

## Aging and Death in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* and Tennessee Williams's *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*

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### ABSTRACT

With focus on the tropes of aging and death in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* (1960) and Tennessee Williams's *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963), the essay investigates the negotiation of the protagonists' identity through specters of age and the means of encountering death, and it analyzes the representation of the dramas' senior citizens with special regard to the ways in which these characters challenge mainstream cultural constructions of aging. On their deathbed, both Albee's and Williams's protagonists are reconnecting with their pasts in idiosyncratic ways: they build up a conscious "age autobiography" (Margaret Morgenroth Gulette) in an inventory of events and feelings assessing a complete(d) life and achieve an "agewise" (Gulette) identity that comes full circle in the very moment of grace. The characters who escort these two elderly women on their last journey reconceptualize the sense of intimacy between people. The dialogic potential of their empathy, care, and unconditional support during the end-game of the protagonists accommodates difference in various contexts by blurring the boundary between the old and the young as well as the one between men and women, because death has neither age nor gender. Thus, these intergenerational exchanges help elder characters' agewise enterprises into the unknown gain a cathartic sense of freedom. (RMC)

**KEYWORDS:** Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, age autobiography, agewise, death, identity



Tropes of aging and death abound in two American dramas, Edward Albee's chamber piece, *The Sandbox* (1960), and Tennessee Williams's *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963), yielding a negotiation of the protagonists' identities through specters of age and the means of encountering death. Both plays were written in the early sixties by playwrights who excelled in the depiction of controversial themes, including the representation of age. It was the time when the last tide of the Baby Boom generation—the generation between 1946 and 1964, which shaped most of twentieth-century US society—was born. The representation of senior citizens in these dramatic plots, ranging from Albee's *Mommy, Daddy*, and especially *Grandma* to Williams's *Mrs. Flora Goforth*, challenges mainstream cultural constructions of aging.

As Philip C. Kolin contends, Albee's one-act plays, including *The Sandbox*, "called America to be self-reflexive" in a turbulent decade in which "the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, the Watts riots in Los Angeles, the Vietnam War, and the Stonewall protests of gays and bisexuals would all force the nation to confront its failings" (17). Unlike other Albee plays of the sixties, *The Sandbox*, however, focuses on a dual theme that was rather unvoiced in the American plays of the sixties: aging and death. Interestingly, the same theme of aging and death also appears in Williams's play written three years after Albee's, *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. Williams had, according to Christopher W. E. Bigsby, a "romantic fascination with extreme situations, with the imagination's power to challenge facticity, with the capacity of language to reshape experience" (32) in a manner that no playwright had before him, especially in regard to the dying and old characters. Indeed, considering his famous characters, especially those "whose lives have reached their apogee and can look forward only to a decline," there is only one play about an old dying actress written in the sixties when the playwright himself was "on the very verge of his vertiginous plunge into the drink and drugs which came close to annihilating his personality" (65, 67).

In my reading of these two plays, I am following the approach to aging and identity as described by cultural critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette, who was among the first to call for a distinctive age or aging studies in the 1990s (qtd. in Bouson 6). Gullette followed immunologist Elie/Ilya Metchnikoff's ideas on aging and longevity in *The Prolongation of Life: Optimistic Studies* (1908/2004) as well as Simone de Beauvoir's notions in her quintessential but largely neglected book *The Coming of Age* (1970) by challenging the so-called "regimes of decline" or narratives of decline (Gullette, *Agenise* 5) and the strategies of ageism. The term "ageism" was invented in 1969, a year after the term "sexism" appeared. According to Gullette, ageism should be used in the plural form as "ageisms" (*Ending Ageism* xviii) rather than the singular (a term coined by Robert Butler, the first director of the American National Institute of Aging in 1969), because it is, in Palmore Erdman's formulation, "the ultimate prejudice, the last discrimination, the cruelest rejection" (3) of old people, related to "any prejudice or discrimination against or in favor of any age group" (4). Furthermore, Gullette claims:

[N]aming and shaming go together. Use of the term "racism" disparages and drives out hate speech, housing and job exclusions, and other

racializations. Calling out “homophobia” changes LGBTQ lives. Naming discrimination against people with disabilities as “ableism” changes the status and identity of people with disabilities. Targeting “ageism” instead of our own “aging” does heavy lifting on behalf of everyone alive, and positions old people to enjoy the accomplishment of making it so far so well. (*Ending Ageism* 202)

Gullette also states that Americans in the twentieth century, especially the so-called Boomers, “generally didn’t pay serious attention to ageism or even notice its precocious spawn, middle-ageism”; moreover, most Americans thought “there never can be a ‘golden age’ for older people,” but, as the cultural critic continues, despite this grim context, “aging-into-the-middle-years, or aging-into-old-age, or even aging-past-youth, can be better or worse depending on social context” (*Agewise* 5). Furthermore, Gullette claims that “. . . whatever happens in the body, and even if nothing happens in the body, aging is a narrative. Each of us tells her own story. But most of us lack an adequate back story,” which she calls “age autobiography” (5). Age autobiography thus becomes a new genre of life storytelling that is endowed with critical revelatory characteristics.

In Albee’s and Williams’s dramas that deal with the imminent presence of death and dying, it is possible to trace an age autobiography by following subsequent markers of identity in the case of Grandma and Flora Goforth, who enact an agewise strategy that helps them encounter the grand finale. “Agewise,” an umbrella term coined by Gullette, is a series of attitudes and strategies that confront “trends and symptomatic events in this new expanded US ageism that have been concealed or misrepresented or underreported even though they do increasing violence to essential aspects of well-being” (*Agewise* 8). An agewise attitude, therefore, is a certain constructive self-awareness that develops in later stages of life. The two dramas I chose for analysis are eloquent artistic examples of how several forms of ageisms work in the western, youth-oriented culture pertaining to women of advanced age arriving at the end of their lives, and how these women fight against societal prejudices applying various strategies. Albee’s Grandma in *The Sandbox* and Williams’s Flora Goforth in *Milktrain* are characters who best represent such modes of agewise journeys empowered by their final creative potential.

### **Aging, ageility, and death in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox***

*The Sandbox: A Brief Play, In Memory of My Grandmother*, which had its debut on April 15, 1960, in the Jazz Gallery, New York City, was inspired, along with *The American Dream* (1961), by the playwright's childhood experiences with his parents and his grandmother (Gussow 152). *The Sandbox* was one of Albee's favorites; it is a piece he called "an absolutely beautiful, lovely, perfect play," which was written

for (and about) his grandmother, Grandma Cotter, his closest relative, the one member of the family with whom he had formed a lasting attachment. A crotchety and very amusing woman, she considerably brightened Albee's childhood and was a natural ally against his mother (her daughter)—and everyone else. When he left home, his one regret was having to leave Grandma Cotter behind. She died in 1959 at the age of eighty-three before her grandson's first play was produced in New York. Still estranged from him, his parents did not tell him of his grandmother's death, and he missed her funeral. He found out later, from "spies in the house of love, so to speak," that is, from a secretary in his father's office. (Gussow 135)

*The Sandbox* grew out of a reconceived play, *The Dispossessed* (1959–60), which was initially titled *The American Dream*. The text of this drama was partially ready when Gian Carlo Menotti requested a "short piece for the Festival of Two Worlds" in Spoleto, Italy; so Albee "took the characters of Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma from *The American Dream*, turned the Young Man into a kind of Angel of Death, put them on a beach, and presto, *The Sandbox*." (Gussow 135). A year later, *The Sandbox*'s twin play, *The American Dream* (1961), premiered in New York. This "outlandish cartoon" portrayed, similar to *The Dispossessed* and *The Sandbox*, a dysfunctional American family, with Grandma, the oldest member of the cast as a "devilish, daft" figure and as a "constant source of amusement" and wit (Albee qtd. in Gussow 139). In the "Preface" to *The American Dream*, Albee sets the parameters of this drama by claiming that "the play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen." Moreover, he added that the play "is a picture of our time—as I see it, of course. Every honest work is a personal, private yowl, a statement of one individual's pleasure or pain; but I hope that *The American*

*Dream* is something more than that. I hope that it transcends the personal and the private, and has something to do with the anguish of us all” (21–22).

