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## Pursuit of an Alter-Reality:

### *The Lady from Dubuque* as an Entanglement of Parallel Worlds

Haruka Murakami

Edward Albee's *The Lady from Dubuque* was discontinued after only 12 performances due to critical reviews. This failure is said to have been the beginning of Albee's decade-long decline (Gussow 314-5). Toby Zinman points out that the characters in this play are difficult for the audience to sympathize with (Zinman 99). All characters are inexplicable, and it is difficult to say that they are likable, but none of them are more difficult to understand than Elizabeth, "the lady from Dubuque," whose self-introductive identity is the title of the play, and her companion Oscar. They are intruders who suddenly appear just before the first act closes, and their identities are never made clear to the audience.

Albee had spoken of Elizabeth in an interview with David Savran on *The Play about the Baby*:

My new play, *The Play about the Baby*, continues the exploration begun in *The Lady from Dubuque*, about reality being determined by our deserving it by our need for it. [...] We always end up with the reality we need to have, the one that is fitting for us. In *The Lady from Dubuque*, that was Jo's mother because Jo needed her to be the mother and she became the mother. No reality there, but we accepted it as an intellectual conceit. It became real because it was what should be. (Savran 12)

In the second act, Elizabeth claims to be Jo's mother, but her characterization is far from that of Jo's mother described in the first act. Albee himself admits that Elizabeth is not Jo's real mother, but he explains that her motherhood has become "real." I will use this representation of "real," which changes itself whenever necessary, as a starting point to understand this difficult play, seeing it as an entanglement of intersecting parallel worlds.

### Elizabeth as Jo's "Mother"

Elizabeth and Oscar appear on stage at the close of the first act as Jo screams in agony from the pain brought about by her illness. They hear Jo's cry and realize that the house is their destination and that they are "just in time."

OSCAR (*Looking about, with some distaste*): You say this is the place?

ELIZABETH (*To the audience, not urgent, not languid, but no nonsense*): Is she alive? Are we here in time?

(*The sound of JO's scream from upstairs; a brief silence, then another scream*)

ELIZABETH (*Still in the audience, her eyes acknowledging the sound with a brief, upward movement of her head*): Ah yes! Well, then; we are in time.

(*Turns her head slightly toward OSCAR*)

Yes; this is the place.

CURTAIN (*Lady 608; emphasis original*)

We learn from this conversation that the two need to arrive here before Jo dies. What this necessity means is unknown, but it implies that if Jo dies before

they come, “something” will be too late.

Zinman and Brenda Murphy both interpret the roles of Elizabeth and Oscar as “Angels of Death.”<sup>1</sup> It is true that the two characters stay by Jo’s side and comfort her as she dies. Her death scene becomes tender due to the intruders. Still, do they not disturb the stage too much, as they are characters whose only role is to lead Jo to a calm, relaxing end? Another way of interpreting the two intruders’ role is given by Matthew Roudané, who says the two function as the white rabbit in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, leading Sam into a world where everything has changed (Roudané 120). Roudané’s idea is more acceptable than Zinman and Murphy’s; yet, we must be careful that the world in the second act is depicted as a real world, not a world of nonsense. Moreover, although Sam is the character who moves and speaks most in the play, we should not forget that this play’s central character is Jo. After all, this play is about Jo’s death.

When Savran asked Albee about ghosts appearing in his plays, Albee denied the idea.

DS: [...] [I]t seems to me you have a number of characters who straddle the line between the living and the dead. What about the lady from Dubuque, for example?

[EA:] She’s not a ghost. She’s a substitute.<sup>2</sup> (Savran 5; underline mine)

According to Albee, Elizabeth is not a ghost but a real being. As we have already introduced, she is a “substitute” for Jo’s mother. Bewildered by the sudden appearance of the intruders, Sam repeatedly asks, “Who are you?” The answer is that they are Jo’s relatives. Finally, Elizabeth claims, “I’m Jo’s mother, come from Dubuque!” (*Lady* 620). However, Sam described Jo’s mother in the first act. She is clearly a different person from Elizabeth.

SAM (to the audience): [...] The lady [Jo's mother] leaves something to be desired. She's tiny, thin as a rail, blue eyes—darting furtive blue eyes— [...] pale hair, tinted pink, balding a little; you know; the way women do, when they do. We don't see her much. We don't like her; I don't like her. (*Lady* 572)

Furthermore, when Jo first meets Elizabeth, she reacts in an unnatural way for a family reunion, and accepts Elizabeth with her persuasion. From these factors, we can see that Elizabeth is not Jo's actual mother. Why then did Jo accept her in spite of this fact?

