

AN ABSURD EVOLUTION: NEIL LABUTE AND  
THE PROGRESSION OF THE THEATRE  
OF THE ABSURD

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Samuel Beckett. Eugene Ionesco. Jean Genet. Edward Albee. Harold Pinter. These are all names associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, according to Martin Esslin who coined the term in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Because of Esslin's book, most scholars define Absurdism as a post-World War II phenomenon. *The Theatre of the Absurd* gives a 400+ page description of the term "Absurdism" and applies it to playwrights whose works share a number of similar characteristics. While this book is incredibly thorough, its discussion of Absurdism and its playwrights only goes through its publishing date, 1969. Forty years later, analysis of contemporary works proves Esslin was slightly wrong—Absurdism is *not* merely a post-World War II phenomenon, but may be associated with post-destruction. The post-September 11<sup>th</sup> works of Neil LaBute maintain the themes and characteristics of traditional Absurdism, and they, too, address issues of disaster.

#### **The Beginning of the Theatre of the Absurd**

Esslin's description of Absurdism in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* is an account of the beginning of Absurdism. The book was written too early to analyze its aftermath, what Absurdism has become. Samuel Beckett, one of the first Absurd

playwrights, wrote works which were radical for their time. For example, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was a drastic change from the norm for its first audiences in 1955, causing near riots in Western Europe (Esslin, *Absurd* 1). The circular plot revolves around two tramps waiting for a man named Godot. During their wait, they are stumbled upon by Pozzo and Lucky, a master and his slave. Then, a messenger boy comes to tell the two tramps that Godot will not arrive that day. The second act is very much like the first, with a visit from Pozzo and Lucky, and the same message from the boy. With "nonsense" language and no climax, the first audiences had difficulty understanding the play. Two years later, it was well-received at the San Quentin penitentiary by hundreds of convicts. One prisoner said of the play, "'Godot is society'" (qtd. in Esslin 2). It was not until several years later, in 1964, that *Waiting for Godot* was accepted by ordinary theatre-goers; its production at the Royal Court Theatre in London was "extremely favourably received by the critics" (Esslin ix). Perhaps Beckett was ahead of his time, as his play took nearly a decade for society to accept. Now, over a half-century later, many audiences consider Absurd tendencies ordinary.

While the Absurdist style may not have become apparent in mainstream theatre until World War II, it is still being utilized. Specifically, the works of contemporary playwright/screenwriter Neil LaBute use the characteristics and themes of the theatre of the Absurd. While LaBute's works are not nearly as radical in situation as the works of pioneer Absurdist, they maintain the principal devices which define the style. Furthermore, LaBute employs such devices in a way that has not merely preserved Absurdism, but has altered the style to reach contemporary audiences.

## Overview of LaBute's Application of Absurd Characteristics and Themes

First, it is necessary to examine the term 'absurd' before attempting to apply it to theatre. The well-known Absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco defines 'absurd' as, "that which is devoid of purpose. [ . . . ] Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (qtd. in Esslin 5). Similarly, in the context of music, "absurd" means "out of harmony" (Esslin 5). David Hesla expands on this lack of harmony by saying human existence itself is absurd, "because *being human* and *existing* are mutually contradictory" (Hesla 8). These three explanations of 'absurd' are quite similar as well as applicable to the characteristics key to the Theatre of the Absurd, which include: Verbal nonsense and devaluation of language, tempo and speedy character reactions, images which are at the same time "broadly comic and deeply tragic," revealing of ultimate realities of the human condition, and dreamlike forms of thought (Esslin 282-361). Thematically, Absurdism is "intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe" (Esslin 353) and brings to the forefront man's discontent with this ambivalent position.

Devaluation of language is a key feature of the Theatre of the Absurd, and a common feature of Neil LaBute's plays. Tom Wilhelmus, author of the article, "Morality and Metaphor in the Works of Neil LaBute" compares LaBute to well-known Absurd playwrights with his observation:

LaBute's language is poetic—a poetry of hesitations, clichés, qualifications, evasions, and doubts—and emulates the practice of

contemporary playwrights such as Beckett, Albee, and Pinter by turning the cliché-ridden speech of the tribe into carefully constructed art.

(Wilhelmus 62).

LaBute creates characters whose language and dialogue consists of those hesitations, as they hesitate in their decisions in what to say or do; their dialogue consists of those clichés, as they stereotype those around them and use the same words and actions as everyday people; their language illustrates those doubts, through what they say to and how they treat others, about their appearances, romantic lives, and choices. Like the Absurdist, LaBute's language portrays everyday dialogue in a poetic, artistic manner.

*The Theatre of the Absurd* argues another major characteristic in the field; a play labeled Absurd communicates “an experience of being, and in doing so it is trying to be uncompromisingly honest and fearless in exposing the reality of the human condition” (371). That reality is comprised of anxiety and despair which come of man's recognition that he lives in unsolvable darkness, “that he can never know his true nature and purpose, and that no one will provide him with ready-made rules of conduct” (374). In other words, characters in these plays recognize, question, and attempt to overcome their purposelessness in life. They remain hopeful and try to find the meaning in their being.

Neil LaBute's plays do just this—expose the truth about the human condition. His post-September 11<sup>th</sup> play, *The Mercy Seat* questions the importance of the individual life while illustrating the cold truth about selfishness, greed, and mankind's tendency to inflict pain on one another. His male character, Ben, is deciding whether

or not fake his death in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks so he can leave his family and begin a new life with his girlfriend, Abby. She puts their selfishness in perspective when she says:

six thousand people are dead, *killed*, some of them *our* associates, and my entire response is “Oh well, whatever . . . at least now we can sneak off to the *Bahamas*.” (*Mercy Seat* 49)

While the play is set on September 12, 2002, LaBute explains that the play is not about political terrorism, but rather a more common terrorism, “the painful, simplistic warfare we often wage on the hearts of those we profess to love” (*Mercy Seat* ix).

*Mercy Seat*, like many of LaBute’s other works, brings attention to the human condition not only through portrayal of human brutality, but also through despair and loneliness. Jerry, a character in Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story*, questions, “Are these the things men fight over? . . . Can you think of anything more absurd?” (37).

Esslin, in his *The Theatre of the Absurd* observes that another characteristic of Absurd theatre is its dreamlike qualities:

Equally basic among the age-old traditions present in the Theatre of the Absurd is the use of mythical, allegorical, and dreamlike modes of thought—the projection into concrete terms of psychological realities. (301)

LaBute creates dreamlike plays through his use of paralysis, the inability to decide, act, or change. The character of Terry in *In a Dark Dark House* is stuck in a state of paralysis with his childhood sexual abuser. He is unable to forget the relationship with Todd, his abuser, to the point of being unable to enjoy other relationships.

While society condemns pedophilia, Terry is unable to view the relationship as abuse and instead considers it the only love he has had and will ever experience. Terry cannot move past the memory of his relationship with Todd to the extent that he searches him out nearly thirty years later. Then, when he finds Todd, he is unable to take any action other than making a purchase at his gas station. He appears to be breaking his stasis, but Terry fails to act when given the opportunity. The closest he comes to moving past his childhood experience is kissing his abuser's daughter, a girl in her mid-teens. He neither moves past Todd's lineage nor the experience of pedophilia; he becomes the pedophile as he repeats his abuser's actions. Terry admits his inability to move on when he tells his brother, "I'm afraid of, like, relationships and women and stuff, scared maybe I'm a *fag* because of what happened and not hating it" (75).

The character of Adam in *The Shape of Things* is also stuck in paralysis, as he spends the play *preparing* to accept himself instead of actually *doing* it. Adam gets plastic surgery on his nose, gets a tattoo, changes his clothes, loses weight, and gets a hair cut with the hopes of being "good enough" for his girlfriend, Evelyn. Adam continues to change his physical appearance. In the end those changes mean nothing when he learns Evelyn demanded his physical changes for her Master's thesis project. Adam spins his wheels but goes nowhere—he is stuck in neutral. Furthermore, Evelyn is symbolic of Eve and her deception of man. This is made blatantly apparent in the first scene of the film when she wears a shirt with a red apple in the center. Eve[lyn] deceives Adam. Nothing changes. LaBute's commentary on the film, "It

ends the way it began” refers to the movie but is also applicable to the play/film’s statement about history’s stereotype of women as deceptive.

This dreamlike state is also present in LaBute’s *This is How it Goes* through fragmentation and distorted images. In the play, Man acts as narrator, however he lets the audience know upfront that he is untrustworthy and may or may not tell the truth. Man takes the audience through his experience of returning to his hometown and his acquisition of a wife. The play is laid out in unclear, exaggerated fragments through what LaBute calls “the shifting sands of a narrator’s voice” (*This is How it Goes* xi). This shiftiness of plot and through-line is common in dreams, particularly those of nightmare qualities.

Dissatisfaction with, and the absurdity of, human existence are other key characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd. Man is discontent with his condition of ambivalence which does not go away (Bauman 15). Davis Helsa, in his book *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* explains that to exist is to be caught in ambivalence for a number of reasons:

- To be a human being is to be body and mind; but what one needs and wants as body is what, as mind, one neither needs nor wants; and vice versa.
- To be a human being is to want to know and to love—that is to say, to become one with—the Other, but the Other is precisely that with which one cannot become one.
- To be a human being is to want to say who one is, but who one is, precisely, is what one cannot say.

- To be a human being is to want to be self-grounded, but self-grounded is precisely what a human being is not and cannot be. (Hesla 8)

Human beings are not in agreement with the conditions provided for existing.

Existence and the world do not suit one another. Beckett explores this in *Endgame* when Hamm screams, “Use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” LaBute explores ambivalence in *Fat Pig*, through the love for and hatred of food, along with the desire for but inability to be one with the Other. *The Mercy Seat* looks at this through Ben’s dissatisfaction with being “grounded” with a family and his desire to be “ungrounded” by becoming “grounded” in a relationship with Abby. *The Shape of Things* investigates the individual’s inability to define one’s self when the self is unstable, and *Reasons to Be Pretty* explores man’s ambivalence with the desire to be one with the Other in relationships.

### **LaBute’s Progression of the Theatre of the Absurd**

Not only does LaBute employ characteristics of the Absurd, but his content and writing style parallel that of Harold Pinter. Like Pinter, LaBute unapologetically dictates the pace of dialogue. Where Pinter is known for his (pause), LaBute utilizes the (Beat.), as well as a slash for suggested character interruption or line overlap. In Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*, for example, Gus’ catalogue of foods includes, “Watercress. Roll mops. (Pause.) Hardboiled eggs. (Pause.) The lot” (612). In *Fat Pig*, LaBute’s pauses work similarly; Tom tells Helen, “I mean it. (Beat.) . . . I staggered into some pretty shitty relationships in the last few years, I mean, a couple real stinkers. (Beat.)” (56). LaBute manipulates his slashes in the same way; in *Coax*, Young Woman spills her coffee and says, “Oww, shit!/Aaahhh [ . . . ]” and

Young Man overrides, “You all right?!/Here, let me [ . . . ] ” (105). LaBute not only employs Pinter’s writing style, but even dedicated his play, *This Is How It Goes* to him. In the preface, LaBute comments:

I dedicated the play itself to Harold Pinter because, besides being a terrific writer and director, he continues to inspire me by his fearless examination of men and women while searching for answers, hoping for change, raging for equality—but never ducking for cover.” (x)

Additionally, LaBute reveals his effort to create works equally as exposed in content as the Absurdist’s with, “What I really admire about Mr. Pinter’s work—and strive for in my own—is that the point of it is not merely to upset people, but that what’s being addressed is worth getting upset over” (x). Like Pinter, LaBute does not strive to create angry audiences, but his subject matter shakes people to the core. LaBute’s works are unapologetic in their exploration of love, relationships, deception, cruelty, and loneliness.

LaBute’s transformation of the Absurd is as significant as his application of the style. His plays touch on significant issues which are directly relevant to our contemporary culture—weight, race, abuse, relationships, marriage, self-definition. LaBute’s works relate quite clearly to our contemporary society, making them more accessible to the general public. While his plays are not as blatantly “absurd” as those of Beckett and Ionesco, Adamov and Genet, his exploration of humanity reaches today’s audiences more powerfully than radical Absurdism and its unconcealed portrayal of the meaninglessness of life. Thomas Bell, author of “Place,

Popular Culture, and Possibilism in Selected Works of Playwright Neil LaBute” explains LaBute’s development of Absurdism:

Media critics have described Neil LaBute as the new Edward Albee of theater for his unflinching exposure of evil, hypocrisy, and ennui in modern American life. (Bell 101)

LaBute is also altering Absurdism through the use of pop-culture references, exploration of stereotypes, and examination of corporal influences on the individual. LaBute’s adaptation of his plays for the screen also advances exposure of the Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd is known for being a post-World War II phenomenon. While this is when many Absurdist playwrights came to the forefront, the style is not limited to the mid-twentieth century, and to say so would be to neglect the issues Absurdism addresses and the unique techniques with which it does so. To limit the Absurd to one era is to also forget that Absurdism is not a club or organization to which all members made a manifesto. The Theatre of the Absurd is a style which spreads continents and decades. LaBute’s works implement the characteristics and themes of the Theatre of the Absurd with fresh issues and through new media, quite possibly reaching new audiences.

### **Purpose of Study**

Whereas this introduction has reviewed LaBute’s works overall in regards to the Absurd themes and philosophy, the remainder of my thesis will focus on major themes and topics of exploration of three of his works in comparison to traditional Absurdist works and end with an analysis of his most recent play. Chapter II will

look into Absurdism as a post-disaster phenomenon by comparing *The Mercy Seat* to Beckett's *Endgame* in regards to the influence of trauma on characters' decisions. Both of these plays are set post-catastrophe, and the plots revolve around the main characters having to make a decision. Chapter III will approach the ideas of cruelty, fear, and the desire for power often found in the Theatre of the Absurd by analyzing *Fat Pig* in comparison to Genet's *The Balcony*. While these two plays are very different in terms of plot and the forms of cruelty they utilize, the same underlying fears and desires are responsible for the unkindness in both. Chapter IV will focus on the self versus the Other in *The Shape of Things* and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. My readings support that LaBute has been compared to Pinter more often than to any other Absurdist, as he parallels Pinter in regards to his writing style, use of realistic plots, and focus on the individual up against society. Chapter V will examine *Reasons to Be Pretty*, LaBute's newest play, in regards to the themes and characteristics of the Absurd. The goal of this chapter is to explore the many aspects of Absurdism found in one LaBute play.

