Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Study Guide

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by Edward Albee

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Introduction

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Edward Albee's first full-length play and his first to appear on Broadway, is considered by many to be his greatest dramatic achievement, as well as a central work in the contemporary American theatre. *Virginia Woolf* focuses on an embittered academic couple who gradually draw a younger couple, freshly arrived from the Midwest, into their vicious games of mantal love-hatred. The play is a dramatic bloodsport fought with words rather than weapons—"verbal fencing," wrote Ruby Cohn m *Edward Albee,* "in the most adroit dialogue ever heard on the American stage." The play premiered October 13, 1962; at New York's Billy Rose Theatre and starred, in the roles of the battling husband and wife, Arthur Hill as George and Uta Hagen as Martha. The acclaimed production ran for 664 performances and led almost immediately to other successful productions throughout the United States and the world; the play has continued to be revived frequently.

Virginia Woolf garnered an impressive collection of awards, including the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Foreign Press Association Award, two Antoinette Perry ("Tony") Awards, the *Variety* Drama Critics' Poll Award, and the *Evening Standard* Award. For the play, Albee was additionally selected as the most promising playwright of the 1962-63 Broadway season by the New York Drama Critics' organization. When Albee did not receive the Pulitzer Prize for his widely-acclaimed play because one of the trustees objected to its sexual subject matter, drama advisors John Gassner and John Mason Brown publicly resigned from the jury in protest.

Author Biography

Edward Albee, numbered among the United States's most acclaimed and controversial playwrights, was born March 12, 1928. As the adopted son of Reed and Frances Albee, heirs to the fortune of American theater manager Edward Franklin Albee, he had an early introduction to the theatre. He began attending performances at the age of six and wrote a three-act sex farce when he was twelve. Albee attended several private and military schools and enrolled briefly at Connecticut's Trinity College from 1946-47. He held a variety of jobs over the next decade, working as a writer for WNYC-radio, an office boy for an advertising agency, a record salesman, and a messenger for Western Union. He wrote both fiction and poetry as a young man, achieving some limited success, and at the age of thirty returned to writing plays, making an impact with his one-act *The Zoo Story* (1959). Over the next few years Albee continued to satirize American social values with a series of important one-act plays: *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), the savagely expres-sionistic *The Sandbox* (1960), and *The American Dream* (1961).

Albee came fully into the national spotlight with his first full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). The play quickly developed a reputation as one of the most challenging works of the contemporary American theatre, even if some critics faulted it as morbid and self-indulgent. Albee has yet to make as large an impact with any of his subsequent plays, many of which have failed commercially and elicited scathing reviews. At the same time, however, the playwright has been commended for his commitment to theatrical experimentation. Albee's 1966 play *A Delicate Balance,* in which a troubled middle-aged couple examine their relationship during a prolonged visit by two close friends, earned him a Pulitzer Prize which many felt was a belated attempt by the Pulitzer committee to honor Albee for *Virginia Woolf.* Albee won a second Pulitzer for his 1975 play *Seascape,* in which two couples—one human, the other a pair of intelligent lizard-like creatures that have been driven from the sea by the process of evolution—discuss the purpose of existence. Albee has also continued to write experimental one-acts, including the paired plays *Box* and *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968), and his 1977 work *Listening: A Chamber Play* He received a third Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for his play *Three Tall Women.*

Albee has also adapted many works of fiction for the stage, including the novels *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* by Carson McCullers, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Truman Capote, and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov. Early in his career, he also collaborated on the opera *Bartleby,* based on a story by Herman Melville. Albee has applied his theatrical talents to directing productions of his own plays and has also served as co-producer at the New Playwrights Unit Workshop, co-director of the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, founder of the William Flanagan Center for Creative Persons in Mountauk, NY, and member of the National Endowment for the Arts grant-giving council. He has lectured extensively at college campuses and visited Russia and several Latin American countries on cultural exchanges through the U.S. State Department.

