

# Illusion in Edward Albee Selected Play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf”

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**Abstract:** Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Exposes the plunge of moral values of the American family in the modern society in which materialism is Victorious. The play shows the deceptive appearances and moral disintegration of George and Martha. This paper attempts to outline the American dream and how the characters accept illusion as an escape from real life. The initial part provides us with some information about the writer’s life and how he is influenced by the theater of the absurd, and the impact of the psychological approaches on Albee’s way of writing. The paper also proposes Albee as a modern playwright to recall and explain the community problems that help modern readers to understand his crises and his tragedy form. Superficially, the play seems to be about the illusion but in fact it examines and presents crises of the modern American values and their way of life. Thus, the play discloses the theme of illusion and social American crises through the bond of marriage of the two couples.

**Keywords:** Illusion, Social Crises, American Dream, Marriage, Psyche of Absurdity

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## 1. Albee and the Absurd Theater

Edward Albee (1928- ) is one of the important writers in 20<sup>th</sup> century American drama. He becomes an orphan at an early age. He had a miserable life with his adoptive parents. Albee found it difficult to relate to them, therefore he never felt at ease with them, especially with his domineering (step) mother. Being an adopted child of a harsh woman had a negative effect on the psyche of the writer. Albee’s rootless life always troubled him and the question of who he was, where he was from and to which family he belonged intensified his dissatisfaction with life and increased his crisis.

Albee was dismissed from two private schools and even rejected by Trinity College in Hartford. He had never seen his father or met his mother for 17 years. It is only later in life through his love to the theatre and arts that Albee enjoyed success. His wealth and social status came from his involvement in the national circle of the theater. In spite of his interest in the drama and the theatre his adoptive parents pushed him to pursue more conventional career, but he refused to comply with their wish and followed his own artistic ambition. His final decision to leave his family forever came at the age of 20. After a long mission in his

miserable life, he finally could find the way to prove his talent in writing and become a famous writer.

At the age of 30 his major work *The Zoo Story* (1958) brought him his international reputation after being staged in Berlin, Germany in 1959. Within a few years Albee brought the absurdist to American stage for the first time with his works, *The Sandbox* (1959), *The American Dream* (1960) and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1961).

*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was the first Broadway production of the writer which achieved great success and brought him Tony Award and pantheon of American criticism like Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller. Albee for many years was unable to duplicate the success of this play though he tried to stage different plays with varied themes such as *All Over* (1971), *The Season Escape* (1974) and many other literary works (Kucuk 2008:1-3).

As a tragedy writer influenced by the modern absurd drama, Albee was listed among such absurdist dramatists as Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett who were considered as the founders of absurd drama. Albee adopted the methods of the absurd theatre and established his own unique literary style.

Theater of the absurd has become one of the most important phenomena in the history of literature especially

drama at the modern age. In fact, the word "absurd" refers to a specific type of play which flourished in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and which was borrowed from, the French philosopher, Albert Camus' essay *The myth of Sisyphus* (1942) in which he detonated the human condition as essentially meaningless. Camus proved that humanity had to emerge itself to understand that a fully satisfying rational world was behind its reach; in that case, the universe ultimately should be absurd. After its appearance in the 1950s in France, it has revolutionized all the concepts of the common understanding of the theater and played a vital role in the development of drama. Modern people surrounded by unreal life pushed the critics to use a different language with disingenuous expressions in the works of theater. All the writers of the absurd share the same themes and writing styles while combining his own techniques in it, especially after the Second World War when European countries lost their faith in religion and their dreams for a better life. Compared with the life in United States, the situation in Europe was totally different from what was happening in the United States because "... there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose. The American dream of the good life ... [was] still very strong. Their belief in progress... has been maintained into the middle of the twentieth [century]" (Esslin 1961:225). As a result, it was difficult to find many absurd plays in America as there were in Europe. Albee is one of those who established the absurd theater in America as he "attacks the very foundation of American optimism". (Ibid) As a result, he is considered as one of the writers who follow cyclical pattern of the absurd to establish the modern American Theater.