*The Sandbox* adheres to all the above criteria but unlike *The American Dream*'s consumerist opulence, it was conceived to be played on a minimal, “bare” stage with two simple chairs set side by side and a “large child’s sandbox with a toy pail and shovel;” its background “is the sky, which alters from brightest day to deepest night” (Albee, *The Sandbox* 8), prefiguring someone’s long day’s journey into eternal night. The characters of the play include a glacial Daddy and a callous Mommy—portraying the playwright’s mother, Frances Albee, who was a model for characters featuring in *The American Dream*, *A Delicate Balance* (1966), and *Three Tall Women* (1991). The couple escort Grandma to her last act into a grave-like sandpit, with the Musician and the Young Man assisting in the process. Daddy (aged 60) is described as a small, gray, thin man; his wife, Mommy (aged 55), is a well-dressed, imposing woman (8). Their names, according to the descriptions in the script, are “empty of affection,” pointing to the “pre-senility and vacuity of their characters” (8), whose implicit ageism is imminent in their own fear of the end. According to Philip C. Kolin, this play encapsulates “familiar Albee targets as anti-Momism, hollow rituals, failure to communicate, sterile couplehood, complacency, and hypocrisy” (26). Among these quasi-hollow characters, Grandma (aged 86) stands out: she is the play’s protagonist and Mommy’s mother, a “tiny, wizened woman with bright eyes” (8), actually the most dynamic of all characters. The play also features the Young Man (aged 25), nicknamed the Angel of Death, who is a “good-looking, well-built boy in a bathing suit” (8) doing calisthenics that suggest the “beating and fluttering of wings” (9) along with the Musician, whose nondescript age suggests also a young man. It is these two who show real affection and true care for Grandma in a sterile, consumerist world devoid of sentiments and burdened with meaningless regulations.

At the beginning of *The Sandbox*, Mommy and Daddy arrive at an unremarkable beach that seems for them to be the perfect location to place Grandma to rest. “There’s sand there—and the water beyond” (9), Mommy says. The play’s sandy beach setting has a double denotation: it stands for a playground and a burial ground and connotes the infantilization of Grandma, who is taken there to die. Similarly to a disobedient child, the elderly woman is, as the stage directions run, “borne in by their hands under her armpits; she is quite rigid; her legs are drawn up; her feet do not touch the ground; the expression on her ancient face is that of puzzlement and fear” (10–11). Their condescending, ageist attitude suggests that the couple act against Grandma’s wishes as she is unable to

touch ground anymore. In a dehumanizing act, Mommy and Daddy discard their disabled parent by putting her into a sandbox to shovel sand on herself; by this they push the responsibility of dying to her alone. Realizing what is happening to her, Grandma decides not to communicate with them more than a baby does: she screams and groans “Ahhhhhh! Ah-haaaaaa! Graaaaaa!” (12). Her onomatopoeias sound like a “*cross between a baby’s laugh and cry*” (12), indicating the tragicomic nature of her dead-end situation. This lack of communication provides the generative moment of the plot: terminally disabled, Grandma realizes that the end of her day(s) has arrived, but her productive subjectivity manages to make the experience less uncanny by playing a trick on the others present.

Motionless and distant, Mommy and Daddy watch Grandma’s agony and wait patiently for her to stop moving; as foreseen by Albee, their communication is empty of meaning and lacks any ceremonial traits. The couple’s attitude suggests that this is yet another mundane act devoid of any ritual content. Resisting sentimentality and knowing that she will not get any reaction from her family members, the protagonist suddenly undercuts theatrical illusion, breaks the fourth wall, and starts to talk directly to the audience (Kolin 27), complaining about how Mommy and Daddy treat(ed) her. By this metadramatic turn, she adopts her audience making them instant relatives and participants in her play(ground). Moreover, with a keen awareness of her situation, Grandma makes herself not only visible (by shoveling sand) but also heard (by screaming and groaning) and understood by all, when she finally speaks out, summarizing her life in terms of familial relationships that reflect the lack of respect towards the old:

GRANDMA. Ah-haaaaa! (*Looks for reaction; gets none. Now . . . directly to the audience*) Honestly! What a way to treat an old woman! Drag her out of the house . . . stick her in a car . . . bring her out here from the city . . . dump her in a pile of sand . . . and leave her here to rot. I’m eighty-six years old! I was married when I was seventeen. To a farmer. He died when I was thirty . . . I’m a feeble old woman . . . how do you expect anybody to hear me over that peep! Peep! Peep! (*To herself*) There is no respect around here. (*To the YOUNG MAN*) There’s no respect around here! (13–14)

Grandma’s succinct age autobiography involves a kind of conscious ageility. The term was coined by Leni Marshall (33) in the process of writing

on the convergence of disability and age studies. Conscious ageility derives from the term of “conscious aging,” defined by Margaret Cruikshank in *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging* (2003), and from the idea of “disability” connected to it, meaning the aging-awareness of disabled people together “with an understanding of one’s self-identity and social identity as variable, and with an appreciation for the possibility that the self can remain whole even as it changes” (Marshall 33). Indeed, as Marshall emphasizes, “people with disabilities mark their bodies as aging more quickly; their bodies are temporally beyond a cultural norm. In this formulation, Otherness is coded as aged-ness. Conversely, elders may try to maintain their connection to the cultural norm of able-bodied-ness in an effort to stave off the Otherness that they code as disability” (23).

The idea of old age as “Other” was brought into critical discourse by Simone de Beauvoir, who described advanced age as a “forbidden subject,” a “shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention” (7, 10). In this context, ageility thus connotes a double Otherness that materializes in the ageility of Grandma caught in her near-death moment. Quickly realizing her hopeless situation, she overcomes the emotional dimensions and the limitations of her own body and age in an absurdist turn: by embodying the defensive mechanism of feigning death, she freezes. Her tonic immobility makes her folks believe she is finally dead:

(GRANDMA *plays dead*. (!) MOMMY and DADDY *go over to look at her; she is a little more than half buried in the sand; the toy shovel is in her hands, which are crossed on her breast*.)

MOMMY. (*Before the sandbox; shaking her head*) Lovely! It’s . . . it’s hard to be sad . . . she looks . . . so happy. (*With pride and conviction*) It pays to do things well. (*To the MUSICIAN*) All right, you can stop now, if you want to. I mean stay around for a swim, or something; it’s all right with us. (*She sighs heavily*) Well, Daddy . . . off we go.

DADDY. Brave Mommy!

MOMMY. Brave Daddy! (*They exit, stage-left*) (20)

In this dysfunctional family there is no sense of loss, sorrow or grievance at all—as if Grandma was just another unneeded object to be safely deposited in a proper place; their congratulatory support is absurdly coined as “brave” before they leave the internment ground. After her family leaves, Grandma, however, finds herself totally paralyzed.

Robert A. Neimeyer and James L. Werth, two specialists in end-of-life psychology, claim that death triggers “despair, paralysis or defensive avoidance, on the one hand, or some form of acceptance, affirmation or even meaning on the other” (388). However, death is not there yet for Grandma, and she has enough time to think about her big move that finally makes her welcome what Tennessee Williams termed in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) as “the kindness of strangers.” Realizing this dead-end, she agewisely accepts the Young Man’s quasi-memorial service and the Musician’s music (who continues to play as the curtain slowly comes down). These two thanatic interlopers reconceptualize end-life intimacy: they act as if they were Grandma’s children and she, in return, calls them “kids,” “dear,” and “sweetie.” They also provide Grandma with skilled nursing and with an atmosphere of trust and love; with their hospice service and palliative care they facilitate her rite of passage. This moment is similar to what psychologist Elizabeth MacKinley describes in her study on death and spirituality as a “unique, spiritual journey” (399) and a “successful negotiation of a final identity that gives retrospective meaning to life and prospective meaning to death” (396). During the act of sand shoveling, Grandma recollects her life as part of her larger age autobiography and realizes her new agewise stance when she says:

GRANDMA. I am *smart that way*. Anyhow, I had to raise . . . that over there all by my lonesome; and what’s next to her there . . . that’s what she married. Rich? I tell you . . . money, money, money. They took me out of the farm . . . which was real decent of them . . . and they moved me into a big town house with them . . . fixed a nice place for me under the stove . . . gave me an army blanket . . . and my own dish . . . my very own dish! (Albee, *Sandbox* 15–16, emphasis added)

The attitude of the two young men, whose accompanying “this final journey in life with the one dying is a special position” is reserved for “those privileged to be part of this journey” (MacKinley 399). Grandma’s conscious ageility and her final, agewise attitude make the departure ceremony a serene voyage into afterlife, uplifting the mournful event to the elevated level of sublime love. The Young Man, an alter ego of the playwright in this short memory play, bids a final goodbye to Grandma (modeled on the playwright’s



beloved grandma), whose last words soothe the one left behind in an intimate, “dear” moment of shared death experience:

GRANDMA. (*After they leave; lying quite still*) It pays to do things well . . . Boy, oh boy! (*She tries to sit up*) . . . well, kids . . . (*but she finds she can't*) . . . I . . . I can't get up. I . . . I can't move . . . (*The YOUNG MAN stops his calisthenics, nods to the MUSICIAN, walks over to GRANDMA, kneels down by the sandbox*)

GRANDMA. I . . . can't move . . .

YOUNG MAN. Shhhh . . . be very still . . .

GRANDMA. I . . . I can't move . . .

YOUNG MAN. Uh . . . ma'am; I . . . I have a line here.

GRANDMA. Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie; you go right ahead.

YOUNG MAN. I am . . . uh . . .

GRANDMA. Take your time, dear.

YOUNG MAN. (*Prepares; delivers the line like a real amateur*) I am the Angel of Death. I am . . . uh . . . I am come for you.

GRANDMA. What . . . wha . . . (*Then with resignation*) . . . ohhhh . . . ohhhh, I see. (*The YOUNG MAN bends over, kisses GRANDMA gently on the forehead*)

GRANDMA. (*Her eyes closed, her hands folded on her breast again, the shovel between her hands, a sweet smile on her face*) Well . . . that was very nice, dear . . . (19–20)

### **Aging, memory, and death in Tennessee Williams's *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore***

Similarly to a number of other plays by Williams which focus on the theme of death and dying produced in the 1960s including, for example, *The Mutilated* (1966), *Kingdom of Earth* aka *The Seven Descends of Myrtle* (1968), *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969), and *The Frosted Glass Coffin* (1970); *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* is, in Christopher Bigsby's words, a “brutal, apocalyptic and death-centered” play with a high-camp figure as the protagonist (63). This protagonist is Flora “Sissy” Goforth, the famous aging actress, one of Williams's characters “whose lives have reached their apogee and who can look forward only to a decline whose reality they choose not to confront” yet try to “live with compromise, to soften the edges of a reality which they see as threatening” (Bigsby 66). Moreover, Mrs. Goforth is, according to Howard Taubman, a “dying woman with a flamboyant past and a bruising tongue,” a “coarse and coy, wise and foolish, vulnerable and

tyrannical” old woman “full of pretense, yet has reached the point of no more pretense.” *Milktrain*’s stage directions do not provide any specific description of this character; however, she is briefly portrayed in *Man Bring This Up Road*, a short story Williams wrote between 1959 and 1960, which was then adapted into drama. Here, the character of Goforth (her name was left unchanged in the play) is described as a wealthy widow “edging timorously into her seventies” (347) and resembles in many respects Alexandra del Lago also named Princess Kosmonopolis from *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), which Williams wrote in the same period of time. And while Kosmonopolis continuously chases (her) youth and is still into more lively adventures, Sissy Goforth’s activity is postponing death—up to a point.