Plot Summary

Act I: "Fun and Games"

The play takes place one late night on the campus of a small New England college, in the home of a childless, middle-aged couple. Martha is the daughter of the college president and George, her husband, a professor of history whose career has stalled. The two stumble in from a faculty party where it is obvious that they have already been drinking a great deal. Their conversation is disjointed, Martha making jokes that George ignores or appears not to understand. She chastises him for his behavior at the party: "you never *do* anything; you *never mix. "*

¦Martha has apparently invited a young couple, "what's-their-name," over to continue the festivities. Neither George nor Martha can remember much about their guests, to whom "Daddy said we should be nice." When George expresses frustration at Martha always springing such things on him, Martha pokes fun at his sulking and smgs to him the "Virginia Woolf song, apparently a joke she heard earlier at the party. The doorbell chimes, but George and Martha continue scrapping (with George warning Martha "don't start in on the bit 'bout the kid"), until George finally flings the door open just at the moment that Martha lets oul a rousing "SCREW YOU!" Nick and Honey (much to George's delight) are clearly taken aback by Martha's outburst, but although their entrance is awkward they do not turn back.

After some uncomfortable exchanges regarding Martha's father and Nick's job at the college. Martha takes Honey to show her around the house and lead her to the "euphemism" (bathroom). George provokes Nick with more or less "trick" questions, until Nick snaps out. "All right.. . what do you want me to say?" When the talk turns to children, Nick comments awkwardly that he and Honey have none, and George is coy, stating that the information is "for me to know and you to rind out." Honey returns on her own. and in talking to George reveals that Martha told her about their son. Martha then returns, having changed into a more voluptuous outfit, and as the talk turns to bodies and exercise routines, her tone with Nick grows more flirtatious. The two couples discuss George and Martha's son and Martha's devotion to her father. Martha's story of her courtship with George leads her into another tirade about his professional failure. Especially angry at having this all played out in front of the company. George smashes a liquor bottle on the bar and attempts to drown out Martha's story. Honey runs out of the room feeling nauseous, and Nick follows her. The act ends as it began, with Martha's expletive, "Jesus!"

Act II: "Walpurgisnacht"

*[The subtitle of this act "Walpurgisnacht," means **"Walpurgis** night" and **is** commonly known as **the** "eve of May," It is a holiday of German origin held after midnight on April*

*30 (May I). During **this** event, witches gather **in** the Hartz Mountains to meet with the Devil and plot **evil.]***

Nick and George are alone. In light of Martha's attacks and his situation in general. George tries **to** gain sympathy from Nick but is rebuffed: "I just don't see why you feel you have to subject *other* people to it." The mood is tense between them, but Nick opens up to tell George the circumstances of his marriage with Honey (a false pregnancy), and they share a laugh over Nick's **observation.** "She blew up, and then she went down." George tells Nick a story of an early drinking adventure with his friends, including a boy who had accidentally shot his mother and then, the following summer, had an automobile wreck in which his father also died. Nick admits that money in his wife's family was also a factor m his marrying Honey, and George sympathizes with the situation.

They seem to be enjoying each other's company now, as they joke about the "inevitability" of Nick taking over the college through a strategy of "plowing pertinent wives." Nick grows nervous, however, when he can no longer tell to what extent George is joking about the professional value of committing adultery with Martha. Honey and Martha return, Nick paying close attention to his wife as George and Martha go at one another again, using their son as a weapon. Martha claims that George made the child throw up all the time, and George counters that the boy "ran away from home all the time because Martha here used to corner him."

Music is put on and the couples dance, Martha flirting heavily with Nick as an affront to George. As she dances, Martha tells Nick another story from the past, about a book that George wrote which her father refused to allow him to publish. Martha's father had thought the manuscript was "a novel all about a naughty boychild who killed his mother and father dead," but George revealed to him (as Martha is doing for the guests) that the story was true and had happened to him. As Nick makes the connection to the story George had told him earlier, George is furious, his hands on Martha's throat as he yells "YOU SATANIC BITCH!' ¦

Everyone calms down as George observes that, having played "Humiliate the Host," they need a new party game. He suggests "Hump the Hostess," but Nick is genuinely a bit frightened by George's tone. George proposes "Get the Guests" as a game and plays it by retelling the story of Nick and Honey's courtship. Honey is upset that Nick told George their own secrets, and she runs out of the room, Nick following. Martha for a moment is somewhat perversely impressed by George's angry performance. "It's the most... life you've shown in a long time," she observes. Quickly, however, they are once again threatening each other. Nick returns, reporting that Honey is lying peacefully on the bathroom floor.