The goal of my thesis is to explore how the dramatic works of Neil LaBute parallel the tradition of the Absurd. Not only do his plays closely parallel the Theatre of the Absurd, but LaBute relation of the style and its philosophical grounding to the problems and concerns of our postmodern society proves that he is a Contemporary Absurdist.

## CHAPTER II

### DESTRUCTION AND DECISION IN *THE MERCY SEAT* AND BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*

Neil LaBute's post-September 11<sup>th</sup> play, *The Mercy Seat*, is a compelling parallel to Samuel Beckett's post-World War II absurdist play, *Endgame*. Both works depict the response to large-scale catastrophe, illustrating how far characters are willing to go to ensure their survival. LaBute and Beckett portray animalistic characters who focus on the most basic of human needs: survival. Moreover, their characters *have* survived the annihilation which most in their communities may have not—what next for them? These characters show that it may not be enough just to remain alive; they have lived through disaster, and now they must survive the aftermath.

Esslin argues that the tradition of the Absurd is not as strong in the United States as it is in Europe:

The convention of the Absurd springs from a feeling of deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and purpose in life, which has been characteristic of countries like France and Britain in the years after the Second World War. In the United States there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose.

(225)

Esslin published his theory of disaster's influence on the Absurd in 1961, his first edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd*. At this time, war had threatened the civilian lives of those in Europe more than it did the people of the United States. However, the September 11, 2001 attacks tackled the very foundation of America's optimism, as does LaBute's *The Mercy Seat*, which premiered in 2002. The Theatre of the Absurd's endeavor to "re-establish an awareness of man's situation when confronted with the ultimate reality of his condition" *has* reached America, and LaBute's works do in fact confront man with the "reality of his condition" (Esslin 291). Furthermore, *The Mercy Seat* explores the post-catastrophe condition through a variety of approaches comparable to Beckett's approaches in *Endgame*: damaged relationships, the struggle for power, the attempt to gain freedom, and characters confronted with a major choice. Before investigating these approaches, it is necessary to evaluate the relationship between the situations presented in *The Mercy Seat* and *Endgame*.

The setting of *The Mercy Seat* is a New York loft apartment. At rise, Ben sits on the corner of a love seat with a cell phone ringing loudly in his hand. Abby enters, stops, looks at him, puts away groceries, and then turns his phone ringer off. Dialogue begins (LaBute 5). The first moments give the reader/audience important information. Ben's stillness and ability to ignore the ringing phone shows that he has likely been sitting in that same spot and ignoring the ringing since long before the play's beginning. Abby's immediate disregard for Ben and his phone creates the sense that she expects him to be there with a ringing phone. The opening of this play is semiotically similar to the opening of

*Endgame*, which takes place in a bare room with two old ashbins covered with two old sheets. Hamm, who sits center in a wheeled chair, is covered with an old sheet. Clov enters, look at Hamm, looks out the windows, uncovers the ashbins, and uncovers Hamm. Both characters speak to themselves before dialogue ensues (1-3). Like Abby, Clov is not surprised by Hamm's presence, and his routine conveys the idea that everything happening has happened before. Both of these characters seem to inch towards communication; they interact with their immediate environment, then the other person's immediate environment, and finally the other person.

Outside of both these rooms lies a world of devastation. The back cover of *The Mercy Seat* states that the play takes place on September 12, 2001. LaBute writes that the setting is "New York City, not long ago." However, the script never states the date, and the characters never say exactly what catastrophe has just occurred. Abby and Ben at times allude to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, but the play never creates a concrete time. Abby tells us that the catastrophe, or "apocalyptic shit" as Ben refers to it (32), happened a day prior to the start of the play (10). Ben states that "those buildings are just, like gone" (27) and that "there's a shitload of people out there right now who would like to be just 'okay'" (47). While the script never says what destructive event has just occurred, the contemporary audience has a good idea. The only reference to location occurs when Abby describes the chaos outside her door:

ABBY. I mean, the world has gone absolutely *nuts* out there; it really, really has . . . No idea what's happening, no one does, the

army patrolling around—there are people in *camouflage* out on the Brooklyn Bridge . . . (10)

References to the destruction of buildings, the Brooklyn Bridge, chaos, a large number of deaths, and the army provides the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> audience with enough information to easily correlate *The Mercy Seat* to that world.

Beckett's *Endgame* also lacks a clear setting and time frame, and much like *The Mercy Seat*, scholars assume the setting to be post-the war of their generation. First performed in 1957, *Endgame* provides allusions to the Second World War. While the script never directly states that the play takes place in a bomb shelter, Hamm refers to his home as “the old shelter” more than once. Like Carpenter, many scholars believe the world of the play to be in nuclear ruin:

The devastation which is subtly evoked seems to have been the kind generally envisioned before thermonuclear weapons were widely tested and mass-produced. Hamm's story and other details about conditions of the ‘other hell’ outside hint that bombs [ . . . ] were used. (139-139)

Furthermore, Carpenter explains that the post-World War II audience perceived the play as a representation of their situation, or what their situation could have become. The world outside the shelter is, as Clov describes it, “corpsed” (Beckett 30). Clov later becomes more descriptive, stating that “The whole world stinks of corpses” (46). The script also references the Holocaust. Hamm describes a man he used to know, telling Clov that he would take the man to the window to look at the corn and the ocean. The man would “snatch away his hand and go back into

his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (*Pause*). He alone had been spared” (44). This man seems to have been a Holocaust survivor. Later, Hamm says there is not so much to be feared any more. Maria Brewer explains that Hamm is referring to the “ideological concept that lurks in the practice of concentration camps”—the destruction of identity (157). Furthermore, she states, “Since Auschwitz, fearing death means fearing worse than death” (157). Concentration camps have created the fear of torture—living through pain, hunger, and loss—over the fear of death. Hamm often suggests that living is worse punishment than death. Near the beginning of the play, for example, he threatens to give Clov no more to eat. Clov responds by saying that they will die. Hamm considers this, and retorts with a worse threat: “I’ll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You’ll be hungry all the time” (5). Hamm contends that living in pain is worse than dying. He does not want Clov to have the easy way out of life—to live is to suffer.

### **Destruction in Relationships**

The large-scale destruction which occurred in the external worlds carry over into the internal relationships. While LaBute and Beckett’s primary characters survive the damage, their relationships do not. Marriages crumble and friendships decay. Characters are cruel to others on and off stage.

In the Preface to his play, LaBute explains that the damage of the Twin Towers in New York City and the loss of lives “hangs like a damaged umbrella” over the actions in the play. Neither *The Mercy Seat* nor *Endgame* are about the

catastrophic events, but rather focus on relationships. LaBute explains that his play is not concerned with the “politics of terrorism.” It is concerned with a different type of terrorism, “the painful, simplistic warfare we often wage on the hearts of those we profess to love. Above all else, this play is a ‘relationship’ play, in the purest sense” (ix). The focus of LaBute and Beckett’s works is not what happens outside, but rather how that event shapes the lives and relationships of those inside.

With New York City in the state of ruin, Ben and Abby banter not about the state of the city but rather the state of their relationship. When the towers were hit, Ben was at Abby’s house engaging in sexual activity instead of going to work. Ben is married, but not to Abby. The damage done outside the loft is representative of the damage being done inside. The play begins with Ben’s phone ringing in his hand. His wife, Maggie, is calling, and he must decide whether or not to answer. By not answering, which he has been doing for the past day, he leads his wife to believe he has died in the attacks (and he likely would have had he gone to work instead of Abby’s). He plans to continue not answering her call, fake his death, and move away with Abby so that he does not have to tell his wife the truth about his affair. Ben tells Abby that the end of his marriage is better if he pretends to be dead than it would be if he told his wife the truth. He explains his relationship with his wife:

I’m sick of the ups and downs, you know, greatest guy on earth when the going’s good and a son-of-a-bitch when I run through a yellow light [ . . . ] The wife wonders how the fuck she ever got

mixed up with a prick like you when, in college, you were the guy whose smile used to make her cry herself to sleep. Just you smiling at her could do that, she wanted you so badly. (47)

Facing the ruin of the marriage would be far more painful for Ben than faking death. Running from the trouble becomes an even more extreme option when Abby points out that falsifying one's death is illegal and reminds Ben that he will never be able to see his children again.

Marriage in *Endgame* is also portrayed in decay. Nagg and Nell are husband and wife but live in isolation. Each lives in his and her individual ashbins—next to each other, but not *with* each other. Nagg and Nell reminisce when they crashed their tandem and lost their shanks (16). This pleasant memory quickly fades and communication collapses. Theodor Adornia states, “The waning of a marriage is the situation where one scratches the other” (133). It appears that scratching is the most Nagg and Nell have done for each other recently, and even that comes to a stop.

NELL. I am going to leave you.

NAGG. Could you give me a scratch before you go?

NELL. No. (*Pause.*) Where?

NAGG. In the back.

NELL. No. (*Pause.*) Rub yourself against the rim.

NAGG. It's lower down. [. . .] Could you not? (*Pause.*)

Yesterday you scratched me there.

NELL (*elegiac*). Ah yesterday! (19-20)

Nell refuses physical contact with Nagg. However, when he refers to her having scratched him in the past, she takes the time to reminisce. While the script never makes it clear specifically what Nell reminisces, perhaps it is the memory of her relationship with Nagg. The residue of love persists, however; it is shown when Nagg knocks on Nell's trashcan. Nell creeps her head out, and asks, "What is it my pet? (*Pause.*) Time for love?" Nagg responds with the request for her to kiss him. Nell reminds Nagg that they cannot kiss, and Nagg requests, "Try." They reach their hands towards each other, straining for a moment. Unable to kiss, they give up (14). Nagg and Nell try to love but cannot. After a few minutes, they return to their individual ashbins and continue to live (and die) in isolation.

Both plays' primary partnerships are in equal decline. The first problem is that Ben has not wanted to tell his wife about his affair with Abby. It is not until three years into their relationship that he is willing to consider choosing Abby over his wife. Even at this point, though, he says he has decided but takes no action. Throughout the play, Abby and Ben argue more than they get along. One example is when they argue about their usual sexual position. What used to be an exciting sexual adventure has become, like their relationship, stale and boring. Abby asks Ben, "Then why do we always do it from behind? [ . . . ] From the first day since. All fours, facedown, never looking me in the eye" (40). Even their sexual relationship lacks connection. Like Nagg and Nell, Abby and Ben reminisce their past, remembering when they first met in Vermont. Ben states that it was a great trip, and Abby responds, "Yep. Back when we used to like

each other [ . . . ] I'm saying those first days were lovely. Really special" (30-31). While Ben deals with the loss of romantic love of wife, his romantic love with Abby is steadily in decline. To reminisce their early romance is to simultaneously mourn the loss of it. Ben's situations with his wife and girlfriend demonstrate that all relationships decay.

Hamm also mourns the decay of his and Clov's relationship. Throughout the play, and it seems all of their time together, Clov follows Hamm's orders. Clov takes on the role of a servant, as he is the only one in the play able to walk. During Hamm's "chronicle"—the story of his life—Hamm explains of when Clov's father brought Clov to him, begging for him to take Clov (53). Hamm's consent to rear Clov helps depict them as adopted father and son, and it explains their master-servant attitudes. That relationship dwindles, and Hamm remembers fondly their interactions:

Do you remember, in the beginning, when you took me for a turn?  
You used to hold the chair too high. At every step you nearly  
tipped me out. (*With senile quaver.*) Ah great fun, we had, the  
two of us, great fun. (*Gloomily.*) And then we got into the way of  
it. (62-63)

Hamm recalls their past actions and acknowledges their stagnant dependency. Like Ben's relationships with women, Hamm and Clov's once healthy relationship has grown old and stale. At one point, Hamm asks Clov what happened to his bicycle. Clov responds, "When there were still bicycles I wept to have one. I crawled at your feet. You told me to go to hell. Now there are none"

(8). Unlike Hamm, Clov does not remember (or at least never speaks of) their happy past.

### **The Struggle for Control**

Beckett and LaBute present characters who lack control over their own lives and struggle to obtain it. The worlds outside their homes have fallen apart, and nothing they can do change that. Moreover, that disintegration is bleeding over into their personal lives. Maria Brewer describes the reason behind these characters' state of being trapped: "our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience" (Brewer 157). Beckett and LaBute's main characters are trapped in the state of paralysis—they try to improve their conditions but cannot.

Hamm and Ben are similar in that they are both semiotic representations of their situations. Hamm sits center in a chair until Clov moves him. When moved, he is afraid of the outside. Clov pushes Hamm in a circle around the walls of the room. At one point, Hamm leans towards the wall and says, "Beyond is the . . . other hell" (26). He then "strikes the wall with his knuckles," screams, "Hollow bricks!" and violently yells to be pushed back to the center of the room (26). Clov pushes Hamm to the center of the room, and Hamm demands to be "Bang in the center!" (27). The stage picture Beckett creates is one where Hamm is the farthest from the outside as he can possibly be. Also, Hamm is unable to walk. This represents his inability to control his actions and therefore his life.

Hamm tries to gain this control by pushing his chair with a gaff, but he fails each time.

Similarly, Ben spends the majority of the play sitting on the couch. As the play begins he “sits pressed into the corner of one loveseat” (5). He does not stand up until nearly a third of the way through the play. Ben and Abby argue about whether or not she has a higher professional status at their work. When Ben admits that he is “under” her in the career food chain is when he stands up, moves the pillows around, and sits back down (22). His momentary stand and exertion of power over the pillows are an attempt to gain physical control over his situation if he cannot have professional control. The play ends with the same stage picture as when it starts; Ben sitting on the couch in a state of stasis.