One piece of information that cannot be ignored when considering this situation is the insubstantial relationship between Jo and her mother. Jo's death is expected to come soon, but her mother never shows up or rings the phone. She does not exist in the play. Jo reacts to this treatment by saying, "Where is she? Where the hell is she? [...] IN THE HOUR OF MY GODDAMN NEED!!" (*Lady* 571). Sam says that neither couple likes Jo's mother, but Jo actually yearns for her. When we examine what Jo seeks, we learn that the mother Jo wants is not necessarily the woman who gave birth to her but "a woman who takes a motherly attitude" toward her. Rather than biological facts, psychological needs are emphasized here.

ELIZABETH (*A litany*): Come, let me stroke your forehead, comb your hair, wash you, lay you down and tell you stories... [...] Protect you from the dark and from the sunder?

JO (*A little girl*): Protect me?

[...]

ELIZABETH (*Smiles*): From the dark and from the thunder.

JO: Make it better?

[...]

ELIZABETH (*So tender, gentle*): Make it better? What have I come for?

Come to me. (*Lady* 639)

Elizabeth's words are those that a mother might say to her little child, and indeed, Jo's reaction to them is that of a young girl. Jo seeks motherly, unconditional love and protection. Moreover, she looks for a way to let her pain and agony go away. Instead of her birth mother, who never gives her what she needs, Jo accepts Elizabeth because she fulfills her necessities, despite being a stranger.

#### Interchangeability of Sam and Oscar

If Elizabeth is a substitute for Jo's mother, what Oscar takes away is her husband Sam's position. Here, Oscar "becomes" Jo's (substitute) husband. Since Oscar is black, Sam denies his insistence that he is Jo's relative.<sup>3</sup> Although it is reasonable to say that Oscar and Jo are not blood relatives, Oscar still can "be" Jo's husband; all that is needed to confirm this relationship is Jo's acceptance.

Near the end of the second act, Oscar changes into Sam's pajamas and appears. The following is what he says and how Jo and Sam react.

OSCAR (*To CAROL*): Don't you think I make a splendid Sam?

JO: Sam? Is that you?

SAM: Jo? Please don't?

OSCAR (*Arms wide; beatific*): Am I not...am I, indeed, not Sam?

(*To the audience*)

Am I not Sam? (*Lady* 662)

There should be no need to explain that Oscar is not Sam: Sam appears since

the first act, and the two male characters neither behave nor look like each other. Of course, none of the characters is confused in that sense. However, Jo, due to her dimmed consciousness, mistakes Oscar in Sam's pajamas for her husband. Marital relationships do not involve blood, and the essential element that determines the relations is the approval from each other. Now that Jo mistakes Oscar for Sam, her husband "becomes" Oscar.

Here, the word "Sam" used in this context is no longer a proper noun/name of a character but a common noun meaning "the person who is Jo's husband." This is in line with the idea I mentioned in the last section: Jo's "mother" is not the specific person who gave her birth but the person who gives her the motherly affection she needs in this current situation. The person called "Sam" is not necessarily the person who is the legitimate husband of Jo's (i.e., Sam as a character) but a man whom Jo believes or wants to be her spouse.

Jo mistook Oscar for Sam not only because he wore Sam's pajamas. Murphy points out that Albee read and was affected by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' *On Death and Dying* when working on this play. Murphy posits that the book describes the relationship between a dying wife and her husband:

In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross narrates the case study of a Mrs. W. who had reached the point of wanting to be left alone to die in peace. She said that the only thing keeping her alive was "her husband's inability to accept the fact that she had to die" and was angry with him for "not facing it and for so desperately clinging on to something that she was willing and ready to give up." [...] In *The Lady from Dubuque*, Jo's husband Sam is an embodiment of the loved one who is unable to face the fact of his wife's dying. Each time she forthrightly refers to her dying, he evades it, acting as if she had made a remark in bad taste. (Murphy 97-8; underline mine)

Kübler-Ross introduces a couple in which the wife, who is the one facing death, accepts the fact that she will die quietly, but her husband does not want to face her situation because he wants to keep her alive somehow. Sam is also this type of husband: he keeps condemning Jo when she speaks of her illness or death and insists that his heart hurts from this current situation. Sam's reaction shows that he loves Jo and that he does not want to lose her. Ironically, this shows that he has not accepted that Jo will only be released from her pain and anguish by death.