As George goes off to get ice for the drinks, Martha and Nick come together in a long kiss. George sees this going on when he returns and settles down to read a book. The incongruity of this action drives Martha crazy, as George obviously knows what is going on between her and Nick but does not seem to care. Martha sends Nick off to the kitchen and then follows him there. George flings his book away, hitting the door

chimes, the noise of which rouses Honey Honey's insistence that someone was ringing at the door gives George an idea— to pretend there had been someone there, with terrible news about the death of their son.

Act III: "The Exorcism"

Martha enters, alone, amusing herself with her own prattle but also frustrated at not being able to find the others. As Martha stands there, saying "clink[1]" to the jiggling ice in her glass, Nick enters, convinced everyone in the house has gone mad. Martha upbraids Nick for his poor sexual performance, calling him a "flop." She actually speaks fondly of George, although the extent to which her comments are genuine is difficult to gauge. As Martha continues to mock Nick, the doorbell rings, and Nick opens the door to admit George, who carries a large bouquet of snapdragons and calls out *"flores para los muertos."* Martha is gleefully amused at this performance, and although she and George continue to argue all the while, they appear to be in allegiance against Nick, who they have taken to calling their "houseboy." Nick observes with frustration, "Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what."

George summons Honey for "one more game, and then beddie-bye " He appears at his strongest in the course of the play, warning Martha "I'm going to knock you around, and I want you up for it." Nick returns with Honey, who has "decided I don't remember anything" about the evening. George builds up to his game slowly, prompting Martha to speak fondly about their son as she has throughout the evening. He then performs a ceremony of exorcism, first in Latin text as a counterpoint to Martha's speeches, then announcing at last, "our son is ... dead." Martha is hysterical at first, screaming at George "YOU CANNOT DO THAT!" and bursting into tears. Gradually, however, she grows more calm. Nick, finally understanding the reality of the situation—that the "son" is a fictional creation— is more baffled than ever about George and Martha's relationship. At last he and Honey make their exit. A tender moment follows, as dawn begins to break. George explains the necessity of putting their lie behind them, and Martha appears to understand.

For once she is comfortable enough to admit that she feels real human fear.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

George and Martha arrive home from a party thrown by Martha's father, the president of the university where George is a professor. It is the early hours of Sunday morning. Martha is drunk and loud; George is less drunk and quieter. As they come in Martha quotes a famous line from an old film, and asks George what the name of the film was. When he is unable to answer right away she calls him names, reminds him of details of the film and keeps asking him what it was called. She also asks him to make her a drink, telling him they've got guests coming over. George, in disbelief, asks who the guests are. Martha tells him they're new on staff and that the husband is in the math department, and that the husband is good looking. This makes George pay closer attention and ask why they're having them over. She tells him that her father told her she and George were to be nice to them. George complains that Martha is always springing things on him unexpectedly.

Martha asks mockingly whether he's sulking, and then quotes the punch-line of a joke that caused a lot of laughter at the party, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," shouted out in a sing-song kind of voice. George finds it mildly amusing but Martha says he laughed his head off at the party, and then tells George that he makes her sick. He says that's not a nice thing to say, and they play a verbal game of completing each other's sentences. As they laugh, Martha asks for a kiss. George says he doesn't want to kiss her, saying he might get excited and start having sex with her right there in the living room, which wouldn't look good to their guests. She calls him a pig and asks for another drink. He makes her one, she mocks him about how little personality he has, and he asks her to keep her clothes on.

The doorbell rings. As George answers it, he tells Martha to not start "the bit" about the kid. Martha tells him she'll talk about the kid if she wants to, but George advises against it. He comments on how nice it is that some people still have manners, ringing the doorbell before coming in even as they're hearing yelling going on inside. Just as Martha yells at him one more time, George opens the door and reveals their guests.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

The tension between George and Martha is apparent from the very first line of the play and builds throughout the section. They engage in arguments that they've argued before, play verbal games that they've played before, flirt the way they've always flirted, and drink the way they've been drinking for years. The fact that they're expecting guests is somewhat new, but George's reaction to Martha's description of the new member of the math faculty as "good looking" implies that they've had good looking guests before, and he knows what's going to happen. The comment foreshadows the relationship that develops between Martha and Nick later in the play, the way that several other parts of

this scene foreshadow later events and revelations. These include the comment that Martha is always "springing" things on George, which foreshadows things that both Martha and George spring on each other; the quotation of the joke about Virginia Woolf, which foreshadows the return of the quotation under very different circumstances at the end of the play; George's comment about sex in the living room, which is another foreshadowing of the relationship between Nick and Martha; and, most significantly, the reference to their son. Because it's referred to as "the bit," there is the implication that George and Martha have a routine, a particular way of referring to their son, that George doesn't want Martha to go into. Martha, being who she is and as drunk as she is, makes easy to see that she takes his warning as a dare.