Ben and Hamm try to gain control over their situations through the most primal of all instincts: survival. For this reason, characters in *Endgame* and *The Mercy Seat* are cruel to people in need. Hamm reveals his unkindness in his “chronicle” when he admits to refusing assistance to those in need: “All those I might have helped. (*Pause.*) Helped! (*Pause.*) Saved. (*Pause.*) Saved! (*Pause.*) The place was crawling with them!” (68). Clov goes further to accuse Hamm of allowing Mother Pegg to die when he asks, “When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then, no? (*Pause.*) You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness” (75). Hamm’s refusal to help Mother Pegg is an example of his attempt to insure his physical survival at the expense of others.

Ben, worried about his own situation, refuses to help those in need. Near the end of the play, the doorbell rings. Ben freezes. Abby waits a moment, then answers it. She comes back onstage and tells Ben it was her neighbor asking for milk for her children. The neighbor does not know where her husband is, and Abby assumes him dead. She gets milk from her refrigerator and goes back offstage to give it to her neighbor (51). Had Abby not been home when the neighbor knocked, it is highly unlikely Ben would have answered the door, even if he was aware of the neighbor's needs. Ben hides in Abby's apartment at the expense of other people. Furthermore, Abby and Ben maintain cavalier attitudes about the disaster outside:

BEN. [ . . . ] they're missing.

ABBY. Dead.

BEN. Whatever.

ABBY. Exactly. Whatever. (*Beat.*) That's the position this puts me in . . . six thousand people are dead, *killed*, some of them our associates, and my entire response is "Oh well, whatever . . . at least now we can sneak off to the *Bahamas*." (49)

Instead of doing anything to improve the disaster outside, these characters plan their future together. Moreover, Ben's survival instinct is similar to Hamm's—he secures control over his life by denying safety and comfort to others.

Characters in *Endgame* and *The Mercy Seat* attempt to gain control over their circumstances by increasing their authority in relationships. Clov acts as Hamm's servant. While he is the only character in the play who has physical

power, he fails to be in charge of his life. Instead, he obeys Hamm's orders and acknowledges submission: "Do this, do that, and I do it. I never refuse. [ . . . ] Soon I won't do it any more" (43). Clov wants the control, but is afraid of managing himself. A little later, Clov picks up an object on the ground. Hamm asks him what he is doing, and he responds, "Putting things in order. I'm going to clear everything away! [ . . . ] I'm doing my best to create a little order" (57). During those few moments, Clov takes rule of his environment. However, when Hamm orders, "Drop it!" Clov drops everything he has picked up and returns to submission (57).

Although blind and paralyzed from the waist down, Hamm appears to have mental and emotional control over Clov. He lacks command of his physical situation, so he attempts to dominate Clov's in order to improve his own condition. For example, Hamm tells Clov to look out the window (27). When Clov does, he makes demands regarding how and where Clov should look, requiring him to describe each detail (28-29). By managing Clov's sight, he manipulates himself into imagining the view. Another attempt at control is in his relationship with the stuffed dog. Hamm requires Clov to make him a dog; when Clov delivers it, Hamm pretends to dominate:

HAMM. (*his hand on the dog's head*) Is he gazing at me?

CLOV. Yes.

HAMM. (*proudly*) As if he were asking me to take him for a walk?

CLOV. If you like.

HAMM. (*as before*) Or as if he were begging me for a bone. (*He withdraws his hand.*) Leave him like that, standing there imploring me. (41)

Hamm makes believe the dog is real and feigns his master. Again, control over the dog substitutes for control over his own situation.

*The Mercy Seat's* Ben seeks to control his relationships with both his Abby and his wife. Ben has difficulty accepting Abby's dominance in their work place. The topic of work gets brought up when Ben tells Abby that he will not put up with be treated like one of her "underlings" and that he does not work under her (20). He says, "I am your colleague. Your co-worker. Your partner" (21). However, through this discussion he slowly begins to admit that he gets paid less and holds a lower position than Abby (20-21). Later in the play, Ben acknowledges Abby's control over him when he speaks of their relationships in terms of traditional gender roles:

If you didn't want us coming over here, or sneaking off at conferences and me banging the shit outta you, we wouldn't be doing it [ . . . ] I mean, you're the fucking "guy" in this relationship, let's not kid ourselves . . . (37)

He then calls her an "overdominating cunt" (37). As Ben progresses from denial to recognition of his powerlessness, he works harder to gain control over his life by taking control of Abby's. He asks Abby to run away with him; she would have to give up her job, seniority, pension plan, and everything she has worked

for. Ben and Abby would have to find new jobs, where they would both start at the bottom rung and consequently have the same level of professional power.

Ben also wants to run away with Abby and fake his death so he does not have to go through a divorce with this wife. He tells to Abby that by running away together, his wife will not make him pay the mortgage. They argue about the consequences of divorce:

ABBY. We've lied to everyone we know, every minute of our time together for this long . . . because of a fucking *house payment*? Tell me that's not true.

BEN. She would've buried me in a divorce, you know that!

ABBY. So what? I would've uncovered you.

BEN. No, no . . . I don't want that. (57)

Ben displays his fear of his wife's financial control over him. Then, when Abby offers to help him, Ben refuses to allow her financial help. If Abby supports Ben financially, he thinks she will have control. Again, he is uncomfortable with the switch in traditional gender roles because of his loss of power.

### **The Big Decision**

LaBute and Beckett illustrate characters who are stuck in a state of paralysis. They cannot control the outside world, and they struggle to take control of their own lives. Esslin explains this state as, "man trying to establish his position, or break out into freedom, only to find himself newly imprisoned" (Esslin 292). Ben has come to Abby's apartment to find freedom. He tells her:

“We’ve been given something here. A chance to . . . I don’t know what, to wash away a lot of the, just, rotten crap we’ve done. More than anything else, that’s what this is. A chance. I know it is” (32). Instead, he finds himself “newly imprisoned.” At the end of the play, Abby tells Ben, “I’m not Harriet Tubman and I just don’t feel like helping” (68). She explains that she will not help him fake his death, and that she will not run away with him if he does. Ben has a decision to make: he can either “miraculously wake up in some alley” and return to wife and children, or he can tell his wife the truth about his affair and face divorce (68). While he thought he was on track to managing his future, he finds that he is no closer to that control than before they play begins.

During one of Hamm’s stories, he narrates of when a man came to his house and begged him to take his child: “In the end he asked me would I consent to take in the child as well—if he were still alive. (*Pause.*) It was the moment I was waiting for. (*Pause.*) Would I consent to take in the child . . .” (53). Assuming that child is Clov, his father brought him to Hamm for safety. Intended as freedom from death, Hamm’s home has become a prison for Clov. At one point, he says of Hamm, “If I could kill him I’d die happy” (27). He introduces the idea of rebellion with his first words: “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished [ . . . ] I can’t be punished any more” (1). Then, throughout the play, Clov continues to threaten Hamm: “I’ll leave you.” The main dramatic question then becomes: Will Clov leave Hamm? At the end of the play, he sees a small boy through the window. Unclear whether he *really* sees a boy or if he pretends to as an excuse to leave Hamm, Clov has the opportunity to escape. However, there is

no food outside, and Hamm has the key to the pantry. Clov's choice becomes either to leave Hamm's home and risk starvation or relinquish potential freedom for the sake of survival.

Ben and Clov both face a major, potentially life-altering decision, which is introduced at the beginning of each play. Martin Esslin explains the importance of this decision:

The Theatre of the Absurd forms part of the unceasing endeavor of the true artists of our time to breach this dead wall of complacency and automatism and to re-establish an awareness of man's situation when confronted with the ultimate reality of his condition. (291)

Will Clov and Ben break out of this complacency? Will they go back to their ordinary lives, or will they choose to take a risk? Hamm gives Clov permission to leave him; he says, "It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you anymore" (79). Hamm *does* need Clov; as Hamm cannot move alone, he will die without Clov bringing him food and water. Lying to Clov by telling him he does not need him is a way of giving him his blessing. It is an attempt to allow Clov freedom without guilt. Likewise, Abby gives Ben permission to go back to his wife when she says, "See your children, tell them you love them. Tell your wife, too. Because you do, you know. Love her. You must, or you'd already be at the lumberyard in the Bahamas . . . with me" (68-69). At the end of each play, the antagonists imagine what life will be like alone. When he thinks Clov has already left, Hamm exclaims, "And now? (*Pause.*) Moments for nothing, now as always, time was never and time is over, reckoning closed and story ended" (83).

Likewise, Abby comments on going back to work and pretending like the affair never happened (68).

The end of *The Mercy Seat* is comparable to the end of *Endgame*, because neither protagonist makes a decision. Ben is in the same position as he is during the play's onset—on the couch with the phone ringing in his hand. He stares at it, then the stage goes to black. Ben never makes a decision, and the control he desires is never obtained. *Endgame* closes similarly to how it begins; Clov stares motionlessly at Hamm, whose face is covered with a bloody handkerchief. What *is* different about the ending is that Clov is prepared to weather the outdoors; wearing a hat and coat, he carries a raincoat, umbrella, and bag. His costume gives the impression he will leave, but he never does.

LaBute and Beckett both end their plays without answering what their characters decide to do. More specifically, *do* they decide? Theodor Adorno explains the Absurdist phenomenon of paralysis: “our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience” (qtd. in Brewer 157). The worlds of *The Mercy Seat* and *Endgame* are devastated. Death and ruin outside of these characters' walls encompass their lives and infests itself into relationships as well as the decision-making process. LaBute truly shakes the core of America's optimism, as he fulfills the Theatre of the Absurd's endeavor to confront mankind with the “reality of his condition” (Esslin 291).

## CHAPTER III

### STAGING CRUELTY: FEAR AND CONTROL IN *FAT PIG* AND JEAN GENET'S *THE BALCONY*

Martin Esslin, in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, explains that Absurdism pioneers “the violent, brutal drama of mental aberration and obsession” (239). Fear, anxiety, and the struggle for power are all major factors in the Theatre of the Absurd, and are played out in the form of cruelty. Well known Absurdist dramatists examine mankind’s natural instinct towards this defense mechanism; *Endgame*’s Hamm asserts his power over his family by not giving up the key to the cupboard and by putting Nagg and Nell in ashbins, *The American Dream*’s Mommy keeps Grandma under the kitchen sink, *The Dumb Waiter*’s Ben turns to shoot his partner because of an order. Herbert Blau, in his article “Ideology and Performance,” helps clarify the reasoning behind cruelty: “As an ideological act in its own right, any performance involves questions of property, ownership, authority, force, and what may be the source of ideology—according to Nietzsche—the will to power” (447). Viciousness is therefore enacted when one’s power is threatened, however the individual society defines that power. The staging of cruelty in response to fear and the struggle for power is apparent in both traditional Absurdism and its contemporary equivalent, namely through Jean Genet’s *The Balcony* and Neil LaBute’s *Fat Pig*. While their plots differ greatly, I have chosen to compare these two dramas because

of the influence of fear and control on their characters, as well as the characters' use of misogynistic cruelty against women as a tool to gain (or pretend to gain) power.

### **Plot Overviews**

*Fat Pig*, by Neil LaBute, is a play about a man named Tom who tries to gain acceptance from his peers. Tom, a person of average weight and height, becomes romantically involved with Helen, a woman who happens to be overweight. Helen's weight is not accepted by Tom's peers. As the play progresses, and Helen and Tom become more serious about their relationship, Tom becomes more alienated from his friends. Carter, his friend and co-worker, tries to maintain power over Tom's life and decisions by continually striving to convince Tom to date someone thinner. Afraid of what others think of him, Tom breaks up with Helen.

*The Balcony*, by Jean Genet, takes place in a brothel which, amidst a violent revolution, caters to the misogynistic fantasies of men. The first three scenes introduce men who act out their desires for control by pretending to be a judge, bishop, and a general. The Court Envoy arrives and informs everyone in the brothel that government officials have been murdered. His riddles make it unclear whether or not the Queen is still alive (1.6.773). Irma (the brothel owner), dresses as the queen, and she and the men in her brothel go onto the balcony pretending to be the ruling officials with the goal of restoring the old social order.

The play focuses on the transition of power through characters whose authority is sometimes only an illusion.

### **Cruelty to Gain Power**

The Theatre of the Absurd presents characters who act cruelly to one another in order to gain or maintain power. Esslin explains that the human struggle for power over oneself and others is derived from the individual's helplessness and impotence in society:

A feeling of helplessness when confronted with the vast intricacy of the modern world, and the individual's impotence in making its own influence felt on that intricate and mysterious machinery, pervades into the consciousness of the Western man today.

(Esslin, *Absurd* 156)

The feeling of helplessness is present in the characters of *The Balcony*, which is seen in their efforts to alleviate their impotence. This is illustrated most clearly when men come to the brothel and act out their desires for authority over women. These male characters exchange money for the illusion of hegemony and to—even for a brief “session”—forget their weakness in society. Nietzsche examines the relationship between power and fear: “With the ‘aid of the morality of mores and the social straitjacket,’ as Nietzsche puts it, the organism’s oligarchy is kept in power; man learns ‘to be ashamed of all his instincts’” (Miller 476). Desires which society deems as immoral become acceptable in the sanctuary of Genet’s brothel; men who are ashamed of their instincts no longer fear what others think

and find themselves empowered. For example, Scene II stages a man role-playing as a judge and illustrates his interactions with a female “thief”:

THE JUDGE. . . . I want to see hot tears gush from your lovely eyes. Oh! I want you to be drenched in them. The power of tears! . . . Where’s my statute-book? (*He fishes under his robe and pulls out a book.*)

THE THIEF. I’ve already cried. . . .

THE JUDGE. (*he seems to be reading*). Under the blows. I want tears or repentance. When I see you wet as a meadow I’ll be utterly satisfied! (1.2.758-759)

Not only do these men wish to dominate women, but moreover they yearn to be viewed as power players in wider society. Men dress to portray those who hold social and political influence—general, judge, cardinal—they choose costumes which allow them to make believe they influence masses of people, represented by the lone woman they pay to dominate.

