

Edward Albee

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?



The English Theatre Frankfurt

Tuition Material

Basic Understanding / Easy texts

1 The Author



Edward Albee grew up in a family deeply invested in projecting the perfect image of itself into social situations. Born in Washington D.C. on March 12, 1928, Albee was adopted by a wealthy family from Larchmont, New York. This affluent suburb of New York City was home to a rich, competitive social scene, of which his mother, in particular, was very much a part. Through his youth, Albee resisted interacting with this culture, finding it hollow and unsatisfactory. At age twenty, after years of expensive schooling at prestigious institutions, Albee moved to New York City's Greenwich Village to join the avant-garde art scene. His first play, *The Zoo Story*, was performed in 1959, met with fine success, and launched his career. After that, Albee earned much praise for most of his work, the most famous of which are *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *A Delicate Balance*, and *Three Tall Women*.

- *Like to find out more about Edward Albee? See pages 12 – 15!*

2 The play

2.1 Synopsis of the plot

The play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is set on the campus of a small, New England university. It opens with the main characters, George and Martha coming home from a party at her father's house. The two of them clearly care deeply for each other, but events have turned their marriage into a nasty battle between two disenchanted, cynical enemies. Even though the pair arrives home at two o'clock in the morning, they are expecting guests: the new math professor and his wife.

Of course, as it turns out, this new, young professor, Nick, actually works in the biology department. He and his wife, Honey, walk into a brutal social situation. In the first act, "Fun and Games," Martha and George try to fight and humiliate each other in new, inventive ways. As they peel away each other's pretenses and self-respect, George and Martha use

Honey and Nick as pawns, transforming their guests into an audience to witness humiliation, into levers for creating jealousy, and into a means for expressing their own sides of their mutual story. In the second act, "Walpurgisnacht," these games get even nastier. The evening turns into a nightmare. George and Martha even attack Honey and Nick, attempting to force them to reveal their dirty secrets and true selves. Finally, in the last act, "The Exorcism," everyone's secrets have been revealed and purged. Honey and Nick go home, leaving Martha and George to try to rebuild their shattered marriage.

2.2 The reception of the play (Content and Historical Background)

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was first performed in New York City in 1962. The play stunned and pleased American audiences, seemed to provide a vital insight into American life. The country was coming out of the 1950s, when Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower was a conservative, well-loved president and television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* were popular. The importance of a happy family was emphasized by both politicians and popular culture. Many Americans considered success to be measured by having one's own house, car, kids, and dog. By all shallow measures, the 1950s were a stable, productive time for the United States of America. And yet, these shallow measures and the trappings of success often hid real problems, which will eventually crop up in any human community. It is this raw, human truth beneath the phony exterior that Edward Albee attempts to reveal in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was a sensation in its own time because of the powerful themes that it touched on. By writing a play, with its inherent tension between actors and audience, rather than a novel or a short story, Edward Albee uses his genre to illustrate one of these themes. He brings up the idea of private and public images in marriage. Inherent in this idea of public and private faces is the theme of phoniness. Many couples, Albee seems to say, project false images of themselves in public situations. In fact, that phoniness is generally preferred to exposing all of one's problems and indiscretions to the world.

At the time that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was produced, Albee was already a successful and noteworthy new playwright, most well known for his one-act, *The Zoo Story*. Both plays showcase his talent for combining realism and absurdism.

The audience was immediately polarized by *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. The play was an enormous commercial success. Many audience members and critics lauded it as revolutionary and as marking a new era in American drama. Within the decade, Albee became the second most produced playwright, after Shakespeare, on college campuses.

But many of the people who saw *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* during its 1962 run found its language and sexual content shocking and labeled it "perverse" and "dirty minded." While this debate raged far and wide, even among those who had not seen the play, it had specific ramifications in the world of theater critics.

The committee selected to chose the play that would be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1962 voted to make *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the winner. However, the Pulitzer Prize is overseen by Columbia University, and the trustees of the university decided that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*'s explicit language, interest in "taboo" subjects, and controversial public reception made it the wrong choice. Though it had won the vote, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* did not receive the award, which was not given to any play that year as a result.

Nonetheless, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Tony Award for Best Play that year. Albee has won three Pulitzers in years since. The production, which ran at the Billy Rose Theatre, featured Uta Hagen as Martha, Arthur Hill as George, George Grizzard as Nick, and Melinda Dillon as Honey, and was directed by Alan Schneider.

In 1966, Mike Nichols directed a film adaptation of the controversial play, starring famous and controversial then-couple Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton as Martha and George. Sandy Dennis played Honey, and George Segal played Nick. Studio honcho Jack Warner insisted on maintaining the integrity of the play, and The screenplay, adapted by Ernest Lehman, preserved virtually all of Albee's dialogue, though it did open up the locations of the one-set play beyond George and Martha's living room. The film was shot on-location as Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Drawn by the power of its controversial stars and the fame of the play itself, the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was a resounding commercial success. It was the most expensive black and white film ever made. Stars Burton and Taylor drew \$750,000 and \$1.1 million, respectively. Though Albee rumoredly wanted to cast Bette Davis and Henry Fonda in the roles, studio heads prevailed. Burton pushed Taylor to sign on. She then brought first-time director Mike Nichols on board, and Nichols in turn cast Burton as George.

Friend familiar with the play warned Taylor and Burton that portraying this hate-filled couple would be detrimental to their marriage. Indeed, it is believed that the film ? for which Taylor gained 20 pounds ? led to their breakup. Taylor also chipped a tooth during filming. Not only was it Nichols directorial debut, it was also actress Sandy Dennis's first film. Pregnant when production began, she suffered a miscarriage during the filming of the movie.

Despite Jack Warner's warnings, Nichols shot the film with the script's profanity in tact. For the most part, the censors let it by. This not only added to the immediacy and believability of the film at the time but helps it to remain effective even today. Nonetheless the dialogue that was cut from the play upset Albee, who felt that the political message of his play were excised from the film.

The film opened on June 22, 1966, at the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood. All of the film's actors were nominated for Academy Awards. At the time, that was the first time this had every happened. It has only happened once since (in 1972), with *Sleuth*. Ultimately, Elizabeth Taylor won the Oscar for Best Actress and Sandy Dennis won for Best Supporting Actress. The film also won for Best Cinematography, Best Art Direction, and Best Costume

Design. It was nominated for Best Actor, Best Director, Best Film Editing, Best Original Score, Best Picture, Best Sound, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay.