The names George and Martha are an obvious reference to George and Martha Washington. It's an ironic reference because the Washington's represent something of an iconic, or ideal, marriage. Martha and George in the play, however, represent a marriage that's far from ideal. The second reference to a famous person is to Virginia Woolf, a well-known British writer, feminist, and diarist who lived and worked in the early 1900s. She is famous for experimenting with literary forms and imagery, and also for committing suicide by filling her pockets with rocks and drowning herself. One notable aspect of her work focused on the importance of day-to-day occurrences, observing them closely and understanding the full range of meaning they actually had in relation to the context of a whole, fully lived life. This was a form of intense and poetic ultra-realism, which means that the reference to her in this play is ironic. As the play eventually makes clear, many aspects of George and Martha's lives - their drinking, the games they play with their guests, the story of their son - are desperate means they take to avoid reality. This means that, although asked within the context of a joke, the question "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" has a very real answer. Again as the play makes clear that both George and Martha, Martha in particular, are both deeply afraid of "Virginia Woolf," meaning reality.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Martha shouts for their guests, Nick and Honey, to come in. They protest that because it's late they maybe shouldn't have come, but Martha insists it's all right. Honey comments on how nice the room is and Nick begins to comment about an abstract painting but George finishes his thought and explains that the painting represents the chaos of Martha's mind. As George makes drinks, Martha starts in with the "Virginia Woolf" refrain. Honey joins in and Nick smiles, but George says he doesn't want to go through that whole thing again. Nick and Honey comment on how nice the party was, and Honey tells how at their last posting they weren't made welcome at all and how she had to introduce herself all the time. Martha says that her father knows how to run things, which makes George comment that there are easier things than being married to the daughter of the president of the university. Tension quickly builds between George and Martha, and Honey asks where the washroom is. As Martha leaves to show her the way, George reminds her again to not start on "you know what." Martha says she'll talk about anything she wants and goes out.

George takes Nick his drink and asks whether he's in the Math Department and whether he likes the university. Nick asks whether George has been there a long time. George says yes, then makes a comment to himself about dashed hopes and insists that Nick respond to a play-on-words he makes. Nick becomes angry and says that when Honey comes back down the two of them will leave, saying that when they arrived it sounded like George and Martha were in the middle of an argument. He adds that he doesn't like getting involved in other people's affairs. George says that he and Martha were just exercising "what's left of their wits." He also says that Nick won't have much choice but to get involved with other people's affairs, since "musical beds is the faculty sport of choice."

Before Nick has a chance to respond George asks how old he is. Nick reveals he's twenty-eight, while George reveals he's only in his forties and admits that he looks a lot older. He asks again whether Nick is in the Math Department. Nick tells him he's in the Biology Department, and George finally recognizes him as the scientist who's investigating the possibilities for re-arranging the human chromosome. As Nick tries to explain his theories, George tells him that he's in the History Department and warns him that Martha will complain that he isn't running the history department. He wonders aloud why Martha and Honey are taking so long, and then asks whether Nick and Honey have children. Nick says no, and asks whether George and Martha have children. George says that's for him to know and Nick to find out. He then asks whether Nick thinks he'll be happy there, and goes on to talk about how Martha's father likes his faculty to stay a long time. He asks how many children Nick and Honey want, and Nick says he doesn't know.

George shouts upstairs for Martha, who shouts back. George comments on the loveliness of her voice as Honey returns. Honey announces that Martha's getting changed and surprises George with a mention of his and Martha's son. When George reacts with surprise she goes on to explain that Martha just told her that it's their son's twenty-first birthday the next day, and asks for another drink. As Nick pours her some more brandy, Honey says that they really should be going but George insists they stay - after all, Martha is getting changed and she hasn't changed for him in years.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

Nick and Honey represent George and Martha as they once were, young and idealistic and still in love even though a few tensions are already in the air. The return of the Virginia Woolf joke suggests that, also like George and Martha, Nick and Honey are afraid of reality. The reality that they're afraid of, however, is the reality of George and Martha's marriage. This is illustrated by Nick's sudden anger and Honey's quick eagerness to leave the room when face-to-face with George and Martha's bickering.