Like Esslin, Miller mentions Jean Genet as an example of a writer whose literature portrays cruel actions (480). This is because Genet’s *The Balcony* examines this juxtaposition of power and fear as well as the role cruelty plays in balancing the two. He explains that through the use of cruelty towards her lover, George (who is also The Chief of Police) and her coldness to her customers and employees, Irma attains “‘complete control’ at the end of *The Balcony*” when she states: “I’m going to prepare my costumes and studios for tomorrow. You must now go home, where everything—you can be quite sure—will be falsier than

here” (1.9.785/Miller 110). To return to Nietzsche’s assessment of power, Irma’s attainment of this “complete control” is in response to her fear of lacking control. When her dominance in society begins to falter is when she strives to gain more. For example, because of male dominance, Irma has less power in society than men. She works to gain more control over them, however, through satisfying their desires for cruelty. While the male characters act out physical dominance over women, Irma controls the men by creating false situations which cause them to continue returning to her brothel which, in turn, improves her economic power.

Characters in LaBute’s *Fat Pig* also trade cruelty for fear with the hope to gain power. Carter, the most ruthless character in the play, works to gain and then maintain social authority in his work place. When he first appears onstage, he strives for power by nagging Tom about the identity of his new female friend. When Tom refuses to tell Carter about her, Carter begins to fear for his social status and control in the office. He reacts maliciously towards Tom and justifies his behavior with, “Anyway, that’s what you can expect, by the way. Mean-spirited shit like that until you tell me who she is” (21). Then, when Carter figures out Tom is dating Helen, a woman who is overweight, he revels in the glory of his advantage and says, “I mean . . . OH-MY-GOD! This is a . . . Jesus Christ!!! . . . Yeah, I gotta go find my camera . . . ‘Tommy joins the Circus!’” (46) Calling Tom “Tommy” and comparing his life to the circus degrades his social status by referring to him as child-like and an animal. Carter’s statement also insinuates that Helen, too, is a circus “freak” or even an elephant because of her large size. By doing this, Carter establishes dominance over Tom and Helen.

Carter gains power two other ways: he uncovers Helen's identity, taking away Tom's privacy, and because he recognizes that Tom's girlfriend is overweight, which places Tom and Helen as "outsiders" to what society considers normal and acceptable. By decreasing Tom's status, Carter's status increases. Another example of Carter gaining control is when he emails all of their co-workers a picture of Helen just to be cruel. When Jeannie asks Tom if he has any pictures of Helen up in his office, he responds, "Wasn't the one that appeared on everybody's *desktop* this morning enough? You need more laughs than this?" (64). Miller explains that the mere enjoyment of power is cruelty: "'To practice cruelty is to enjoy the highest gratification of the feeling of power.' To *enjoy* the exercise of power is, in effect, to *be* cruel: This is Nietzsche's hard teaching" (475). In this sense, Carter is cruel to Tom because he enjoys the feeling of power he experiences from mentally tormenting him.

The theory that people acquire power by decreasing others' is further explored through Tom and Jeannie's relationship. Jeannie is Tom's co-worker, who he dated before Helen. When Jeannie discovers that Tom has chosen to have a relationship with Helen instead of her, she becomes angry and begins an argument with him. Enacting her anger is a way for her to assert her power over him. In this argument, Tom then takes the power away from her by telling her he only acted "interested" in her to keep her from complaining:

TOM. We don't *have* a relationship!!

JEANNIE. Oh, really?! . . . You said you wanted to try again!

YOU told me that!!

TOM. To keep you from nagging at me!! Just to stop you from calling and going on and on and *on* about this all the time!!

That's why!! (46- 47)

Because Tom embarrasses Jeannie, she loses all power she previously had in their "relationship." She responds to this by slapping Tom in the face, leaving, and slamming the door. Jeannie uses violence, physical brutality, to respond to the emotional cruelty she has just endured. She uses the violence to re-gain power.

### **Cruelty Due to Gender Struggle**

The Theatre of the Absurd also explores cruelty through the struggle for power between the sexes. Male characters in *The Balcony*, already the more powerful gender in their society, take power from women in order to increase their own authority. Moreover, although Genet's female characters maintain a certain amount of control over their male clients through finances and fulfilling their desires, the actuality is that masculine ideology still dominates their choices. Mark Pizzato, explains that female characters in *The Balcony* "do not take complete control over male figures or a male world but rather reveal a dangerous hypocrisy behind the masks and mirrors of revolutionary dreams. Patriarchal desire persists in Genet's plays . . ." (Pizzato 110). In other words, the play's gender reality is (what Judith Fetterley describes as) the "*immasculation* of women by men" (qtd. in Austin 27). The women in the brothel think like men and identify with the masculine point of view. Instead of gaining power by overturning the "male system of values," these female characters adopt them (27).

This “patriarchal desire” persists as the women attempt to be successful at becoming more like men and satisfying such desires. For example, Irma gains her power by thinking like a man and identifying with their wants; she creates a brothel to profit from misogyny. Within the brothel, men act out the hypocrisy of their roles by exploiting man’s cruel desires for control over women. They dress up as “powerful” men and pay for the women to dress up as submissive creatures (including horses). They then perform their desires for cruelty, violence, and control.

Appearance on the balcony factors into patriarchal power. While it first appears that Irma has authority due to her imitation of the Queen, her rule is completely dependent upon physical beauty. When Irma suggests that The Envoy attempt to “poke around for the Queen in the rubble of the Palace and pull her out. Even if slightly roasted,” The Envoy refuses. He says severely, “No. A queen who’s been cooked and mashed up isn’t presentable” (1.7.775). The Envoy reminds us that The Queen is only powerful because of physical appearance. If she is injured or looks “mashed up,” men in society will not follow her rule. The Envoy examines Irma “part by part” and comments, “Splendid head! Sturdy thighs! Solid shoulders!” (1.7.775). As the male gaze is focused upon even royalty, Irma becomes The Queen not because of intelligence or capability, but because she would look good on the balcony.

While Neil LaBute does not portray physical control to such great extent as Genet does in *The Balcony*, *Fat Pig* does display cruelty through man’s control over woman. Carter, a man who employs cutting discourse to maintain power,

exerts his dominance over women by treating them as the lower sex and criticizing their bodies. To Carter, a woman's top priority should be to please men, particularly with her body. For example, when Carter and Tom's slender co-worker, Jeannie, exits the room, Carter immediately criticizes her to Tom, ". . . doesn't she look a bit sloppy or something? In her ass, I'm saying? Flabby" (21). Carter is critical of Helen's body as well. After first meeting her in the restaurant, he comments on her weight to Tom and jokes about her stealing dinner rolls (35). Jeannie, struggling for power in her work place, adopts the masculine point of view and also becomes cruel towards women and condemning of Helen's body. Trapped in a patriarchal society where misogynistic viewpoints are considered the norm, she has no choice but to accept the male system of values and, on several accounts, calls Helen a "pig."

### **Cruelty Due to Fear of Class Differences**

The creation of cruelty is largely due to a power struggle between classes. In *The Balcony*, men put on costumes in order to imagine they have control over others. Outside the brothel, the lower-class is rebelling against the upper-class, against the established order. By dressing up as men in authoritative positions, these lower-class men are trying to *become* the powerful. Likewise, by rebelling against the ruling-class, the rebels are trying to *become* the rulers. Herbert Blau, in his article "Ideology and Performance," examines the desire to identify with those in control:

. . . in any face to face encounter with the Other, the Other is doubled over by the performed into a mirrored version of the Self, which itself mirrors the system of representation which reproduces itself. 'The spectacle or the tribunal . . . which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors.'  
(Blau 448)

This theory is staged quite literally in Genet's *The Balcony*. The male customers lack power in society and come to the brothel to put on costumes and act out their desires for control. The scene is set up so that each man sees his reflection in the mirror. The reflection of him in his costume is a reflection of the Other, whom the man both fears and wishes to be. Ironically, the costumes are out-dated and lack power in this society of civil war; the powerful is no longer the man in the uniform but rather the rebels and peasants in the streets. Each man dresses up like the Other while simultaneously becoming more distanced from him. Harvey Hornstein, in his book *Cruelty and Kindness: A New Look at Aggression and Altruism*, explains the fight for a high status in society as a survival instinct:

Together, behavioral adaptation and biological endowment ignited a selective force which fueled the development of a capacity for empathy, the necessary prerequisite for developing an *effective* cooperative social organization. It is this capacity that allows human beings to experience the bonds of *we* and the barriers of *they*; and it is this capacity that regulates the occurrence of altruism

and aggression, benevolence and brutality, kindness and cruelty.

(50)

Hornstein explains that empathy is ignited by and for individuals of similar social classes. In *The Balcony*, Irma explains to Carmen those whom are in danger during the rebellion are: the Royal Palace, Clergy, Army, Magistracy, and the “whore-house.” Those who have money have power, and those who hold the power are threatened by the rebels. In this situation, Genet’s characters in the brothel empathize with people slightly more powerful than they, because if the royalty decrease in power then it is likely that the brothel’s power will also diminish. She also tells Carmen that the peasants are not joining the rebels; they are of similar social classes and want to take power from those who have it (1.4). Because the women and male clients of the brothel identify with the upper-class, they work together to restore power to the Royalty. When The Envoy asks the questions, “Whom do you want to save?” the responses follow:

THE CHIEF OF POLICE. The Queen!

CARMEN. The flag!

IRMA. My hide! (1.6)

Irma is honest and declares concern for her welfare, also the underlying motive behind Carmen and The Chief of Police’s answers. Because these characters identify with the Queen’s social status over that of the rebels and peasants, to restore power to the Royalty is to save their own social powers. Esslin observes that Genet “is projecting the feeling of impotence of the individual caught up in the meshes of society.” Furthermore, he examines that “he is dramatizing the

often suppressed and subconscious rage of the 'I' alone and terrified by the anonymous weight of the nebulous 'they.'" (Esslin 157) The "I" of those of the brothel fear the "they" of the rebels who threaten their financial and social security.

Irma chooses a higher social status over love. In Scene XI, she makes the decision to accept The Envoy's offer to act as the Queen. She states, "My mind's made up. I presume I've been summoned from all eternity and that God will bless me." Then she tells George, The Chief of Police that they can no longer be intimate, "George . . . this is our last minute together! From now on, we'll no longer be us." George responds with, "But I love you" (1.7.776). The power of love does is no match for the power of authority.

In *Fat Pig*, Carter describes a different social struggle; the characters in this play do not work to gain power through money or government position, but through socio-physical statuses. He tells Tom that because Helen is overweight, she is of a different social class and, similar to a caste system, should find a mate within her class. Carter says to Tom, "I'm not saying she can't be happy. That she shouldn't meet somebody, but it oughta be a fat somebody, or a bald one. Whatever. Like her. A somebody that *fits* her" (71). He continues to describe what is really behind this class struggle: fear. He explains to Tom that people in society are terrified of difference:

They scare us or something. . . . The thing they represent that's so scary is what we *could* be, how vulnerable we all are. I mean, *any* of us. . . . We're all just one step away from being what

frightens us. What we despise. So . . . we despise it when we see it in anybody else. (71-72)

Society dislikes anything outside of the norm, because they fear it in themselves. Carter proceeds to tell Tom that by intimately associating with someone of a lower status in society, he lowers his own status.

Tom has to make a choice. In order to be with the woman he loves, he must exchange his social status for a less powerful one; in order to maintain his power, he must give up the woman he loves. Because his co-workers do not approve of Tom dating someone overweight, he fears losing their acceptance and being the outcast. When Tom takes Helen to the company picnic, he sets up their blanket away from everyone else. While this is the first time Tom takes Helen around his friends, he keeps them secluded. She recognizes their distance from everyone else and approaches him about the topic:

HELEN. Look where we're at. I mean, Tom, it's . . . forget it . . .

TOM. This isn't . . . Helen, I just wanted to get us near the dunes here, so have a little protection from the wind. That's all. [ . . . ]

HELEN. But we haven't . . . we didn't hardly talk to—

TOM. I introduced you to people . . .

HELEN. In the parking lot! As you and I were unloading stuff out of the car. That's not an *introduction*. (79)

Helen recognizes that Tom is afraid of what his friends think of him because of her weight. He explains his dilemma to Helen, “All this love inside and it's not nearly enough to get around the shit that people *heave* at you . . . I feel like I'm

drowning in it—*shit* . . . I don't wanna fight it anymore" (83). Tom tears up as Helen pleads, "But that's . . . it's something we could work on, right . . . can't we, Tom? Right?" At the end of the play, Tom breaks up with Helen because of this difference in social status. Tom's response to Helen's plea closes the play, ". . . No. I don't think I can" (84). The desire for acceptance, status, and power in society win the battle against love.

The Theatre of the Absurd explores further the juxtaposition between cruelty and fear. The characters of these plays work to gain power and control over their lives and in society. At times, they show hatred and coldness to others in order reach their goals of control. They go to such extremes to maintain that authority because of the fear of losing *all* of their control, or as *Fat Pig's* Carter explains, of being the disadvantaged class. Carter tells Tom that his mother was over-weight, and tells of how he was embarrassed by it as a child. He was afraid of what others would think of him if seen with his mother, so he always walked a head of her when in public and never told her about school functions. He informs Tom of his first act of cruelty towards her:

[ . . . ] this once, in the grocery store, we're at an Albertsons and pushing *four* baskets around—you wanna know how humiliating that shit is?—and I'm supposed to be at a game by seven, I'm on JV, and she's just farting around in the candy aisle, picking up bags of "fun-size" Snickers and checking out the *calories*. Yeah. I mean, what is that?! Suddenly, I go off on her, like, this sophomore in high school, but I'm all screaming in her face . . .

“Don’t look at the package, take a look in the fucking *mirror*, you cow!! PUT ‘EM DOWN!” (48-49)

Carter was afraid of what others would think of him and his mom, but instead of admitting his fear, he covered it with anger and frustration. He spoke viciously to her in order to gain control over his own situation.