## 2. Psyche of Absurdity in Interpretation of Modern Drama

In 20<sup>th</sup> century, modern literature faced essential development in the theme, form and structure. The first decade witnessed most playwrights' realization of a unique modern situation in form and content. The scientific interpretation of modern literature is so complicated that a layman cannot perceive and understand. So the 20<sup>th</sup> century artists were interested deeply in the aspects of reality, which rejected some of conventional values like religion and humanism. When so many existing systems were rejected, the writer's mission is to find and develop a new model in the world of literature (Ahmed 2011: 145). Thus a new technique of absurdity rose to the occasion.

The modern absurdist playwrights have been influenced by the psycho analysis in the works of Freud, disclosing the complexity of human personality, and looking for the answer to their philosophical inquiry. Freud's psychic theory sates on unconscious aspect of personality. According to him, the human mind is like an iceberg and partly hidden in the unconscious. What we can see only the conscious level of the mind as same as the tip of the iceberg, another part is the unconscious level that becomes mysterious and hidden.

(Booker, Selden, Widdowson 2005: 153-156). Thus, the psychoanalysis theory focuses on the observation of the human beings unrealizable of many factors that determine their emotions and behaviors. In another word, we can say that the psychoanalysis helps the individuals to make the unconscious conscious and deal better with the realities of adult life. So, the revolution in inner human psychology that begun in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century made distinction between interpretation and creation of new literary works. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between psychoanalysis and literary criticism was perceived as a unique perspective moving from the external world of material phenomena to the inner one of the human psyche, proving to be the best way to analyze human behavior. Absurdist writers looked back toward the direction of the classical world and added new element to the modern theater, which means, to interpret man's behavior and attitude, most of the playwrights brought the concept of "myth" into their works. As a result "myth spread from the confines of anthropology to the ultimate circle of the verbal universe." (Thomson 1967: 13). Therefore writers started to mix and use the mythical concept within modern narrative of the absurd theater. Eliot (1922) advocated for "mythical method" in "Ulysses, Order and Myth": "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him ... It is a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." (Eliot 1923: 485). Critics noticed that in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the presence of "Myth" comes within the symbolism of its title, a rhetorical device of the mythic folklore as well as the name of British novelist who became insane and put an end to her life by drowning herself. The title of this play is also related to the nursery rhyme, "The Three Little Pigs", which echoed with the symbolism Dies Irae, Easter, and The Birthday. Originally, Albee named the play as *The Exorcism*, but he relegated it as a title of the third act (Allan 1964:34).

## 3. "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf"

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is considered Albee's first major work. It is a realistic drama in three acts, Act I: "Fun and Games", Act II: "Walpurgisnacht", and Act III: "Exorcism" the last one is the being the play's original title. The play with the present title reflects two metaphors, the previous one was taken from the song "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" and the present one related to the English writer, Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf's works reflect the tearful crisp nature of life in the style of stream consciousness, which guided her to mimic the inner world of her characters. One might be horrified of Virginia Woolf's style to penetrate the complexity of human mind and heart. The writer borrowed her name to reflect the hidden fact that the characters live in reality with illusion.

The play illustrates the disturbing and illusive life of two couples in modern society under the idolization of marriage.

The old couples are George and Martha. George is forty-six, a history professor at the university who is irresponsible and unsuccessful in his career. His wife, Martha, is fifty-two. She is the daughter of the university president. She has paradoxical and domineering personality that embodied love and hate at the same time. They have no children. The way of communication is similar to a military battle, ready to attack each other at any moment. However, they pretend to be a happy couple with seemingly successful life and an imaginary child in front of the public. But shortly this fake life vanishes when the truth exposes itself to light.

The second couple with the same made-up life is Nick, a Twenty-eight biologist and new member at the science faculty. His wife, Honey, is twenty-six, a blond and plain woman with a slim hip. He pretends to be a "man of God", he married Honey mainly because she inherited a large wealth from her step-father and pretended being pregnant.