There have been two major theatrical revivals of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* since its original Broadway production. Both were directed by Edward Albee himself. The play was first revived in 1976 on Broadway. Its stars, Colleen Dewhurst and Ben Gazzara, were both nominated for Tony Awards for their performances. Only fourteen years after the initial production, America was a far different place. Watergate, Vietnam, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, had all made America a much more cynical place politically. Culture had changed too. No longer was George and Martha's animosity so shocking or controversial.

Yet, Albee also shows that people not only make up images of themselves for their friends and neighbors, they create illusions for their husbands and wives as well. Both of the couples in this play make up fantasies about their lives together in a somewhat unconscious attempt to ease the pains that they have had to face along the way. Over the course of the play, both kinds of masks are torn off, exposing Martha, George, Nick, and Honey to themselves and to each other. Perhaps, though, this exposure frees them as well.

One of the difficulties that Martha and George experience in their marriage is his apparent lack of success at his job. Albee shows the power of this failure through George's cynical disgust with young, ambitious Nick. Through George, Albee questions the reason for this desire for success, and demonstrates how the desire can destroy one's self-esteem and individuality.

From the relationship between Martha and George, it seems that women can be more caught up with the idea of success than men. Martha is disappointed in George's professional failure, perhaps more than he is. One of the reasons for this expectation and hope for her husband could be the fact that she wants to live through his experience. Women had careers much less frequently in the 1950s and 60s than they do today, so Martha might have felt limited.

Part of the ideal of familial success is children. Albee explores how children and parents affect each other. Neither couple in this play has a child, a fact that seems to come between both sets of parents. For Martha and George, their lack of a child is another failure. For Honey and Nick, it is another ground upon which they are not communicating. Both couples furthermore, are deeply influenced by the wife's father; the play forwards the thought that none of the characters is ready to have children in part because they are all living like children themselves.

Assignments for essays or presentation statements and discussion in class:

- What caused the controversial reactions on the play?
- Why did it however appeal to people and could eventually be called a success?
- Which themes does it focus on?
- Which role did the movie play in the history of reception?

3 A first approach to interpretation

Act I

From the very beginning, George and Martha are a surprising and disturbing couple. They explode all fantasies about the bliss of marital life. Not only are they cruel to each other, but they cannot even be civil around their company. Through their horrifying behavior, Edward Albee seems to indicate that love can quickly transform into hatred. In addition, since George and Martha connect to each other best when trading insults, he also reveals that a marriage can fall into being a series of games that the couple plays with each other.

This play also toys with the idea of privacy in marriage. In this theme, the audience is crucial. After all, not only is Albee opening up George and Martha's marriage to Nick and Honey, but he is revealing their mode of interaction to an entire audience of theater-goers. After a long stretch of time where families were pictured as perfect and happy, George and Martha were especially shocking. In the simple fact that George and Martha share the name of America's founding and most famous couple, George and Martha Washington, Albee also implicitly extends his portrayal of this one faulty marriage to all of America. The illusions and tensions under which they hide and snipe at each other are paradigmatic of a larger phenomenon in the nation itself.

Part of the reason that George and Martha relate to each other by trading insults is that they are afraid to communicate in a sincere way. It is easier to be mean and hide their true feelings. Therefore, as they drink heavily, the alcohol becomes a symbol of their desire to mask their true emotions from each other and themselves. At the same time, George does not want to be so phony. He attacks Nick's profession and genetic engineering because he is afraid of artificially changing the way that people are supposed to turn out.

Of course, one could read his distaste for genetic engineering as a result of his own career path. In the 1950s and early 1960s, many social scientists argued that the professional competitiveness that men felt was very destructive. Albee seems to be picking up on this idea. George clearly feels like a bit of a failure, having lost the position of head of the history department. George felt people pushing him to be a success but did not want to involve himself in such a rat race. Therefore, the genetic engineering scares George because it seems like the ultimate form of personal competition. He hates the way that people only want to succeed now, and genetic engineering just seems to be the next step.

The meaning of the title, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, becomes clearer as the play progresses, but so far we know that it comes from a joke at a cocktail party. The song usually goes, "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf?" Virginia Woolf was an English writer during the first half of the twentieth century. She wrote in the style of stream-of-consciousness, which tried to mimic the thought patterns of her characters. One might be afraid of Virginia Woolf because she tries to understand the intricacies of the human mind and heart. She is so honest that she might frighten characters like George and Martha, who hide behind their

insults. At the same time, her writing is also very complex and intellectual. Therefore, one might be afraid of not understanding her. In the competitive world of a University, no one would want to admit to being afraid to read something by her. The title, then, could also refer to the competition that George feels at his job, and the need that all people within that academic environment have to puff up their own intelligence.

Much of this first section simply sets up the climax of the play. All of the discussion of George and Martha's child, then, is foreshadowing for the revelation at the end of the play.

Martha's desperation can be seen as a feminist statement by Edward Albee. As she tells her own history, the audience realizes that she never considered taking over the University herself. Instead, she felt that she had to marry someone to do it for her. Therefore, her only power comes from her father. She seems to try to gain power through sexuality, though. As Martha puts on a sexy dress, flirts with Nick, and reveals secrets from her sexual past, she is attempting to gain some authority. She insists, through this behavior, that she made her own decision and that she can control men. But, her attempts to show this power are somewhat sad because she is ultimately disappointed with her life. She does not have much power, because her fate is so tied up in the men around her.

As Martha and George fight about their son's eye color, they hint at the fact that the audience learns later--they made him up. The significance of this fight beyond their usual bickering is that they are trying to claim ownership for this fantasy. Whereas a real child might bring parents together, the dream of one that they created is tearing them apart. They each want to be closer to this dream, to make it more theirs. Instead of joining together through their pain, they fight each other.

In the meantime, Honey and Nick are not completely innocent. Nick, with his many degrees and boxing prowess, is an image of youthful pride. Nick can be seen as a younger version of George. Although George no longer has Nick's ambition or youthful energy, George began his time at the University with similar hopes (as Nick mentioned earlier in the act). As Nick and Honey watch this disenchanting, cynical, seemingly hopeless couple fight each other, they seem to recognize the potential for the same in their own lives. This realization might be symbolized by Honey's need to vomit.

Act II

This act is titled "Walpurgisnacht." This German word refers to the night before May Day (the first day of May) when witches are supposed to meet together and create havoc. Anything called a "Walpurgisnacht" is supposed to have a nightmarish quality. This term relates to the second act of Albee's play because the games among the guests escalate to a frightening level. In addition, since "Walpurgisnacht" is a pagan myth, Albee uses it to show the breakdown of modern civilization. Conservative, modern ideas, like church and family, are all collapsing in this act.