Tom later acts cruelly towards Helen because he fears what his co-workers think and wants to regain their acceptance. He rationalizes his breaking up with her by admitting, “I guess I do care what my peers feel about me. Or how they view my choice” (82-83). Jeannie also acts cruelly because of this fear. She admits that she is afraid of never finding a decent man to marry, and she takes out this fear and frustration on Tom and Helen. For example, when Tom asks Jeannie why she is acting harshly towards him, she responds, “I don’t even wanna discuss your fat bitch, okay?” (65). She continues, “I’m twenty-eight years old, and I just keep hitting the booby prize, and you know what? After a while, it really starts to get you down” (65). Jeannie has committed to the masculine point by submitting herself to the male gaze. She objectifies Helen by identifying her by her physical appearance. By calling Helen “fat” and then questioning her own failure in relationships, Jeannie is actually questioning her male-based ideological foundation.

### **Satisfaction Through Pretend**

While many of the characters in *The Balcony* and *Fat Pig* do not actually end up more powerful than before, they satisfy their need for control through

make-believe. For example, the men in *The Balcony* get caught up in pretending to be powerful. They act out violent situations in order to identify with powerful characters. Men know that they will have no more power when they leave the brothel than they did when they entered, however their session of pretending gives them a chance to experience an hour or so in the shoes of the upper class. Helen does the same thing in *Fat Pig*. She watches war movies, something not seen as “feminine.” She later explains that she enjoys these violent films because she used to watch them as a child with her brothers and father (30). She was trained to identify with the men, those who have power in society, to do what they do and enjoy acts of violence in order to be more like the Other. When Tom asks why her family liked to watch war movies, Helen responds:

Well . . . most of them either fought in wars or wanted to, or had some relative who did or whatever. Or they just like watching other guys get shot . . . I think guys today feel left out, like guilty about not having to kill things, provide food. All that ‘early man’ stuff. (31)

Helen too feels left out. She lacks power in society because of her weight as well as her gender. War movies give Helen the chance to identify with men and pretend that she, too, has control over the lives of others. For Helen as well as the male characters in *The Balcony*, pretend is a form of escape from their impotence in society.

While Esslin, in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, mentions cruelty as

an Absurdist characteristic, his book does not put as much focus on it as the plays do. Genet and LaBute apply the Absurdist themes through use of cruelty, fear, and power, all of which go hand-in-hand. The characters in *The Balcony* and *Fat Pig* all struggle for control through cruelty and the attempt to become like the Other. As with all plays under the umbrella of the Absurd, these characters may work hard to gain power, but they hardly succeed. In the end, Irma returns to running a brothel, the rebels fail at their revolution, and Tom breaks up with Helen. The ending is the same as the beginning, regardless of how vigorously the characters try to change their lives. The power returns to those who originally had it, and the audience is led to believe that their social situations will never change.

## CHAPTER IV

### (DIS)ILLUSIONMENT: IDENTITY AND SOCIAL SACRIFICE IN LABUTE'S *THE SHAPE OF THINGS* AND PINTER'S *THE DUMB WAITER*

ADAM. ...you stepped over the line. Miss./Umm, you stepped over...

EVELYN. I know. / It's "Ms".

ADAM. Okay, sorry, Ms, but, ahh...

EVEYLYN. I meant to. / Step over... (1)

*The Shape of Things* begins with Adam and Evelyn at a stand-off; a line is between them. Adam, the art museum security guard, appears to be the authority because of his uniform, however it quickly becomes clear that Evelyn is in control. Stepping "over the line" immediately introduces the idea of boundaries—a major theme of the Theatre of the Absurd, particularly the boundary between cultural and personal identity. A large number of the works considered part of the Absurdist style question the role of society in the formation of the individual: Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* portrays two men waiting for Godot to legitimize their human situation, Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros* presents a man named Berenger who struggles to maintain his human identity amidst the quickly-changing social norm, Genet's *The Balcony* portrays men who pretend to be of higher-powered classes. Likewise, the relationship between society and the individual are strongly questioned in the works of Neil LaBute who, much like the Absurdist Harold Pinter, explores the relationship between man and society without apology. *The Shape of*

*Things* is similar to Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* in that the playwright dramatizes "the terrors that most individuals experience on confrontation with external forces" (Haney 7). Both LaBute and Pinter's characters interrogate the boundaries between social and individual identities, and at times their characters (representative of social order) are accused over stepping over that line. Furthermore, LaBute's *The Shape of Things* and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter* create protagonists who find themselves attempting to gain or maintain their individual identities whilst simultaneously working to achieve cultural acceptance. My goal in this chapter is to investigate the individual's relationship with society and the roles that both independency and conformation play in that relationship. More specifically, I will start by examining the parallels between Pinter and LaBute's creation of mystery, narrative, and relationships in both *The Shape of Things* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Next, I will look at the societies in both plays in regards to cultural criteria, ethics, and ideologies; and move on the discussion of identity in regards to fear of the Other, desire, and truth.

### **Mystery**

Pinter and LaBute present their plays with an air of mystery about them. The characters and their purposes are unclear from the beginning, and the reader/audience works to obtain a clear vision of whom the characters are and what is happening before them. In Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, first performed in London in 1960, Ben and Gus are two gangsters waiting in an unknown basement for the orders on their next kill. While waiting, the men engage in meaningless

banter; for example, they discuss a newspaper article about a girl who kills her cat. This conversation first introduces mystery, as Ben and Gus question the truth behind the article. Pinter proceeds to create more mystery by never giving the audience a back story of the two men, nor does he ever define who Wilson (their boss) really is. Throughout the play, Gus questions his situation. What is above the basement? Who is in control of the dumb waiter? Why are increasingly obscure requests coming down on the dumb waiter? Who are the two men going to kill? Bernard Dukore explains the ambiguity of Pinter's works:

The characters behave in a "believable" manner, but they are shrouded in a twilight of mystery. We are never precisely sure who they are, why there are there, or what they have come to do. Their motives and backgrounds are vague or unknown. We recognize that there is motivation, but we are unsure what it is. We recognize that there is a background, but that background is clouded. Each piece of knowledge is a half-knowledge, each answer a springboard to new questions [ . . . ] His characters are recognizable human beings who seem to behave according to valid psychological and sociological motives, and yet there is something bizarre about their very reality. (43-44)

It is clear that Ben and Gus have motivations, but those motivations themselves are unclear. It is also certain that the two men have a history of working together; but the length of time is unknown, as is their career as hitmen, and the reason they chose such a profession.

The play ends under mysterious circumstances as well, with the conclusion opening up more questions. When Gus exits stage right to get a glass of water, the speaking-tube for the dumb waiter blows. Ben “goes to it, takes the whistle out and puts the tube to his hear. He listens. He puts it to his mouth” and replies:

Yes. Straight away. Right. Sure we’re ready. Understood.

Repeat. He has arrived and will be coming in straight away. The normal method to be employed. Understood . . . (120).

Ben hangs up the speaking-tube, calls for Gus, and points his revolver toward the stage left door. Gus stumbles in the stage left door stripped of his jacket, tie, waistcoat, revolver, and holster. Ben and Gus stare at each other (121). It is unknown how Gus enters from a door opposite the one from which he exits, who strips him of his gun and some clothes, whether or not Ben expects to be presented with the situation of killing his partner, and why Gus is the one to be murdered. The play ends with a tableau of Ben pointing his gun towards Gus, so Pinter never implies what the outcome will be. Howard Pearce examines the ambiguity of Pinter’s play, saying that it “exposes us from the beginning to the discomforts or the mysterious . . . [Gus and Ben] live in fastidious circumstantiality while musing about the absent, the forces of their ken” (697). He continues to explain that “the facts are subjected to persistent interpretation, toward the satisfaction of solving a puzzle, for instance discovering or imagining, constructing and interpretation about, who killed the cat” (697). Pearce is referring to the newspaper article about the girl accused of killing a cat. Ben and

Gus question the truth behind that article and conjectures the possibility of her innocence. In this situation, Pinter points out the unreliability of society and its mainstream communications of meaning..

Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things*, which premiered in London in 2001, also applies mystery as a major theme (Brantley). Like Pinter, LaBute presents characters whose motives are unknown. For example, Evelyn meets Adam when she steps over the velvet rope in an art museum, getting too close to the sculpture. Through Adam's interrogation, she reveals her intention to spray paint the plaster leaf covering the sculpture's "thingie" because society put it there, not the artist (7). While she can justify her intentions, her personal gain from the illegal action is unclear. Before Adam leaves the site so she can perform her "art" she spray paints her phone number on his jacket. Evelyn continues to be a mysterious character as the play progresses. She never reveals to the audience her past, her Master's thesis project, the reason she wants Adam to change, or the fact that Adam *is* the subject of her thesis. Martin Esslin, in his book *The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter*, explains that the dumb waiter in Pinter's play progressively creates orders which become more and more outlandish (73). This also occurs in *The Shape of Things*—as the play continues, and as Adam fulfills Evelyn's requests, her expectations become more extreme. She begins the play requesting that he change his clothes and hair style, and in the end she convinces him to get plastic surgery.

The mystery of character and intention in *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Shape of Things* is also present in regards to narrative. Alice Rayner describes the

issue of narrative: “The end of a narrative, like the end of life, renders signification to events, so a wish for an end is equally a wish to know” (483). In other words, in the works of Pinter the audience wishes to experience the end of the play because they desire information. This is apparent in LaBute’s works as well. In *The Shape of Things*, to get to the end of play is to get to finally understand the relationship between the four characters; the ending gives the previous action its significance. This play satisfies the desire for knowledge more than *The Dumb Waiter* does; its ending reveals answers, while the final scene of *The Dumb Waiter* only creates more questions.

In Rayner’s article, she explains that the main concern of narrative theorists is “the function of repetition and the participation of the audience in accumulating knowledge about the relationship between beginning and ending” (484). As Gus questions his situation more and more, Ben becomes increasingly aggressive towards him and warns him of consequences of his curiosities. As tension increases, the audience may hypothesize that his boss, representative of society as a whole, may take action against him. Pinter drips information about Gus and Ben’s relationship; through repetition of actions and events, it becomes clear that Ben is the senior partner and that they engage in the same routines prior to each kill. LaBute parallels Pinter’s style by also gradually releasing information throughout his work. For example, as the play progresses and Adam and Evelyn’s romantic relationship develops, Adam and Jenny’s friendship blossoms into secret romantic feelings for one another. The repetition of Evelyn’s surface-level requests of Adam simultaneously contrasts the more intimate,

internal development of Adam and Jenny's relationship as they reveal their feelings for one another. Like Gus and Ben's situation, it remains unclear at the play's end what will become of Jenny and Adam's relationship.

When put into production, the level of mystery will likely be different from that of reading the script. Turning Pinter and LaBute's literary works into realized productions will inevitably change the meanings. Pearce explains this situation in regards to reader-response theory:

Reader-response theory, developing from Roman Ingarden's phenomenological thought, postulates the work of art as a 'concretization,' an activity determined neither by the text nor the reader, but realized in the event. This premise allows for a certain openness, for the impossibility of finishing—the word 'finalizing' seems allowable here—in that for Ingarden there will always be 'spots of indeterminacy' that a reader will try to fill, to determine. (Pearce 700).

In other words, when the dramatic literature becomes a production, directors and actors must interpret the script. The production has the potential to make the play concrete, erasing ambiguities. For example, the actress playing Evelyn will likely choose when she decides to use Adam for her master's thesis. This choice on her part may or may not be immediately clear to the audience, but it will influence her acting and character choices for the remainder of the play. Ben's actor must decide whether or not he already knows that he is going to be ordered to kill Gus. This will impact the performance in regards to his level of surprise when Gus is

pushed through the door, as well as whether or not he decides to complete the order. By just reading *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Shape of Things*, the reader is left “assuming the freedom to generate an imaginative construct of freedom and power, identity and being, motive and design” (Pearce 697). Through performance, however, the playwrights’ elements of mystery and the potential for personal interpretation may or may not be lost; the “concretization” of production will determine how audiences respond and may create a communal interpretation, as opposed to an individual reading of the plays where the reader will create a personal response and fill in the gaps of “indeterminacy.”

### **Society**

Both Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter* and LaBute’s *The Shape of Things* investigate the role of society in the formation of an individual. Both plays present a major character who struggles to balance his own identity amidst the world which surrounds him. These societies are the antagonists, with characters representing the social and cultural norms. Gus and Adam both find themselves alienated from their peers (and therefore their culture) because of their differences. S. E. Wilmer explains that theatre has a history of staging the role of society on the person. He states:

With its rhetorical and semiotic features, theatre has offered a particularly effective means of conveying notions of what is national and what is alien. Furthermore, because plays purporting to express national values can be performed in the actual presence

of the community, they can serve not only to make claims for national identity, but they can also gain immediate communal or rejection for that assertion. (Wilmer 1)

In this regard, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Shape of Things* convey social notions of what is normal and what is not. By presenting society's ideologies to them, audiences have the opportunity to assert or reject such claims.

*The Dumb Waiter*'s Gus is a character who toils to understand and gain control of his situation. Gus begins to question the identity of his boss and orders. The dumb waiter is representative of the world surrounding the character, delivering orders he must fulfill without question. The dumb waiter may symbolize society through religion, government, or community norms. Because Gus questions the authority, his life is threatened. As Gus deconstructs his identity, the dumb waiter demands more of him. The dumb waiter's commands could be taken literally, progressing from "Two braised steak and chips. Two sago puddings. Two teas without sugar" to "Macaroni Pastitsio. Ormitha Macarounda [ . . . ] One Bamboo Shoots, Water Chestnuts and Chicken. One Char Sui and Beansprouts" (103, 108-110). On the other hand, with the dumb waiter as a symbol for the demands of the larger society, it is also possible for the progression of *food* orders to symbolize *society's* orders from the protagonist's point of view. In other words, instead of such requests becoming more outlandish as the play continues, perhaps those orders are synthesized through Gus so that the audience realizes the extremity of society's demands on him as he does. The

orders may remain the same, but Gus (and therefore the audience) begins to understand them differently.

The morality of cultural influence on an individual is questionable in Pinter's play. Ruby Cohn explains that, "The religion and society which have traditionally structured human morality, are, in Pinter's plays, the immoral agents that destroy the individual" (Cohn 56). Like Cohn, a number of critics have associated the dumb waiter with religion. A God-like force, Gus and Ben have spent their lives satisfying the requests of their boss, whom remains mysterious to both them and the audience. Cohn continues to explain that *The Dumb Waiter* illustrates "Man vs. the System" (56). Gus is alone against the forces of God and society. Ben chooses to be a blind-believer, and he complies with the dumb waiter's demands immediately and unquestioningly. The dumb waiter also becomes God-like when it punishes Gus for doubting its supremacy.