The conversation between George and Nick goes through a lot of twists and turns, and the impression is that George is playing games with Nick, getting a sense of who he is. It has already been foreshadowed that Martha has an ulterior motive in inviting Nick and Honey over, something that George knows perfectly well. In this scene he is feeling Nick out, testing him to see how will react when he is challenged. Within this context, George's statement that he and Martha are, in effect, playing with each other is one of the most honest statements in the play, spoken without any agenda. But whatever turn the conversation between Nick and George takes, they always come back to children, an important symbol of the state of both marriages.

George and Martha's son, as is revealed at the end of the play, does not actually exist. The reason that they invented him can be found in another honest statement in this section of the scene, George's comment about dashed hopes. His and Martha's hopes for each other and for their life together have been completely destroyed. The fact that they have to invent a child represents how completely empty their lives are. In other words, George and Martha's imaginary son is the embodiment of their lost hopes, the only thing they've got left, which means that when George "kills" him at the play's climax he's actually making both himself and Martha realize the true emptiness of their lives.

In the case of Nick and Honey, their current childlessness represents the possibility that their marriage will end up as barren as George and Martha's. Because there is still hope for a child for them, there is still hope for a decent marriage in spite of the indications that they are already starting to resent each other as much as George and Martha resent one another.

George's reactions to Honey's announcements that Martha is getting changed and that Martha told her about their son foreshadow the confrontations to come. Again, it has been hinted at that Martha has plans for how the evening will progress - Honey's announcements indicate that whatever Martha has planned is about to be revealed.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

Martha appears in an outfit that's both more comfortable and sexier. Nick is impressed, Honey is uncomfortable, and George is sarcastic, calling it her Sunday dress. Martha tells him to get her a drink, then reveals that Honey told her that Nick got his Masters when he was nineteen and played football. When Nick says that he was better at boxing, Martha asks him whether he's still kept his body. George protests quietly, but Nick says that he's kept in pretty good shape. Martha starts to tell a story of a boxing match she and George had, which makes George leave in disgust.

Martha continues, telling how her father put on a pair of boxing gloves and called George into the ring for a friendly little bout. George refused, and she put on a pair of gloves and called his name. When he turned, she hit him with what she thought was a playful punch, which in fact knocked him to the floor. As George returns, Martha says that the boxing match colored their whole life together. George pulls a rifle out from behind his back and aims it at Martha's head. As Honey screams, George pulls the trigger. A bundle of artificial flowers pops out. Nick, Martha and George laugh. Honey tries to calm herself down. Martha, still laughing, asks George to give her a kiss. At first he refuses, but she pulls him towards her, kisses him, and puts his hand on one of her breasts. George accuses her of wanting to put on a show for the guests, and as Martha becomes angry at that accusation, shows Nick how the flowers load into the gun, and pours everybody drinks.

The conversation turns to Nick's work with chromosomes. Martha insists that Nick works in the Math department, but is eventually convinced and says that Nick is right at the "meat" of things. George tells her that part of Nick's plan is to rearrange everybody's chromosomes so that everybody will look just like him. Martha looks at Nick and says that's not such a bad idea. George goes on to suggest that the sameness that will result from this re-shaping of the chromosomes will mean the elimination of history, which he opposes, and vows to fight Nick all the way. Martha sarcastically cheers him on.

Honey, now very drunk, asks when George and Martha's son is coming home. George asks Martha if she knows and Martha says she wishes she hadn't brought it up, but George insists. Martha says that George doesn't like talking about their son because deep down he's not convinced he's the father. George tells Nick and Honey that Martha's lying, that if there's one thing he knows for sure it's that he's the father of their son. He and Martha argue about the color of their son's eyes, ending with Martha saying he's got green eyes like her father. George says that Martha's father has beady red eyes and a shock of white hair just like a mouse, which leads Martha to say that George hates her father because he (George) feels inadequate. George goes out to get some more booze.

Martha starts to tell Nick and Honey the truth about why George hates her father. She tells how her mother died when she was little, how she got married to a gardener when she was fresh out of college, how her father had the marriage annulled and how she got the idea that she should marry someone on the faculty - marry into the college as it were. George returns with more alcohol, and as he continues to drink, Martha tells how she fell for him and how her father was looking for someone to take over after he passed on. George warns her not to keep going, but she talks about how her father tried to groom George to be head of the history department and eventually head of the school but realized George didn't have the right stuff. She calls George a flop, and George deliberately breaks a bottle on the bar.

