union telegram delivery boy, Albee created the menacing, world-weary, but highly articulate character of Jerry, to give unfettered expression to his sharply critical view of the conventional, bourgeois world embodied by Peter. (3)

Likewise, Kolin remarks that "Like Jerry, Albee travelled all over New York encountering strangers when he delivered telegrams for Western Union, a job he held for over two years before writing *The Zoo Story*" (19). As Kerjan notes, he was also "a messenger of death":

> De 1955 à 1958, on le retrouve porteur de télégrammes pour la Western Union. Il aime ces courses au grand air, mais très fréquemment il est le messager de la mort, car c'est lui qui apporte aux familles la nouvelle du décès des malades des hôpitaux de la ville ou d'autres régions, de telles nouvelles n'étant pas communiquées par téléphone. (Le théâtre d'Edward Albee 27)

Matthew Roudané, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Toward the Marrow,* explains that Jerry might be a bold representation of Albee's discontentment with the direction the evolution of his society had taken at the time:

> In the late 1940's and through the 1950's, Albee took measure of and became disenchanted with the rapidly shifting industrial, social, and historical climate of
America. A young man in his teens and twenties during this period, Albee felt as perplexed with American culture as would Jerry, his first antihero in *The Zoo Story* (1959). (42)

Roudané reinforces the interpretation of the play as a social critique of New York's middle twentieth century society.

While reading the play, I understood Jerry's death at the end as being a sacrifice comparable to the Christian sacrifice of Christ. In other words, the reason explaining Jerry's death as a sacrifice is intelligible when it is compared to Christianity. But in order to understand this critique and the significance of the play's gestures of sacrifice we must first understand who Jerry is and what kind of character he represents in the drama. How we understand his identity determines how we might explain the sacrifice that he performs at the end of the play. When we compare him to Peter more specifically, we discover that their differences supply much of the meaning, the essence of Jerry's sacrifice of his life on a Sunday afternoon in Central Park.

The initial stage directions of the play portray Peter as a tidy-looking middle aged man who seems to correspond to the typical profile of the respectable bureaucrat one would meet in New York at the time. Jerry's characteristics are rather contrasting with Peter both in terms of physical appearance and wealth. The lexical field employed to describe him evokes carelessness and shabbiness. Albee presents him as "A man in his late thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness" (11). Those clues from the text are hints that Jerry is on the downfall, and that he *once was* more respectable, more handsome and is now somehow a degraded individual.
At the beginning of his discussion with Peter in the play, Jerry's description of his apartment in the poorest neighbourhood of New York contributes as well to classifying him as a low status individual in comparison to Peter who seems to live a rather wealthy life with his wife, his two daughters and their parakeet. As Peter comments when he hears Jerry describe his neighbourhood, "It doesn't sound like a very nice place . . . where you live" (22). As he explains to Peter, Jerry seems in fact to belong to the lowest of the low of New York; he lives among the excluded, the hopeless and the eccentric on the margins of society among the colored queen with rotten teeth, the unwashed alcoholic landlady or the woman who cries relentlessly behind her door. Jerry complains to Peter: "I don't live in your block; I'm not married to two parakeets, or whatever your setup is. I am a permanent transient, and my home is the sickening roominghouses on the West Side of New York, which is the greatest city in the world. Amen" (37). In his analysis of The Zoo Story in Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest, Michael Rutenberg describes Jerry and his rooming neighbours as barren outcasts of New York's society:

Jerry's blatant confession marks the beginning of a series of grotesquely pathetic pictures of one kind of very real life in New York City. It is a vivid portrait of society's outsiders, trapped in dwellings of oblivion, quietly seeking refuge in cheap rat-infested hovels in order to survive another day in a society that does not want them. We find that the other inhabitants of this rooming house are also outcasts from society. (24)

Jerry is part of the alienated of the society, the rejected whom people like Peter would rather avoid as much as possible maybe because they are different, considered degraded:

JERRY. I've been to the zoo. *(Peter doesn't notice)* I said I've been to the zoo.

MISTER, I'VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!

PETER. Hm? . . . What? . . . I'm sorry, were you talking to me? [. . .]
JERRY. And the zoo is around Sixty-fifth Street; so, I've been walking north.

PETER. *(Anxious to get back to his reading)* Yes; it would seem so. [. . .]

JERRY. *(Watches as Peter, anxious to dismiss him, prepares his pipe)* Well, boy;
you're not going to get lung cancer, are you? (12-3)

In the first passages of the play, the stage directions show that Peter is disturbed by the presence of Jerry and that he would like him to go away. In a polite manner he responds to Jerry's questions but he will not add further comments so that a conversation could be engaged. His attitude shows that he hopes that Jerry will be satisfied by the answers Peter provides and go on his way. As Kolin explains the characters’ relation to each other, when compared to Jerry,

Peter is the opposite. He is passive, inhibited, unwilling to give up his solitude for confrontation. A conformist and isolationist, he is both Jerry's nemesis and his hope, enemy, and heir. Living the credo of the "Organisational Man," Peter is an upper-middle-class drone whose job, family, and lifestyle validate the mainstream rituals of the Eisenhower 1950's, as modeled by Gregory Peck in the film *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956). (20)

Peter is Jerry’s symbolic antagonist and antithesis. In "Edward Albee's Triptych on Abandonment," Lucina Gabbard depicts quite well the representation of Jerry and Peter as opposite poles of New York's society: "Jerry, the abandoned one who seeks understanding and acceptance, and Peter, the indifferent father-figure who desires privacy and freedom from intrusion. The play reveals that Jerry has been re-enacting this same conflict all his life, continuously locked into the role of outcast, locked out of love and belonging" (15).

In order to reinforce the idea that Jerry's status is pitiful and marginal when compared to Peter, Jerry reminisces about his early days so that the audience may learn more about his personal background. Jerry's childhood is presented as tragic and miserable. When he was ten
years old, his mother left the family, "embarking on an adulterous turn of [the] southern states" and died away. His father, an alcoholic, after celebrating the New Year for two weeks, died, in an apparent suicide, crashing his car into a city omnibus (24).

The Zoo Story seems to embody the tragedy of the befallen and alienated modern man, the anti-hero who, paradoxically living in a cosmopolitan milieu, finds himself isolated, deserted or abandoned. Instead of moving up the hierarchical ladder of society, this individual is on the downfall, leading him either to insanity or to an early death. As Rutenberg underlines, "[Jerry's] personal cares and concerns with the everyday routines of life have already begun to disintegrate into a form of self-exile from the society that has not allowed him to succeed. We soon sense that this man is one of society's outcasts [. . . ] He has not succeeded in the American tradition as Peter has" (16-17).

In sum, Jerry's life, as he describes it himself in the play, is degraded and in sharp contrast to Peter's. As Lisa Siefker Bailey notes in "Absurdly American: Rediscovering the Representation of Violence in The Zoo Story," "Peter represents suburbia. He is part of established society, in which he resides conventionally and respectably. Jerry dwells elsewhere" (35). This difference between the social status of the two protagonists was essential to the drama that Albee wanted to produce. There would not have been any clash between Peter and Jerry if those two characters had come from the same social class. Jerry is constantly surrounded by people of New York's slums from whom he is alienated. In "Albee's The Zoo Story: Alienated Man and the Nature of Love," Mary Nilan comments:

Jerry provides us with some facts about his past life. He has, for example, "two picture frames, both empty," symbolic of course of the emptiness of his own life. But when questioned by Peter, he maintains that there isn't "anyone to put in" the frames. He has apparently given his live to no one. Peter suggests the natural
objects of "parents" or a "girlfriend," but Jerry can relate to neither. [...] Moreover, in his relations with "the pretty little ladies," it is apparently only a purely sexual, never a personal relationship he attempts to achieve: "I've never been able to have sex . . . to make love to anybody more than once." How is his desperate drive to truly "know" another exemplified here? (56)

The confrontation between the two strata of society is the centre of *The Zoo Story*. In "The Tragic Vision in *The Zoo Story*," Robert Bennett underlines the fact that Peter never tried to communicate with members of his own social milieu,

> But Jerry's own account of his past indicates that what he is doing with Peter is as new to him as it is to Peter. When Jerry describes the colored queen who leaves his door open and the women who cries behind her closed door, we realize that he observed and did not respond to their passive invitations for a relief from loneliness. Similarly Jerry never saw the prostitutes more than once. Jerry's intense assault on Peter is in striking contrast to his former aloofness. (58)

What really counts for Jerry is to come into contact with the other, blind and indifferent, pole of society. Therefore Jerry is not only an individual, he is the spokesperson for a community of outsiders, of alienated people like him who live in the slums of New York City—the poor, the mad, the forgotten. Those individuals represent everything that the middle class, represented by Peter, would like to avoid as much as possible, as Rutenberg has pointed out. As Kolin rightly remarks, "With Jerry's arrival, a new voice came into the American theatre. Albee empowered the disempowered. Living on the margins of society, Jerry is the antiestablishment, counterculture hero. He is the dark stranger, the social outcast, the orphan, the Other" (20). In that sense, even before we discuss the tragic sacrificial death of Jerry, we can understand that
Albee's play seems to emphasize a need for equality or reunification—which are typically altruist values—between the two opposite castes of society.

At the end of the play, Jerry throws himself on a knife held defensively by Peter. Impaled, he finally dies on the park bench around which the play was set. How can we interpret this gesture which, at first glance, appears like a sacrifice? Among critics, the interpretation and the meaning of this apparent sacrifice have been much discussed.

Jerry's suicidal tendencies show someone who would like to be given attention, if not importance. Bennett adds that "Neither hope nor despair totally governs Jerry at the opening of the play [...]. On the surface it looks as if death has been Jerry's primary objective; his early prophecy of what Peter would see on TV [...] It is more accurate, though, to see Jerry at the start expecting and half hoping to die but hoping more to establish a relationship [...]" (60). The essence of the act of sacrificing is there, the law of exchange is apparent. Jerry's abandonment of his life shows that there is some higher value at issue in the play.

Bennett goes further by assuming that it looks like Jerry would sacrifice his life for a spiritual union with Peter, that he is "hoping more to establish a relationship on spiritual rather than physical terms" (60). More precisely, Bennett explains that it's all about what he calls "spiritual love": "Through Jerry, Albee asks how we can tell whether spiritual love is a genuine human faculty or an illusion. Jerry hopes that man is a spiritual creature, expects that he is no more than an animal with illusory and frustrated spiritual longings, and fears that man may have lost even his animal instincts as a result of social conditioning" (57). What Bennett calls "spiritual love" is Jerry's "spiritual contact with Peter, that is, to achieve a meeting of the minds, sympathy, and love" (63). This interpretation of "spiritual love" is compelling but Bennett's interpretation minimizes the fact that Jerry has selected an individual like Peter, with his
particular social background, to narrate his zoo story to. Jerry is isolated and alienated but can always make contact with people if he wants to. If Jerry wanted to demonstrate that man is more than an animal, he could have chosen anybody else. Rather than Peter, he could have chosen his landlady or anybody who lives in his neighbourhood for instance.

In her interpretation of the play, Mary Nilan reiterates the claim that Jerry's sacrifice is made for love: "Doesn't the central tragedy of The Zoo Story reside in the fact that in modern life the very concept of love has been distorted and corrupted and that both halves of polarized society are equally incapable of communication?" (59). In Nilan's interpretation, Jerry's need to be recognized and loved appears to be one of the most significant signs of caring and importance one individual may show to another:

For by his very nature man needs to love in order to overcome separateness in union with another, and apparently Jerry can find no other way to fulfill his nature. But he is not just one individual case; he is a universal symbol of the alienated modern man. He is not the only one who desires to be the object of love but seems incapable of giving of himself in the normal sense. (58)

If we consider love as being somehow a mark of care and concern for the good of another, in the sense of altruism for instance, I find Nilan's interpretation appropriate to the play. Through his sacrifice Jerry would demonstrate a need for being loved and cared for.

Robbie Moses also offers a similar interpretation of the play and believes that Jerry dies for love: "The key to Albee's religious luminosity lies in his adaptation of the Christian equation of love and death. In his view, life without meaning is death, and life without love is absolute death. His plays reveal that the greatest fear of man is being unloved, and the most terrible form of death is the inability to love" (39). Moses also boldly compares the play to Christian narratives where notions of altruism are given great importance.
Lisa Siefker Bailey understands that Jerry and the outcasts of society he symbolically represents are asking to be recognized by the other pole of society:

[Jerry] wants to give voice to the people of his stratum whose bypassed histories seem lost in the fast-paced tumult of society. With his isolation and painful sense of alienation, Jerry wants his story to make a difference; he wants to earn for his marginalized story a memorable place in the larger narrative of society [. . . ] If Jerry's story can somehow become real in another's mind, Jerry can help end the alienation [. . . ] Jerry's goal is to make meaningful contact with another human being. (32)

Bailey also adds that "Jerry wants to find a way to bridge the gap between his underworld and Peter's middle-class world" (35). It is an interpretation of Jerry's role that is akin to Kolin's when he writes that "Jerry's death is intended as a catharsis for the complacent, a wake-up message to get involved in life—ours and others" (24).

And so we see from a variety of points of view and luminous interpretations that the result of Jerry's sacrifice sheds light on values like love and recognition for instance. More generally, so far, from the text as well as from a majority of critics, the understanding of Jerry's death can be synthesized as a result of harmony between the two opposite social classes of society and between human beings in general. It is altruism in its best form. Still, we cannot prove specifically from the text that Jerry sacrifices his life because he believes strongly in a principle — whether it be love, the recognition of the lowest or the will to create communication, etc.— but we understand that in the end, his death makes those values stand out from the play.

The drama has also been understood by many as being a context for the presentation of Christian symbols. We know that the play is set in a secular context but the values it articulates
have been interpreted often as religious values because they are often promoted by religions such as Catholicism as an example. Nevertheless, it might look surprising to suggest and read about Christian symbolic interpretations of the play since *The Zoo Story* is written by an author who at first denied any influence from religious or Christian sources.