*The Shape of Things* also presents society with an illustration of their ideologies. LaBute stages normality and alienation in regards to Evelyn and Adam, and he uses Jenny and Phil to reinforce those ideas. When Evelyn is first introduced on stage, she rebels against society by spray painting the statue. However, the act of spray painting the statue is as equally damaging to it as was a community's act of covering it with a plaster leaf. This action foreshadows what is to follow; while Evelyn pretends to be different from society, her actions reinforce the cultural values and norms. Evelyn spends the play working to transform Adam into a living work of art, which she refers to as a "human sculpture" (LaBute 77). Evelyn, over time, uses physical and emotional

persuasion to convince the awkward Adam to alter his appearance until he looks ideally “all-American.” Jenny reinforces the American value of physical appearances at two major points in the play. First, when Adam and Jenny meet in the park, Jenny notices minor changes in his façade:

JENNY. What the heck is this? What is this?!

ADAM. What...?

JENNY. Did you stop biting your nails?

ADAM. Yeah, for, like, a month now [ . . . ] She put some crap on them, slapped ‘em out of my mouth a few times and that was it.

JENNY. You have nails! This is crazy [ . . . ] Ever since I’ve known you, three years now, your fingers’ve looked like raw meat...anyway, awful. And now you just quit?! This girl is the messiah. (37)

Jenny refers to Evelyn as a “messiah” for altering Adams “raw meat” finger nails; she has changed him physically as well as cured him of what good society considers a bad habit. After this recognition, Jenny asks Adam, “Damn, when did you get so cute?” and kisses him on the cheek. They look at each other, and then they kiss (“*A real kiss, not a ‘great to see you, aren’t we the best of friends’ kiss*”) (37). Jenny both reinforces society’s values as well as encourages him to continue his conformation.

The second major point at which Jenny backs up social normality is when she and Evelyn meet in the coffee shop. Jenny tells Evelyn that what she’s done

with Adam is “really great” (60). Evelyn says that Adam has done all the work, and Jenny retorts:

Right. That’s always what they say, though, isn’t it? [ . . . ] You know, like in *Cosmo*, when they have those tests, asking what you’d like to change about your guy [ . . . ] It’s true, though, right? Almost everybody I’ve gone out with, if you could alter just one thing, or even get them to stop wearing sunglasses up on their head all the time...then they’d be perfect. (61)

At this point in this play, Adam has not only stopped biting his nails, but he has also lost approximately twenty pounds, gotten a hair cut, started wearing contacts, changed his wardrobe, discarded old clothes he loved, and had plastic surgery on his nose. He is becoming more like the models presented in mass media and stepping closer to what the American culture considers ideal. While Jenny supports these changes, she responds negatively when Evelyn announces her “human sculpture” project at her Master’s thesis presentation. When she realizes that Adam is the sculpture, she “*is suddenly up and storms off toward an exit, crumpling up her program and throwing it as she goes*” (76). Interestingly enough, this is just minutes after telling Phillip to stop wearing sunglasses on his head at night (74). Jenny’s actions condone the practice of systematically altering one’s appearance, while her conscience disapproves of others doing it. LaBute’s play raises the question of whether or not Jenny realizes that she and the rest of society engage in human sculpting. In fact, she does not find Evelyn’s act of sculpting a problem until Evelyn announces that it is for her art project. Jenny,

representative of society, finds Evelyn's thesis repulsive because it was an act of objectification rather than "love." *The Shape of Things* "deals with a theme of which Mr. LaBute has already proved himself an assured master: soullessness in objectifying others" (Brantley). Moreover, when performed, LaBute's play serves as a "microcosm of the national community, passing judgment on images of itself" (Wilmer 2). Jenny acts as a substitute for the audience as well as the greater community when she objectifies both Adam and Phillip but then condemns Evelyn for the same. Walking out of Evelyn's presentation is an act of passing judgment on the image of herself; simultaneously, the audience passes judgment on both Jenny and Evelyn as they judge each other.

*The Dumb Waiter* and *The Shape of Things* not only represent the norm, but they illustrate the consequences for stepping outside it. While most societies generally have no guide book to what is and is not customary—with the exception of criminal law, of course—they do condemn individuals for exploring the boundaries of acceptable behaviour and appearance. Identity theorist Madan Sarup describes this situation:

Within the boundary, the norm has a jurisdiction. [ . . . ] [first] a social norm is rarely expressed as a firm rule; it is really an accumulation of decisions made by a community over a long period of time. Second, the norm retains its validity only if it is regularly used as a basis for judgment. Each time a deviant act is punished, the authority of the norm is sharpened, the declaration is made where the boundaries of the group are located (11-12).

Both Adam and Gus explore the boundary between what is acceptable and what is not. Adam does this prior to the play's start, when he has already chosen what to look like and how to behave. Again, there appears to be no rule book regarding what is "cool" or "uncool," although Jenny *does* mention *Cosmo* as a source of guidance for social normality. Adam's individuality is punished by being turned into a project. His changes improve his social life for a while, however, in the end he is publicly humiliated at Evelyn's presentation. His old clothes, glasses, pictures, and even video of him and Evelyn having sex are put on display. Adam becomes like a zoo animal; he not only loses his individuality but also all of his private life. While Adam spends the play structuring his identity (but ironically lack thereof), Gus deconstructs his.

Pinter introduces Gus as a character who fits in with his surroundings; he follows orders, has a daily routine, dresses like his partner, etc. Throughout the play, Gus begins to question his situation. He becomes less like his partner, Ben, who remains the same throughout. Dukore explains that Pinter writes "not only about the man who has been crushed by the weight of the social world into a conforming nonentity, but about the man who resists being crushed. This man may be a rebel, an artist, or simply a questioner" (Dukore 50). Gus is the rebel questioner. As he becomes aware of the impact of Wilson on his life, he chooses to stop filling the orders being demanded. Soon after this point, Ben is given the order to murder Gus. While there are no written rules regarding filling the dumb waiter's order, the accumulation of decisions to fill the requests have become a norm. So, when Gus strays from the norm, he is resisting having his individuality

crushed by the weight of the social world. However, in the end, society threatens to sacrifice more than his individuality—life.

### **Victimization of the Individual**

The image of Ben pointing a revolver at Gus at the end of *The Dumb Waiter* creates a loaded semiotic message . Ben, dressed nicely wearing slacks, a jacket, waistcoat, tie, and holster, appears to by a symbol of strength and power. He stands with his arms out straight before him, pointing a loaded revolver at his (ex)partner who is an image of disheveled weakness. Gus, stripped of his jacket, waistcoat, tie, holster, and gun, lacks the clothes and accessories which makes Ben powerful. Gus *is* different when he enters the room. He is physically changed after being emotionally and socially changed. Society strips him of his false identity; he no longer belongs in the world of gangsters and hit men. The culture to which he has belonged chooses to make a sacrifice of him. Cohn refers to *The Dumb Waiter* in terms of a play that “concentrates even more pointedly [than Pinter’s other works] on the plight of the victim” (61). The final tableau creates the image of Ben as powerful and Gus as the helpless victim. In fact, Gus *is* completely helpless at the play’s close; he has no defense against the firearm directed at him. However, Gus makes decisions leading up to this moment which got him in this situation. He has, first of all, chosen to lead the life of a gangster. Gus also lies to his senior partner, Ben, by keeping food from him; Ben discovers this as Gus panics to fill the dumb waiter’s orders. Then, knowing Gus has kept a secret, Ben looks through his bag and finds crisps (106). Gus’ attempt to deceive

Ben backfires. Gus also chooses to question and complain about his situation aloud, so that Ben has no choice but to acknowledge Gus' self-alienation. While the end results of Gus' choices seem unfair, they are not shocking. Gus does not even appear to be surprised by the consequences of his decision. "*He raises his head and looks at Ben. A long silence. They stare at each other*" (Pinter 121). Instead of pleading for his life, Gus accepts the consequences of his actions.

Neil LaBute, in an interview with Warren Curry about the film adaptation of *The Shape of Things*, comments on Adam as a victim by saying that he is victimized but not a complete victim (Curry). He continues to explain that Adam is *not* at the complete mercy of Evelyn, and that he makes his own decisions about his personal changes. Not only does Adam choose to change physically, but he chooses to change internally: "—he didn't have to kiss [Jenny] back. He didn't have to lie to his friends, he didn't have to say I'll give my friends up. He didn't have to lie when asked about what happened to his nose." LaBute further acknowledges that there are "a lot of lies and treachery that Adam begins to foster on his friends. I can't see him as a complete victim" (Curry). While manipulated into changing himself physically, Evelyn cannot be entirely to blame for his changes. Adam, after all, is responsible for making his own decisions.

Both Gus and Adam make choices which influence their final situation. Not only does society punish them for lashing out against the norm, but their partners react in response to deception. Esslin explains that Gus is "tormented by doubt and guilt feelings—ransacks his luggage to find old biscuits, a pack of potato chips, a small bottle of milk, a packet of tea" (Esslin, *Peopled Wound* 68).

As previously mentioned, this is when Ben recognizes that “Gus has been less than candid with him, having concealed the fact that he had a packet of potato chips so as not to offer him a few” (*Peopled Wound* 68-69). Similarly, Evelyn learns from Phillip that Adam has been withholding information from her—that Adam and Jenny kissed. She confronts Adam and Jenny about this event, and reacts by claiming she kissed Phillip in an act of revenge. While Ben is ordered to murder Gus, and Evelyn has already planned on putting Adam on display, the two appear to have stronger objectives because of their partners’ betrayals. Gus and Adam become untrustworthy. Like Gus, Adam attempts to assuage his feelings of guilt by working harder to please his partner. The scene following Adam and Jenny’s kiss is when Adam allows Evelyn to persuade him to get plastic surgery on his nose. Adam sacrifices his nose for Evelyn. It becomes clear that this decision is not for himself; embarrassed, he lies to Phillip and Jenny about the bandage on his face. Obtaining plastic surgery is a way to not only hide his real nose, but to hide his feelings of guilt and doubt about the relationship.

### **Identity and the ‘Other’**

Harold Pinter and Neil LaBute both create characters who question their identities. Like many Absurdist playwrights, Pinter dramatizes “the terrors that most individuals experience on confrontation with external forces” (Haney 7). LaBute similarly explores the experience of a protagonist up against external forces, such as society and other characters. Both Gus and Adam attempt to gain acceptance and become more like the ‘Other’ while simultaneously struggling to

maintain individuality. In order to explore how these characters work to maintain individuality, it is necessary to first examine how they are similar to the ‘Other.’ Sarup explains that identity “is a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices [ . . . ] groups maintain boundaries to limit the type of behaviour within a defined cultural territory” (Sarup 11). In other words, each social group maintains unspoken guidelines about how its members are to behave—this includes dress, language, actions. In Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus begins very much like the ‘Other.’ He meets the desires of his organization—he dresses, speaks, and behaves similarly to his partner Ben. Both men wear nearly identical uniforms, and they go through their pre-murder routine of talking about sports and reading the newspaper. As the play progresses, Gus’ behaviour and language become less similar to Ben’s. However, even though Gus’ individuality becomes clearer, he still maintains some of the behavioural characteristics of his organization and partnership. Gus tries to behave like the ‘Other’ expects him to by going through normal routines—he goes through the step-by-step procedure for when the unknown person enters the room, he gets dressed when Ben does, and when Ben reads the newspaper aloud he responds with his usual phrases.

Adam identifies with the ‘Other’ as well. He wears popular clothes, loses weight, gets contacts, gets a tattoo, and has plastic surgery. With the help of Evelyn, Adam progressively conforms to what society defines as normal. Jenny even compares Adam’s appearance to *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. For Adam and

Gus, gaining society's acceptance refers not only to behavior but also desire. They must desire what society wants them to desire.

Anthony Wilden defines the Other in the following terms: "The Other is not a person, but a principle; the locus of the 'law of desire' . . . the only place from which it is possible to say 'I am who I am'. . . . [The Other] puts us in the position of desiring what the Other desires: we desire what the Other desires we desire."  
(Silverstein 20).

In this sense, Adam desires to get rid of glasses and invest in contacts, because society wants him to want contacts. Evelyn, representative of society and therefore the 'Other', wants Adam to desire popular commodities. LaBute also uses *Cosmopolitan Magazine* to portray the 'Other.' *Cosmo* creates quizzes which make women (like Jenny) desire for men to desire certain material goods, such as name brand clothing. Adam begins to desire for himself what Evelyn wants him to, representing what the greater community wants him to desire. Similarly, Gus desires what the 'Other' wants him to desire. The person in control of the dumb waiter wants Gus to fill the orders; because Gus desires to *be* the 'Other,' he hurries to fill the dumb waiter with any type of food he can find. He wants what the 'Other' wants—to please the social forces responsible for the dumb waiter.

The Other disciplines its individuals to desire conformity—Adam and Gus want to be one with the Other while still retaining individuality. These two characters are not forced into similarity. Gus joined his profession, because a

gangster, on his own free will. He explains that he passed tests in order to become part of his organization; Gus chose to join the Other and worked hard to gain its acceptance. Adam also chooses to identify with the other; every decision he makes is his own. Identity theorist Madan Sarup explains society's use of persuasive discipline to encourage identification:

Foucault's studies suggest that discipline, as a procedure of subjection, does indeed tie each individual to an identity. He remarks that it is not that the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order; it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it. (Sarup 72)

In *The Shape of Things*, the Other uses persuasive techniques to promote identification with it. Adam becomes "carefully fabricated" and meticulously molded into what Evelyn desires he become. During her thesis presentation, she explains that she never forced Adam to change. She says that she implemented sexual persuasion—"coaxing" often of a sexual nature—he wanted to literally be one with the Other (78). She also convinces him to get plastic surgery on his nose by lying to him and telling him that she did it; Adam gets the surgery partially because he is led to believe that others do it.