The line in which Sam utters to take care of Jo as she screams in pain in the first act is almost accurately repeated by Oscar in Sam's pajamas in the second act.

SAM (*Gently taking her to the top of the stairs; soothing, crooning*): I'll take care of you now; I'll make you better; you'll see; I'll put you right to bed, and take a cold cloth to your... (*Lady 607*)

OSCAR (*As HE carries her upstairs; soothing, crooning*): I'll take care of you now; I'll make you better; You'll see; I'll put you right to bed; I'll make you better... (*Lady 665*)

The two almost identical lines are delivered in a similar situation where Jo is screaming from pain and taken to her bedroom. Nevertheless, as Murphy points out, the meaning of "make you better" differs between these two lines. Sam is saying that he will lessen Jo's pain and let her live longer, whereas Oscar is saying that he will let her pass away peacefully (Murphy 100). At the end of the play, Jo reaches the point of accepting her death. The attitude she wants her husband to take is that of Oscar's, not Sam's.

When we fit Jo's thoughts into the equation from the last section, the word/

name “Sam” means “Jo’s husband,” that is, “the man who takes the attitude Jo wishes her husband to take,” which is Oscar. Here, Sam loses both his name and position, leaving him in a crisis of identity.

### Intrusive Characters from Another World

In the discussion above, we have derived that despite the lack of blood or legitimate relationships, Elizabeth has the function of Jo’s mother, and Oscar Jo’s husband, in the second act. The second act’s character functions contradict those of the first act, in which Jo’s mother is described as a pink-haired woman and Sam as Jo’s husband. In this section, I will provisionally refer to the first act as “the real world.” Thus, the world in which Elizabeth and Oscar exist becomes a parallel world where the characters differ, with Jo as a central point. We will continue analyzing this play based on the assumption that one of Jo’s parallel worlds is intruding “the real world” in act two.

When Lucinda, one of Jo’s friends, first meets Elizabeth, she checks on Jo’s mother’s profile that she had heard the night before (the home party in the first act). Lucinda asks Elizabeth if she is living in Dubuque with her sister; she reacts as follows:

ELIZABETH: I...move about all the time [...] Well! One may *be* from Dubuque... [...] But certainly one *roams*: Dubuque is not everything.  
(*Lady* 626; emphasis original)

The notable point of this line is Elizabeth’s first-person expression. At first, she uses “I,” but eventually, she begins using the generic singular “one.” Further, her statement, “Dubuque is not everything,” deprives her of her only characteristic information.<sup>4</sup> If she is not “the lady from Dubuque,” who could she possibly be?

What if Elizabeth is only one of the possible candidates for Jo's mother? This view changes the analysis. Since Elizabeth is neither Jo's birth mother nor her relative, there is no inevitability that she must be the one who becomes the mother. She is only a "possible mother," leaving infinite possibilities for any alternative woman to become Jo's mother. There is no necessity for her to be from Dubuque. Elizabeth's saying "one" infers the possibility that she is speaking not only of herself but of any alternatives as Jo's mother.

The same could be said about Oscar. His personal history is wide-ranging and too wide-ranging to be of a single person. Although Oscar is black, he says he has been in the Japanese Army in World War Two (*Lady* 622) and is a member of the Foreign Legion (*Lady* 642). Hearing of his past careers, Edgar, a friend of Jo and Sam's, denies it. Still, it is not much of an importance to Oscar. He says to the audience, "Then I *wasn't* in the Foreign Legion. *I don't care*" (*Lady* 642; emphasis original). Oscar's simple denial of his life history and his emphasis on "I" show that he is only a possible husband of Jo's, not "the husband." If we assume his diverse careers introduce other possible candidate's pasts, these peculiar explanations may be comprehensible.

Thomas P. Adler also gives attention to the stage direction, which says, "ELIZABETH and OSCAR enter the set from one side, from without the set, in that order" (*Lady* 608), and that Elizabeth says, "We *are* in time" (*Lady* 608; emphasis original), pointing out that Elizabeth and Oscar came from "somewhere out of time" (Adler 138).