The theme of parents and children also emerges very strongly here. George recalls his young friend going crazy from the guilt of accidentally killing his parents. This story shows George's distress at the amount of power parents have over their children and how much the lives of

parents affect their children. This is an extreme example, but the pattern is echoed in Martha and Honey, whose fathers' wealth and prestige led, in great part, to their marriages. Nick and George seem to regret the amount of power these men have (or had) over them. But, as George's tone in the story indicates, he is resigned to the overwhelming nature of this power.

Nick's story about Honey also reveals how sexuality can create power for women. When Honey appeared pregnant, Nick married her. And, both George and Nick recognize that part of having power at the University is sleeping with the women that are a part of the community. Therefore, Martha is not alone in thinking that much of her power could come from seduction.

Much of this conversation becomes a triumph for George. He is afraid of Nick, after all, because he fears that Nick's field, genetic engineering, signals the future of the University (and the country). But, as George peels layers away from Nick's golden-boy veneer, he reveals a great number of faults and fears. Nick the unblemished, blonde, athletic, good-looking man whose very life is dedicated to eradicating the imperfections in human genes, is himself revealed as flawed. Similarly, the appearance of a perfect marriage between Nick and Honey is shattered by Nick's admission that they got married because she was pregnant. After he tells George that secret, George and Martha's relationship seems partially more healthy than Nick and Honey's. At least their tensions are out in the open.

The war between Martha and George is heating up. She insults him more and more personally, honing in on his work and its connection to his personal life. Plus, the fact that he could not publish his book without her father's approval reveals his reliance on her and her family for his life and livelihood.

George goes after the guests in a forced removal of their last shred of dignity. As he and Martha take each other down, he does not want to let them get away without some humiliation. This can be seen as a complex point by Albee. He seems to be pointing out that one of the major problems in his society is that people measure themselves against one another. All competition results from comparison. George seems to understand this problem and tries to rise above competition. But, as he is being humiliated, he becomes competitive about how desperate and low he is. His attack on Nick and Honey is ironic, then, because he is simply engaging in another kind of competition, similar to the one he disparages.

As the perfect image of Nick and Honey crumbles, the final idealization of marriage and family also collapses. Albee reveals that even this, the seemingly perfect marriage, has serious problems. Honey is afraid of having children, so they cannot have a family. And, it is unclear whether they love each other at all. Nick, the perfect model of a new faculty member, is rather easily seduced by Martha.

Act III

The climax of the play reveals the extent to which invention is featured in the story. Their son is made up, as is, perhaps, the story from George's childhood about his friend who accidentally killed his parents. The idea behind the "Exorcism" (the title of the final act) is that the characters are getting rid of the illusions. To "exorcise" means to rid one's body of evil spirits. Therefore, in terms of the play, no more will George and Martha exist in a land of fantasy and make-believe. Still, Martha fears the amount of reality involved in this life. She is afraid of Virginia Woolf, who tried to expose reality and the sincerity of emotion.

This exorcism occurs in front of Honey and Nick, who are not sure what to make of it. Most of their masks have come down as well, but they remain somewhat naïve. After all, Honey comes out of the bathroom where she was tearing the label off of a bottle of alcohol. While

the peeling of the label is symbolic of her desire to reveal the truth beyond the surface, she remains attached to alcohol, another symbol of removal and hidden emotions. Nick and Honey might not be ready to tear down their illusions yet. In part, perhaps subconsciously, or perhaps incidentally, George and Martha seem to be both warnings and guides to Nick and Honey. Though Nick and Honey hold the potential of becoming another George and Martha, perhaps in seeing the example of George and Martha they might be able to avoid that fate.

George's prayer chant is a Latin requiem for the dead or dying. As he chants, he marks the passing of his and Martha's fictional son. At the same time, he also imposes a Catholic order on the night that had thus far been pagan and ritualistic. "Walpurgisnacht" is a term for a pagan event. "Exorcism," too, is often connected to pagan traditions rather than those of an established church. The evening of the play, therefore, has passed as a whirling, chaotic, pagan experience. George's prayer, then, exorcises not only the phoniness of his and Martha's child but also the chaos of the night.

Assignments for presentation statements and discussion in class:

- **Introduce the characters by means of role biographies!**
- **Show what they do in the plot by reading or acting out crucial situations!**

Intermediate Material: Major Themes and Interviews

4 Themes

4.1. Reality vs. Illusion

Edward Albee has said that the song, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" means "Who is afraid to live without illusion?" At the end of the play, Martha says that she is. Indeed, the illusion of their son sustains George and Martha's tempestuous marriage. Ultimately, George takes it upon himself to "kill" that illusion when Martha brings it too far into reality. Throughout the play, illusion seems indistinguishable from reality. It is difficult to tell which of George and Martha's stories about their son, about George's past are true or fictional. Similarly, Nick and Honey's lives are based on illusion. Nick married for money, not love. Though he looks strong and forceful, he is impotent. Honey has been deceiving him by using birth control to prevent pregnancy. As an Absurdist, Albee believed that a life of illusion was wrong because it created a false content for life, just as George and Martha's empty marriage revolves around an imaginary son. In Albee's view, reality lacks any deeper meaning, and George and Martha must come to face that by abandoning their illusions.

4.2 Games and War

The title of the first act is "Fun and Games." That in itself is deceptive, for the games that George and Martha play with their guests are not the expected party games. Rather, their games of Humiliate the Host, Get the Guests, and Hump the Hostess which involves the characters' deepest emotions. George's characterization of these emotionally destructive activities as games and assumption of the role of ring master reveals that all the events of the evening are part of a power struggle between him and Martha, in which one of them intends to emerge as victor. Martha and George's verbal banter and one upsmanship is also characteristic of their ongoing game-playing. Years of marriage have turned insults into a finely honed routine. By characterizing these activities of games, Albee does not suggest that they are frivolous or meaningless. Rather, he likens game-playing to war and demonstrates the degree to which George and Martha are committed to destroying each other. George and Martha in fact declare "all out war" on each other. What begins as a game and a diversion escalates over the course of the play until the characters try to destroy each other and themselves.