Sarup continues to explain social identity pressure: "They prescribe the body's movements, impose norms in its activity, watch out for any deviation, and exclude the non-conforming. In these ways, the body is connected with processes of meaning: it is tied to an identity" (Sarup 72). Gus and Adam's bodies and activities become strongly tied to the identity of the Other. Gus' behavior and

actions are prescribed through the routines previously discussed, such as reviewing where to stand and what to do when the unknown individual enters the room; Ben and Gus do this in a script-like fashion, illustrating that they have gone through these lines and actions many times before. Adam's body becomes similar to the desires of the Other not only through physical conformity, but also behavioural. Near the end of the play, Evelyn gives Adam an ultimatum: if he wants to remain in a relationship with her, he must never see his friends again, or vice versa. Adam chooses Evelyn, the Other, and the conformity she desires him to desire. He says to her "I choose you," and her response confirms that he chooses what she wants him to, "You choose well, grasshopper" (71). Evelyn's ultimatum is an example of the Other's exclusion of the non-conforming that Sarup describes. If he chooses to see his friends, he loses the identity he has formed with her. This choice becomes concrete when Adam refuses to sit with Phillip at Evelyn's thesis presentation.

While trying to become like the Other, Ben and Gus strive to maintain their own individuality. This is a precarious position for these characters, attempting to balance similarity and difference without upsetting the social equilibrium. Gus and Adam aim to conform *enough*, but not all the way. Their positions are dangerous, and throughout the plays they walk that line. Sarup explains the arrangement of identity versus non-identity:

Because identification forges a unity with the Other, it also poses an imaginary threat. To maintain a separate identity, one has to define oneself against the Other: this is the origin, for Lacan, of

that aggression towards the Other who threatens separateness, and thereby identity. That one is not what the Other is, is critical in defining who one is. Thus the truism that an individual is most likely to define her/himself against who or what s/he is most like.

(Sarup 47)

In Pinter's and LaBute's plays, the protagonists forge an identity with the other, but also keep small pieces of personal identity through deception. Gus and Adam's secretive behavior helps them define themselves against the Other; their identity becomes based on what the Other is not, and their uniqueness is rooted in the few things which make them different.

### **Human Loneliness**

In Martin Esslin's book *The Theatre of the Absurd*, he argues that a major characteristic of an Absurdist play is that it communicates "an experience of being, and in doing so it is trying to be uncompromisingly honest and fearless in exposing the reality of the human condition" (371). Pinter and LaBute both expose the human condition through the depiction of human loneliness. In *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus at first appears to *not* be alone because he is the presence of his partner. Gus and Ben begin the play with a quick conversation about a newspaper story.

BEN. Listen to this! A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

GUS. He what?

BEN. He crawled under a lorry. [ . . . ]

It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

GUS. It's unbelievable.

BEN. It's down here in black and white.

GUS. Incredible. (86)

At the end of the play, after Ben and Gus have clearly turned on one another, the two men discuss the newspaper again. Gus yells at the dumb waiter, "WE'VE GOT NOTHING LEFT! NOTHING! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?" Ben yells at Gus, "Stop it! You maniac! . . . (*savagely*). That's enough! I'm warning you!" Silence. The dumb waiter goes back up. Although Gus and Ben are clearly at odds with each other, and have separate perceptions of their place in the world around them, they engage in the same type of conversation as they did at the beginning of the play, to the extent of repeating a number of the same lines:

BEN. Listen to this! *Pause*. What about that, eh? *Pause*. [ . . . ]

Have you ever heard such a thing?

GUS.(*dully*) Go on!

BEN. It's true.

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's down here in black and white. [ . . . ]

GUS. It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

BEN. (*almost inaudible*). Incredible. (119)

Esslin states that quick pace and speedy character reactions are also characteristics of the Absurd. At first, Ben and Gus' quickly-paced dialogue portrays them as a cohesive unit. However, they maintain that type of dialogue even after Ben exposes that he is no longer supportive of Gus. This shows that the two men, although together and interacting, are alone in their thoughts and desires. When Gus no longer fulfills the requests of his boss (the dumb waiter), Ben is no longer supportive of their partnership. Gus is alone, and their newspaper conversation proves empty and meaningless.

Adam in *The Shape of Things* also discovers that he is alone. Throughout the play, he is led to believe that a romantic relationship is forming between him and Evelyn. As this relationship blossoms, his friendships simultaneously decay. When Adam changes his physical appearance, he becomes what mass media and our culture advertise as "cool" and "popular," terms our society often believe to be synonymous with happy and *unlonely*. Dukore explores loneliness and isolation in regards to Pinter's characters, a description which applies equally to LaBute's. He says:

They live in a "closed, womblike environment. They keep to themselves as if they are afraid to go outside their little world, afraid that their ordinariness, ineptness, or sheer emptiness will be seen and exposed in all of its nakedness." (Dukore 47)

He explains that Absurdist characters "isolate themselves" (47). Gus isolates himself through refusing to involve himself further with the goings on of the dumb waiter, and therefore his employer. He is lonely even when around Ben,

because of the divide in their loyalties. Adam is also isolated from those around him. As he conforms to society's physical standards, he closes himself off from those who cared about him. He is afraid of his "ordinariness, ineptness, or sheer emptiness" and attempts to cover those qualities with clothes and a hair cut. Doing so is an attempt to make him less lonely and bring him closer to Evelyn. However, the opposite proves true. He closes himself off from the people who really know (knew) him, and his ordinariness and emptiness are exposed when Evelyn publicly reveals his facade at her Master's thesis presentation.

### **Truth versus Lies**

Also a major characteristic of the Theatre is the Absurd is the use of grotesque images and dreamlike modes of thought (Esslin, *Absurd* 301). Pinter and LaBute similarly implement this characteristic with a nightmare-like quality to their plays. In both playwrights' works, it is difficult to determine what is real and what is unreal. In *The Dumb Waiter*, it is unclear who runs the dumb waiter and whether or not its orders have consequences. In *The Shape of Things*, the line between art and life becomes blurred; this spills over into Adam's life and makes his sudden changes in appearance and relationships ambiguous. Esslin explains the problem with truth in Absurdism:

The desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. The

thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. (Esslin, *Absurd* 206)

Evelyn brings into question the differences between art and real life. She states at the beginning of the play, “I don’t like art that isn’t true” (5). Adam then retorts, “[ . . . ] they’re both pretty subjective: ‘art.’ ‘Truth.’” (5). LaBute brings the difference between art (or fiction, or the untrue) and Truth (with a capital “T” of course) into question. Can art be True? Evelyn turns Adam into a piece of art. The changes which he goes through are very real—his plastic surgery the most permanent of all—but those changes occur on false terms. So then are his changes real or unreal? In regards to his relationship with Evelyn, Adam found satisfaction enough in their time together in that he proposed marriage. The relationship is very real to Adam while it happens. Meanwhile, that same relationship is *not* real to Evelyn; it is art. She knows the truth behind the reason for their being together. In this sense, LaBute explores the Absurdist idea of something being both real and unreal simultaneously. Adam forms a bond with his Evelyn while she remains at an aesthetic distance; his attachment is true and hers is falsified.

The conflict of these plays give them their nightmare quality. Gus is forever trying to do his job and please the God-like Other just to find himself at gun point. He tries to fill the constant orders, but his resources run out and his actions are consequently paralyzed. Then his only ally transforms into his enemy; his friend becomes the creature who runs the dumb waiter, and everyone turns against him. Adam is forever trying to change himself to please his girlfriend and

fit in, only to find out that his physically and emotionally painful sacrifices were only made so he could be put on display like a zoo animal. Adam's experience is like the common nightmare of standing naked in front of an audience; because he is, in a certain sense, naked and exposed for all the world to point and laugh at. Adam's nice, cute girlfriend transforms into a devil character; Eve picks the apple and condemns Adam to judgment.

### **Conclusion**

LaBute envelops the Absurdist tradition of humankind, alone, up against uncontrollable forces. Gus and Adam may attempt to obtain control over their own existences, but that "control" spins out of their hands. They plays end in such a way that it seems as if it does not matter what the characters do; regardless of how much food Gus puts on the dumb waiter and how much Adam changes his appearance, these characters cannot sacrifice enough of themselves to avoid condemnation. Dukore explains that Pinter's theatre, much like other Absurd plays, illustrates:

a picture of contemporary man beaten down by the social forces around him. It is a picture of man without identity and without individuality, of man crushed into a rigid social mold. It is a horrifying picture of contemporary life. It is a picture of the powerlessness of modern man, and the plays are frightening. It is a picture of the absurdity of the human condition in our world [ . . . ] there is a cry of despair from a well of human hopelessness. (51)

*The Shape of Things* and *The Dumb Waiter* are frightening; they portray protagonists who, like most individuals, face the forces of society. Adam and Gus try to please the force of the Other, but are not big or strong enough to win the fight. They fail to balance individual identity against the social forces of the Other. These characters cannot defeat that loneliness, and the more they try, the more isolated they become; they want the approval of others but cannot obtain it. The grotesque, unreal nature of these plays is actually *very* real; Pinter and LaBute employ extreme examples of this universal situation to communicate the allegorical truth about the human condition.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS OF *REASONS TO BE PRETTY*

“There must be no doubt about it—absurdity is the inescapable assessment of the human condition” (Oliver 196).

Neil LaBute is well known for his unapologetic depictions of true human behavior, and his characters “all seem to be the same as us, unfortunately” (*Pretty x*). Like most of us, the characters in his plays are consumed with appearances. *Reasons to Be Pretty* is LaBute’s 2008 play, completing his beauty trilogy which includes *The Shape of Things* and *Fat Pig* (Gans). While the main action of *Reasons to Be Pretty* focuses on physical appearance, recognition of the human condition lies deep at the play’s core. The four main characters, Greg, Kent, Carly, and Steph lead average lives, work average jobs, and live in an average town. The play’s action begins when they become aware of their ordinariness, with Greg and Steph arguing about an incident where Greg called her “regular”. This dispute about beauty leads into the remainder of the play, where these characters struggle to give their lives and relationships meaning. *Reasons to Be Pretty*, like many of LaBute’s plays, is an extension of the Theatre of the Absurd, as it makes an “effort to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition” (Esslin, *Absurd* 351). Even though the plot is

based in reality more than those of earlier Absurdist (LaBute has yet to write about people turning into Rhinoceroses), *Reasons to Be Pretty* portrays the traditional characteristics of the Absurd to a great extent. As I have previously discussed three of LaBute's works in comparison to specific Absurdist playwrights and themes, my goal with this chapter is to demonstrate how his works thoroughly employ the tradition of the Absurd, both thematically and stylistically, through a comprehensive analysis of his most recent play, *Reasons to Be Pretty*. I will do this by exploring the play in regards to the following traditions of the Absurd: images which are at the same time "broadly comic and deeply tragic," quick pace, failure of language, repetition, cruelty, and the void between self and society (Esslin, *Absurd* 291). This exploration is to provide a clear example of how LaBute's plays have been influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd.

### **Tragicomedy**

Plays classified as the Theatre of the Absurd present images which are at the same time "broadly comic and deeply tragic" (Esslin, *Absurd* 291). They combine comedy and tragedy, mixing audience laughter with horror (361). For example, this image is created clearly by the Absurdist playwright Edward Albee with *The American Dream*. When Daddy tells Mommy that he feels fortunate in life, Mommy responds:

You should. I have a right to live off of you because I married you,  
and because I used to let you get on top of me and bump your uglies;  
and I have a right to all your money when you die. (106)

Mommy's bluntness is humorous, but also horrific in its truth. Another example by Albee is in *The Zoo Story* when Jerry and Peter are fighting over Peter's bench, calling each other names such as "vegetable" or by saying bluntly, "You're slow-witted" (35).

Billed as a "comic drama," LaBute's *Reasons to Be Pretty* likewise employs this tactic throughout (Gans). Following Greg and Steph's argument about her beauty, the two separate and later decide to meet at the mall. Greg arrives early in the food court with flowers. When Steph arrives he gives her the flowers and apologizes. However, she does not accept his apology and, in an act of revenge, she reads aloud a letter listing everything unappealing about Greg's appearance. Steph's list becomes quite detailed and addresses each aspect of his body. Near the end of her list, she reads:

Your feet are the worst, though. They are. Your toes are, they're like, almost like fingers *and* you bite your own toenails—I know you do, I've seen you—and that goes down as the most disgusting fact I know. The fact that you rip off your toenails with your teeth . . . and then eat them, or nibble at them, anyway, after you've done it. (1.48)

Not only is the image of a grown man eating his own toenail is pretty hilarious, but this picture becomes even more humorous when staged, as Steph announces Greg's habit aloud in the middle of a mall food court. At the same time, this image is also deeply tragic. It reveals the crumbling of a relationship as well as the pain of rejection. Ending their four-year relationship with bitter words and judgment, Steph leaves Greg sitting in the food court, exposing his loneliness to a crowd of hungry shoppers.

The representation of life as both comic and tragic is also illustrated by Greg and Kent's fight scene at the end of the play. Warming up for their baseball game, Greg approaches Kent about an affair he (Kent) is having on his pregnant wife, Carly. Verbal wit comes into play during a serious conversation, as Kent describes his affair with candor:

KENT. She's got a name, Greg . . . even is she does like taking  
*Polaroids* of my cock.

GREG. That's . . . I really never needed to know a fact like that, Kent.

KENT. Yeah, but now you do . . . and I take 'em of her, too. / *Loads*  
of 'em.

GREG. Super. / Hmmm. Didn't even know she had a cock. Learn a  
little something every day. (2.98)

In the midst of a discussion about adultery comes verbal humor. Greg continues the discussion by stating that after having lied to Carly on Kent's behalf, he refuses to lie again. Kent begins to call Greg names and dares him to hit him. Fighting ensues, and Greg "*unleashes a flurry of punches that drop KENT in his tracks. He goes down hard. Frankly, KENT proceeds to get his ass kicked*" (2.109). As Greg walks off, Kent scream profanities and again dares Greg to come back for another fight. When Greg does not return, he "*stops his rant and kicks at the dirt with his cleats. Huffs and puffs. Stamps his foot—in case you didn't notice, it's a full-blown tantrum*" (2.109). The humor in this scene evolves from verbal to physical, as it ends with a grown man throwing a temper tantrum in his baseball uniform. At the same time, this

fight emerges from a number of heartbreaking matters: adultery, the decay of a marriage, and the end of a friendship.