One of the most interesting interpretations of religious symbolism is Rose Zimbardo's in "Symbolism and Naturalism in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*." In her essay, Zimbardo explains that *The Zoo Story* is an allusion to the biblical story of Jesus. Not that the sacrifice of Jerry is done for a religious purpose that is related to God but because it is better understood when compared to the sacrifice of Christ who died to save humanity:

> What Albee has written in *The Zoo Story* is a modern Morality play. The theme is the centuries old one of human isolation and salvation through sacrifice [. . .]
> Albee, in recreating this theme, has used a pattern of symbolism that is an immensely expanded allusion to the story of Christ's sacrifice. But the symbolism is not outside of the story which he has to tell, which is the story of modern man and his isolation and hope for salvation. He uses the allusion to support his own story. He has chosen traditional Christian symbols, I think, not because they are tricky attention-getters, but because the sacrifice of Christ is perhaps the most effective way that the story has been told in the past. (53)

Similarly, Nelvin Vos in "The Process of Dying in the Plays of Edward Albee" writes that "[Jerry's] suicide is transformed into an act of martyrdom" (83).

In "Edward Albee: A Retrospective (and Beyond)," Anne Paolucci suggests that there are possible Christian religious connotations and symbolism in the play. She writes that "Religious resonance rises out of a chance encounter in Central Park; revelation is the end result of frustrated, inadequate communication; the end product is a kind of crucifixion [. . .]. The very
names of the two protagonists, Jerry and Peter, have biblical overtones and the park bench might indeed be a church pew [. . .]" (23). I would not go as far as suggesting that Jerry is Jesus and that Peter is the apostle Peter but Paolucci's comment adds weight on the side of those who believe that The Zoo Story is filled with Christian symbols. As it was mentioned during an interview, "Albee commented on various occasions that he did not have Jesus in mind when he named the character Jerry. The play deals essentially with human outcasts in a savage society" (Rutenberg 35). Still, the result of Jerry's death, his sacrifice, tempts the reader to compare him to Christ because the result of Christ's death was altruistic. Jerry's death is somehow altruistic and even spiritual as Bennett notes (60). The altruism that both stories share—Jesus dying to save the world and Jerry for the benefit of his society—makes them comparable through analogy.

Finally, when we look back at the play and especially at Jerry's role in the drama, it seems that one of the ways to understand more clearly Jerry's death as a sacrifice is to interpret it following the lines of Christian tradition. Jerry's gesture—evoking an altruistic nature implying love, equality between people, a need for communication—looks like a sacrifice as it is presented in the Christian tradition, a Christ-like sacrifice. The grammar, our ability to interpret the sacrifice of Jerry, comes from our knowledge of Christian myth and ritual. Therefore it appears that Edward Albee uses Christian symbolism to show us that Jerry is making a sacrifice. It is one way we can understand the tragic death of the character at the end of the play.

This death will cause the audience as well as Peter to reflect on the possible explanation of Jerry's death and question the sacred value behind the act, whether it be love or altruism. Still, the "value" behind the sacrifice does remain unclear. We do not know what the specific sacred value is. Jerry's death may be for love, for communication or any similar altruistic aim including to reconcile both poles of society, the middle and the lower class. I think that the play shows that
there are important values intimated in the drama, and they come to take on an aura of the sacred with Jerry’s death which is like similar sacrificial deaths in the Christian tradition—crucifixion and martyrdom. The actions in the drama leave us with a sense of something “sacred” because we are familiar with the Christian tradition and the play uses that tradition as well as its symbolism to leave us with the feeling that something terrible happened that makes us think and feel the need to reconnect to something higher, above us and the world of the play. As Bennett explains,

To regard the dramatic experience of *The Zoo Story* as embodying a doctrinally absolute statement underestimates the play’s complexity. Albee does not here presume the absurdist’s certainty that all is meaningless nor the social protestor’s certainty that he knows what is wrong and how to correct it. Rather, in the manner of tragedy, this play tests and questions, by the experience it presents, the propositions of religion and philosophy. (57)

In the play Peter claims that he does not understand what Jerry tried to communicate to him, he says "I don't understand you, or your landlady, or her dog . . ." (37). However, Peter will be forced to reflect on his encounter with Jerry and try to make it intelligible somehow just like the audience. He will necessarily try to grasp why Jerry killed himself and why for instance the latter cared so much about Peter not being caught on the scene of his death and asked him to hurry away and pick up his book (49).

According to Bailey, what Albee wrote with *The Zoo Story* is social criticism intended for a society that does not seem to show any will to question its mechanisms that are probably alienating people:

[. . .] the play’s mood reflects the cultural ethos of the 1950's. Albee is writing social criticism in the Cold War era, a time in America’s history when Ozzie and
Harriet made the domestic ideal look easy amid the threat of nuclear war. This split has become a hallmark of the 1950's. Uncomfortable subjects like communism, (homo)sexuality, contraception, women's equality, segregation, civil rights, and cancer—if they were not mentioned—seemingly could be ignored. America refused to confront such issues directly. (32)

In that sense the play is not as absurd as it looks; it's American theatre that hopes for change in society: "The final image of Jerry's brutal death does communicate with Peter and the audience, and this intense desire on Jerry's part to accomplish connection keeps this play out of the realm of the Theatre of the Absurd. With its hope for change, The Zoo Story presents itself as an American play" (Sieker Bailey, 33).

And so, although the play is written in a modern secular context, it transmits a sense of the sacred through its use of Christian symbolism, and suggests that the absence and pursuit of certain values can approach the measure of a man's life offered in sacrifice. Although God is not referred to in The Zoo Story, Jerry's dying points us toward a transcendental realm.
*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and The Sacrifice of an Illusionary Son*

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is without a doubt the most popular three-act drama written by Edward Albee. First produced in 1962 in New York City, the play was just newly produced on Broadway in 2004/2005. "In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Toward the Marrow,*" Matthew Roudané cites the drama as being "Albee's most affirmative play" (39). Edward Albee is a talented playwright who has written successful dramas over his life but *Who's Afraid* is often considered the apex of Albee's art in many dimensions. Unlike *The Zoo Story,* *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* premiered in North America and signaled a new beginning for its author. Until this point, Albee had staged his work abroad, in Germany, and in small off-Broadway venues in New York City [. . .] however] the play, which premiered on October 13, 1962, became an instant hit, bringing the still relatively underappreciated Albee from the margins to the very epicentre of the American stage. (Roudané 41)

As a play which reinforced Albee's image as the *enfant terrible* of American theatre and which was without a doubt as much—if not more—controversial than *The Zoo Story,* *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was the result of the work of a playwright who in a few years had greatly meditated upon and matured his craft. As Anne Paolucci explains in *From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee,* in *Who's Afraid* Albee created a unique combination of different dramatic techniques and currents in order to create an unforgettable drama that would again shake up American complacency:

In addition to being the first of Albee's full-length plays, it is also the first juxtaposition and integration of realism and abstract symbolism in what will remain the dramatic idiom of all the full-length plays. Albee's experimentation in
allegory, metaphorical clichés, grotesque parody, hysterical humor, brilliant wit, literary allusion, religious undercurrents, Freudian reversals, irony on irony, here for the first time appear as an organic whole in a mature and completely satisfying dramatic work. (Paolucci 45)

The play combines undercurrents of tragedy and absurdism by presenting a middle-aged couple who create an imaginary child who ends up sacrificed by George, his "father," at the end of the play. That sacrifice is performed in the fashion of a Christian exorcism ritual where a demonic force is expelled out of a victim by a church authority. Filled with religious symbolism which seems stretched to the point of parody, the play which is set in a modern, secular setting presents a sacrifice that is made intelligible through the mechanisms of Christian symbols and values.

The first aspect I shall treat is the identity of the child and what he represents for the couple as well as why he was created. By outlining the importance of the different religious symbols and influences that are scattered throughout the drama, I will analyse the ending and the result of the sacrifice which will shed light on possible values that seem to be at work in the play.

What makes *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* so unusual in its content is the presence of an imaginary character who is given capital importance by the rest of the cast and who finds himself at the center of the drama. Although only imagined on stage, the imaginary son of George and Martha, Jimmy, is really considered by his parents as if he "functioned as an actual child of flesh and blood would function in marriage" as Thomas Porter notes in "Fun and Games in Suburbia: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" (238). And so when we attend the play or read it, our first question is why would these people create such an illusion to which they seem to give so much importance.
The illusionary child fills a need for the couple. Although it is not boldly said in the play, it is assumed that Martha and George cannot have a baby and that it would likely be because the latter is sterile. To Martha, George is a failure in every sense of the term and Martha, as the emasculating female character of the drama, does not miss an occasion to remind him or to humiliate him in front of their evening guests, Nick and Honey. From the opening minutes of the play, before the guests arrive, Martha has already told George that he was a blank, a cipher and a zero (17). While George is referred to as a flop in all aspects of life including professionally and sexually, Martha is represented as powerful and sexually concupiscent. Caricaturing his wife, George even vengefully fancies her as an incestuous mother who would hope to sleep with her "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" (120). In front of her husband, Martha also dares to seduce Nick. Martha trumpets "I'm loud, and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in this house because somebody's got to . . ." (157). With his two boldly framed protagonists, Albee attacks the sexual identity and nuclear family stereotype emphasized in the society of the sixties where women used to be represented as sexually passive and men rather more energetic.

Martha is the Earth Mother as she likes to name herself (189) and even in terms of physical strength, she is portrayed as stronger than George. She enjoys narrating how she once knocked him out during an improvised boxing-match when they were younger. As she tells their guests, George "isn't too happy when the conversation moves to muscle" (52). Charles Lyons notes in "Some Variations of Kindermord as Dramatic Archetype," that George's "submission to Martha is symbolized in an absurd boxing-match in which she was triumphant" (70).
Martha and George, then, cannot have a real baby because George is a failure biologically, sexually and socially. We understand that their imaginary son was created in order to cope with that reality in order to be able to live an illusionary nuclear family life. Thus, on one hand, the child is supposed to help the couple cope with the reality that they cannot have a child. The subject of adoption or the desire to bear a child is indeed important in the play and Harold Blum recognizes it as the "fundamental underlying theme" of the drama in "A Psychoanalytic View of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" In order to make her feel better and since he probably loved her, we can hypothesize that George probably thought that one possible or temporary solution to Martha's discouragement would be to create with her consent an illusionary child as long as the belief in its existence would remain between him and her; an important rule that Martha will break after twenty-one years of secrecy. In "The Hidden Meaning of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," John Dollard interprets the meaning of the creation of the illusionary child in the same fashion:

Well, it could mean that Martha was safe so long as she and George shared the delusion but if she tried to persuade others without George's love and tolerance, they would reject the phantasy and count Martha as insane. Thus George swore her to secrecy in order to protect her and limit her delusion to the intimacy of their marriage. (46)

The imaginary son helps Martha and George coping with reality, filling the empty void of their marital relationship. The emptiness of their conjugal life also leads them to distract themselves from their lives with different riddles and games like "Get the Guests," "Bringing Up Baby" and "Hump the Hostess." The illusionary son is for them the ultimate game that has helped them make sense in their senseless universe for twenty-one years. Their son is "[...] a child whose presence counterbalanced the absence within their marriage, whose very being was
created out of a fear of unfulfillment, an existential experience of nothingness" (Roudané 53). Charles Lyons focuses his analysis of the play on the role of the child for the couple and explains that his invention was for them an attempt to accept the painful reality of life:

Within the characteriological structure of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the fantasy child is the vessel of Martha's and George's hopes and fears: the object of an incestuous eroticism, a weapon in their attempt to maim each other, and an extension of their will in time. In another sense, the child is their attempt to enjoy the game of "normality" in the face of the reality they confront [. . .]. (70)

However, while being a cure for their hopes and life expectations, the child is also a source of problems in itself for the couple or at least, we sense that it has become a problem over the years. We know that George and Martha are living a sickened life together and that it is almost absurd to admit that these two have lived together for more than two decades when we hear them throwing vitriolic insults at each other throughout the play. Some psychologists have gone as far as using "the play as a perfect 'case study' for their patients undergoing marriage counselling" (Roudané 41). The problem with the illusionary son is that although he might have been created to improve the lifeless existence of George and Martha, he is finally used between them as a weapon of destruction. In "Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*", Steven Carter acknowledges that Janus-faced characteristic of the son which results in emphasizing the chaos in the couple:

The transcendent son brings a double-edged sword to George and Martha's relationship. He gives them something to share above and beyond the disillusionments and recriminations of a tortured marriage. Ironically, however, the son also provides them with a doomsday weapon to use in their "total war" against each other. (103)
The main problem that was identified with the child is that both parents manipulate him at their will in order to use him to attack and blame each other for all sorts of matters. As Georges remarks, Martha models the child as she wants him to be but most importantly, she uses that child to dishonour George and to trash him publicly in front of Honey and Nick:

But you've taken a new track, Martha, over the past couple of centuries—or however long it's been I've lived in this house with you—that makes it just too much . . . too much. I don't mind your dirty underthings in public . . . well, I do mind, but I've reconciled myself to that . . . but you've moved bag and baggage into your own fantasy world now, and you've started playing variations on your own distortions [. . .]. (155)

The fact that Martha is distorting the illusion to her advantage also contributes to the manifestation of her hate towards George and the latter certainly understands that in the play when he points out: "She has a son who fought her every inch of the way, who didn't want to be turned into a weapon against his father, who didn't want to be used as a goddamn club whenever Martha didn't get things like she wanted them!" (225). George knows that at some point in his relation with Martha, their illusionary son is raised against him and that Martha is using it as a weapon to get what she wants. In "Terror and Violence in Edward Albee? From Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? to Marriage Play," Jeane Luere explains that George and Martha "struggle bitterly for supremacy in their relationship" (52). The illusionary child is constantly at the middle of that struggle.