4.3 History vs. Biology

George and Nick's academic departments at New Carthage College set up a dialectic in which Albee presents a warning about the future of life. George is an associate professor in the History Department, while Nick is a new member of the Biology Department. Old, tired, and ineffectual, George exemplifies the subject that he teaches. What's more, he notes that no one pays attention to the lessons of history just as Nick ignores George's sincere advice, responding contemptuously, "Up your!" Nick, as a representative of science, is young and

vital. In the words of George, he is the "wave of the future." Through Nick and George's argument about Biology and History, Albee demonstrates two clashing worldviews. George's lack of success in the History Department and inability to rise to power as successor to the president of the college contrasts with Nick's plans and seeming ability to move ahead first taking over the Biology Department, then the college. Albee clearly intends for us to perceive Nick's (half-joking) plan as a threat. George's criticism of Biology's ability to create a race of identical test tube babies all like Nick and Nick's ruthless willingness to take any means necessary (including sleeping with factory wives) to get ahead reveals the absence of morality and frightening uniformity in a future determined by science. What's more, in exposing seemingly virile Nick's impotence, Albee demonstrates the underlying powerlessness of science and in George's perseverance, the unexpected staying power of history.

4.4 The American Dream

The title of one of his earlier plays, the American Dream was a significant concern of Albee's. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, he explores the illusion of an American dream that masks a core of destruction and failure. Writing during the Cold War, Albee was responding to a public that was just beginning to question the patriotic assumptions of the 1950's. His George and Martha reference patriotic namesakes George and Martha Washington. Albee uses this symbolic first couple's unhappy marriage as a microcosm for the imperfect state of America. When George and Martha's marriage is revealed to be a sham based on the illusion of an imaginary son, the viewer is led to question the illusions that similarly prop up the American dream. Nick and Honey, a conventional American dream couple, are also revealed to be presenting a falsely happy façade. They too secretly take advantage of and lie to each other. What's more, Nick's name is a direct reference to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, and his threat to George and Martha's marriage references the Cold War turmoil of America.

4.5 The Christian allegory

Subtle references to Christianity, particularly to Catholic rites and rituals, abound in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. For instance, Martha refers to her (imaginary) son as a "poor lamb," making him a Christ symbol for Jesus is also known as the Lamb of God. George chants the Kyrie Eleison, Dies Irae, and Requiem from Catholic liturgy. The doorbells chimes which sound at the end of the second act echo the chimes that sound during a Catholic mass. Albee even names the third act of the play "The Exorcism." That name, of course, refers to George's attempt to kill the "son" and thus exorcise illusion from his marriage. The killing of the "lamb" can also be seen as a sacrifice necessary to save George and Martha's marriage. George calls the proceedings "an Easter pageant," referencing the day the Lamb of God was sacrificed to save the world, and the scene even takes place early on a Sunday morning.

4.6 Love and Hate

In his portrayal of George and Martha's marriage, Albee seems to make the not-uncommon literary assertion that love and hate are two parts of a single whole. From their vitriolic banter, it clearly appears that George and Martha hate each other. In fact, they say as much and even pledge to destroy each other. Nonetheless, there are moments of tenderness that contradict this hatred. George even tells Nick not to necessarily believe what he sees. Some of George and Martha's arguments are for show, others are for the challenge of arguing, while still others are indeed meant to hurt each other. However, Martha's declaration that George is really the only one who can satisfy her suggests that there are or have been positive aspects to their marriage. Clearly, as much as they fight, they also need each other, even if just to maintain the illusions that keep them going.

Assignments for essays or presentation statements and discussion in class:

- Why is it important that George is a history professor, whereas Nick is a biologist? How do these two disciplines relate to their characters?
- Why would Edward Albee set this play at a cocktail party (rather than at a family dinner or on a vacation or at an amusement park, etc.)?
- A great deal of what goes into a play is visual rather than simply literary. How would you set up the stage if you were directing this play? What costumes would you use for the characters? What actors would you cast in the parts?
- What is the significance of sexuality in the play?

Why do Martha and George decide to tear each other apart in front of Honey and Nick?

5 Interviews with Edward Albee

5.1 Printed material

5.1.1 The Paris Review Interviews



EDWARD ALBEE

The Art of Theater No. 4

Interviewed by William Flanagan

© Nancy Crampton

Issue 39, Fall 1966

FROM THE INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER

Incidentally, when did the title *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* occur to you?

ALBEE

There was a saloon—it's changed its name now—on Tenth Street, between Greenwich Avenue and Waverly Place . . . and they had a big mirror on the downstairs bar in this saloon where people used to scrawl graffiti. At one point back in about 1953 . . . 1954 I think it was—long before any of us started doing much of anything—I was in there having a beer one night, and I saw “Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” scrawled in soap, I suppose, on this mirror. When I started to write the play it cropped up in my mind again. And of course, who's afraid of Virginia Woolf means who's afraid of the big *bad* wolf . . . who's afraid of living life without false illusions. And it did strike me as being a rather typical university intellectual joke.

 [Download a PDF of the full interview →](#)

5.1.2 Edward Albee Interview

"Who's Afraid of Virginia

Woolf?"

June 2, 2005

New York City



AMERICA'S GREATEST LIVING PLAYWRIGHT

What was it like for you growing up in and around New York City as a kid?

I got thrown out of a lot of schools, yeah, because I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to be home either. I didn't want to be anywhere I was. But, I managed to get an education before I got thrown out, in the stuff that interested me. Teachers seemed to sense that, in some terribly unformed way, there might be something going on in the mind there that should be encouraged. So, they would encourage me towards the things that interested me. And, that was nice. So, I'd learn something at one school, get thrown out, go to another and learn some more.

Were there teachers who influenced you? Who were important to you?

Edward Albee: Oh sure.

There were some teachers who were very, very helpful and, as I say, sensed that maybe I had a mind worth cultivating, and pointed me in the right direction to a lot of things. I can't be specific about it, but I know that was going on. These are all private schools, not public schools in the bowels of the city. These were private schools, a lot of wealthy kids there. But, the teachers were paid fairly well, and they were better educated than their students -- which is not necessarily true in many of our public school systems now -- and some bright people. They had small classes -- seven or eight kids in a class -- and they could spend time finding out who the kids were. I'm very, very grateful that, even though I didn't get along with my adoptive parents, they did offer me an extraordinarily good education.

[\[Watch \]](#) [\[Listen \]](#)

You say you started writing poetry at eight or nine.

Edward Albee: Yeah. I'd already started drawing before then.

What do you think motivated you to do that?

Edward Albee: Probably because I thought I was a painter, and I thought I was a writer.