Mrs. Goforth retired to her Italian estate of Divina Costiera [the Divine Coast], a metaphorical antechamber of Elysian Fields (the final resting place of the souls in Greek mythology) to write her memoirs. She is secluded but has a number of people who visit her from time to time. Her last visitor, Chris Flanders, becomes her Angel of Death, and assumes a peculiar role in the reconceptualization of her agewise transition into her end. He appears as a Young Man (he is thirty-four) bearing “a white sack over his shoulder” and “looks back as if to make sure he’s no longer pursued” by Mrs. Goforth’s lupos, the Cerberus-type of dogs (Williams, *Milktrain* 144). His equivalent character in the short story is Jimmy Doby, an “odd combination of ski instructor and poet” (Williams, *Man Bring This Up Road* 349). Chris, however, is a more complex character than Jimmy: he is a wandering artist who makes mobile decorative structures and who wrote poems published as *Meanings Known and Unknown*. Chris has the same qualities as Brick Pollitt in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending* (1957), and Lawrence T. Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana* (1961); they all deal “in ambivalence, the poetic, the allusive, the metaphorical” (Bigsby 41). Accordingly, he “has the opposite appearance to that which is ordinarily encountered in poets as they are popularly imagined,” with his rough and weathered appearance and with his eyes “wild, haggard,” Chris “has the look of a powerful, battered but still undefeated fighter” (Williams, *Milktrain* 147). Moreover, he is the embodiment of the ultimate usher, a 1960s beatnik-faced Thanatos, whose job is to escort old, dying people to their final journey, easing their passage to afterlife. Chris has indeed a distressing demeanor but his presence is at the same time soothing for Mrs. Goforth; as a result, she is unable to send him away, despite the fact that even Marquesa Constance Ridgeway-Condotti, nicknamed the Witch of Capri, bluntly warns her about the hazards of her visitor’s company:

THE WITCH. Chris, poor Chris Flanders, he has the habit of coming to call on a lady just a step or two ahead of the undertaker. [*She sits.*] Last summer at Portofino he stayed with some Texas oil people and at supper one night that wicked old Duke of Parma, you know the one that we call the Parma Violet, he emptied a champagne bottle on Christopher's head and he said, I christen thee, Christopher Flanders, the 'Angel of Death'. The name has stuck to him, Sissy. Why, some people in our age bracket, we're senior citizens, Sissy, would set their dogs on him if he entered their grounds, but since you are not superstitious. (170).

Mrs. Goforth believes the story, yet lets the Trojan Horse Guest remain in her palace. Hostile to him at the beginning, Mrs. Goforth realizes she needs to learn how to "go forth" in this last period of her life and by challenging her own fate, she lets Chris stay to help her facing agewise the inexorable exit. Nonetheless, she accommodates him in the "Oubliette," a little Polynesian grass hut reminding one of a vault or dungeon, where people were put to be forgotten [from the French word *oublier* meaning "to forget"] and where "undesirables are transferred to when the villas are overcrowded" (195). Chris, however, cannot be made invisible or suspended as a mobile being in the wind. Therefore, the hostess, after rightly perceiving her ageility in what J. Brooks Bouson called the "embodied shame" of a terminal illness alongside "the dreadful secret of gendered ageism" (v), starts talking to him and brings up the tabooed issue of passing away in one of their in-depth discussions. She is almost ready to openly acknowledge her situation and prepare for her final departure as her "last career" move but needs a final touch, of which Chris is fully aware.

CHRIS. [*who has come down to her*] Mrs. Goforth, are you still afraid of—[*He hesitates.*]

MRS. GOFORTH. Death—never even think of it. [*She takes his arm and they move down to a bench and sit.*]

CHRIS. Death is one moment and life is so many of them.

MRS. GOFORTH. A million billion of them if you think in terms of a lifetime as rich as mine's been, Chris.

CHRIS. Yes, life is something, death's nothing . . .

MRS. GOFORTH. Nothing, nothing, but nothing—I've had to refer to many deaths in my memoirs,—Oh, I don't think

I'm immortal. I still go to sleep every night wondering if  
I'll—wake up the next day . . . (198–99)

For Mrs. Goforth the next day is another chance to finish not only her memoirs but also her age autobiography, a story that goes beyond the usual life-account, which she dictates to her secretary, Blackie.