The script of the play leads the reader to understand that the son must disappear but the reason motivating the sacrifice stays unclear. At first it appears to be a vengeful act by George
who wishes to avenge himself for all the insults and the humiliations he was subjected to during the evening because of his wife:

*(Grabbing her hair, pulling her)* Now, you listen to me, Martha; you have had quite an evening . . . quite a night for yourself, and you can't just cut it off whenever you've got enough blood in your mouth. We are going on, and I'm going to have at you, and it's going to make your performance tonight look like an Easter pageant. [. . .] Pull yourself together! [. . .] I want you on your feet and slugging, sweetheart, because I'm going to knock you around, and I want you up for it. (208)

But there is something else behind an apparent act of vengeance as we see at the end of the play. We must consider that, as for Martha, it must be painful for George to kill the son because it was also his idea to propose that avenue to Martha in order to save their dying relationship. If George and Martha are so importantly attached to their son and go as far as mistaking the illusion for reality, therefore if they can successfully hurt each other with that illusion, their phantasmagorical son has become part of the reality on which they are quite dependent and attached. In "What Happens in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," Max Halperen explains how he understands the killing of the illusionary son as a sacrifice for George as well as for Martha:

I have already suggested the degree to which Martha and George feed each other's illusions in their curious substitution for love, so that any attempts to destroy a Martha-vision involves a painful George-sacrifice. Between them George and Martha have concocted a make-believe child, an invisible companion, who is as important to George as he is to Martha. Their little "bean bag," as George calls it, gets tossed back and forth, being employed both as a weapon by which they may
express their disgust with each other and a shield behind which they may hide
their illusions about themselves. (139)

I agree with Halperen and in accordance with his observations, I want to point out that when
George sacrifices the son, he also sacrifices a part of his wife Martha and a part of himself. The
son belongs to both of them and we assume that they both accept that the creation of their son
would be a plus in their marriage. If George sacrifices the son, he accepts to hurt himself and
Martha in order to reach something else in exchange for that pain, in exchange of that death. The
essence of sacrifice is represented through this act of substitution, it illustrates an unavoidable
renouncement in order to reach a transcendent aim.

Yet, it is not clear in the play why George kills the son or what could be his expected
result for the act. Over time, many scholars have offered their interpretation of the play and one
that often rises from critical receptions is to see the sacrifice of the child as a means to destroy
Martha and George's shared set of illusions. As Thomas Adler observes in "Albee's Who's Afraid
of Virignia Woolf?: A Long Night's Journey Into Day," the thematic of illusion versus reality is
a recurrent reading of the death of the child: "In the decade which has now passed since the play
opened on Broadway, critics have persistently cited the illusion/reality dichotomy as the central
thematic motif, although there is certainly no consensus of opinion on the question of which
Albee believes preferable, illusion or reality" (66). Following that interpretation, when George
kills the son, he forces himself and Martha to face the reality that they cannot have a baby and
that they will have to manage without it even if life threatens to be hard to bear that way: "It
arises from the audience's recognition that George exorcises the child not only to kill the illusion
and live in reality, but to destroy one reality—that in which he has failed to exercise the strength
necessary to make the marriage creative even without children—and create a new reality to take
its place" (Adler, 67). Behind that motivation might lie an ideal of truth that was neglected for twenty-one years.

In that sense the killing of the son can be understood as the exorcism of the couple. It is the abandonment of their shared illusions and phantasms for truth and reality. In her book dedicated to Edward Albee, Lilian Kerjan notes that "The Exorcism" was in fact supposed to be the first title of the play chosen by Albee (86). In the final version of the play, "The Exorcism" became the title of the third and final act. George's killing of the son answers a need to relinquish the illusions that have made the couple sick and unable to readapt to reality over time:

Incapables de créer un livre ou un enfant, ils détruisent; mais en tuant Jimmy, ils tuent une part d'eux-mêmes. En le tuant à la veille de sa majorité, ce sont eux-mêmes qui symboliquement deviennent adultes. Incapables de vivre une vie sans illusions, ils s'étaient réfugiés dans le passé ou dans des phantasmes, dans un monde où les meurtres sont nécessairement intellectuels et sans effusions de sang.  

(Kerjan, *Edward Albee: Textes* 87)

Another interpretation of the death of the son is to see it as an exorcism specifically directed at Martha. In "The Hidden Meaning of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," John Dollard notes that Martha represents the image of the witch for whom an exorcism must be performed: "Martha cannot call off the games at will. She's not allowed to be sleepy or to feign sleepiness. The ceremony or exorcism has begun and she must participate. Indeed she is the very witch from whom the devils must be driven" (42). Likewise, in "Ritual and Identity in Late Twentieth-Century American Drama," Peter Nesteruk explains that "George's violent provocation of Martha takes on a sacralized ritual form intended to cleanse Martha of her reliance upon delusion and masks" (45). That interpretation seems to put Martha at the source of the problems faced by the couple. After all, she is the one who could not resist talking about her son in public and fancy
that he was living for real: "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 . . . oh, George [. . .]" (237). Scholars who interpret the death of the son as Martha's exorcism tend to prove that it is she who cannot control herself from manipulating him and talking about him. In that sense, as Roudané observes, the child is a symbol of a demon who possessed the innocent:

Here the fictive son assumes a most real place within Martha's consciousness during the exorcism. She has become psychologically dependent on this fantasy—a fantasy conceived out of her fearful need, twenty-one years before, to fill a void in her marriage and her own existence [. . .] her child not only does not merely occupy her thoughts—he possesses her, like some demon spirit. George knows this and, especially in the final act, sets his sights on banishing the son-myth precipitating a ritualized form of expiation though the performance of an exorcism. Through this stylized process of expunging what was once an innocuous game, but which has now mutated into a pathological obsession. (51)

When the son is sacrificed, it seems it is a part of Martha that is also sacrificed. That's why she seems to feel its effect more seriously than George at the end of the play when she cries and screams and literally collapses on the floor just like the typical frenzy a demon-possessed subject would be expected to demonstrate during an exorcism.

Nesteruk's interpretation of the death of the child is also intended to focus on the thematic of exorcism for Martha but while he explains it in his essay, he stresses the fact that the purification of Martha or her liberation is guided by George, the male figure of the play:
Here the therapeutic shock of violence involves the sacrifice of a fantasy world, of part of Martha's self—even of her point of view [. . .] if the sacrificial Other in the text is the imaginary child, then the sacrificial Other of the play for the audience (the play as ritual, play-going as a ritual experience) is Martha herself. It is her point of view that is sacrificed to our congratulatory self-recognition as those chosen few capable of being beyond role-play, beyond illusion [. . .]. The heart of the play appears to lie in the male guidance of the exorcism that frees a woman from her delusions. (46-47)

We cannot deny that it is George who decided to sacrifice the son and who performed the exorcism of his wife. However, through that "male guidance" of the act as Nesteruk writes, others have seen another result behind the exorcism of Martha.

That scene has also been studied from a feminist perspective. In her essay "In the Bosom of the Family: Evasions in Edward Albee," Rachel Blau Duplessis interprets the death of the son as being George's final access to the stereotypical male-dominant position in the marriage. Following that interpretation, through the death of the son, the emasculating features of Martha have disappeared:

At the end, the humiliated, weak, unsuccessful man is shown to be stronger than the brutal, emasculating woman. The family problems are solved, not by investigating their real source, which we have seen to lie outside the family, but by further regulating the family relations in a highly normative manner. The man is returned to his position of mastery, dominance and control over a subordinate, dependent woman by exorcising all challengers, upstarts and rivals to the central couple [. . .]. A powerful mother-son team disrupts the proper order of the family.
Thus to return the father to the center, inevitably the child must be brokered, as is his mother, but by different means, usually death. (90)

Even from a feminist perspective, the act of sacrificing the son can still be interpreted as the result of an extrication of power from a character. However, Duplessis is careful not to portray George as motivated to kill the son in order to exorcise the emasculating powers of Martha. The scene looks like an exorcism. What Duplessis observes in fact is the end result to which the play is leading.

Behind this destruction of the male child lies an assumption about the "proper" order of the family. Albee's implicit definition makes the family a stable couple with an unchallenged head (the dominant male) helped and approved of by the subordinate female. The reasons that lead to the murder or mutilation of the male rival are thus not investigated. Rather, Albee assumes them. (91)

The denouement of the play might symbolize the re-establishment of the typical sixties family scheme and prove "that problems and conflicts seen in the family originate in distortions of family relationships and can be solved by righting these relationships in stereotypical ways" (94). Duplessis' thesis does not prove that George was motivated by this idealistic vision of family when he killed his son but it still underlines that through the death of the child, which is an apparent exorcism, some kind of transformation occurred within the characters, that Martha and George were transformed and that their roles in their marriage have been counterbalanced.

In his essay "The Hidden Meaning of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," John Dollard understands the sacrifice of the son as being an act of love: "So, George's deed is either love or it is almost pure hatred, or it is something of each. Each must brood and choose for himself. The artist is not required to speak in capital letters. But I call it love!" (47). Likewise, Anne Paolucci describes the sacrifice as George's "gift of love" to Martha (60). If George agreed to the creation
of the illusion to lighten his and Martha's weight produced by their inability to have their own family and the emptiness of their life, it seems that it was because he loved Martha. Therefore, if George wants to remove that illusion he and Martha decided to create, it is because its result after twenty-one years proved worse than facing the painful reality they have tried to avoid. My interpretation is akin to Dollard's:

[...] George's behavior is an act of love. He was trying to let Martha have the comfort of her delusion by sharing it with her alone. By swearing her to silence he was trying to protect her from the punishing isolation and suspicion which is accorded those who are publicly recognized as insane. If this view is taken, this vicious-seeming play turns out to be a strange sort of love story. (Dollard 46)

We will never be sure about the ultimate meaning of the play—as Dollard writes, the artist is not required to speak in capital letters—but the thematic of love seems inherent to the drama even if it lies covered under three acts of demonstrations of pure hatred: "Beneath the play's playfully devastating gameship and animosity lies the animating principle of genuine love which—sometimes unspeakably, sometimes ironically, always paradoxically—unites George and Martha" (Roudané, 43). As Robbie Moses writes in "Edward Albee: A Voice in the Wasteland," the theory about love motivating the sacrifice is daring because for most of the play, Martha and George seem to prove that they truly hate each other, except in certain passages such as at the beginning of act three during Martha's confession that George is after all the best man she could ever be left with: "George's symbolic murder of the imaginary son is for them a rebirth into a living, vulnerable relationship that dares to love despite all the attendant pain involved in making that leap outside self" (39). Hence, under all these vicious humiliations and heartbreaking insults that both characters are throwing at each other there must be built a platform, a solid ground
which has provided them the force or the pleasure to live together in the same house on the
Campus of New Carthage for twenty-one years. That value seems to be love.

And what's love? Some like Roudané have defined it dialectically as the opposite pole of
"indifference":

The play stages a battle between the sexes, but Albee's real interest lies in
presenting love as a unifying presence. Albee supplants the lack of compassion in
The Death of Bessie Smith and the apathy in The American Dream with George
and Martha's care and love. Love's opposite—indifference—is nowhere in
evidence in Virginia Woolf. (44)

Most critical receptions of the play seem to admit that the death of the son created a major effect
on the couple's behaviour which can mostly be understood rather as being related to love when
we attend to the last moments of the play. It seems that the conjugal predicament between
George and Martha will be solved at least temporarily when we pay attention to the last dialogue
between the protagonists as well as to Albee's stage directions.

After the sacrifice of the child, Martha is strangely more docile, insecure and fragile. She
represents the contrary of the emasculating woman that she has been throughout the play. For
instance, instead of revolting against her and George's new "childless" situation, she is rather
frightened. Moreover, while she used to trample her husband with insults as she did during most
of the drama, she demonstrates that she needs to be reassured and comforted by him. She
abandons her aggressivity:

MARTHA. (Pause). I'm cold

GEORGE. It's late.

MARTHA. Yes.
GEORGE (Long silence). It will be better.

MARTHA (Long silence). I don't . . . know.

GEORGE. It will be . . . maybe.

MARTHA. I'm . . . not . . . sure.

GEORGE. No.

MARTHA. Just . . . us?

GEORGE. Yes.

MARTHA. I don't suppose maybe, we could . . .

GEORGE. No Martha

MARTHA. Yes. No.

GEORGE. Are you all right?

MARTHA. Yes. No.

GEORGE. (Puts his hand gently on her shoulder; she puts her head back and he sings to her, very softly) Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf,

MARTHA. I . . . am . . . George . . . (240-1)

In this very last scene of the play there is an obvious change in the characters of George and Martha and especially in how they both communicate with each other. The moment is peaceful when compared to the shattering three acts of crisis that the audience has witnessed. Martha is so stunned by the sacrifice of her son that for the first time, the woman who has been a hardcore drinker throughout the play, as Michael Rutenberg observes, refuses a drink (114). Roudané remarks that the language used by the couple in the final scene suggests that peace and order are apt to be restored. At the end of the drama,

[. . .] the tensions of the exorcism ease, [there's] a different kind of language.

Structurally, the scene parallels the opening moments of the play with Martha's
repeated question-asking. Whereas the opening questions were laced with sarcasm, gamesmanship, and anger, however, the closing inquiries are free from such nervous tensions. Earlier, George and Martha revealed in questions that maimed. They are now more willing to ask difficult questions tenderly, questions geared toward restoring order and marriage. The rhetorical gallantries and linguistic attacks are nowhere in evidence. (45)

In "Parodied Ritual in the Plays of Edward Albee," Kathleen Sullivan in an interview with Albee asks the latter to comment the relationship of Martha and George:

I think they love each other very much. It's not an "S and a M" relationship. I mean there's some problems there. They've had a lot of battles, but they enjoy each other's ability to battle. I think once they've brought their marriage down to level ground again and gotten rid of the illusion, they might be able to build a sensible relationship. (138)

It seems that the killing of the son created a purgation of hate and cleared Martha of her hysterical frenzy. After the screams and the tears, now there is calm and acceptance with at least a gleam of hope for a new love relationship. Other characters such as Honey are also transformed by the end of the play. She who went through a secret abortion has signified her desire to bear a son even prior to the sacrifice of the illusionary child, as Ruby Cohn notes in his book on Edward Albee:

[...] when Martha indulges in an idealized biography of her son (before George kills him), Honey announces abruptly, "I want a child." She repeats this wish just before Martha shifts from the son as ideal biography to the son as weapon against Georges. Though Honey's conversion is sudden (and scarcely credible), it seems to be sustained. (23)
From the last conversation that George and Martha have after their guests have left, there can't be any retaliations or fight expected soon. The couple demonstrates that now they need each other, which is the first step in the process of a conjugal reunion. As Thomas Porter states in "Fun and Games in Suburbia: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,” "Martha is now afraid of Virginia Woolf, of that private world of fantasy built into a public face according to what society expects and demands. Without masks, husband and wife can begin to create a new life, maybe out of a mutual isolation and a mutual need" (242).