Throughout the play the two couples pretend to be happy in public, but abuse each other in private. As a younger couple they threaten George and Martha by being one-up on them in many occasions in front of their guests. As an attractive woman with full hip, Martha tries to seduce Nick in front of his wife to test her sexuality by wearing sexy dress and talking about her sexual experiences. However, toward the end of the play when they become drunk, the couple came out of their illusions. George and Martha's imaginary child disappointed Nick and Honey. At the same time, George and Martha discovered that the younger couples are not in love. The play illustrates that familial success in modern American society means to be happy one should have a child, good wealth and a lovely wife (Jenkins 2011:31-32).

#### 4. Illusion in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf"

After the Second World War nothing remained untouched, undisturbed and uncomfortable which led the whole world to live in shock, because it elevated the USA to a powerful position by putting the nation as the richest people among all the communities. Later the American dream became a nightmare for most conscious population; the society was capitulating to the ambivalence of materialism, and love within family had lost. To overcome this problem, most modern dramatist like Albee and his fellows try to employ an imaginative style of writing to bring the social changes to their modern stage (Lazuli 2013: 124).

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1961) exposed the falsity of American dream and how the modern families adopted illusion as a form of reality. It is well known that in the early 1950 it was important for a happy family to conform to the inherent culture of their community. The success in life was perceived as being happy, having a house, a car, kids, dog and job. Indeed these material measurements for success sometimes disguised the real problems in reality in most cases represented by alcoholism, anti-social convention,

dissatisfaction and corruption. In the play Albee combined together realism and absurdity as a reflection of modern American society.

Albee proposed that illusion is an American weakness and hypocrisy which could be framed on the American absurd theater. Albee was preoccupied with criticizing his community through a contemporary American family with its dominant wife and her weak husband; he used the family milieu to display his characters. On the surface level, the play seems to be about the social crises of American social values. But in fact if we examined the deep level, we found out that the play was examined *truth and illusion* (Hudson 1985: p.19). Indeed, his play presents profoundly false illusion and the savage threatening of moral collapse.

In *who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, the relation between George and Martha was deep rooted in illusion, and absolutely absurd. Within twenty-one years the couple shared the illusion of an imaginary son. The image of the child was created in their minds only and day after day it grew up, at the same time the gap of mutual disrespects became wider. In fact, living with illusion meant living with unreal life forever. So, the idea of an imaginary child was totally absurd. As we know the absurd drama was one reflecting the human emptiness, frustration and disappointment in life. What the writer intended to clarify here was the failure of a mother who was in a constant conflict between motherhood and sterility (Lazuli 2013:p.125).

However, the action of the play begun gradually when Martha called George a *cluck* (Albee: p.11) and a *stupid man* (Ibid) and then she remarks that they live in a *dump* (Ibid). When she asked George to tell her what film the line what a *dump* (Ibid) came from, George answer *Chicago* (p.12).

Martha: Good grief! Don't you know *anything*? Chicago Was a thirties musical, starting little Miss Alice Faye.

Don't you know *anything*?

George: Well, that was probably before my time, but (p.12)

As wife and husband, George and Martha's relation was shrouded by illusion. They pretend to be happy couple in public, but had no passion to each other in private. If they started a conversation, absolutely they would hurt each other savagely. Martha revealed her hidden feelings towards her husband when she began to call him a *cluck* (Albee: p.11) and a *stupid man* (Ibid) and then she remarks that they live in a *dump* (Ibid). When she asked George to tell her what film the line *what a dump* (Ibid) came from, George answer *Chicago* (p.12).

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In this statement we found that Martha was somewhat older than George and how he kept reminding her of this fact during the course of night especially when he discovered that she still likes the young men. Martha also realized that George was not the kind of man that would convince her father and get his approval. According to J.L. Styan this play

was "riot of sensational exchanges" in which the disabled characters, George and Martha, "taunt and accuse and torture each other into a condition of mental stalemate." (Stayn 1968: p.214) But the play was not only an examination into what many critics had called "domestic butchery." (Rutenberg 1969: p.98) The play had some border social significance.