Although Flora Goforth claims that her life has to be recorded because of a book contract, it is obvious she needs this oral history therapy in her quickly deteriorating physical state to keep the illusion of life going on. As MacKinley contends, storytelling is a “vital part of the process of dying,” “important for the person coming to the end of their life” because “as the person’s life is completed for the first time their whole life can be told and perhaps meanings can be seen in context for the first time” (398). Moreover, the act of remembering stories resonates—as Elena Bendien observed following Michel Foucault’s ideas on memory—with the contemplation of self-care and the preparation for old age as “specific tactics to maintain identities in later life” (93). Mrs. Goforth’s memoir is an earnest attempt to reaffirm her existence and maintain her agewise identity during times of death anxiety and distress; moreover, in the retelling of her life she tries to find meaning in the process of dying. The more amazing the narrative is, the less fear of ending she has:

MRS. GOFORTH. A legend in my own lifetime, yes, I reckon I am. Well, I had certain advantages, endowments to start with, a face people naturally noticed and a figure that was not just sensational, but very durable, too. . . . Hell, I was born between a swamp and the wrong side of the tracks in One Street, Georgia, but not even that could stop me in my tracks, wrong side or right side or no side. Hit show-biz at fifteen when a carnival show, I mean the manager of it, saw me and dug me on that one Street in One Street, Georgia. I was billed as the Dixie Doxey, was just supposed to move my anatomy but was smart enough to keep my tongue moving, too, and the verbal comments I made on my anatomical motions while in motion were a public delight. So I breezed through show-biz like a tornado, rising from one-week “gigs” in the sticks to star-billings in “The Follies” while still in m’teens, ho, ho . . . and I was still in my teens when I married Harlon Goforth, a marriage into the Social Register and Dun-and-

Bradstreet's, both. Was barely out of my teens when I became his widow. Scared to make out a will, he died intestate so everything went to me.

CHRIS. Marvelous. Amazing.

MRS. GOFORTH. That's right, all my life was and still is except here lately I'm a little run-down, like a race-horse that's been entered in just one race too many, even for me . . . (184)

The protagonist of *Milktrain* was once herself the one who accompanied other people, namely her husbands, on their end-journey. And now, towards the end of her life, deploying an agewise attitude she recognizes that Chris has the same potential she used to have, but she denies this companionship by trying to postpone, once again, something that could not be withheld for long:

MRS. GOFORTH.—Well, I've escorted four husbands to the eternal threshold and come back alone without them, just with the loot of three of them . . . It's my turn, now to go forth, and I've no choice but to do it. But I'll do it alone. I don't want to be escorted, I want to go forth alone. But you, you counted on touching my heart because you'd heard I was dying and old dying people are your speciality, your vocation. But you miscalculated with this one. This milk train does not stop here anymore. (222)

The metaphor of the milktrain, the central trope of the play, is revealing at this point: with multi-stop milk runs milktrains used to run between the 1930s and the 1960s in the USA and the UK before the pasteurization process was introduced in the food-processing industry. If these vehicles did not stop in a place it meant the territory was empty, deserted, or dead. In this drama, similar to a milktrain, Chris stops for Flora Goforth so that she can stop living; she has to die in order to finally "complete her memoirs." This is her own deadline.

Mrs. Goforth's age autobiography, a memoir of dying, is written through the daily routine of resisting death through remembering, chronicling, and storytelling. Blackie, the *secretary*, writes down the oral history Sissy dictates as well as records on tapes, so she knows all secrets present in the nascent volume of *Facts and a Figure* reminding the reader of the voluntary and involuntary memories of Marcel Proust's unfinished *In Search of a Lost*

*Time* aka *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913–22) (emphasis added). These secrets come to book-life when Mrs. Goforth passes away because, as Paul Kalanithi wrote in *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016), words have a longevity that people do not have. Age autobiography comprising the stories she lived and relived by remembering them in a book serve a subversive basis for Sissy’s developing sense of ageility: she is incapable of finishing the book—unless she dies in the midst of writing it. By the time Chris, the crossover escort between a “saint” (Williams, *Milktrain* 172) and a “graveyard sexton” (160) with “his best bet in strangers” (222) arrives, these recollections help her recognize the mysteries of aging by finding meaning in the process of dying. And with Chris’s help, Mrs. Goforth has the final say—in the form of an ultimate, unfinished sentence from her age autobiography, which is completed by her peaceful departure into the realm of the dead.