There is an inherent sense of reconciliation in the final scene. Those two individuals demonstrate that they are ready for a ceasefire and for a new beginning with no illusionary vision of life. They agree that from the death of the son, it will be "just us" (241). Nelvin Vos in "The Process of Dying in the Plays of Edward Albee" also interprets the ending of the play as a reconciliation between Martha and George: "Out of this process of dying, purgation and purification emerge. The sacrificial death of the son brings atonement and reconciliation at dawn on a Sunday morning" (82). When reconciliation is present, Roudané points out that love is not very far behind and must be expected as a result: "Despite their intense fighting, George and Martha forgive, and in forgiving create the possibility for a sense of love to reassert itself" (57). "[...] [their] verbal and nonverbal communication implies the start of a loving armistice, a definitive change in their relationship to the self and the other" (56).

Although Albee's play is modern, there are many religious symbols or parodies of religious symbols in the drama which I think stress the importance of the sacrifice of the son and help us to understand it. Albee's use of religious symbolism is not new to Virginia Woolf as Kerjan notes:

Dans toutes les pièces à composante religieuse, qu'il s'agisse de *Zoo Story*, de *Virginia Woolf* ou de *Tiny Alice*, on constate qu'Albee utilise non seulement le
rituel liturgique, mais également le langage propre des prières, et que les allusions à la Bible foisonnent—ce qui en soi n'a rien d'étonnant de la part d'un auteur anglo-saxon. (180)

We know that Albee's first play, *The Zoo Story* has been thoroughly interpreted as a Christian allegory by different critics such as Rose Zimbardo for instance. As well, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the child of Martha and George can be seen as a Christ figure who turns out being immolated by George during the performance of the Mass of the dead. During the ceremony, George can be portrayed as the sacrificer, the high priest who performs a Latin ritual that has obvious similarities with Christian eucharistic celebrations:

In his role of prophetic high priest, George hears Martha's "confession," blessing it with his reading of the service for the dead. And like the priest, who in the sacrifice of the Mass becomes once again the figure of Christ, and who in the mystery of the transubstantiation turns ordinary bread and wine into the body and bread of Christ, George too emerges gradually as celebrant of a mystery [. . .]. The parody of transubstantiation is completed in his claim that he ate the telegram (the only proof of the story he is telling), just as the priest at the elevation eats the consecrated Host in remembrance of Christ's last supper. (Paolucci 61)

While Martha refers to their son as a poor lamb, George starts reciting Latin prayers and psalms: "Absolve, Domine, animas omnium fidelim defunctorum ab omni vinculo delictorum" (220).

The quality and the form of the speech is resonating with Catholicism when it is marked with lines like "Kyrie, eleison. Christie, eleison. Kyrie, eleison" (228).

Before the sacrifice of the son there are other clues from the text that describe him as being almost worshipped and given a sacred status by his parents. For example, Martha seems to
consider him as a savior, as the one who will make she and George live a better life. As Thomas
Porter points out: "Martha does see the child as savior, a medium of reconciliation and
redemption in a hostile universe" (244). The child saves her and George from a chaotic
existence:

And as he grew . . . and as he grew . . . oh! so wise! . . . he walked evenly
between us . . . (She spreads her hands) . . . a hand out to each of us for what we
could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love . . . and these hands,
still, to hold us off a bit, for mutual protection, to protect us all from George's . . .
weakness . . . and my . . . necessary greater strength . . . to protect himself . . . and
us. (222)

While associated to Christian symbols, the son figure can resonate as well with Greek
mythological symbols as Rictor Carl Norton states in "Folklore and Myth in Who's Afraid of
Virginia Woolf?":

This son, whom George does indeed have the power to kill, is a little Apollo: "He
loved the sun! . . . He was tan before and after everyone . . . and in the sun his hair
. . . became . . . fleece"; he is called "sunny-Jim," and used to keep "the bow and
arrow" under his bed. He is also "the Lamb" and George is "going to make
[Martha's] performance tonight look like an Easter pageant," a ritual in which the
sacrifice of the son brings atonement for the living. (166)

The child is the image of a redeemer. Martha believes that their son, by his existence will
redeem her and George and lead them to a final reunion. It is through the sacrifice of his life that
the imaginary son and the figure he might symbolize, such as Jesus for instance, opens the gates
for salvation to his parents: "It is not a mass for the repose of a son who never existed, but for the
new souls of the living. Light may now strike their perturbed spirits [. . .]" (Halperen 141).
Carter stresses a literal comparison between Jesus and the son and adds that "The italicized 'us' in "Jesus" is, in short, a mnemonic clue to the play's ultimate irony: The cherished son must be sacrificed in order to redeem the us, the barren marriage of George and Martha" (103). Moreover, Kerjan underlines the symbolism implied by the end of the night and the new dawn of a Sunday morning following the crisis: "La pièce débute au plus profond de la nuit, elle s'achève lorsque le jour s'est levé et que le dernier verset du requiem pour une illusion défunte consacre la lumière retrouvée: 'Et lux perpetua luceat eis'" (Albee 77).

In short, from among the different interpretations of the drama, it is easy to agree that there is a significant religious symbology implied in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? From the language, the concepts and the values that many critics underline in their respective depiction of the play, we understand that religious and mostly Christian symbolism help us to give sense to the sacrifice of the illusionary son. The references to concepts of truth and illusion, acceptance, exorcism, witchcraft, priesthood, sacralized ritual, demonization, purification, liberation, love, rebirth and conversion confirm that theory.

The fact that the sacrifice of the son looks like a religious sacrifice—particularly Christian—stresses its importance from the audience's perspective and renders it intelligible. Using Christian symbols can be more appealing for an audience as well. As Norton observes: "To make a primordial ritual appealing to the contemporary audience, [Edward Albee] has hinted at basic ritual patterns by the use of jokes, allusions, and illusions" (Norton 159). But Albee's use of religious symbols does not mean that he endorses their religious origins. However, using those religious symbols in a modern context and for a secular audience becomes important for the playwright because only in that context can his depiction of the death of an illusionary son be understood as a sacrifice.
CHAPTER 2: The Performance of Sacrifice in Two Plays by Michel Marc Bouchard

Michel Marc Bouchard: Moments in the Life of the Playwright

What kind of writer is Michel Marc Bouchard and how did he came to write plays that are concerned with sacrifice and sacrificial victims? Like Edward Albee, Bouchard is a dramatist in whose work the topic of sacrifice is presented and where references to the religious are underlined.

Bouchard was born in 1958 in Saint-Cœur-de-Marie in Lac-Saint-Jean. The name of his native town as well as the period during which he was born suggest that he was raised in a rural, Christian society. In some of his plays, like Les muses orphelines and Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique, the setting of the plot is Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean where the author lived his childhood. What we know from those early years is that Bouchard developed an affinity for theatre from a very young age and during that period he himself organised the first tour of one of his own plays, Scandale,¹ as he mentions to André Dionne: "J'ai d'abord écrit un roman très sensuel à douze ans. J'ai organisé ma première tournée théâtrale au Lac-Saint-Jean à quatorze ans" (Bouchard, "Tout plein d'émotions" 13).

From his first dramatic works, we notice that Bouchard was significantly inspired by Greek myth and mythological characters. Two of his earliest plays are Mortadelle, a play about the death of gods and Angelus, which is described as "un spectacle-fleuve où s'opposent le monde des corps et celui des âmes" ("Michel Marc Bouchard" Afterword, 51). In the same fashion, Bouchard will later create his "'Tétralogie des Tanguay', cette série de pièces qui s'inspire de figures mythologiques pour explorer l'apprentissage affectif, comprenant aussi La contre-nature de Chrysippe Tanguay, écologiste, La poupée de Pélopia et Les muses orphelines" ("Michel Marc Bouchard", Afterword 51).
In his book *Dramaturgie québécoise des années quatre-vingt*, Jean Cléo Godin affirms that because he wrote family sagas, Bouchard's writing style is likely to be compared to the craft of Michel Tremblay who is a great icon of Québécois theatre:

*De tous les jeunes auteurs, Michel Marc Bouchard est perçu par la critique comme l'héritier le plus direct de Michel Tremblay, avec lequel il partage une certaine prédilection pour la scène familiale, allant même, comme lui, jusqu'à organiser la configuration de ses personnages en une lignée, celle des Tanguay qui figurent dans trois pièces [ . . ].* (62)

As a modern playwright, Bouchard is not known for being an explicitly religious writer although many of his plays contain religious symbols and seem to touch on different religious themes such as the death/love paradigm and the notion of sacrifice or dying for loved ones. That latter thematic is very apparent for instance in *Les Feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique* with the intertextual reference to the Christian martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. In truth, when one thinks of Bouchard as well as of other dramatists of the eighties, it is interesting to notice that after the period of the fifties that some described as obscurantist—especially when the province of Quebec was under the Duplessis political regime which led in the following years to a rebellion against Catholicism and religious movements in general—a certain yearning for the religious seemed to rise again at the end of the seventies. As Louise Vigeant notes in *Du réalisme à l'expressionisme: la dramaturgie québécoise récente à grands traits*, after a period of rebellion against Catholicism in Quebec, religious topics seemed to be more attractive and evocative for different writers:

* [. . .] si la religion, après avoir longtemps été omniprésente dans nos manifestations culturelles, a connu une courte éclipse, les figures mythiques, sinon*

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1 See also "Michel Marc Bouchard," Afterword, 51.
la spiritualité, semblent connaître un certain regain. On aura remarqué, par exemple, la présence du cérémonial dans l'œuvre de Normand Chaurette, ou encore l'association de la mort et de l'amour en une sorte de sacrifice, chez René-Daniel Dubois et Michel Marc Bouchard. (15-16)

This sudden awareness of the religious that rose in Québec by the beginning of the eighties is beyond the scope of the present thesis. Still, we know that when religious themes are explored, whether in literature or in different forms of art, the notion of sacrifice can be expected somewhere.

Like Albee, Bouchard is homosexual and the Théâtre cotemporain.net web site describes him as an "auteur ouvertement gai." His different works contain indeed many homosexual characters and treat issues related to homosexuality such as in Les muses orphelines, La contre-nature de Chrysippe Tanguay and of course, Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique. In Les feluettes, religion is even paralleled with homosexuality according to the intertextual references to the martyrdom of Saint Sebastien as narrated by Gabriele D'Anunzio. Saint Sebastien is also known in popular culture for being the patron of homosexuals (Defraeye 131).

In brief, when we think of Michel Marc Bouchard and his work, we think of Greek and Christian mythological influences and values and themes such as love and death that are often treated within a dramatic, even romantic, homosexual context.
Sacrificing the Mother in Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique

Some critics have described the reception of Bouchard's Les feluettes as his first public recognition. For Bouchard, "[..] la reconnaissance publique n'arrive vraiment pour lui qu'avec la création, en septembre 1987 à la salle Fred-Barry, de Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique par le Théâtre Petit à Petit en collaboration avec le Théâtre Français du Centre national des arts" ("Michel Marc Bouchard"). Les feluettes is in fact the playwright's "premier véritable succès".² As Pat Donnelly comments, "Michel Marc Bouchard [..] quickly rose to stardom after launching his Les feluettes in 1987" (D13). In "Comédiens et martyrs," Solange Lévesque and Diane Pavlovic elaborate on the success of the play which is now considered an incontournable from Montreal's theatre scene. Bouchard's work with director André Brassard created an unforgettable masterpiece that the public very much admired:

On a dit des Feluettes qu'ils étaient désormais un "classique" de la dramaturgie québécoise; leurs nombreuses séries de représentations, à Montréal et ailleurs, ont suscité partout le même enthousiasme et, à quelques exceptions près, la même unanimité. La rencontre entre Michel Marc Bouchard, auteur, et André Brassard, metteur en scène, est déjà considérée par plusieurs comme étant de celles qui comptent, de celles qu'une alchimie mystérieuse transfigure en communion, de celles qui changent l'histoire du théâtre dans un milieu donné ou du moins, qui y marquent un jalon incontournable. (152)

Since its first presentation in 1986, the play toured the country and it has been adapted into a movie in English. In her essay, "À propos des Feluettes: questions et hypothèses," Solange Lévesque confirms that the Montreal public warmly welcomed the play from its first representations (174). The drama won the "prix du Journal de Montréal" and the "prix
d'excellence du Cercle littéraire de l'Outaouais" as the Centre des auteurs dramatiques details: "En 1988, le succès de *Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique* lui donne accès à d'autres scènes canadiennes et à d'autres continents. *Lilies*, la version anglaise de *Les feluettes*, reçoit le prix Dora Moore et le prix Chalmer (1991)” ("Michel Marc Bouchard", CEAD). The play was in fact so successful that it attracted the attention of movie director John Greyson who produced *Lilies*, the movie adaptation of the play which also won numerous awards:

La version cinématographique des *Feluettes*, scénarisée par l'auteur et réalisée, par John Greyson sous le titre *Lilies* (1996), a remporté plusieurs prix internationaux dont la Salamandre d'or à Blois, le Grand prix du jury au Outfest Film Festival de Los Angeles, le prix du meilleur film au Lesbian and Gay Film Festival de San Francisco, le prix du public au Festival international d'Oslo et le Génie du meilleur film canadien. ("Michel Marc Bouchard", CEAD)

The play was acclaimed but it was also celebrated for its treatment of gay issues in a society that was still in the process of questioning the definition and the acceptance of homosexual love: "Explicitement, l’oeuvre illustre la grandeur et les misères de l’amour homosexuel" (Lévesque 176). However, even when we understand the play—which included only male actors, even for female roles—as a defence of homosexual love and its undeniable presence in our society, as Sara Graefé explains in "Reviving and Revising the Past: The Search for Present Meaning in Michel Marc Bouchard's *Lilies* or *The Revival of a Romantic Drama.*" the play turns out to be much more complex and multileveled:

The reason for the play's success is no doubt linked to the fascinating and intellectually challenging nature of Bouchard's script: what on the surface may be too hastily summed up as an adolescent love story of two gay men struggling to

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2 See Théâtre-contemporain.net
find fulfilment in their homophobic, rural town of Roberval in 1912, is in fact
something much more complex. (Graefe)

Beside homoeroticism, there are other significant elements to the play such as themes of passion,
romanticism, religion and life experience which "are revived as both the characters and Bouchard
engage in restaging plays" (Graefe).