### **Quick Pace**

Speed—like quick dialogue and character reactions—is, as Esslin observes, a feature of the Absurdist style (*Absurd* 289). This tactic is derived from the Marx brothers and modified by the early film comedic Jacques Tati's *Monsieur Hulot*, a “figure helplessly enmeshed in the heartless mechanical civilization of our time” (209). LaBute exercises this technique in many of his plays. In *Reasons to Be Pretty*, he introduces this approach at the beginning of the script, when he addresses the reader by stating that a slash represents a point of overlap between speakers' lines (4). This tactic is utilized regularly and is often accompanied by mindless chatter. For example, Greg brings a book to work with him to read on his break. Carly, Kent's wife and also the company's security guard, sees the book and asks him what it is. His book is Poe, and Carly does not know who that is. Greg describes him as dark, and their conversation continues as follows:

CARLY. That's why they call it that.

GREG. What? Call what that?

CARLY. Night. / 'Cause it gets dark at night, so.

GREG. Oh. / Is that why?

CARLY. I believe so . . . (1.24)

This dialogue is about Poe's dark style; Carly does not understand this term, so miscommunication ensues. Moreover, Carly is Steph's friend, and this conversation

takes place following Steph and Greg's break up. Their conversation is an awkward silence-filler with meaningless and mechanical dialogue; neither of them says anything of importance. They cover their thoughts and feelings with banter so as to *avoid* communication.

## **Language**

This type of dialogue also portrays the failure of language. Esslin describes this as an important attribute to the Absurd, when he states:

In its devaluation of language, the Theatre of the Absurd is in tune with the trend of our times. [ . . . ] Take the case of Marxism. Here a distinction is made between *apparent* social relations and the social *reality* behind them. (Esslin, *Absurd* 357-358)

Like Pinter, Albee, and Beckett, LaBute's plays are in tune with the trend of our times. Even though conversation about Poe between Greg and Carly makes them *appear* to be friends, their language fails to reveal the true condition. The difference between language's appearance and its reality becomes further apparent in Kent's soliloquy, when he describes the situation behind his wife's employment at the factory. He tells the audience that Carly applied for a job on the line, but there was an opening in security so one of the "big cheeses" in human resources offered her that job. He said he'd like to "help her out and suggests an easier job, up near him where she can sit and watch all the video cameras." The cheese continues, "'You make a really great first impression for our company'" (1.64). Kent and Carly both recognize this discrepancy between what the supervisor *says* and what he actually *means*. The

supervisor's language does not communicate his true meaning—that he thinks Carly is pretty and wants her to work near him. The absurdity in this statement, and others like it, is that her boss' statement does not communicate his true meaning. Both conversations are realistic, furthermore pointing out the absurdity in daily life.

## **Repetition**

Repetition is considered a distinctive feature of Absurdist theatre. Esslin describes the recurrences in *Waiting for Godot*: “Act II ends with the same lines of dialogue, but spoken by the same characters in reversed order” (26). Action, too, is repetitive, but what variety *does* occur is “merely serve to emphasize the essential sameness of the situation” (26). In *Reasons to Be Pretty*, Steph and Greg's argument in the mall is almost a repeat of their beginning argument; not word-for-word, but they cover the same bases with Greg saying that Steph is not ugly and her walking out on him. He says again that he was trying to be nice when talking about her to Kent. She acknowledges the reverberation and comments, “Let's not get into this again, OK” (1.39). Much of this repetition is due to characters not listening to each other (Brantley, “Listen”). Even though they attempt to communicate, their meaning is often lost in transition. During this argument, Greg tells Steph, “I do not get you, I really don't,” and she yells back, “That's because you don't try!” (1.44). Steph becomes even more angry with Greg for talking and not listening. She screams, “Shut up! / Shut your big sideways-grinning mouth, that's what I want you to do. OK?! (Beat.) Keep your damn mouth closed for a minute and listen to me” (1.45). He does close his mouth, but whether or not he really listens is questionable. Also

questionable is whether Steph ever tries to understand Greg. Both of these characters, like others in the Theatre of the Absurd, are self-involved, focusing on their situations rather than understanding those around them.

Repetition also comes into play in regards to the characters' overall situations. Just as Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon wait for Godot each day, and Ionesco's humans keep turning into rhinoceroses, LaBute's characters continue repeating the same actions. Besides going to work every day and eating lunch at the same time, actions which are absurdly familiar to the average human being, other situations repeat. Relationship problems, for example, appear to be a never-ending problem for these four characters. Greg and Steph break up because he judges her beauty. Then, during a conversation about Carly's pregnancy, Kent becomes judgmental about her weight gain to Greg: "I'll put up with it, though. For now. [ . . . ] Long as she hits the gym, like *day* after she delivers, we're all fine" (2.97). Then, just as Greg compared Steph to the new co-worker, Crystal, so does Kent. The situation repeats, though in a more cruel fashion, as Kent decides to act on his feelings about Crystal's beauty by having an affair with her. LaBute suggests Kent and Carly's relationship ends when Greg advises Carly to go home at a time when he is certain Kent and Crystal are there together. The cyclic nature of Absurdist drama is used by LaBute in a realistic nature, demonstrating the absurdity of the human condition.

### **Cruelty**

As cruelty was discussed in Chapter III regarding LaBute's *Fat Pig* and Genet's *The Balcony*, I would like to acknowledge that cruelty is a major factor in *all*

Absurdist plays just as it is in all of LaBute's plays. *Reasons to Be Pretty* is no different, as the work explores the cruelty people do unto one another on a daily basis. Many traditional Absurdist plays illustrate physical cruelty—Albee's *Mommy and Daddy* store Grandma under the sink in *The American Dream*—LaBute's form of cruelty is more telling of contemporary culture. LaBute's unkindness is more emotionally and psychologically painful than it is physical, as his characters use language to hurt each other. Words easily become a vehicle for cruelty, because as Lois Tyson explains, "it is through language that we come to conceive and perceive our world and ourselves" (255). So, when Greg calls Steph "ugly," Steph identifies herself with the unprivileged classification in the binary opposition of "pretty" and "ugly," with Greg's co-worker being the privileged. It is through these two words that Steph and Greg qualify the term "beauty" to their worlds. For Greg to grant her the unprivileged classification, he is simultaneously granting himself the privileged opposition. Because they are a couple, one will always be prettier than the other; and by saying that Steph is ugly, he is also saying she is uglier than him. Also, the failure of language comes into play here as the terms "ugly" and "pretty" have different meanings to each person. The individual associates his or her own meaning to the terms; the signifier (the sound-image "ugly") does not create the same signified connotation to Greg and Steph, and they can never clearly communicate what the word signifies for them. Therefore, "ugly" imparts a different level of cruelty for each of them.

Similar to *Fat Pig* and *The Balcony*, LaBute depicts the male gender as cruel to women for the purpose of gaining control. Kent is whom this relates most to, as he

represents the male struggling for sexual dominance. In his soliloquy, Kent tells the audience that Carly has to work because he cannot financially support them both, she has a dominant position at their work place, and he is afraid of her cheating on him because she is so beautiful. Kent's cruelty is towards or about women, so it is clearly due to his struggle with gender roles. These roles, as Tyson describes them, "cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive" (85). Unlike Steph, who has internalized patriarchal ideology, Carly does not fit the stereotype of a woman, as she proves to be strong and never weak or submissive. She does not privilege attractiveness and even explains why she hopes her daughter is normal looking. Carly recognizes the negative impact that attractiveness has on her life, particularly in regards to her interactions with men. In retaliation for this gender mix up, Kent attempts to gain control over his masculinity by engaging in an affair with another woman. In doing this, Kent intentionally acts cruelly towards his wife, asserting his dominance and sexual strength. Kent now has two women to protect and dominate. Cruelty towards his wife is also, in part, a response to the already stated employment situation. Tyson explains how this has a negative affect on Kent:

Failure to provide adequate economic support for one's family is considered the most humiliating failure a man can experience because it means that he has failed at what is considered his biological role as provider. (87)

Kent's fear of what others will think of his masculinity ties into the Absurdist tradition of representing a character's *real* self in contrast to what society expects of

him or her. Kent is afraid of having his gender role in question, as society deems that men must be able to support their families without help.

### **Self Versus Society**

The Theatre of the Absurd presents the individual up against the rest of the world. Each person struggles with society in order to gain control over his or her situation. Steph becomes a victim of society's stereotyping women as having to be pretty. When her boyfriend rejects her sexuality, she works harder to increase her attractiveness. In the second act, Steph comes across Greg at a restaurant. Dressed in a skirt, heels, and make up, Greg makes attack on her femininity by comparing her curse words (which he provoked) to her appearance: "High heels and a smutty mouth are a *perfect* match" (2.74). Steph responds to his patriarchal expectations by explaining the labor she goes through to fulfill the demands of society:

I'm trying to look pretty, all right?! I'm *trying* to make myself feel better because my former boyfriend—this guy that I gave a whole lot of my heart to—couldn't find me attractive and now it keeps me awake at night, wondering what's wrong with me. Why I was so unappealing to him . . . (*Beat.*) So yeah, I'm wearing a *skirt* tonight so that I feel a little sexier, or cuter, or, you know . . . (2.74)

Although Steph is unable to change her face, she alters her wardrobe and make up in the endeavor to become more like media's depictions of attractive women. She remains awake at night because of one word Greg used—"ugly." A loaded word, "ugly" is rich in ideological meaning, as it represents the patriarchal values imposed

by and on our culture. Steph realizes the male gaze is forced upon her, so she now strives to conform to society's standards.

Tragicomedy, quick reactions, impotent language, repetition, cruelty in response to fear, and the battle between self and society are all major characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin, *Absurd*). These stylistic tendencies create the tradition of the Absurd, and LaBute's plays implement each of them. *Reasons to Be Pretty* is, like many of his plays, based in realism more than many Absurdist plays. Even so, LaBute's use of Absurdist Realism continues the tradition of the Absurd by bringing attention to the reality of the human condition. Life is both funny and tragic. Communication fails. Situations repeat themselves, and many problems do not work themselves out. People are afraid and mean because of it. Society makes us afraid of ourselves and the world. These ideas, while simple, are what make up the meat of the Theatre of the Absurd, and they work cohesively in LaBute's *Reasons to Be Pretty* to illustrate the realistic circumstances of the human situation.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

“Mr. LaBute is writing some of the freshest and most illuminating American dialogue to be heard anywhere these days” (Brantley, “First You”)

The dramatic literature of Neil LaBute greatly parallels the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd. Like Beckett, Pinter, Genet, and Albee, LaBute’s dramas reveal the ultimate reality of the human condition. His characters recognize and question their purpose(lessness) in life, striving to make meaning of their situations. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, a number of LaBute’s plays fit the style and characteristics by which Esslin defines the Absurd. Disintegration of language and the failure of communication, quick dialogue, and tragic-comedy are equally present in LaBute’s plays as they are in traditional Absurdist works. Moreover, his plays not only meet such qualifications, but his overall themes are similar to those found in Absurdism. *The Mercy Seat* parallels the situation of paralysis in a post-catastrophe world illustrated in Beckett’s *Endgame*. *Fat Pig*’s is thematically similar to Genet’s *The Balcony*, because of its ideologies regarding cruelty, fear, and power; the difference is that while Genet’s characters utilize physical violence for power, LaBute’s employ discursive cruelty. *The Shape of Things*’ theme of self versus the

Other and the struggle to both maintain identity and conform to society is apparent in much of Pinter's work, namely *The Dumb Waiter*. More of LaBute's plays parallel the Absurd, however these three stand out in their conformation to the tradition.

LaBute not only mimics the themes and characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd, but he progresses the style to address contemporary concerns. For example, his beauty trilogy, consisting of *The Shape of Things*, *Fat Pig*, and *Reasons to Be Pretty*, illustrate society's obsession with physical beauty. These characters must deal with physical judgment and the social weight of being called "fat" or "regular." Whereas many works canonized as Absurd present physical cruelty, LaBute's illustrate the more common cruelty in today's world—violence of the word:

[ . . . ] for all these characters words are weapons, far more potentially damaging than fists. Like Harold Pinter, Mr. LaBute understands language as power, even (or perhaps especially) among the unlettered.  
(Brantley, "First You")

Decaying marriages, adultery, sexual abuse, and social pressure are some of the topics he presents to audiences, making them question their conditions within society in addition to the ultimate reality of the human condition. These reasons suggest that Neil LaBute is not only influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, but may be considered one of its great contributors as a Contemporary Absurdist.

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“An Absurd Evolution: Neil LaBute and the Progression of the Theatre of the Absurd” explores the Absurdist movement in terms of its influence on contemporary drama. Despite Martin Esslin’s argument that the Theatre of the Absurd is a European post-World War II phenomenon, contemporary American playwrights have successfully utilized and developed the Absurd. Namely, the drama of Neil LaBute has not only been influenced by the major Absurdist playwrights, but his works parallel and progress the movement to address contemporary concerns. This thesis explores four of his major works: *The Mercy Seat*, *Fat Pig*, *The Shape of Things*, *Reasons to Be Pretty*. The introduction discusses the Absurdist movement in terms of how it is defined by Martin Esslin. Chapter II looks into Absurdism as a post-disaster phenomenon by comparing *The Mercy Seat* to Beckett’s *Endgame* in regards to the influence of trauma on characters’ decisions. Both of these plays are set post-catastrophe, and the plots revolve around the main characters having to make a decision. Chapter III explores cruelty, fear, and the desire for power often found in the Theatre of the Absurd by analyzing *Fat Pig* in comparison to Genet’s *The Balcony*. Chapter IV focuses on Self versus the Other in *The Shape of Things* and Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*. Chapter V analyzes *Reasons to Be Pretty*, LaBute’s newest play, in depth regarding the themes and characteristics of the Absurd. The goal of “An Absurd Evolution” is to prove that Neil LaBute is not merely influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd, but may be considered one of the movement’s great contributors.

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