You left college early, didn't you?

Edward Albee: Yes, I did. It was a mutual agreement.

I was not going to many of the courses I was supposed to in my freshman and sophomore year. I was going to a lot of interesting courses the seniors were taking, getting a good education on a graduating level, and of course, being marked absent and failing my required courses. They didn't like that. And, they gave me a choice: go to the courses I was supposed to, or leave. So I left. I was the one being educated; I thought I should have some say as to the nature of my education. Foolish notion.

You also left home for good after that, didn't you?

Edward Albee: Yes, I did. I tried first when I was 13, because one of my grandmothers had given me little Christmas presents, and I had a few hundred dollars. So I went into New York with my little suitcase and tried to get on an ocean liner -- Cunard, or whatever the line was -- and discovered that I didn't have enough money. Also, I didn't have any identification or anything, and they weren't going to let me on board the ship.

Where did you want to go?

Edward Albee: Anywhere. London or Paris, probably Paris. But that didn't work out. So I waited until we were so completely fed up with each other there was nothing for it.

How would you describe yourself as a kid?

Edward Albee: Forming myself, I suppose.

I never felt comfortable with the adoptive parents. I don't think they knew how to be parents. I probably didn't know how to be a son, either. And, I stayed pretty much to myself. I had a fairly active inner life. I certainly didn't relate to much of anything they related to. They sent me away to school when I was nine, ten years old, not to have me around. So, that was fine. It was all right. I took care of myself.

Did you like school?

Edward Albee: Yes, I liked school, only when I was doing the stuff that I wanted to do. I was always very, very good at the classes that interested me and very bad at the ones that didn't. I think I knew very, very young -- or at least had some inkling of -- the direction that my life was going to take. I was always interested in the arts. I started painting and drawing when I was eight years old and writing poetry when I was nine or 10. I wanted to be a composer after I discovered Bach when I was 12 and a half, but that didn't work out. He was too good!



5. 2 Audio/ Video Material

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=edward+albee&aq=f

Assignments for essays or presentation statements and discussion in class:

- Have a look at the print material and the many video interviews which present Edward Albee talking about theatre and his plays.
- Make a sample and present your picture of the author in class! Give your presentation a clear content structure. Which themes/questions do you want to focus on? What might be interesting to discuss with your fellow-students?

Advanced Work (Literary criticism)

6 Seeing the play from different perspectives

6.1 A symbolic approach

Folklore and Myth in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

By Rictor Norton

Most critics have recognized the presence of mythic symbolism in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but few have done little more than to mention in passing that Martha is a self-confessed Earth Mother, and that George might be a comic Dionysus. Critics have not demonstrated how the mythic folklore levels of the play give coherent meaning and unification to it. The symbolism is usually seen as an absurdist counter to the action on stage rather than as an essential embodiment of that action, and some critics apparently feel, that "the danger in reading Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is becoming too involved with the symbolism.

Just as the title, the time, and the place of the play point up the positive nature of Albee's theme, so likewise do the 4 characters' mythic qualities and their ritual actions. Martha's Daddy, for example, may be the Head of the University, but he may also be the Ruler of the Universe. He organizes "these goddamn Saturday night orgies", orgies which take place on Saturday, a day sacred to Saturn, and which are related to the fertility rites of the Saturnalia. He lives at Parnassus, and there are rumors that "the old man is not going to die." Martha says, "I worshipped him . . . I absolutely worshipped him. I still do." George resembles Martha's Daddy insofar as both are concerned with Dionysian history; Daddy had a sense of history . . . or . . . continuation", and George is Head of the History Department. George will later take over Daddy's role of Saturn when he, as in Goya's painting, devours his son, this time in the form of a telegram.

Martha's name comes from the Aramaic *Martha*, which means simply "lady". During the last part of the play, after Nick discovers what Martha really is, he appropriately refers to her only as "Lady". The two appellations are interchangeable, for Martha is the Archetypal Feminine in her many roles. She is "destructive", "Voluptuous", "wicked", a "monster", a "sub-human monster", a "Monstre!", a "Bête", a "Putain!" and a variety of repulsive or brutish animals and insects. She is "limitless" because she is the Earth Mother: "You're all flops. I am the Earth Mother, and you're all flops. (*More or less to herself*) I disgust me. I pass my life in crummy, totally pointless infidelities . . . (*Laughs ruefully*) would-be infidelities." She is "the only true pagan on the eastern seaboard", "paints blue circles around her things" (i.e. her nipples), and understands the rhythm of *Sacre du Printemps* (i.e. sexuality). Like all Mother Goddesses, she is a perpetual Virgin although a Harlot: "Anyway, so I was revirginized."

Martha rules like a Circe over her hogs: “Martha thinks that unless . . . you carry on like a hyena you aren’t having any fun.” “Hyena” comes from the Greek *hyaina*, a “sow”, from *hys*, a “hog”. She is also the tri-headed Hecate: “There aren’t many more sickening sights than you with a couple of drinks in you and your skirt up over your head, you know . . . your *heads*, I should say.” However, Martha is essentially the Mother Goddess in her most negative aspect, that of the Bitch Goddess. George says that she chews her ice cubes, “like a cocker spaniel”, and that when she was courting him she would “sit outside of my room, on the lawn, at night, and she’d howl and claw at the turf.” At one point Nick says to George, “Well now, I’d just better get her off in a corner and mount her like a goddam dog, eh?” – such an act would of course literally make Martha a bitch. This aspect of Martha is summer up when George shouts at her, “YOU SATANIC BITCH!”

Martha is also a dragon. George, who in this context should be called Saint George, plucks a bunch of snapdragons in the moonlight, and hurls them “spear-like” at her, shouting “SNAP WENT THE DRAGONS!!” in his attempt to destroy her. By the end of the play, he has effectively succeeded in destroying her illusions, and has thereby destroyed the dragon, the Circe, the Bitch, the Satanic, the destructive aspects of *Martha*, thus making way for the positive, creative aspects of the Mother Goddess to manifest themselves. Martha’s Dianic moon has set, but it will reappear, just as the moon in the play:

Martha: (*With finality*) There is no moon; the moon went down.

George: (*With great logic*) That may very well be, Chastity; the moon may very well have gone down . . . but it came back up.

Martha: The moon does *not* come back up; when the moon has gone down it stays down.

George: (*Getting a little ugly*) You don’t know anything. *If* the moon went down, then it came back up.

Martha: BULL!

George: Ignorance! Such . . . ignorance.