Alan Schneider, in his opinion about the acceptability of such abuse and obscenity in the play, said that shock is a necessary function of the theater to present the truth of behavior and thoughts of modern community inside America. (Ibid:p.81). Albee himself admits that the play had a wide social scope. In his interview with Rutenberg he assured him that the main characters of the play, George and Martha, were meant to suggest the founder president of America, George Washington, and his wife (Ibid: p.230). This play was an allegory on American life, and Albee's choice fallen on the archetypal an American family which he considered representative of the contemporary American society.

When the younger guests arrived, the older private family started to quarrel in public; Martha called George *amuck-mouth* (p.20) in front of Nick and Honey. And as the night advanced with a lot of drinking both the couples were embroilment in *fun and game*. George and Martha' played games with their visitors, this games aimed to reveal the hidden facts of their lives; and through light on their inner thinking. We know that Martha was the daughter of the college president. She proudly said:

Martha: Some men would give their right arm for the Chance!

George: Alas, Martha, in reality it works out that the Sacrifice is usually of a somewhat more private portion of the anatomy (p.24).

Here George mentioned that his masculinity was determined by his position as son-in-law of the college president, because he gained this position for the sack of Martha not to his qualifications. The remark which presented by George accounted one of the social crises in this play, the emotional emasculation of the male by the female in the American society (Ibid: p.98). Martha and George pretend to be happy family with the presence of their guest by bringing the illusion of an imaginary son. At the same time, Nick and Honey played the same game. As we knew how Honey cheated Nick to marry her by claiming that she was pregnant and how she refused the idea of childbearing in fear of becoming old. Bigsby believed that "the play remained on the level of social criticism from the beginning to end" (Bigsby: 143). If we traced their history certainly we would find that the characters had been emotionally trapped by their background, their childhood crises, and low self-image and self-doubt. Martha told Nick and Honey (Act one) how she had grown so close to her father after her mother's death. Her first marriage with the gardener was short-lived because of her father's intervention. After her first marriage failed, she returned home to live with her father and search for another man to please him till she married George, a professor in history department, but shortly this marriage turned to be another failure. Martha wanted her husband to fulfill her

dream by becoming the head of history department, but George was incompetent to get such a position that he felt inferior in front of her. Throughout the play, Martha complained that her husband had not measured up to her father. She said: "he was going to be groomed. H'd take over somebody... first, he'd take over the History Department, and then, When Daddy retired, he'd take over the college ... you know? That's the way it was supposed to be (P.55).

Martha tried to show that she was the lonely "Daddy girl" and that she sacrificed her life to please her father but unsuccessfully. She told Nick (Act three) that she disdained and hated herself. In fact we are always influenced by our history and it is impossible to change and remove any tiny event in our past. Martha had her own problems in her first marriage thus she sought support by marrying someone who was able to gain a powerful position but she was disappointed. Again she tried to regain the lost power through her sexuality, as she wore a sexy dress to seduce Nick and abuse her husband. Actually Martha's attempts to show sexuality power were ultimately unsuccessful. In fact we faced here the aspect of Social crises of an American woman when she tries to prove that she is still sexually attractive to men Rutenberg puts it this way:

If we consider, for a moment, the multi-billion dollar cosmetic industry in this county entirely geared to make women look younger than they really are, or notice the television commercials proudly showing how difficult it is to tell mother from daughter, we can realize that Martha is a product of her time, caught up in her society's need to worship youth. She is determined to hold on to her lost youth, even if it makes her repugnant to her husband.(Rutenbreg: P.98)

Similarly George was plagued by his troubled childhood too. He told Nick about his adolescence and how he accidentally killed his parents. Actually, George had a sense of agony and guilt because he considered himself responsible for his parent's death. He was ashamed of himself but he could not confess his secret to any person in order to maintain his social status. However, Martha embarrassed him by unfolding his secret to the guests with such a declaration when she got drunk.