These observations suggest the existence of a parallel world in which Elizabeth is selected as "Jo's mother" and Oscar as "Jo's husband," and that this parallel world interferes with the "realistic world," where mothers and husbands are defined by blood and legitimate relationships. By contrast, the parallel world appearing here in act two is defined by Jo's desire.

## Two Parallel Worlds in Conflict

When we examine act two as a battlefield in which two worlds appear in the same space-time, the roles of “Jo’s mother” and “Jo’s husband” overlap. Sam tries to get rid of Elizabeth and Oscar from his house, which should have been his and his wife’s private space, but conversely, he is excluded by the guests who take over his house.<sup>5</sup> This struggle for the house resembles the conceptual struggle for the “real world” of the play.

Within the struggle, the judges who determine the predominance between the intruders and Sam are the other characters. Sam becomes driven into a troublesome situation here because the two pairs of guests do not doubt Elizabeth’s identity.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned above, Jo’s birth mother has an eccentric appearance and does not behave motherly. Of course, all the guests could have identified Jo’s mother to Elizabeth. However, since Jo’s birth mother is bizarre, the guests accept Elizabeth as Jo’s mother because she seems to match their idea of how a mother should act. After Jo agrees to receive Elizabeth as her mother, Sam is seen as a liar who turns the situation into chaos; therefore, he is restrained and deprived of freedom.

One of the significant features of this play is that the characters speak naturally to the audience time by time. In the “Performance Note,” this point is mentioned as follows:

*With some regularity throughout this play the characters address the audience—usually in brief asides, but occasionally at greater length. This is done without self-consciousness, quite openly, and without interrupting the flow of the play. In other words, the characters are aware of the presence of the audience, and since the audience has always been there, the characters are not upset by it, even though there are times they wish it would go away.*

*It is of utmost importance that the actors make it clear that it is not they, but the characters, who are aware of the presence of the audience.*

*Speeches to the audience (asides, etc.) are clearly marked, as is their termination.* (Lady 559; underline mine)

Since the audience is spoken to by the characters, the whole theater becomes a platform where the characters communicate.

In a discussion of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Zinman explains the theater by saying:

True or False is a game central to the theatrical enterprise: “Truth or illusion” governs not only the content of this play [*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*] but of play-making itself: any naturalistic play depends on our accepting its illusion as reality (and thus we are engaged emotionally) while maintaining our consciousness of it as theater (and thus we are engaged aesthetically). (Zinman 41-2)

Apart from reality and illusion within the play, there is a safe place outside the play where the audience can watch it as a fictional drama. When characters speak beyond the fourth wall, they start to interfere with the audience. In other words, the illusion of the play starts to disrupt the safe realism of the theater. Characters do speak to the audience from the first act, but in the second act, Elizabeth and Oscar repeatedly question the audience of their own existence. If the intruders could make the audience accept their existence, they would succeed in taking over the house (literally and theatrically) with their “parallel world” from both inside and outside the play.

Of course, the final judgment will be given by Jo: After all, she is the one who is connected to all other characters and has the power to determine who plays

which part. At her death bed, if Jo chooses comfort (with Elizabeth as her mother and Oscar as her husband), Sam automatically loses his position within the house (both in the play and theater).

### Disappearance of Sam

Taking the above into consideration, I will focus on the question “Who am I?”, which starts this play as a party game. At the beginning of the play, Jo, Sam, and the two guest couples play “Twenty Questions.” The host asks, “Who am I?” and makes other players guess what he is pretending to be. This game has two great significances involving “I.”

The first point is that “I” is never determined, changing its existence from time to time. Each time the game starts over, “I” becomes a different being. Moreover, Sam uses the word “I,” a singular first-person pronoun, but makes the answer a pair of people to confuse his opponents. This trick forecasts that “I” could be plural; several people can be candidates for a singular role. In other words, this game shows that there is no concrete and singular “I” in the first place.

Another suggestion in the game is that people can only define “I” by using other words to explain. Even though “I” seems to be a solid concept, one could only explain it by indicating whether “I” is male or female, alive or dead, and so forth. Sam tries to begin the game by asking others, “Who am I?,” but the answer he gets from Jo is, “Your name is Sam; this is your house; they’re drinking your liquor [...] and I am your wife, and I am dying...” (*Lady* 563). In act two, when questioned about himself, Sam only says, “I’m Jo’s husband; this is my house” (*Lady* 611). The answers given by Sam show that people can only describe themselves by mentioning their property or where they belong. For Sam, Jo is someone to whom he could say he is attached. Therefore, she is an initial element in defining his identity. If Sam loses Jo, he not only loses his beloved wife but also tum-

bles into a crisis of his own identity.