More specifically, in his review of the play, André Bourassa explains that there is an
important relation between the sacred and the profane in the drama:

Ce n'est pas l'exploitation dramatique du rapport érotisme/sacré qui m'intéresse le
plus, du point de vue de la modernité, dans la pièce de Bouchard. [...] C'est
l'effet du rapprochement plus ou moins arbitraire des deux réseaux de métaphores
du sacré et du profane qui, provoquant l'inconscient, peut générer des
automatismes révélateurs. (Bourassa 50)

In fact, from various analyses of the play, we understand that the drama treats the issue of love as
a transcendent concept.

For example, the transcendence of love is displayed at the end of the play when Vallier
and Simon, after swallowing the rings consolidating their union, are ready to die in the flames of
the attic for their love, expecting their embrace to be eternal. Similarly, the burial of Marie-Laure
de Tilly, the French Countess, is another moment fort of the drama. The act of killing her is
accomplished in the name of a sacred value that both agents—sacrificer and sacrificed
victim—call "love." In the background of Les feluettes and the romantic homosexual love story
between Simon and Vallier lies the sacrifice of this fifth business character who asks her son to
half-bury her alive before strangling her to death. For critics like Lévesque and Pavolovic, the
character of the Countess and her death scene stole the whole show of Les feluettes even if she is
not one of the main characters of the play: "[...] le personnage de la comtesse de Tilly a vite attiré les foules, l'interprétation inoubliable de René Gagnon le propulsant presque à l'avant de la scène, où il concurrence en quelque sorte la relation amoureuse entre Vallier et Simon" (Lévesque et Pavlovic 156). Vallier's matricide for some critics becomes the centre of the structure of the play. As Lévesque points out: "Mais étrangement, c'est l'histoire implicite de Vallier et de sa mère que j'ai trouvé la plus convaincante et la plus poignante ..." (Lévesque 177). Likewise, Piet Defraeye and Marylea MacDonald identify the ritualistic death of the Countess as the central core of the drama:

[La comtesse] est, en d'autres mots, plus qu'un personnage; elle est, pour citer Artaud, "une sorte de drame essentiel qui comprend des perspectives infinies de conflits." Ce n'est pas par hasard qu'elle choisit de mourir vers la fin de la pièce et qu'elle met en scène sa propre mort. Bien qu'au premier abord elle paraisse folle et perdue, elle est le seul personnage qui soit rattaché à la terre et qui, à la fin, y retourne, après avoir mangé un gâteau de terre, sa recette préférée [. . .]. (132)

The death of Marie-Laure de Tilly is more than an assisted suicide. The sacrifice serves the symbolic purpose in the play of bringing to the forefront of the stage the value of love which is presented in a pseudo-Christian setting. Thus, even if Bouchard presents his play in a modern and postmodern context, his craft is filled with sacred and religious symbols resulting in the distinction of realms and values for which some characters are ready to sacrifice their lives. The religious resonances of Les feluettes emphasize the importance and the meaning of the sacrifice of the Countess and facilitates our understanding of this gesture.

In the sub-plot of Les feluettes, the Countess and her son Vallier De Tilly were once part of the aristocratic class of France before they were forced into exile in Quebec after the downfall of the French monarchy. The Countess declined into apparent lunacy over time waiting for the
return of her husband and the downfall of the Third Republic, which would have meant for her the re-establishment of the French monarchy. In the play, the Countess lives constantly in illusions and pipe dreams which mostly concern the eventual glorious return of her husband from France. Ruined and living with Vallier in impoverished conditions, she goes as far as imagining that she and her son live in a manor in Roberval with servants. She believes as well that Lac-St-Jean is the Mediterranean Sea on which her son likes to sail in order to relax when in fact he is working as a tourist guide. As Lévesque and Pavlovic point out: "La comtesse De Tilly, que plusieurs croient folle, s'invente très consciemment un manoir, des terres, une Méditerranée, un mari la faisant danser, une femme de chambre et un valet de pied, univers destiné à pallier la perte de celui où elle évoluait auparavant [. . .]" (Lévesque and Pavlovic 157).

All of the Countess's pipe dreams lighten the weight of her despair. The Countess is considered mad in the Roberval community but there is method in her madness. She despairs—much more than her son Vallier—that her husband has abandoned her but Lévesque and Pavlovic observe: "la comtesse apparaît comme celle qui ne voit pas (ou qui ne veut pas voir)" (158). The residents of Roberval consider the Countess insane since they cannot relate to her phantasy world and understand the truth behind this universe she has fashioned for herself. There is a crucial moment in the play during which the Countess really admits to be creating herself a world of illusions and it is when she is ready to die and when she tries to convince her son that she must die:

LA COMPTESSE. Ne gâchez pas mon héritage, cessez de pleurer, de gémir sur votre sort, et jouez, Vallier. Jouez!

VALLIER. Je ne pleurerai plus jamais. Je jouerai comme vous. (113)
The Countess admits that she is creating for herself a drama in which she is the main actress. Her theatre is only meant to ease the burden of her destitution and alienation in a country that is not hers. Unlike George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the Countess must die with the illusion she has created in order to free her son who truly exists.

In fact, behind the fabulous universe the Countess creates herself lies a hope for the return of her husband. Marie-Laure's utmost pipe dream is destroyed by Lydie-Anne who tells her that she met the Count in France and, as a newly remarried man, he would not be coming for his ex-wife and his son in Canada. The Countess resigns to die with the death of her hopes and illusions. That is how Jean Cléo Godin interprets her death in *Dramaturgies québécoises des années quatre-vingts*:

> Au premier épisode, telle une messagère tragique, [Lydie-Anne] annonce à la Comtesse De Tilly, la mère de Vallier, que son mari lui reviendra sous peu. Des que les royalistes dont il est l'un des chefs auront rétabli la monarchie, il mettra un terme à son exil et à sa déchéance sociale. Mais, à la fin de la pièce, Lydie-Anne détruira cet espoir de retour qu'elle a elle-même suscité: le Comte, maire d'une commune, s'est remarié. Cette trahison... radicale (!) conduira la Comtesse à la mort. (81)

The shattering of her hope is too painful for her and so the Countess only desires to die to liberate herself from her suffering.

As André Loiselle observes in "The Corpse Lies in Lilies: The Stage, the Screen, and the Dead Body," *Les feluettes* becomes "the melodrama of a boy who has to strangle his mother because she has lost the will to live" (122). Vallier struggles to avoid his fate and argues against his mother's will to have him participate in her death. However, he finally accepts to kill his mother out of his love for her: "Je leur expliquerai comment j'en suis arrivé à lui donner cette
preuve ultime d’amour" (118). The essence of sacrifice is thus confirmed in the play: the yielding of something cherished for the sake of higher values.

In *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton offers a vision of sacrifice that is pertinent to the drama of Bouchard:

> For sacrifice, like revolution, concerns the demand to yield up what you see as unutterably precious—in Abraham’s case, his son—in the name of some even greater value; and there is never any telling whether the bargain will prove worth it. It is this moment of crisis or aporia, when you cannot not choose yet cannot do so without unbearable loss. (60)

The tragic scene gives rise to the question why? Why and how can a son kill his mother if he loves her and if she loves him? Nevertheless, the answer that is boldly expressed in the play to explain the sacrifice is clear but paradoxical: if Vallier finally has the strength and courage to strangle his mother to death, it is because he loves her. As André Loiselle suggests: "the theme of *Les feluettes* is that one might be justified in killing one's beloved when the outside world proves too dreadful to bear" (122).

In Bouchard's play, what is being shown is that the most powerful act of love one may demonstrate is to kill another being because you love that individual. As Bouchard explains in an interview published in *Lettres québécoises*: "Je voulais voir quelqu'un mourir d'amour sur scène" (12). In "*Les feluettes: aimer/tuer*," Isabelle Raynauld comments:

> [...] toujours aussi poignant, l'amour pour être vrai et grand a toujours été mesuré à la mort, seule limite honorable qui clôt et permet l'amour à la fois. Et l'amour n'est peut-être vivable que s'il est constamment menacé de mort.
Dans *Les feluettes* l'amour se fait meurtrier, dévastateur. La preuve ultime de l'amour n'est plus de donner la vie mais bien la mort, parce que l'amour, dans la mort ne meurt pas mais "revit sept fois plus ardent." (171)

*Les feluettes* presents love as a transcending value which may bring the individual to salvation:

[... ] l'amour véritable est marginal mais salvateur, il mérite qu'on meure pour lui et même, il trouve dans la mort une preuve de sa force et de sa véracité: "Je leur expliquerai comment j'en suis arrivé à lui donner cette preuve ultime d'amour," dit Vallier venant d'étrangler sa mère, à la demande de cette dernière. (Raynauld 176)

However, some critics have difficulty accepting this feature of the drama. For instance, Lévesque claims: "De surcroît, que tuer ou être tué par celui qu'on aime constitue la plus belle preuve d'amour m'apparaît quelque peu indigeste" (174).

In a modern secular context, the sacred value of love justifying the death of a loved one might indeed be difficult to accept. As Father St-Michel explains to his actors in his theatrical production of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom, "Imaginez que la personne que vous aimez le plus au monde vous demande un pareil service ... *(Se reprenant: )* sacrifice. C'est un moment d'amour ultime!" (28). The ending of the play where Simon and Vallier die in the flames of the fire in the attic is similarly motivated: they are ready to die for their love as Lévesque and Pavlovic observe: "Vallier accepte de tuer sa mère à la demande de cette dernière; après cette 'preuve d'amour', les deux jeunes amants, réunis, mettent le feu au grenier où ils se sont enfermés, dans une dernière étreinte qui, croient-ils, les lie pour l'éternité" (154).

The theme of dying for love is typical of the romanticism suggested in the play's title. Bouchard dramatizes homosexual love by presenting it as poignant and powerful as any other Romeo and Juliet love story. Lévesque confirms it in her analysis of the play:
L'amour est au centre, il est le Bien suprême, la vie lui est subordonnée. Ne sommes-nous pas là confrontés à des valeurs ressortissant au Romantisme pur et dur? L'amour, cette valeur gratuite par excellence, cette folle dépense de l'émotion trouve son expression la plus intense dans l'adversité qu'il rencontre, son paroxysme dans la destruction de ceux mêmes qui sont atteints de ses flèches, c'est-à-dire ici Vallier et Simon, l'un brûlé, l'autre emprisonné. (176-7)

Donnelly also stresses the comparison between Shakespeare and Bouchard: "Les feluettes was a romantic thriller offering a passionate homosexual response to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet" (D13). In "Homo création: pour une poétique du théâtre gai," Robert Wallace explains that gay couples might be the only ones in our society now who are able to proclaim their courage to die in the name of love: "Pour Simon comme pour plusieurs gais dans l'histoire, la mort est la conséquence de l'amour [...] En cette époque du SIDA, une telle affirmation—mourir par amour—est non seulement radicale mais courageuse, et on peut dire que c'est une déclaration que seul un gai pouvait oser faire" (32). But whatever goal Bouchard was trying to reach with his play by giving importance to the theme of love, this concept is an essential element of the drama and it is rendered sacred by the characters since it is worthy of the sacrifice of life.

There is one important Christian religious symbol underlined in the play which helps the audience understand Vallier's gesture of sacrificing his mother for love. It is the parallel between the Countess' sacrifice and Saint Sebastian's martyrdom in the Christian tradition. Hagiographers lyrically narrate that Saint Sebastian was condemned by the Emperor Diocletian to be pierced by numerous arrows so that his body became like a hedgehog as it is told in Jean-Pierre De Voragine's La légende dorée (135-140). Over time, the different paintings that were made to
describe the scene have found a marked interest especially in gay culture where Sebastian became an icon:

Au cœur de la pièce se trouve la légende de saint Sébastien, qui est bien sûr celle d'un martyr, mais aussi celle d'un beau jeune homme qui a connu une mort passionnée à cause de sa foi et de la passion de l'empereur Dioclétè. Ce n'est point une coïncidence que l'image de saint Sébastien est devenue un icône célèbre de la culture gay contemporaine, une image de la belle jeunesse souffrante, avec des nuances érotiques, sado-masochistes et idéalistes. (Defraeye 131)

As Pascal Riendeau observes in "Le théâtre des Feluettes ou la lecture romantique de Michel Marc Bouchard," the use of D'Annunzio's play as an intertext helps to reinforce the idea that dying for love is legitimate and full of meaning, especially in a homosexual dramatic setting:

La légende de saint Sébastien offrait déjà un terrain de prédilection pour explorer une série de thèmes exploités par [Gabriele] D'Annunzio: la torture, l'amitié, l'ambiguïté, le désir de mourir, le meurtre perpétré par amour, que Bouchard a su reprendre et adapter à l'intérieur d'une théâtralité marquée plus nettement par le jeu théâtral et l'homo-érotisme. (Riendeau 309)

The reference to Saint Sebastian in Les feluettes helps romanticising and legitimizing the sacrifice of the Countess and the sacrifice of the two homosexual lovers: "In the terms set out by Saint Sebastian, the only way to prove [their] love is through death itself. As they are dying, the lovers quote D'Annunzio a final time, echoing the phrase they have proclaimed throughout Lilies, 'one must kill one's love that it may be reborn, seven times more ardent" (Graefe).

In their essay, Lévesque and Pavlovic confirm the use of Christian imagery to give sense to the different sacrificial deaths in the drama: "Parabole de la pièce de Bouchard, le Martyre métaphorise l'amour extatique et sacrificiel qui 'consumera' Vallier et Simon" (Lévesque et
Pavlovic 155). Like Saint Sebastien, through the sacrifice of their lives in the attic, Simon and Vallier become two martyrs dying somehow for the cause of (homosexual) love: "Dans Les feluettes, les deux héros s'identifieront aux personnages du Martyre de Saint Sébastien, la pièce de d'Annunzio, que, dans tous les sens du terme, ils répètent, et ils deviendront, comme le Saint Genest de Rotrou, comédiens et martyrs de la mystique homosexuelle" (Godin 74).

During her sacrifice, the Countess refers to the martyr of Saint Sebastian by quoting from Father St-Michel's production: "Ne soyez pas comme Sanaé qui refuse à Saint Sébastien cette éternité. 'Je vais revivre Sanaé, je vais revivre. Mais pour cela, il faut que je meure. Si jamais vous m'aimâtes... Il n'y a que vous qui m'ayiez aimée de tout ma vie, à qui d'autre pourrais-je demander cela?" (112). The Countess is an avatar of the martyr of Saint Sebastian. She asks to die and is willing to die because she has faith that her death is somehow a rebirth into another state just like Saint Sebastian who believed he would be welcomed into paradise for his martyrdom in the name of God.