Tearfully he asks her to stop, but Martha keeps on talking about how he's quiet, gutless and has no personality. George starts singing the Virginia Woolf refrain. Martha shouts for him to stop. Honey suddenly runs out, about to throw up. Nick follows her out. Martha looks with disgust at George then goes out as well. George is left alone.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

This part of the scene is focused almost exclusively on Martha's humiliations of George. She flirts with Nick, tells the boxing story, forces George to be sexual with her in front of Nick and Honey, says he's not the father of their son and finally tells the story of how she married him and what a flop he turned out to be. This is all an effort to see how far she can push him before he snaps, which he does, eventually. And this is only the first stage of the game playing spoken of earlier, the way George and Martha "exercise what's left of their wits." She humiliates him because she can, and because it's the only way they have left to get an emotional reaction out of each other. She humiliates him again in the second act, in much the same ways. These humiliations are a direct cause of George's actions at the end of the play when he turns the tables and destroys Martha by destroying their shared fantasy of their son. The humiliations Martha heaps upon him are so extreme as to send him over the edge. His firing of the fake shotgun in this scene foreshadows the suddenness of his final attack. Martha's reaction at the end of the play, however, is very different from her reaction here.

The fake shooting of Martha with the shotgun mirrors the story George tells in the second act about the boy who shot his mother. There are several references throughout the play to Martha being several years older than George, and these, combined with the story and this "shooting," suggest that in both their minds she is something of a mother figure to him. The shooting in this scene, then, represents the fact that, on some level, George would like to kill Martha in the same way as the boy in the story killed his mother. At the end of the play, in fact, George metaphorically "kills" Martha, destroying her illusion-filled life when he "kills" their son.

A question at this point might be why Nick and Honey stay in the face of all this nastiness. In Honey's case the explanation is relatively simple: the drunker she gets, the more fascinated she becomes with the ugliness she sees. In Nick's case, he is also fascinated by the ugliness that George and Martha put on display, but he is also

flattered by Martha's attention, especially since there are already tensions and frustrations in his marriage with Honey. The flirting between Nick and Martha foreshadows the sexuality that appears between them in the second act.

Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

A few moments later, Nick returns and tells George that Honey is still in the bathroom, and explains that she's sick quite frequently. He confesses to George that she was pregnant when they got married, lost the baby, and hasn't been pregnant since. George pours more drinks and asks Nick whether he's still drinking bourbon. Nick says yes. The mention of bourbon prompts George to tell the story of how he went out with some friends when he was a teenager, how one of the boys he was with had accidentally killed his mother with a shotgun some years before, and how that boy ordered "bergin" instead of bourbon. He tells how everybody in the bar eventually heard the story, how they all laughed and how they got their drinks for free. Finally, he tells how the boy was out driving with his father and got into an accident in which his father was killed, and how since that time thirty years before, the boy has not spoken one word.

He changes the subject, talking about how Martha doesn't get pregnant. Nick understands him to mean that Martha doesn't get pregnant any more, and George doesn't correct him. An argument begins over how George refers to his son. George accuses Nick of being testy, but then starts to explain what Martha said earlier. Before he can get the explanation out Martha comes in announcing that Honey is getting better and they'll be back soon. She and George call each other names in French, then Martha goes out.

When she's gone George comments that things must have been simpler for Nick, getting married because Honey was pregnant. Nick protests that there was more to it than that. George wonders if Honey has money. Nick reluctantly says yes, and George reveals that Martha has money as well. They each start talking about what brought them together with their wives, and then George stops and allows Nick to go first. Nick explains that he and Honey grew up with each other, and that there was always an understanding in their families that they would get married. He goes on to say that Honey's father was a Man of God who used a lot of money to build things like hospitals and churches, two of which burned down and left him even richer. George explains that Martha's money came from her father's second wife, who died shortly after getting married and left Martha some money in her will. When Nick says that Martha never mentioned a stepmother, George says that maybe the story wasn't true. He goes on to admit that the reason he's been asking for all this information is that he sees Nick as a threat, and wants to "get the goods" on him. Nick confidently says that he's not worried about anything George can do, he's quite confident in his own abilities to get ahead - his academic abilities, his charm, and his ability to "plow a few pertinent wives." He suggests that perhaps Martha, being the daughter of the president of the university is the most pertinent wife of all, and George tells him she probably is.