Jo, her consciousness dimmed by her disease, accepts Oscar as “Sam.” Dying, she says bye-bye to Sam; Sam rushes to Jo and says:

SAM (*Tears; choking; loss; fury; tenderness*): Do you want this? Hunh?

(*Shakes her*)

Is this what you want!? Yes!?

[...]

Because if this is what you want. I’m not any part of it; you’ve locked me out. I...I don’t exist. I...I don’t exist. Just...just *tell* me. (*Lady* 664-5; emphasis original)

Now that Jo does not recognize Sam as Sam, he loses his role, position, and words to identify himself. Sam no longer has the power to establish his own identity. He expresses this condition by saying, “I don’t exist,” which means he is fading into the background of the stage and the play.

### Indefinable Relativities

As we have considered above, the definitions of “Jo’s mother” and “Jo’s husband” are fluidic, and Sam’s identity becomes indefinable. If people can only be identified by words in this play, in which words such as “mother” and “husband” become insignificant, everything is no longer definite.

Just before the curtain, Elizabeth and Oscar exchange thought-provoking lines.

ELIZABETH: Everything is true.

OSCAR (*Descending. Quietly; to ELIZABETH; to SAM*): Therefore, nothing

is true.

ELIZABETH (*Looks up to him*): Therefore, everything is true.

(SHE *smiles*) (*Lady* 667-8)

In a world where words' definitions change endlessly and even the identities of individuals are not concrete, anything could be correct. In other words, there is no absolute "real" here, which also makes everything unreal/incorrect. In this paper, we decided that act one is the "real world" for the sake of discussion; however, in this situation, where there is no such thing as "real," the idea of a "real world" itself collapses, and the world of act one also becomes absorbed as one possible parallel world. When we interpret *The Lady from Dubuque* as a play in which parallel worlds interfere with each other, causing disorder and loss of identities, Sam is forced to retreat into a background world that is merely a possible alternative.

Sam now recognizes himself as nonexistent, for he is rejected by Jo. However, if we consider this situation from Jo's perspective, Sam has not disappeared. Even if Jo accepts Elizabeth and Oscar as her family members; she does not know them in a true sense. The intruders do not have specific identities: they are simply symbols expressing "mother" and "husband."<sup>7</sup> Sam is not the only person who becomes erased from Jo's world. Jo is only choosing people who will relieve her from her final suffering. In other words, Jo's reality has somehow made an alternative reality to save her at the last minute. In this alternative reality, Elizabeth and Oscar do not have superiority over Sam. Their world is, after all, an alternative. They are only a possibility. As we have already discussed, the two seem to understand that they are interfering with the world of act one. They know that they are simply some possible signifiers; they too can be absorbed into the background.

### Agents Showing Alternatives

What does the appearance of Elizabeth and Oscar on stage mean? The two intruders act as Jo wishes, which means that her wish was not fulfilled in her “original world” we saw in act one. In an interview with Kathy Sullivan, Albee discussed Sam and Jo as follows:

Sullivan: It seems to me, however, that you have excluded Sam’s needs.

Albee: But Sam’s reality is less important than Jo’s needs. He’s surviving while she’s dying. (Sullivan 188)

Jo and Sam both have things to be desired, but priority is given to Jo, who is about to die. Unable to accept his wife’s death, Sam laments Jo’s weakening in act one. He says that it is crucial to hold on to the object one is losing and make time for himself later (*Lady* 600). Still, he does not understand that Jo, dying, will no longer have any time left to seek what she wants. The reality Jo faces in the world of act one is that she cannot be comforted by her mother or husband.

Again, Elizabeth and Oscar are merely possible alternatives of “Jo’s mother” and “Jo’s husband.” They have no concrete identities, living in one of Jo’s parallel worlds, and neither has any absoluteness. In the second act, they fight against Sam for the house and stage priority. However, from the way they talk, they do seem to understand that Jo will judge everything. This understanding suggests that the two are not trying to show their power over Sam: what they show is that Sam’s world is not the only absolute. Here, we come to understand that Elizabeth and Oscar are not only possible candidates for Jo’s family but also agents who show that there could be multiple, even infinite, alternative realities ready for Jo.