Vallier also believes so since after he kills his mother he makes reference to her being happier dead than alive. One expected result from the death of his mother will be some kind of rebirth in another happier state. Before her sacrifice, the Countess claims not to be dying but only "travelling" back to France or simply leaving for Paris which is her own vision of a happiest life-after-death:

LA COMTESSE. Il est maintenant l'heure de retourner à Paris. Je me sens un peu triste de vous quitter.

VALLIER. Madame, je ne pourrai pas. Je n'aurai pas la force d'aller jusqu'au bout.

LA COMTESSE. Ne soyez pas comme Sanaé qui refuse à saint Sébastien cette éternité. "Je vais revivre, Sanaé. Je vais revivre. Mais pour cela, il faut que je meure. Si jamais vous m'aimâtes..." Assez parlé. Le dernier bateau pour la France va partir bientôt.
(Émue) Il n'y a que vous qui m'ayiez aimée toute ma vie, à qui d'autre pourrais-je demander cela?

The Countess sees her death as a new departure to France and in the scene following the burial of her body, Vallier fancies her dancing near the Seine while Simon underlines that she was very happy to leave:

SIMON. [. . .] c’qu’y vont retrouver dans le bois, c’est le cadavre d’une femme qui s’en allait danser à Paris. Y retrouveront pas ses valises, sa joie de s’en aller d’icitte, toutes ses airs de valses, son bonheur d’être enfin en France. Non, y vont retrouver rien que le cadavre d’une femme enterrée vivante par son garçon.

VALLIER. Je l’ai vue en rêve. Elle dansait sur les bords de la Seine. Je leur prouverai qu’elle est enfin heureuse. Je leur expliquerai comment j’en suis arrivé à lui donner cette preuve ultime d’amour. (118)

Death is like a liberation for the Countess and that scene can be read in parallel with the Christian conception of life after death.

In their article, Lévesque and Pavlovic even refer to the Countess’ death as a parallel to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary:

[. . .] c’est évidemment la Femme—que Les feluettes assassinent soigneusement en brûlant ses ailes au sens propre (Bilodeau incendie l’aérostat de Lydie-Anne, cocue, abandonnée et condamnée à ramper désormais), en la privant de toute intelligence (la baronne, les dames Bilodeau, Lavigne et Scott) ou en l’enterrant vivante (la comtesse, pareille à la Vierge Marie, échappe apparemment à cette mort-là, qui est plutôt pour elle une assomption: Vallier, après l’avoir étouffée, la voit en rêve danser au bord de la Seine . . .). (164)
The Countess is in fact the only female character who seems to "resurrect" to another life through her death. Her sacrifice is not the end but a beginning. As mentioned in the introduction of this work, in "The Corpse Lies in Lilies," André Loiselle reported the actor Brent Carver's comments on the play regarding the death of the Countess as being a "vital death" in a "vital scene" (See Introduction 9-10).

That new beginning that one may find through death is metaphorically underlined at the end of the play when Bishop Bilodeau wishes to be killed by Simon once he recognizes his guilt. In that final act, Simon refuses to proceed with the execution not because he forgives the Bishop for what he did but because he believes that death would only be a deliverance from Bilodeau's guilty conscience:

MONSEIGNEUR BILODEAU. Maintenant, que mon destin s'accomplisse; que des mains d'hommes me tuent. (Les autres acteurs le menacent également d'un poignard. Il déboutonne sa soutane.) Tue-moi! Tue-moi!

LE VIEUX SIMON. Je te déteste au point de te laisser vivre. (Il lance son couteau par terre. Les autres font de même. Ils sortent, laissant Monseigneur seul.) (124)

As Loiselle notes, death is not the end in Les Feluettes; otherwise Simon would have killed Bilodeau and Vallier would not have sacrificed his mother:

Just as the deaths of the Countess and Vallier are tragic precisely because they represent not "the end" but a continuous process that will never cease to haunt Simon (we are told early in the play that the actors have been rehearsing for three years [. . .]) and the subtitle of the drama itself is La répétition d'un drame romantique) so too Bilodeau's death in the "reality" of the narrative must be perpetually deferred. If Simon decided to kill Bilodeau, the corpse that would be
lying there, at curtain fall, would be lying about the finality of Simon's mourning.

(129)

The death of the Countess also produces a symbolic rebirth for her son and especially the renewal of his courage to admit his passionate love for Simon. As the Countess says, "Les vieux arbres meurent pour laisser la lumière aux jeunes pousses, et leur corps pourrissant devient une terre fraîche qui est le plus bel héritage qu'on puisse laisser à un autre" (113). In *Sweet Violence*, Terry Eagleton explains that the theme of a renaissance through death is typical of tragic drama: "Tragedy has no truck with ethics: instead, it offers us an aestheticized version of sacrifice, of death-in-life and life through death, which is as implacably amoral as the old fertility cults" (Eagleton 56). Likewise, in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye notes that in general a "sacrificed victim [. . .] has to be killed to strengthen the others" (148).

As we know, the conflict in Bouchard's play is really located between Simon and Vallier who are unable to express their homosexual love for each other. Even if she is only a fifth business character, the Countess' sacrificial death seems to have an impact on Simon and Vallier's relationship. Vallier's being witness to and participation in the sacrifice of his mother gave him the courage to approach Simon once more and to declare his love to him again. After the death of his mother, Vallier is even ready to die in the flames of the attic with Simon, wishing their embrace to be eternal. Thus, Vallier becomes stronger through his sacrifice, he is not the "feluette" anymore and love is triumphant. (113) Now that Vallier has sacrificed his mother out of love, he is ready to do the same with his own life. He now knows that love is worth dying for. Lévesque and Pavlovic reiterate: "Vallier accepte de tuer sa mère à la demande de cette dernière; après cette "preuve d'amour," les deux jeunes amants, réunis, mettent le feu au grenier où ils se sont enfermés, dans une dernière étreinte qui, croient-ils, les lie pour l'éternité" (154).
The Countess and her sacrificial death turn out to be essential to the drama. Without her, the story of Les feluettes would never have been as the old Simon explains to Bishop Bilodeau:

MONSEIGNEUR BILODEAU. [. . .] Comme j’ai l’impression de subir un procès, j’aimerais m’objecter. D’où vient cette scène? J’applaudis votre imagination. Je ne vous savais pas capable d’un tel lyrisme! Vous semblez vous complaire dans les états d’âme hystériques de la comtesse, comme si elle avait une importance dans cette histoire!

LE VIEUX SIMON. Elle était peut-être hystérique, comme tu dis, elle ne subvenait peut-être pas aux besoins élémentaires de son fils, mais sans le courage dont elle l’a nourrit, Vallier aurait été une victime trop facile . . . et cette histoire n’aurait pas eu lieu. (79)

If Vallier and Simon succeed in fulfilling their love for each other and if in the end Bilodeau can be properly judged for his cowardness, it is because of the Countess, the corner stone of the play. Her meaningful sacrifice is essential to the drama.

In conclusion, within Les feluettes, the different Christian symbols and allusions in the drama such as the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian help us to assess the sacrifice of the Countess as well as the other gestures of sacrifice. Religious symbols can be read in the script as well as seen on stage. As Lévesque and Pavlovic mention: "[. . .] c'est à une cérémonie très connotée que l'on assiste. Procession, croix, cierges, cantiques et lampions, tout l'attirail catholique y est, sans oublier les sacrements [. . .] les notions de vertu, de péché, de faute, de sacrifice et de rachat" (163-4). The references to religious symbolism in the play renders the sacrifice of the Countess more intelligible and thus avoids any possible absurd interpretation of the act. It forces us to think that today, even in a modern, secular context, it is still possible to believe in love, to die for love and to place it at the top of a hierarchy of values. As Riendeau notes:
Ce qui s'avère le plus marquant, c'est le profit que Bouchard tire de la grande richesse de cette scène du Martyre de saint Sébastien pour théâtraliser l'histoire d'amour, lui donner une sorte de grandeur, qui peut même passer pour de la grandiloquence dans le contexte de tenir un discours qui serait impensable autrement. Ainsi, le dialogue amoureux possède une plus grande force par la médiation du théâtre. (306)

Lévesque concludes that Bouchard supports his characters in their belief and sacrificial gestures: "[...] rien dans le texte ne me permet de discerner la pensée de l'auteur derrière celle de ses personnages; tout m'invite à penser qu'il endosse les paroles qu'il leur prête" (175). Even if Bouchard does not adhere to the received dogma and ideologies of the symbols he makes use of in his play, they serve as a code for the audience so that the play, especially the sacrifice of the Countess, might be comprehensible.

After the decline of the church power with the end of the Duplessis regime in the fifties, do plays like Les feluettes show us that we are tending toward a return to the logic of the religious, toward the established belief system through which our ancestors gave meaning to their lives? As Lévesque explains,

La religion, le couple et la famille ne représentent plus, comme il y a une trentaine d'années, des institutions sûres. Or par un curieux retour des choses, alors que l'amour absolu s'incarne dans deux garçons séduisants qui s'aiment jusqu'à mourir, nous succombons et nous sommes touchés. [...] Aurions-nous conservé, sans le savoir, quelque nostalgie romantique? quelque envie de faire justice aux influences qui ont marqué la plupart des Québécois de trente ans? (179)

It is tempting to think so since the sacred values that are at work in Les feluettes, such as love, make sense for people who are even ready to die for them. It is faith in a value system that
makes the sacrifice of life meaningful in the play. In the context of a society that has lost confidence in the most idealistic values of the past, the play evokes atavistic values that have often been endorsed by religious movements such as Christianity for instance. As Lévesque notes, today, "nous cherchons des valeurs et peut-être des idéaux; ceux que nous proposent Les feluettes nous feraient-ils rêver?" (179).
The Sacrifice of the Goose in L'histoire de l'oie

Michel Marc Bouchard's L'histoire de l'oie, published in 1989, is a play addressed to children. As Kate Taylor stresses in her review of the English translation of the play, "The Tale of Teeka is perhaps Canada's most successful work of children's theatre, a celebrated Quebec export that has been performed more than 400 times in 12 countries in four languages and won the Governor-General's Award in 1993" (R4). As pointed out on website of the Centre des auteurs dramatiques (CEAD):


("Michel Marc Bouchard," CEAD)

The play was also adapted for television resulting in another widely acclaimed success:


Although Bouchard might have labelled his play primarily as theatre for children, some critics who have reviewed it encouraged parents to accompany their youngsters to the theatre because the drama might have a shocking effect on them, especially the ending when the goose
Teeka has its neck broken by her best friend Maurice. In fact, in "Kiddie Play Tackles Violence in Fantasy World," Barbara Crook says that The Tale of Teeka is not a play for young children (C2). As Liam Lacey remarks in "A Child's Story for an Adult Audience," the play can be interpreted as an adult story that is narrated in the form of a children’s story:

As the narrator Maurice (Alain Fournier) says—cryptically—at the beginning of the play, there are adult stories and children's stories, and adult stories that children should be told. The Tale of Teeka is his demonstration: it is a story of violence and cruelty told as if it were a children's story, and the effect is to throw adults back to their childhood experience. (E3)

To those critics who suggested that his play might be disturbing for young audiences, Bouchard answered in an interview for The Vancouver Sun that he had "a problem with most children's theatre . . . [that] There are too many answers and too much color. It's didactic and pedantic, and has too many good intentions" (Crook D1).

The topic of the drama is serious and still current, as indicated in Bouchard's foreword. The plot is about hereditary violence that is transmitted from one generation to another:

1955. Un Québec rural, piégé entre la pauvreté et l'obscurantisme religieux.

Comment y élève-t-on les enfants? Au doigt et à l'œil, à la cuillère de bois et à la strap! L'histoire de l'oie, c'est une histoire de lois. Une histoire de violence héréditaire qui, comme la misère, se transmet de génération en génération.

(Bouchard, "Histoire pour les enfants humiliés" 7)

As Kathryn Greenaway underlines for the Montreal Gazette in "Goose Tale Treats Dark Subjects Deftly," there was one sad event at the root of Bouchard's inspiration when he wrote the play:
Bouchard was not a victim of domestic violence as a child. But one childhood memory in particular acted as catalyst for this, his first children’s play. He saw a father hitting his little boy at a local mall. The sound of that slap reverberated in Bouchard's mind for years before he sat down to write *L'histoire de l'oise*.

At the end of the play, people might ask the same question: why is Teeka the goose killed by Maurice? The play suggests that Maurice kills Teeka in the manner of a sacrifice to a god. Since Maurice likes to believe that he is Tarzan living in the jungle, his sacrifice is made on behalf of Bulamutumumo the god of Tarzan's jungle. Maurice’s story of hereditary violence demonstrates that the laws of sacrifice can be confused with abuse and cruelty.

We know that Michel Marc Bouchard is a playwright interested in different myths and he includes a lot of mythological influences in his writing in general. The beginning of his playwriting career was marked by the creation of plays that treated myths and the world of gods such as in *Mortadelle* and *Angelus* (*Michel Marc Bouchard, Afterword, 51*). As discussed in the first part of this chapter, we know that *Les feluettes ou la repetition d’un drame romantique* is also filled with allusions to Christian narratives. As Godin observes, *L’histoire de l’oise* does not escape mythological influences:

Même si *L’histoire de l’oise* en présente une variation plus contemporaine, elle n’échappe pas au traitement mythique. L’enfant se réfugie dans une jungle imaginaire dont il est le Tarzan, c'est-à-dire un héros maître de sa force, maître de l’orage qui menace son royaume peuplé d’animaux complices et qu’il conjure en invoquant un dieu vengeur, Bulamutumumo. (*75*)

*L’histoire de l’oise* is the theatre of a new mythology created by Bouchard as explained in a review of the play for *The New York Times*:
To the French Canadian playwright Michel Marc Bouchard, an abused child is the most desperate of prisoners: he has no escape. So it is not surprising that when choosing a pet for Maurice . . . he decided to use a creature incapable of freedom: a farm goose.