Here we can say that the two couples got married for wrong reasons but not for attraction and love. Consequently, George and Martha humiliated and hated each other and were unable to accept sincerely the love from others. Every human being has flaws and so it is with the characters. They failed to forget the mistake of their past, that is why they bringing their imaginary child as a means of reaching redemption; it reflects the hidden desire of them to get rid of their memories of their own by becoming good parents. In another word, Albee wants to say that they created their imaginary son as a support to their divergent viewpoints and as a weapon to attack each other, because this imaginary child will take the side of one or the other in their quarreling and their world of illusion. Sometimes wetended to relate the illusive son to some kind of social crises; that is why children represented the strongest tie which connect any husband and wife, so

these two characters, George and Martha, were in deed need to bring their child to bind them strongly. In fact, sterility is a common problem of health but sometimes leads to psychological sickness.

John Gassner said that imaginary child "is used to solace these people in their loneliness." (Gassner: p.40). So the child is invented out of a need to ease the barren loneliness of George and Maratha. Both the characters were completely conscious that their son is a fiction. (Ibid: p.39-40) In another word, the imaginary child seemed to reflect the illusion people created to make life bearable. George and Maratha restored to the illusion by bringing their imaginary son because, they refused to be alone and that they have a child who lived with them. Because life cannot be lived within illusion, but people must face his world and accepted the reality whatever is it.

Anyhow, as a reaction against Martha George insists to kill their imaginary son to get rid of his revenge from Martha epically when she revealed her husband's secret to their guests. After an evening of anger and humiliation; George suddenly came to this decision, he insisted on doing it because he knew that it would hurt Martha deeply.

GEORGE: Now listen, Maratha; listen carefully. We got a telegram;

There was a car accident, and he is dead .POUF! Just like That Now how do you like it?

MARTHA: NOOOOOOooooooo

GEORGE (To Nick): Let her go. (MARTHA *slumpsto the floorin sitting position*)

She'll be all right now.

MARTHA (Pathetic): No; no, he is *not* dead; he is not *dead*.

GEORGE:He is dead. *Kyrie, eleison.Christe, eleison.Kyrie, eleison.*

MARTHA:You cannot. You may not decide these things. (P.247)

So, George killed the child to hurt Martha. He believed that the existence of the illusion had built up beyond extent they could bear. Killing the child means killing the connection between them forever. To stay together there had to be something new and worthy between them and something real that they could bring into the world without fear and hesitation In fact, the image of the child was comfort game for them because they believed that in some way it could bring some happiness, something worthy, clean and untainted to their bitter life by their harsh experiences. Actually, Martha carried her illusion of imaginary child so far which enhanced such people like Nick and Honey criticized and gossip their imaginary child in private.

Finally, toward the end of the play, and after killing the imaginary child George horrified Martha by singing her song and she blankly confesses that she was scared to live without illusion in her barren life.

GEORGE: (Puts *his hand gently on her shoulder; she her head back and sings to her; very softly*)

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Virginia Woolf,

Virginia Woolf,

MARTHA: I ...am...George...

GEORGE: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf...?

MARTHA: I ...am...George...I ...am(P.256)

## 5. Conclusion

Albee's characters are all losers in modern life.

All in all, *Edward Albee who's afraid of Virginia Woolf*, exposes the shallowness and meaningless of modern American society and reveals the falsity of the American dream. What Albee wants to explain in this play is the human truth which lies behind the phony exterior as cause of illusion in the inner-world of the characters relationship inside one family. Yet, he also illustrates that people not only peruse to show their false profiles in public but also between husbands and wives in somewhat unconscious attempt to overcome their pain in real life. George and Martha represent the essence of the American society; their social crises reflect the crises of their community which make them loser in their modern life. According to Albee, the imaginary child represents the revolutionary principles of America society which people have nothing to achieve it.

Illusion, falsity, and deceit are the shelter of any modern American citizen. To live a comfortable life you should own a car, a boy, a dog, and good position. So, Albee analyzes his community dream through the two couples as pattern of modern American individuals which adopts the illusion as a real life.

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