After its 2012 performance, Ela Bittencourt indicated that there were no an-

swers to the many questions aroused by this play. The only sure thing is that Jo is dying (Bittencourt n.p.g.). Albee calls the two worlds “real” and “symbolic” (Sullivan 188), but there is actually no “real” world. By showing a “symbolic” alternative world, the two intruders give Jo a final chance to face her reality and let her pursue her wishes and die in fulfillment.

### The End of the World

In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross explains the final phase of a patient’s death.

The most heartbreak time, perhaps, for the family is the final phase, when the patient is slowly detaching himself from his world including his family. They do not understand that a dying man who has found peace and acceptance in his death will have to separate himself, step by step, from his environment, including the most loved ones. How could he ever be ready to die if he continued to hold onto the meaningful relationships of which a man has so many? (Kübler-Ross 177; underline mine)

According to Kübler-Ross, although it is heartbreak for the family, the patient greets death calmly by separating himself from his surroundings. Jo already knows that this moment will come, saying, “Well, I dare say the day will come I’ll need you all. Then, of course, the day will come I won’t need a soul. And then, of course, the day won’t come” (*Lady* 590).

In the discussion above, we established that the arrival of Elizabeth and Oscar gives Jo the chance to choose what she wishes. The reality she chooses is that in which the two strangers become her loving family members, for then she seeks love and comfort. In the final phase, where Jo meets death, what happens to the

parallel worlds in which she is the central point?

To consider this, we need to focus on Elizabeth's line, in which she explains her dream about death to Sam:

ELIZABETH: All right; I dreamt I was on a beach at sunset—with friends;  
we had a driftwood fire, I believe.

[...]

*(Begins to share this with the audience, too)*

There were seagulls in the distance, and there was the sound of the surf—but muted, for it was sunset.

[...]

And all at once...it became incredibly quiet; the waves stopped, and the gulls hung there in the air.

[...]

Such silence. And then it began; the eastern horizon was lighted by an explosion, hundreds of miles away—no sound! And then another, to the west—no sound! And within seconds they were everywhere, always at a great distance—the flash of light, and silence.

[...]

We knew what we were watching, and there was no time to be afraid. The silence was...beautiful as the silent bombs went off. Perhaps we were already dead; perhaps that was why there was no sound.

*(A silence)*

SAM *(A shivering little boy)*: That was...that was the end of the world.

ELIZABETH *(A pause; comforting; to SAM, now)*: I thought that's what we were talking about.

*(To the audience)*

Isn't that what we were talking about? (666-7; underlines mine)

Having heard Elizabeth's explanation of death, Sam calls the sight "the end of the world." Elizabeth affirms his words. If death means the end of the world, how should one understand Jo's death in this play?

Just as Jo is about to be carried to her death bed by Oscar, she says to Sam, "Please...just let me die?" (*Lady* 665). This line is consistent with Kübler-Ross' final stage of accepting death. Jo is ready to say goodbye to everything and everyone surrounding her. Now that she is ready to let go of her surroundings, she stops choosing from all the possible parallel worlds around her. The multiple alternative parallel worlds lose their central point and become scattered around. As Jo finishes her existence, she lets go of her world. This is when no more alternatives are needed. In other words, this is the end of Jo's world. Death, in this play, is linked to the end of the world through the vanishing of parallel worlds.

### To Face One's Wish and "Realities"

In this paper, I focused on Elizabeth and Oscar's role in *The Lady from Dubuque*, concluding that they are intruders from another parallel world into the world in which Sam lives. The second act becomes a battlefield in which worlds with Jo as their central point struggle against each other. Sam loses this conflict and becomes absorbed into the background. However, Elizabeth and Oscar are not the absolute alternatives. They are merely possibilities, showing Jo that she has the right and power to choose "her reality."

What Jo seeks before her death are the love of her mother and the understanding of her husband. These factors are not provided by her birth mother or her legitimate husband. Instead, they are offered by Elizabeth and Oscar. Still, they seem to know that they are just possibilities Jo can choose. From this point of view, we can draw what Jo seeks in the end from a broader point of view.