"I wanted an animal that was pure and naïve," Mr. Bouchard said, "an animal with its own mythology to create. I picked a bird that couldn't fly, like Maurice." (Graeber E41)

And since Maurice cannot "fly," he creates for himself a mythical world where he is more powerful in order to overcome the suffering of his existence. His imaginary world is the realm of Tarzan, the king of the jungle. As the playwright comments on the creative process which led to the conception of the play, "Pendant presque cinq ans [. . .] je me suis investi périodiquement de l'univers de Maurice, de Teeka et du Tarzan de Edgar Rice Burroughs" (Bouchard, "L'aventure" 8).

But the play also draws specifically on traditional sacred Christian symbols if we think for instance of the staging of the play and especially Maurice’s house which is described as emanating with an aura of the sacred. The description Teeka gives of the interior of the house makes it sound like a religious crypt or a sacred temple. It is not a coincidence that the final sacrifice will happen in this place:

La perspective d'entrer dans cette maison ne me plaisait pas beaucoup. Maurice tenait tellement à ce que Bulamutumumomo la détruir . . . Elle semblait si effrayante . . . Il ouvrit la porte-moustiquaire et nous pénétrâmes dans la maison de Tarzan: la jungle. [. . .] Il y avait, en effet, des choses étranges . . . Ici et là, des petites boules de feu prisonnières dans du verre [. . .]. Au mur, il y avait des humains dans des cadres, des têtes qui regardaient toujours au même endroit sans
bouger [...] Il y en avait un autre cloué à des morceaux de bois en croix ... De chaque côté de lui, dans des cadres, une femelle et un mâle humains dont on voyait les coeurs ... (Bouchard 29)

As Greenaway describes the staging of the play: "Daniel Castonguay's set design presents Maurice's house as a confining place of terror, a forbidding metal house that unfolds to reveal a shabby interior in miniature flanked by exquisite religious carvings" (C6). In his review of the play, Paul Lefebvre underlines that not only is Maurice's house filled with Christian relics but its walls are also carved with hieroglyphic allegories representing a boy with geese: "Castonguay's design features two metal houses (of which the largest opens like a medieval monastery to reveal a realistic interior framed by haut-reliefs representing allegories of a child with geese [...]" (39).

While Lefebvre compares the house to a monastery, Lacey sees angels: "On the doors are carvings of trumpeting angels, with geese beneath their feet" (E3). In L'affect en cachot, la sémiotique des passions et le théâtre québécois d'enfermement chez Michel Marc Bouchard, Normand Chaurette et René-Daniel Dubois, Shawn Huffman explains that the sacredness of Maurice's house is not a coincidence and it foreshadows the sacrifice of the goose which is also considered a sacred moment in the play:

Le caractère sacré de la scène de perte est aussi communiqué par la maison de Maurice [...]. Rappelons que celle-ci s'ouvre pour former un triptyque, les panneaux qui encadrent la scène centrale, celle de la salle de bains, illustrant en haut relief des scènes qui soulignent la nature sacrée de l'endroit. (365-67)

Throughout L'histoire de l'oie which evolves in a significant atmosphere of the sacred, we understand through the display of physical child abuse that sacrifice is presented as a necessary pain which must be endured in order to reach a certain degree of happiness. Our first acquaintance with the rather cruel equation of sacrifice is when Maurice is given his father's cap
after his severe beating by the latter—which resulted in a broken arm. Following the pattern of manipulation that is created through his abusive relation with his father—pain leading to compensation—Maurice builds his relationship with Teeka similarly. For instance he offers the goose cakes while Teeka knows that in return she will have to accept to be plucked of feathers: "Je savais que ça me coûterait quelques plumes [...] mais pour du gâteau [...] j'étais prête à me laisser plumer jusqu'à la chair" (Bouchard 23). Maurice and Teeka's relationship parallels the violence pattern created by Maurice's father with his own child: the individual who abuses is permitted to continue his mistreatment as long as he can offer a certain compensation. Likewise, the abused does not question his mistreatment but escapes reality in his own fantastic world. As Crook comments on the relationship of Maurice and Teeka in "Guaranteed to Give an Audience Goosebumps":

> When they first meet, the boy tries to pull out her feathers, just as he has pulled the wings off butterflies or set ants on fire.

> As they grow to trust each other, their relationship becomes affectionate and nurturing. But in many ways it parallels the patterns of abuse and manipulation that are the only social skills Maurice knows.

> Just as Maurice's parents follow every beating with a gift or the promise of a Tarzan costume, Maurice bribes Teeka with cakes and cuddles, but is quick to berate her if she trips up. (C2)

And so while we read the play, scene after scene, we notice that through that relation with Teeka and his life on the farm with his abusing father, Maurice is transmitted a culture of violence which eventually transforms him into an abuser: "Although not autobiographical, the play is 'based on a culture of raising children,' Mr. Bouchard said. It is a culture passed from one
generation to the next, as the drama makes chillingly clear. 'The life of the young Maurice is the apprenticeship of anger and violence' as Mr. Bouchard said" (Graeber E41). Maurice is also taught that suffering as sacrifice must be legitimate since it is rewarded in the end: he suffers the blows of his father, then he receives a gift. The bigger the punishment, the more important is the gift. For example, at the beginning of the play Maurice gets his arm broken and receives the cap of his father in return. Likewise, at the end of the play he finally wears his highly expected Tarzan costume although that is only after having been badly injured to the head. We know from the script that Maurice appears on the roof of his house in his Tarzan costume wearing a bandage on his head.

Throughout the play, Maurice, although he acts as an aggressor with Teeka, is also portrayed as a victim of hereditary violence. Unlike him, Teeka seems to question the laws of sacrifice that seem to apply both in reality and in fantasy.

TEEKA. [. . .] Pourquoi Bulamutumumo était-il si sévère pour le corps de Maurice?

Pourquoi son bras ne se réveillait-il pas?

MAURICE. (gêné par Teeka qui l'observe) C'est rien, Teeka. C'est parce que . . .

TEEKA. Encore une fois, il ne termina pas sa phrase.

MAURICE. Ce sont des blessures que je me suis faites dans la jungle en me battant avec Numa, le lion . . . Viens te baigner.

[. . .]

MAURICE. C'est un savon. C'est une pierre précieuse que les grands sorciers de la tribu des Gomanganis ont inventée pour être propre. (Il montre à Teeka à quoi sert le savon)

TEEKA. La pierre précieuse des sorciers, le « savon », n'arrivait pas à faire disparaître ses blessures.

MAURICE. Je te l'ai déjà dit. C'est le lion.
Teeka refuses to fall into the vicious pattern while Maurice does not realize that what he suffers in his family contributes to transforming him also into an abuser just like his father. The whole will eventually cost Teeka's life:

MAURICE (ENFANT). Regarde au bout de tes palmes. Y'a des longues serres aiguissées comme des couteaux qui apparaissent. . . . Enfonce-les dans ma peau, incruste-les dans ma chair et envole-toi avec moi!

TEEKA. J'étais horrifiée! *(Temps)*

MAURICE (ENFANT). Obéis-moi!

TEEKA. *(confuse)* J'étais heureuse de jouer avec Tarzan, de découvrir sa jungle, j'étais heureuse de voler . . .

MAURICE (ENFANT). Veux-tu ben écouter quand on te parle!

TEEKA. Je devais payer ce bonheur en le martyrisant?

MAURICE (ENFANT). J'vas sortir, "la strap"! Enfonce tes crochets dans mon dos!

TEEKA. Je m'y refusais!

MAURICE (ENFANT). Tu sais c'qui t'attend si t'écoutes pas!

TEEKA. Il me torturait comme s'il était vital que je le blesse! . . . On aurait dit que quelqu'un d'autre parlait à travers lui . . . *(Bouchard 40-2)*

Teeka does not understand why happiness must always be accompanied by suffering and pain. She is happy to be with Maurice, to save Tarzan from danger but it seems there's no way she can live those moments of joy with Maurice unless she hurts him. That's why she says: "Je devais payer ce bonheur en le martyrissant?" *(Bouchard 41).*

By the end of the play, Teeka discovers another deceiving truth about Maurice who keeps hiding the reality. Behind her long-term friendship with Maurice also lies suffering. Maurice
never told Teeka that her family had been killed and that the feathers of her beloved had been used to produce pillows by Maurice's parents. Most importantly, Maurice never admitted to her that she would probably also be killed one day for her feathers. He tries to justify the atrocity by saying that it is how things work and that there's nothing people can do to prevent it: "C'est comme ça, Teeka. C'est comme ça que ça marche pis on peut rien faire. Rien!" (Bouchard 43).

But Teeka refuses to believe so and flees. In order to get her back, Maurice uses the laws of manipulation that he was taught: "Reste ici! J'vais te donner du gâteau! [...] Je vais te raconter une belle histoire. Une belle!" (Bouchard 43). Unfortunately, as we know, in L'histoire de l'oie every gift or every mark of affection has its price.

Therefore right after that crucial moment, Maurice panics because his parents suddenly return and then he kills Teeka in his apparent frenzy. Just before her neck is broken, Teeka finally understands the laws of the jungle that are governing Maurice's world: "Au moment où la nature fit silence pour la troisième fois dans cette journée, je compris tout ce que vivait Maurice dans cette jungle" (Bouchard 46).

When we review the last moments preceding Teeka's death we understand that Maurice is panicking because his parents are coming back earlier than they had predicted. This situation appears to precipitate the sacrificial offering of Teeka. Most importantly, the return of the truck signifies that Maurice will be harshly beaten because he did not clean the barn as requested by his parents:


TEEGA. On entendit le vrombissement du moteur du camion de la ferme. (Le coucou chante huit fois)

MAURICE (ENFANT). (Paniqué) Y'avaient dit deux heures. Ça fait pas deux heures.
TEEKA. Il ne savait pas s'il devait courir à la salle de bains pour y ramasser ses
vêtements trempés, s'il devait à la hâte nettoyer les restes du miroir, ou bien s'il
devait faire disparaître les plumes qui envahissaient sa chambre. (*Maurice [enfant]*
*reste sur place, glacé d'effroi. Le vrombissement du moteur devient de plus en plus
fort.*)

TEEKA. Le tonnerre du camion cessa.

MAURICE (ENFANT). (*Horrifié*) S'ils te trouvent dans la maison, j'suis mort! (*Long
silence) . . . J'ai pas le l'choix, Teeka. Ça marche comme ça. (*Il empoigne le cou de
l'oie et le brise).* (Bouchard 45-6)

Killing Teeka seems a desperate act of sacrifice to influence the gods, especially Bulamutumumo
which might intervene in Maurice's life to prevent his beating.

Through his life on the farm, Maurice has learned that causing pain and suffering is a
form of exchange that we call sacrifice. By suffering physical pain or by losing a friend for
instance, you might become eligible for the good graces of gods or your violent father. Maurice
seems to believe that killing and hurting each other will result in a salutary solution just as having
his arm broken resulted in receiving the precious cap of his father. That would explain why after
he kills Teeka Maurice foreshadows his beating but also his reward: the Tarzan costume: "Après
. . . Après . . . S'ils m'ont fait mal beaucoup . . . j'vais avoir mon costume de Tarzan" (Bouchard
46).

In that sense, Maurice's sacrifice of Teeka is not much different from the vision of
Christian sacrifice in which his parents believe. As Bouchard writes:

    Tout mon travail a été de chercher une issue pour Maurice. Celles que j'ai
trouvées sont dans l'univers de la névrose. Il prie Bulamutumumo comme ses
parents prient Dieu. Il souhaite devenir Tarzan comme Teeka, l'oie blanche, rêve
de voler un jour. Il trouve en partie une solution réelle en se soumettant aux
coups, en investissant dans le vil troc que ces coups lui procurent. Voilà ses
issues. (Bouchard, Histoire pour les enfants humiliés 7)

Teeka's death looks like the typical sacrifice of Christian martyrdom. Similarly, Maurice—just
like Abraham who sacrificed for the Christian God—can be seen as performing his sacrifice for
Bulamutumumo; it is similar to when he asks Bulamutumumo to destroy his house after his
corporal punishments:

MAURICE (ADULTE). Le ciel et la terre avaient la même densité. Inquiétés par l'orage
qui allait s'abattre, marmottes, crapauds, moineaux se turent. Le vent cessa. La nature
entière fit silence.

MAURICE (ENFANT). Bulamutumumo!

MAURICE (ADULTE). Les premiers grondements se firent entendre à l'appel de

Maurice.

MAURICE (ENFANT). Bulamutumumo!

MAURICE (ADULTE). Il appelait le grand dieu de la jungle, celui à qui même Tarzan

ne se serait pas imposé.

MAURICE (ENFANT). Bulamutumumo, je veux que tu frappes notre maison.

MAURICE (ADULTE). S'approchant, la voix lourde lui répondit à nouveau.

(Grondements.)

MAURICE (ENFANT). Je veux qu'elle explose en mille morceaux! (Bouchard 17)

We could interpret the play as being an ironic clin d'œil to religious currents that are still
promoting sacrifices for gods just like Catholicism. In that sense, Teeka's sacrifice would suggest
that the way of the religious is simply cruel and ill-fated for human beings in general. Suffering
implied by sacrifice is a catch twenty-two and one must question all these equations of endless suffering. Bouchard himself admits that there is no real escape for Maurice. He can only submit himself to his father's rage and expect a Tarzan suit as the result of his suffering. Interestingly, as Greenaway mentions in "Play Ruffles Feathers: Dispute Raises Questions About Role of Art in Schools": "The Montreal Catholic School Commission advised teachers not to take students to L'histoire de l'oise, an award-winning play about violence against children" (C5). Should we understand from that refusal that the play offends Catholic values?