Honey is the absolute antithesis of Martha. Since Martha encompasses so much, very little is left over for Honey. She possesses all the passive, unproductive aspects of the chaste Artemis. She is as effectual as a fetus curled up on the bathroom floor, and little more need be said.

Nick’s name has several possible meanings. On the folklore level, he is perhaps Old Nick, the Devil. On the etymological level, his name is a diminutive form of “Nicholas”, which means “victory over the people”.

Martha: You *cannot*. You may not decide these things.

Nick: He hasn’t decided anything, lady. It’s not his doing. He doesn’t have the power . . .

George: That’s right, Martha; I’m not a God. I don’t have the power over life and death, do I?

Martha: You can’t kill him! You can’t have him die!

This son, whom George does indeed have the power to kill, is a little Apollo: “He loved the sun! . . . He was tan before and after everyone . . . and in the sun his hair . . . became . . . fleece”; he is called “sunny-Jim”, and he used to keep “the bow and arrow” under his bed. He is also “the Lamb”, and George is “going to make [Martha’s] performance tonight look

like an Easter pageant”, a ritual in which the sacrifice of the Son brings atonement for the living.

On the symbolic level, George and Martha are not really uncreative. The son in every archetypal family is always in a sense superfluous; he has no separate personality, but is simply a reincarnation of his father. His purpose is to be a renewed manifestation of his father, or to die so that his father may be reborn. George and Martha will no longer live a life of manifold illusions; they will live a life of eternal reality. They will play no more games, for they have reached the Center of the labyrinth. They have been purged by the exorcism. At the end of the play, George tells Martha that it is “time for bed”, and that it will be “Sunday tomorrow; all day” – words which echo the “*Requiescat in pace*” and “*Et lux perpetua luceat eis*” in the *Exorcism*.

It may be, if Jungian psychology is correct in its assertion that myth is instinctive rather than traditional, that these underlying mythic patterns account for the intense dynamic effect of Albee’s drama. Every time I read the play, or see it performed, or see the movie version, I am almost totally absorbed by it, and experience a wild demonic joy. The violence of the dialogue and action may also account for this response by appealing to what Edgar Allan Poe called the “innate imp of the perverse”, but, as all great drama, Albee’s play demonstrates the cathartic principle that destruction and violence are not ends in themselves, but purge both the actors and the spectators, and prepare the way for rebirth.

6.2 A psychological approach

When Love Hurts

Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is a disturbing and powerful work. Ironically, it is disturbing and powerful for many of the same reasons. As the audience watches George and Martha tear savagely at each other with the knives of hurled words, sharpened on pain and aimed to draw blood, the way in which these two relentlessly go at each other is awful to see, yet strangely familiar. Like wounded animals, they strike out at those closest to them, and reminds one of scenes witnessed as a child between screaming parents from a cracked door when one is supposed to be in bed. In this age of psychoanalytic jargon, George and Martha are the quintessentially dysfunctional couple. Yet, with all their problems, Albee reveals that there is a positive core of feeling that unites these two troubled people and that helps them look beyond their self-created hell. The truth of their relationship is exposed layer by layer as the play progresses, like the peeling of an onion, and though the pattern of this truth appears vague at first, with each cycle of revelation, the pattern becomes more distinct, and the picture is fully revealed in the final, cathartic scene. One of the most consistent themes of the play is the question of George and Martha’s “child,” and all that this child, and children in general, symbolizes for them. The “child” seems not only a desire for fecundity within their relationship, but also a projection through which they express

many of their personal desires, needs, and problems, and, in this context, the child's subsequent "death" signifies a milestone in their understanding of their marriage and of themselves. By the end of play, after much suffering and flagellation, George and Martha appear ready to deal with their lives in a new way.

George and Martha have a history. They are also emotionally trapped by this history, especially that of their respective childhoods. As a consequence, both are plagued by low self-image and self-doubt. The audience learns of this history slowly, in bits and pieces. Martha tells Nick and Honey in Act 1 how she lost her mother early and grew up very close to her father. She was married briefly, but her father had the marriage annulled. She returned to live with her father after college, and met and fell in love with George. Yet she reveals that part of the reason she wanted to marry George was to please her father. What emerges is a picture of a lonely, "Daddy's girl" who has spent much of her life unsuccessfully trying to win her father's approval, unsuccessful because she reveals to Nick in Act 3 how low her self-image is, to the point of self-hatred. This same scene also expresses her ambiguous feelings towards George. Previously throughout the play, Martha reviles George for not being the kind of go-getter that would impress her father, and by extension win approval for Martha, yet here, Martha admits how much she loves and respects George. In this speech, more than any other, Martha reveals how so much of her behavior towards George is driven by childhood feelings to satisfy "Daddy," even though she is a middle-aged, married woman who should have matured beyond these childhood motivations.

But Martha has not grown up because she has not left behind Daddy and the prospect of his unconditional love. To accept George as he is, though this is what she deeply wants to do, would be to give up the possibility of her father's love forever. Likewise, George is plagued by a troubled childhood. The story he tells Nick in Act 2 about a teenage boy who accidentally kills his mother, and later his father, the audience learns later is also the plot for George's failed novel. Martha claims George maintained the boy was himself. The audience doesn't know whether this is true, but one does feel that, true or not, the story reflects George's deep-seated feelings of guilt about his parents. The novel was a possible way for George to expiate these feelings but he is frustrated in his attempt by Martha's father. So George, like Martha, is trapped by feelings about his childhood that he cannot work through in a meaningful way. His resulting emotional impotence is actualized in sexual impotence, a fact that Martha alludes to several times.

As the play progresses, a picture emerges of two people who married each other for many other reasons than attraction and love and, more importantly, each has brought a great deal of unresolved emotional baggage and anger into the forum of their relationship. Neither is in a position to really aid the other in unloading this baggage. The result is that they savage each other in two ways: they each hate themselves and therefore cannot accept wholeheartedly the love the other has to give, and each person's flaws are magnified to be used to indict the other for not functioning as a savior. Therefore, George's "flaws" are the reason Martha is not happy, and vice versa. Thus, the "child" they invent is a symbol of many things for George and Martha. For both, the idea of their own child symbolizes maturity and adulthood. It represents their desire to grow up and leave behind the painful memories of their own childhoods' by becoming parents themselves. I believe it is also a projection of themselves, of the inner child of each, that is still alive, hurting and trapped.