As we have already examined, this play starts with the party game, "Twenty

Questions,” in which the participants ask the other, “Who am I?” Regarding this question, Elizabeth presents her idea:

ELIZABETH (*This and the following both to the audience and generally to SAM and CAROL*): In the outskirts of Dubuque, on the farm, when I was growing up—back there, back then—I learned, with all the pigs and chickens and the endless sameness everywhere you looked, or thought, back there I learned—though I doubt I knew I was learning it—that all of the values were relative save one... “Who am I?” All the rest is semantics—liberty, dignity, possession.

(*She leans forward; only to SAM now*)

There's only one that matters: “Who am I?” (*Lady* 662; underlines mine)

As everything becomes relativized as semantics, the only thing that matters is one's identity. With Elizabeth and Oscar's arrival, Jo is offered possible parallel worlds to choose from, relativized as Elizabeth indicates. Here, Jo receives the chance to get what she seeks as she dies. The single importance is what Jo wants. Everything else presented to her becomes an alternative.

Albee explains, “*The Lady From Dubuque* deals with the question of whether our reality is determined by our need and is not an absolute” (“Introduction” 8). He has in mind multiple realities that cover the play. This idea, however, was not present at the beginning of this play's writing. In an interview with Walter Wager in 1964, Albee indicated that he was writing *The Substitute Speaker* (the former title of *Lady*), and that it was the toughest play he ever worked on at that time. “It's tough because I'm trying to join naturalism and considerable stylization. It is basically naturalistic—but with hallucinatory elements,” said Albee (Wager 41). As this play formed into *The Lady from Dubuque* and was produced in 1980, Al-

bee reached his downfall. Still, he had complicated experimental ways to surprise his audience. The problem was that he still, at that point in the 1980s, was not in control of his maneuvering of multiple realities.

The enigmatic intruders give Jo a possible parallel world that becomes an alternative in which her wish comes true. Moreover, they are supposed to give the audience a chance to face what they really seek, or in other words, the “reality” they want. Although this play ended in a failure, Albee’s challenge went on, leading to his comeback with *Three Tall Women*.

#### Notes

An earlier version of this paper was orally presented at the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the American Literature Society of Japan, held at Kagoshima University on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

- 1 In *The Sandbox*, an early play of Albee’s, a character named Young Man appears as an Angel of Death. Albee dedicated the play to Grandma Cotter, who was the only member of the family Albee loved. The Young Man stays beside the dying Grandma until she passes away, telling her that he has come to her as her Angel of Death (*Sandbox* 94).
- 2 According to Gussow, *The Lady From Dubuque* had a former title: *The Substitute Speaker*. “In the original conception, Jo, the wife who is sick, dies in the first act, and her husband, Sam, dresses up in her clothes and assumes her identity: He became “the substitute speaker” (Gussow 309-10). Although there is a great difference between who is “the substitute speaker,” both the original and the final play use a substitute to depict what Jo needs as she dies.
- 3 In act one, Jo calls Sam “Sambo,” a nickname (602). At this point, Oscar has not arrived on stage. Since the word “Sambo” is a cruel way of addressing black people, it may be said that this nickname forecasts the interchangeability of Sam and Oscar in the proceeding act.
- 4 Albee notes Elizabeth’s character information as “*a stylish, elegant, handsome woman; splendid for whatever her age*” (558). We cannot draw out any concrete information, such as her age or appearance, from this statement. Thus, the only specific information

of Elizabeth's should be that she is from Dubuque.

- 5 Oscar and the male guests tie up Sam when he frantically denies Elizabeth's and Oscar's identities (641). As we will shortly discuss in the main text, the guests believe Elizabeth's insistence that she is Jo's mother, and therefore see Sam as a disturbing character. Sam loses his freedom in a place that should have been his own.
- 6 To be accurate, Carol, the newcomer of the guest group, has some doubts about Elizabeth's and Oscar's identities. She does not find out who they are, but she has the most unbiased view, which lets her at least consider the truth behind them. Carol may be the only character the audience can sympathize with, for she has doubts, confusion, and never-answered questions.
- 7 This is especially true for Oscar. Jo does not call Oscar by his name. She only calls him "Sam" in her blurred consciousness. For Jo, Oscar is not anyone special; he is an unspecified man who acts as an ideal husband, or, in other words, in a way she wants Sam to act. Roudané's view is that Jo and Sam lack love in their relationship (Roudané 121); however, although their thoughts may differ, they both call each other by their names until their final parting. It is obvious that they have love for each other; they just do not know how to show it.

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