Although the play emphasizes the negative effect of sacrifice in parallel with hereditary violence, Maurice's story does present a positive side effect of the sacrifice of Teeka. It seems to have at last resulted in Maurice's understanding of the laws of sacrifice through his grief and suffering. He was led to revisit the past in order to understand the bad influences that he was taught. Some critics observe that Teeka's sacrifice acts as a purgation for Maurice just as a sacred exorcism would have. In Dramaturgies québécoises, Jean Cléo Godin describes the play's main underlying theme as based on "une anamnèse paradoxale par laquelle un adulte évoque les sévices que, enfant, il a fait subir à un animal pour exorciser ceux que lui infligeait son père" (68). That assumption about an exorcism or a cathartic cleansing suggests that killing Teeka would be some sort of expiation for the young Maurice, a way for him to express the anger and frustration that he never had the chance to explain to anybody except maybe Teeka. Being a form of Christian ritual, the concept of exorcism again underlines an apparent connection between Maurice's gesture and the sacred or religious. The legacy of that exorcism is Maurice's critical flashback on his past and his maturation that would have led him to revisit his painful memories about his childhood life and how he disposed of Teeka. The interpretation would again parallel Catholicism in which adepts are encouraged to expiate their sins through suffering and eventually through death in order to reach a salvational heaven. As Godin notes, "La faute du
protagoniste s'explique, à défaut de se justifier, par un fatum dont il est l'héritier et dont il tente de se libérer par un acte qui n'est en fait que sa perpétuation" (69).

The redeeming side of Teeka's sacrifice by Maurice also parallels the reality/fantasy dichotomy that prevails with the reference to the narrative of Tarzan in the drama. In that fantasy world, Maurice is represented as Tarzan the savior while Teeka is also seen as an angel of hope: "Je suis Tarzan! Tarzan te protégera. Car Tarzan est tout-puissant. Tout ce qu'il y aura de meilleur dans la jungle sera pour toi" (Bouchard 32). Likewise, Teeka is referred to as the one who can save Tarzan: "Et comme un ange, je m'élèvai. Je volais . . . au secours de Tarzan. J'étais gracieuse, majestueuse" (Bouchard 40). As Shawn Huffman explains:

Cette imagination, représentée surtout par ses jeux de Tarzan, est le seul échappatoire dont bénéficie Maurice. De fait, le besoin de s'évader de la violence de sa famille devient si grand que Maurice désire que son univers imaginaire supplante le "réel". Sa première invocation de Bulamutumumo, par exemple, "le grand dieu de la jungle" (Bouchard 17) révèle un enchevêtrement important entre la réalité de l'espace-temps de la scène insérée et l'imaginaire de Maurice enfant.

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Maurice uses the fantasy of Tarzan to hide the reality that he is beaten. For instance he will never acknowledge that his father is beating him (Bouchard 32). In her review of the play, Pat Donnelly underlines that Maurice and Teeka created their own mythology in order to escape the painful reality of their existence: "Maurice (Yves Dagenais) who has been physically abused by his father, dreams of becoming Tarzan to compensate for his feelings of powerlessness. His best friend and confidant is a goose named Teeka, who dreams of one day overcoming her clipped wings and taking to the sky" (D13). In "Goose Tale Treats Dark Subjects Deftly," Kathryn
Greenaway interprets the play similarly: "Maurice escapes this existence by singing sweet songs about everything being OK and acting out Tarzan fantasy games with Teeka" (C6).

The use of a puppet in the play to represent the dead goose during the narration of the story is comparable to the use of a religious symbol illustrating some sacrificed saviour just like a crucifix would represent the killing of Jesus Christ and his legacy. Being sacrificed, the goose Teeka would become a sacred symbol which, in a Girardian fashion, could lead to the reestablishment of peace and the renunciation of violence. We understand that the killing of Teeka led Maurice years later (as the adult and narrator of the play) to acknowledge that violence has negative effects which have resulted for instance in his losing of his best life companion. The fact that it is Maurice as an adult who narrates _L'histoire de l'oie_ proves that he matured and that in the end he is at least minimally regretful for what he did to his friend: "Au moment où Teeka sentit ses os se rompre, elle se mit à voler pour la deuxième fois de cette journée. Elle vola si haut qu'elle disparut au-dessus des nuages. J'étais son seul ami. J'étais son bourreau. Le ciel s'assombrit une fois de plus" (Bouchard 46). In the end Maurice admits that he was the persecutor of Teeka. The fact that he is able to narrate the story as well as to borrow the voice of Teeka in order to make the animal express its feelings and points of view—in other words the fact that he understands that Teeka suffered—means that Maurice has changed and that he revisited his past. The sacrifice produced an effect on Maurice and it would seem that Teeka did not die in vain from this perspective.

In conclusion, if we must understand a value from this work and especially behind the sacrifice of Teeka, it is probably the fact that sacrifice has negative and cruel effects if it is not questioned. _L'histoire de l'oie_ is an _histoire de lois absurdes_. These absurd laws are the ones about suffering and sacrifice which are also the same laws that prevail in important religious
currents such as Christianity and which are accepted as valuable in other plays under consideration in this thesis such as in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and even in Bouchard's *Les feluettes*. Through the discussion of sacrificial suffering and pain, the drama draws on hereditary violence as a society vice. As reported by Barbara Crook, Bouchard said: "For me, *The Tale of Teeka* is a poem against violence. It is my most peaceful work" (D1).

Although he treats the problem of child abuse which highly deserves to be solved, Bouchard did not explicitly present answers to the problem on the stage. The play is rather suggesting instead of preaching. As Crook reports, what we know from the playwright's initial intentions was that he intended his work to be unclear and he avoided presenting definite answers to the problematic unlike what the habitual children's theatre usually gives its audience:

"... Bouchard told director Daniel Meilleur of the Montreal-based theatre company Les Deux Mondes that he wanted to write a 'psychological' show, in which everything is not clear" (D1).

Similarly, in her review of the play, Laurel Graeber finds that the play's dialogue is too subtle and the violence, though implicit rather than explicit, too disturbing" (E41). In addition, Godin underlines that the staging does not promote violence and nowhere in the drama do we witness the representation of the beating of Maurice by his father. There is no visual display of violent acts in the play:

Ainsi, la dénonciation de la violence faite aux enfants, évitant le didactisme mélodramatique de la représentation directe, se fait-elle par l'évocation de l'empreinte indélébile qu'a laissée chez la victime la violence dont elle s'est rendue coupable. Plus qu'à une évocation pathétique, le spectateur est ainsi soumis à une démonstration de l'inéluctable engrenage de la violence familiale. (68)
Crook points out that violent acts are only "suggested" in the play except for the final sacrifice of the goose: "We never see young Maurice (Yves Dagenais) abused by his parents. The absentee parents are depicted only through the terrifying glare of returning headlights or the ominous ringing of a telephone" ("Guaranteed" C2). Finally, as Greenaway observes, "The play contains no graphic displays of violence; neither does it offer any concrete solutions to Maurice's problem" (C5).

We know that Maurice is still confused by the end of the play and Michel Marc Bouchard underlines that what was important for him in the process of writing *L'histoire de l'oie* was not to create necessarily a happy ending to the story but something that people would remember and which would encourage the youngsters who suffered from violence to share their own stories. The play is an insight into the secret world of violence against children: "'It was my duty not to create a happy ending,' Mr. Bouchard said. 'It would be just for entertainment, to have a happy ending. The only positive thing is to share the story'" (Graeber E41). At the end of the play Maurice has matured but the conflicts and the questioning has yet to end:

> Le vent souleva en petite tornade les plumes de l'oreiller. Il balaya les restes du miroir et il effaça les empreintes mouillées de Teeka. L'orage éclata une fois de plus au cœur de la maison. *(Le tonnerre et la foudre font rage au coeur de la maison.)* La rage de cet orage continue de sévir au centre de mon être. J'en espère un jour l'accalmie. (Bouchard 46)

Overall the play is questioning the concept of sacrifice. On one hand Maurice's parents seem to have initiated him into a system of sacrifice that is slowly destroying his life. From this perspective it seems that sacrifice is simply cruel. On the other hand, Maurice, the adult, seems to have gained or learned something from the sacrifice of Teeka. The sacrifice helped him to survive, allowed him to understand something about the system of sacrifice/abuse he was part of.
L'histoire de l'oie evokes the question of difference between sacrifice and abuse, between true religious beliefs and values and the pleasure of cruelty, between believing in and acting according to values of a religion and simply following religious rules blindly—as Maurice did when he killed Teeka—without fully understanding what you are doing. Through these questions Bouchard also expects the audience to reflect on the essence of hereditary violence unlike Maurice who "n'interroge pas l'essence de cette violence, elle fait partie des lois" (Bouchard, "Histoire pour les enfants humiliés" 7). As Bouchard mentions in an interview for the Gazette, "[the play] is a family drama that really opens the lines of communication [. . .]. The adults understand it on one level and the children notice other things completely" (Greenaway C6). Kathryn Greenaway finally adds that the play is a fluid, sensitive piece of theatre that can move you to tears. It does not preach, nor does it offers solutions" (C6).
CONCLUSION

Sacrifice, as theorists like Bataille, Eagleton and Botinelli discuss, implies an exchange for higher value. Besides showing the currency of sacrifice in our modern secular society, the sacrifices implied in the dramas of the corpus presented all a loss of life or its illusion—as in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?—for the sake of a higher or sacred value.

Through the analysis of the four plays, the thesis has shown that sacrifice is linked to the religious and the sacred. The codes of the religious and sacred help us to understand the functioning of sacrifice as a form of exchange. Despite a modern secular context, the sacrifices presented in each play of the corpus are intelligible to the degree that audiences or readers are familiar with the religious or sacred code. As a result, the analyses of these plays have shown the pertinence of the religious and the sacred in our communication codes. In all four plays of the corpus it seemed that however the sacrifice of life was presented within the dramas, it was better understood and rendered intelligible if we could relate it to a notion of the sacred or the religious. In other words, sacred symbolism and religious allusions allow people to understand why one would go as far as sacrificing life.

In The Zoo Story, most critics seemed to have interpreted Jerry’s death in a Christian fashion. Still, it is not clear, with certainty, what the value behind his sacrifice of his life is—we don’t know exactly if he does it for love, equality or a communication and other reasons that have been evoked by critics. Even if we cannot name the value behind the sacrifice, we understand that its importance broaches the sacred. Since Jerry dies for that value, exchanges his life in the name of the value in order to promote it, the whole gesture has a transcendent, if not spiritual, resonance.
There are no explicit religious symbols in the *The Zoo Story* such as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or in *Les feluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique* but our knowledge of the Christian myths and rituals facilitates our understanding of Jerry's sacrifice. The play is written in a modern secular context but it is through our understanding of the sacred and its related topics that we may consider that Jerry's sacrifice of his life is not absurd but that it is in fact quite intelligible.

Albee is definitely more explicit in terms of sacred symbolism and religious allusions in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It is mainly Christian symbolism that is at work in the play and the whole combination of sacred symbols and Christian parodies of rituals make the sacrifice of the illusionary son intelligible even if the son in question is simply imaginary. Without these symbols at work in the play and without the apparent boldness with which Albee uses them, the play could have easily become a farce with no other aim than to make the audience laugh and forget about the seriousness and the impact of the sacrifice of the illusionary son for Martha and George.

What Albee depicts in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is most importantly a parody of the Christian mass of the dead. Moreover, it seems that the third act of the play is dedicated to the exorcism of Martha. In general, various critics have suggested that images of sacralized rituals, witchcraft, exorcism, rebirth and conversion—which are typical of the religious—can be noted in the play and linked to the final sacrificial death rendering it intelligible. Again the play does not preach about an explicit value, although critics have suggested that that unnamed value could be altruistic and responsible for the couple's reconciliation. The ending of the play shows Martha and George striving for reconciliation, if not towards the rebirth of a new love relationship based on truth rather than illusions.
In comparison to the two plays by Edward Albee, Michel Marc Bouchard's Les fluettes ou la répétition d'un drame romantique is clearer on the nature of the value implied in the sacrifice of life. The drama specifically shows that sacrifices of life are made in the name of love or that love is worth dying. This is the case for characters like the Countess as well as for Vallier and Simon who consider that love is worth much more than life. The allusions to the sacred and the religious are also quite explicit in the drama if we think for instance of the format of the play which privileges the mise en abîme by using intertextual references to Gabriele D'Annunzio's martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. The play reaches a spiritual level of understanding since the characters believe that death is not the end but only a new beginning through the promotion of love. The drama which was written in the eighties proves that today, even in a modern secular context, love as an altruistic sacred value can be given priority and that religious and sacred symbols do make sense.

Finally, L'histoire de l'oie presented the sacrifice of the goose in the name of the god Bulamutumumo. Different religious symbols and allusions—Christian and pagan—are discussed in the script as well as emphasized on stage. The play gives rise to a debate about the legitimacy of sacrifice which fundamentally implies suffering, and frequently, the life of a victim for an ideal, a sacred value or, in the case of the play, a god. Through its discussion of hereditary violence and with its different allusions to the functioning of sacrifice in Catholicism for instance, the play distinguishes between the redemptive value of sacrifice and gratuitous or degenerative cruelty. While the play points to the raw cruelty of child abuse and hereditary violence, Maurice's case also shows how the ostensibly cruel and incomprehensible sacrifice of Teeka helped Maurice to understand and escape from the vicious cycle of abuse within which he was trapped.
The analyses of the plays of the corpus demonstrate that sacrifices do make sense when performed within the context of a sacred and religious symbology with which the audience is already aware. These sacrifices make sense because they are linked to the sacred, to a value—a sacred value—at work within the dramas surrounding the sacrifice. The audience understands the sacrifice that is presented when it underlines a sacred value that they should "believe in" according to a code or belief system with which they are familiar. Even in a modern, secular context, some sense of sacred values is still required in order for a sacrifice of life to be intelligible for the characters of the play as well as for the audience in general.

As soon as a sacrifice takes shape as presented in the dramas of the corpus, a hierarchy of importance is automatically created by the characters. Sets of values continue to function and are still intelligible for the audience and the characters. They may not be universal values but come to be considered sacred because they make sense and because they are given significant priority in the dramas. People are ready to sacrifice themselves and their loved ones in the name of those values.

For instance, Les fleuettes demonstrates that sacrifice for love—heterosexual and homosexual—does make sense. Dying for the recognition of this love or dying to be recognized as does Jerry in The Zoo Story still makes sense for a modern audience as the critics who have reviewed these plays confirm in their interpretations. The Christ-like sacrifice of Jerry as interpreted by numerous critics, demonstrates that Albee’s use of sacred symbols and religious allusions in his drama helps the audience assess the sacrifice that is depicted. The four plays of the corpus confirm the importance of parodied rituals and religious allusions as strategies of communication. The connection to the religious is at the center of the dramas and it is through the codes of the sacred that the different plays can be accessed.
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