MRS. GOFORTH. . . . Before you go, help me into my bedroom,  
I can’t make it alone . . . and the bed . . . was the bed of  
Countess Walewska, Napoleon’s Polish mistress, it’s a  
famous old bed, for a famous old body . . .

CHRIS. Yes, it looks like the catafalque of an empress. [*He lifts her  
on the bed, and draws a cover over her.*]

MRS. GOFORTH. Don’t leave me alone till—

CHRIS. I never leave till the end. [*She stretches out her blind, jeweled  
hand. He takes it.*] (223)

### Agewise end

Albee’s *The Sandbox* and Williams’s *Milktrain* convey images of advanced age that challenge ageist perspectives in a decade when few art forms dared to venture into discussing the tabooed and controversial subject of aging and death. The two plays illustrate the ways in which two dramatic characters who reached end-life experience and their own, personal understanding of ageility exit according to their newly acquired knowledge. In discussing William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Ellen Matlok-Ziemann claims that “old age and frailty can be conceived of as a harmonious part of being in the world” (260). These two American dramas on the apprehension of mortality written in the sixties fully subscribe to this idea because they portray a surprising harmony achieved by the protagonists’ serene, agewise attitude before they leave the stage of their lives.

In Albee’s play, Grandma realizes her inability to move—or simply just to do anything more in life—and confines herself to the absurdist

*playground* she was placed in by her family members. She participates in a quasi-ceremonial farewell staged by two strangers, a Young Man and the Musician, who faithfully accompany Grandma on her last day till the end of her last syllables. In Williams's drama, Mrs. Goforth, who rehearses her own death each day by remembering her past, comes to a halt in her storytelling and closes off her memoir. In addition, with a newly contextualized sense of ageility she becomes more empowered by the presence of Chris Flanders, her Angel of Death, who brings the "flag-lowering ceremony on the late Mrs. Goforth's mountain" (232). The characters who escort these two elderly women on their last journey on Earth reconceptualize the sense of intimacy between people: they are strangers but stand closer to the dying ones than their kin. The dialogic potential of their empathy, care, and unconditional support during the end-game of the protagonists accommodates difference in various contexts by blurring the boundary between the old and the young, between men and women, because death has neither age nor gender. These intergenerational exchanges help elder characters' agewise enterprises into the unknown gain a cathartic sense of freedom.

On their deathbed, both Albee's and Williams's protagonists are reconnecting with their past in idiosyncratic ways. They build up a conscious age autobiography (Grandma's recollection of her upbringing, youth, marriage, early widowhood, parenthood, and old days; Mrs. Goforth's memory of her teenage adventures into showbiz, her marriages and life of glamour and fame) in an inventory of events and feelings assessing a complete(d) life and achieve an agewise identity that comes full circle in the very moment of grace. Grandma's lost autonomy puts her in a farcical situation that questions the idea of self-reliance and individual independence by subscribing to the decline narratives of old age; while Mrs. Goforth, who subverts usual stereotypical constructions of old age, remains autonomous and in a status that Linn Sandberg calls an "affirmative old age" (11) by emphasizing her sexual nature in telling the stories of her loves. Although quite different in their death plots, both protagonists seek, in Sandberg's words, a "conceptualization and acceptance of old age in all its diversity" (35). Although Grandma and Mrs. Goforth seem to be at the opposing ends of the diversity spectrum, their handling of aging and death from different perspectives contribute to the complex representation of transgressive images of aging and to the critical thinking about end-of-life stages in the literary field and beyond.

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