In these ways, the child becomes the projection through which they work through their conflicting desires and feelings about themselves and each other. In a strange cathartic way, they use the child to point out each other's bad points, the things they've encountered in each other that disappoints and frustrates them, and, in the realm of fantasy, it represents their subconscious drives to try and make childhood dreams come true. Though one senses the show they give Nick and Honey is one they have replayed countless times, there is also the sense of a process at work, a process of catharsis, and it is Martha's and George's underlying love for each other that gives them the strength to take the garbage that they dump on each other, painful though it is.

The symbol of the child also connects George and Martha to Honey and Nick. The younger couple is likewise childless and we learn Honey is afraid of childbearing because she, too, does not want to grow up. Yet the link between the two couples can also be understood in the sense that Honey and Nick have also apparently come into their marriage with unresolved emotional baggage and the two don't fully know and understand each other. One can only assume that if they stay together their relationship might also become a battleground similar to Martha's and George's, if only as a messy way to work through their emotional problems as Martha and George have. Ironically, these two couples, who have such difficulties with the idea or actual manifestation of children, are precisely the kind of couples that should not have children, at least until they have worked many of their own problems out.

As revenge against Martha, George decides to kill their "son." He does not come to this decision lightly, but seems pushed to it after an evening of impotent rage and humiliation and he does it because he knows it will wound Martha deeply. It is significant that the boy is killed in a car accident on a country road while trying to avoid a porcupine, indicating how much of himself George has invested in their fantasy child. Yet George's identification with their child pales in comparison to Martha's level of involvement, as her devastated response to his death attests. Despite all the functions their son served as mentioned above, the child was also a comfort, some way for them to believe they could produce something of worth, something good that was untainted by their own painful experiences. But Martha carries the illusion too far, and she brings it out into the world where other people like Honey and Nick can comment on their pretend child and judge it and them, and I think George feels this formerly pure idea is now sullied. George kills the child to hurt Martha, but he also seems to recognize that their illusory existence has built up to a point beyond which it cannot go. To kill the child is to kill their fantasy life, but it may be the only way something new can be born between them, something real that they create themselves.

After Nick and Honey leave, and George and Martha are talking quietly together, Martha contemplates the idea of a life without the child. One senses that perhaps now it might be alright to let him die because they can at last go on without him, perhaps their fantasy child has served his purpose in helping them expel many of the poisons they were afflicted with. Perhaps, after so many years in which they have wrestled with their own and each other's demons, held together by something good that they nevertheless knew was there, now that the demons are slain they can explore what has kept them together instead what has stood between them.

It is easy to behave like like Martha and George, to prefer familiar pain to the unknown. Theirs is the tragedy of wasted life, not being able to grow up and transcend negative events from their childhood, trapped into being eternal victims. But the power of the love they share lies in its transforming quality. The romantic notion of love, that once two people find

each other life becomes a kind of amorphous rainbow existence, is shattered by the reality that love is the beginning of a creative process which, God willing, may never end. A relationship is indeed something two people create together, an invisible child if you will, but it must be based on growth, not stagnation, honesty, and not deceit, if it is to survive. Martha and George killed their fantasy child so that a new one could be born that is reflective of their hopes and strengths, rather than their fears and weaknesses. After all they've survived, this birth should be an easy one.

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6.3 A feminist approach

Gender Roles in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Though usually viewed as a violent play about turbulent marriages, Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Should be regarded as an early feminist text. Bonnie Finkelstein writes that the 1962 play portrays and analyzes the damaging effects of traditional, stereotypical gender roles, particularly for women; the play serves to point out how unrealistic, useless and extraordinarily damning they ultimately are.

Finkelstein notes that the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* unofficially began a re-evaluation of gender roles in the United States (Finkelstein 55). Friedan explores the idea that women need more fulfillment in their lives than can be provided by the drudgery of childrearing and housekeeping. The book also carefully lays out what society has determined to be the ideal gender role requirements for women:

"They could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training...how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting...They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights...All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children." (Friedan 15-16)

And, more specifically:

The suburban housewife...she was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment." (Friedan 18)

Albee echoes this, noting by contrast what the ideal men and women in 1962 should be. In other words, his characters have failed at living up to gender roles and the play shows us how this quest has destroyed them. The most shocking thing Martha does is pack away the booze: "My God, you can swill it down, can't you." (16) She drinks straight, tough-guy booze, like whiskey and bourbon. She no longer favors the tastes of her youth: "brandy Alexanders, crème de cacao frappes...seven-layer liqueur things...real lady-like little drinkies." Martha once behaved as a woman should, but no longer does and this is off-putting and unsettling to George. The reason women should drink sweet-

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tasting but really lethal drinks is because they make women more willing to serve men sexually, as pointed out in the Paula Vogel's feminist (and set-in-the-early 1960s) drama *How I Learned to Drive*: "In short avoid anything with sugar or anything with an umbrellas...don't order anything with sexual positions in the name...I think you were conceived after one of those." (Vogel 44)

Indeed, the 1962 woman was not in tune with or even in charge of her own sexuality; according to Friedan, women would use sexuality as a means to achieve the fulfillment they were so sorely lacking:

"Are they using sex or sexual phantasy to fill needs that are not sexual? Is that why their sex, even when it is real, seems like phantasy? Are they driven to this never-satisfied sexual seeking because, in their marriages, they have not found the sexual fulfillment which the feminine mystique promises?" (Friedan 261)

While at an overprotective, women-only college (78), Martha was sexually active and chose her own husband. It was a real slap-in-the-face to her intelligence and identity when her father had her marriage annulled because it was not proper for a woman to be sexual or to make her own decisions. George himself comments on how Martha's sexual expression is improper with lines like "your skirt up over your head." (17)

The twenty-six year old "thin-hipped...simp" Honey is the incredibly stifling, unfulfilled result of what happens if a woman conforms to what 1962 society told her to be. In order to quickly show that Honey, the prefeminist-era ideal woman, is a farce, Albee makes her uninteresting, remarkably unintelligent and absolutely loathsome. She characteristically says boring, solicitous, giggly things like "Oh, isn't this lovely" (21) and "Well I certainly had fun...it was a *wonderful* party" (21), even "put some powder on my nose." (28). She is inoffensive, always agreeable, and, as Friedan points out, devoted to her husband, the ideal of femininity: "Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands." (Friedan 18) Still, because she is the perfect woman and Martha is decidedly rebellious of the stereotype, Honey is everything Martha is not.

Similar to the Martha-Honey dynamic, Nick is the ideal man and is thus everything George cannot be. Martha tells George he is "a blank, you're a cipher...a zero" (17) because of his lack of manly attributes, such as a commanding nature, athletic ability, good looks and ability to control his emotions. She berates him for sulking early on: "are you sulking? Is that what you're doing?" (12) Men should not sulk; they must be stoic. Years prior, George refused to box his taunting father-in-law and was made to feel like less of a man because of it (56). Enter Nick, the macho-man, everything George is not. Instantly, he is commanding: "I told you we shouldn't have come." (21); he is also stoic—he dryly responds "I am aware of that" (22) when Honey tells him he's being "joshed." Most of all, Nick is far more attractive and athletic than old, pudgy George, described often as "about thirty, blond, and...good-looking" (9) and once as "quarterback." (151) He was even a middleweight boxing champion (51). Martha has physical competition issues, too, with the young, skinny Honey: "I'm six years younger than you are," (15) George says to Martha, implying that she is old and useless because she's no longer young and pretty. Martha then foreshadows George's inability to measure up against Nick: "Well...you're going bald." (15) Thus, George is ugly, unmanly and no longer virile. He feels threatened: "I said I was impressed, Martha. I'm beside myself with jealousy." (49)

Albee uses George and Martha to show the effects when a society crams definitive, non-negotiable gender roles down the throats of women and men. Nick and Honey's presence shows that even those that strive to be the ideal cannot sustain the image without

serious consequences. All four characters are damaged irrevocably and act out via violence, alcoholism and infidelity as substitutes for happiness and ways to forge identity. Engaging in this behaviors makes them feel something, anything when their gender identity feels nonexistent. Being seductive makes Martha feel like a woman and being violent lets George play out his macho fantasies.

Additionally, each of the four characters has ways in which he or she loses any sense of gender identity (they don't feel like real women or real men) because of certain events. As Friedan repeatedly notes, the sole purpose for the 1962 woman was to be a good wife and produce babies: "All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children." (Friedan 16) Martha is unable to have children and is thus incapable of fulfilling her only supposed purpose in life. Finkelstein points out that:

Martha reveals to us the emptiness and loss she feels when, childless, she is an outcast at sex-segregated faculty parties and is tempted to mention their imaginary son...Martha feels that she doesn't exist: she had no other dreams but to be a mother, and then she couldn't do that. (Finkelstein 55)

For all intents and purpose, she feels she is not a woman and it eats her up. Conversely, we have Honey, who embodies all the attributes of the perfect early 60's woman. She rebels against the path by refusing to have babies. Laura Julier points out this juxtaposition, that Martha cannot be a stereotypical woman and Honey to refuses to be the stereotypical woman.

Since he doesn't fit the manly-man image, George feels almost non-existent: "Don't I sort of fade into the backgrounds...get lost in the cigarette smoke?" (32) Though he agrees, other comments from Martha emasculate George further: "he's not completely sure it's his own kid." (71) Here, Martha overpowers George to humiliate him and elevate herself, but there are fewer things more threatening to manhood in 1962 than by claiming someone's (albeit imaginary) child is not their own; a man does not want to be a cuckold. Albee uses George's emasculation once more to make a clear parallel to the lack of options for women in that period of America: "I *did* run the History Department, for four years, during the war, but that was because everybody was away. Then ...everybody came back." (38) George's colleagues essentially see him as the then-current idea of a woman: useless, but able to fill in at a job of prestige in an absolute emergency. This is exactly like the woman-dominated home front workforce of World War II because the regular male workers were in the armed forces. George, like the enraged female workers of 1941-1945, was degraded when he was forced to return to his proper place.

Also, both George and Nick married their not out of love or because they were sexual conquerors, which would be preferable. Nick married Honey for money: "GEORGE: Sure, I'll bet she has money, too!...NICK: Yes." (102) George married Martha in an ultimately futile attempt to rise in the hierarchy of the college. Julier notes that the revelation that both men married their wives for money is ultimately an emasculating and embarrassing revelation because it shows they are reliant on women for their livelihood, a big no-no for a true macho man. (Julier 36)

Nick's relationship with Honey is tenuous at best. They first knew each other as children, playing doctor (104). "A scientist even then," (105) as George points out. Nick goes on to speak of their loveless marriage: "I wouldn't say there was any...particular *passion* between us, even at the beginning." Nick reveals that he had to marry Honey mostly because they thought she was pregnant. It's almost as if Nick, who was forced to marry Honey and doesn't particularly like her is harboring a latent homosexual nature. This is simply unacceptable in 1962, as Honey quietly notes: "Two grown men dancing...heavens!" (124)

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In order to prove, or fake his manly, heterosexual nature, Nick engages in a quick, lurid sexual encounter with Martha (163). In fact, it is their problems with identity and self-expression within a sexist culture that lead the four characters to act out via near infidelity and heavy drinking. Alcohol is a social lubricant and a social liberator; alcohol gives Martha courage to say what she wants, it gives Honey a personality and proactivity, it gives George wit and Nick a dark side. Only through drinking and possibly by blaming it on the booze later, can these characters ever communicate and express themselves openly.

Though what the foursome do (making up a son, drinking, violence, "hysterical pregnancies," latent homosexuality) isn't necessarily the real-life result of gender roles, they are examples to get across Albee's point that gender roles destroy the ideas of "man," "woman," and make determining personal identity difficult for those who don't fit the mold. It's also highly prescient and protofeminist that Albee structures this analysis of gender roles within a marriage. Finkelstein theorizes that marriages cannot stand under such highly regulated gender role circumstances and that marriage is thus outmoded because women are given so few options in their lives. (Finkelstein 51)

The most telling prophecy lies in Nick's genetic project that aims for the perfection of the human species, a clear reference to 1962's quiet, forced demand to conform to the images of the ideal woman and man. George notes: "we will have a civilization of men, smooth, blond and right at the middleweight limit." (65) There will be no room in society for the unfit (George), the unintelligent (Honey) or female (Martha). Only Nick remains, and even he is flawed, proof that these gender roles are impossible to emulate. As Finkelstein notes, all four characters are afraid of Virginia Wolf, because she is, in 1962, the only icon of female equality society had. (Finkelstein 64)

From: <http://www.inforefuge.com/gender-roles-edward-albee>

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Assignments for essays or presentation statements and discussion in class:

- Have the gist of each of the essays presented by a group in class!
- Which perspective is the most illuminating one? Why?
- If you were a director and you had to stage the play, which text would be the most helpful to you? Give reasons!