Nick suddenly becomes nervous, saying he thinks George is serious. George tells him that what's frightening him is that he (Nick) almost thinks he's serious, and tries to offer

Nick some advice. Nick laughs at him, but George persists, saying he's genuinely been trying to connect. Nick makes a very rude comment, "Up yours," and George becomes very quiet. He talks briefly about history, about how men strive to improve the world and connect with each other, but after all is said and done, all anybody can say is "Up yours." As Nick applauds, Martha and Honey return.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

The essential action of this scene is that both Nick and George, at different times, let their guard down. George does it deliberately, partly because he genuinely sees a kindred spirit in Nick and glimpses of his own long-ago idealism and vulnerability, but mostly because he has two things he wants to find out. He wants to learn if what he suspects about Nick's underlying ambitions is actually true, and to discover Nick's weak spots so he can be manipulated.

To do this George employs several tactics. He tells the story of the boy who shot his mother, which, as previously suggested, has echoes of George's relationship with Martha, and watches Nick's reaction carefully. He lets Nick go first in their conversation about their wives' money, he lets Nick make jokes about Martha's father, and above all he gets Nick even more drunk. He does all this to loosen Nick's inhibitions and get him to reveal more than Nick probably intended to.

These tactics work. Throughout the scene Nick reveals truths about his marriage, his feelings about Honey, and his ambitions. But this does not happen just because of George. The main reason Nick becomes so open is that he has total contempt for George and sees himself as being superior in every way: younger, smarter, sexier, and far more driven. The climax of their conversation is Nick's story of how he plans to "plow a few pertinent wives," the word "pertinent" meaning that the wives are connected to influential men and can help advance his career. This is the information George wanted and that the bragging Nick is all too glad to reveal. Over the course of the play so far, George has come to know Nick better than Nick is prepared to know himself, which is what makes Nick angry.

The irony is that Nick's outburst prompts another moment of honest vulnerability from George. His musings on history and the feelings of most people about history emerge in response to Nick's chromosome theories, and therefore are deeply personal and connected to his own fears of becoming irrelevant. This, in turn, is related to what he fears about his relationship with Martha, in which he feels he already is irrelevant. His feeling of irrelevance fuels his actions later in the play when tries to prove to Martha that he is not irrelevant.

Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

Honey apologizes, saying that she gets sick quite often. She says that before she got married she developed appendicitis, or what everybody thought was appendicitis but turned out to be a false alarm. Martha orders George to make her a drink and tells how their son was always sick because of anxiety at being around George. George counters by saying their son was always sick because Martha was always going after him with her kimono open, touching him and chasing him. Martha loudly denies it, George insists, and Honey asks for more brandy. Nick asks whether she should, Honey angrily insists, Nick angrily gives in; George says he used to drink brandy, and Martha says he used to drink "bergin" too. This reminds Nick of the story of the boy who shot his mother.

George tries to change the subject, but Martha asks whether George told Nick the whole sad story of his life. George says they "danced" around it, which makes Honey want to dance. George sees that Martha and Nick want to dance as well and puts on a classical record. As Martha shouts at George for not putting on some real dance music, Honey dances alone. Nick tries to get her to sit down but she angrily tells him to leave her alone. George lets Martha choose the music. She puts on some slow, jazzy music and starts dancing sexily with Nick. George and Honey watch.

As they dance, Martha tells Nick about George's book, a story that starts to sound like George's story about the boy who shot his mother. George tries to get her to shut up but she won't, saying that her father refused to let him publish it. George rips the record off the record player as Martha says that her father told George that if he published the book he'd be fired. George's protests get angrier and angrier as Martha, Nick and Honey all laugh at him. Martha finishes the story by saying that the book was all about a boy who killed his father and mother but tried to make it look like an accident. As Nick puts the pieces together and realizes that this is the story George told him earlier, George attacks Martha with his hands around her throat. Honey sits on the sofa and shouts "Violence! Violence!" Nick comes to Martha's aid and wrestles them apart.

They all sit separately, breathing hard, calming themselves. After a moment, George wonders aloud what game they'll play next. They've had "Humiliate the Host," and suggests that now they play "Hump the Hostess." Honey laughs, Nick shouts at her, and George, seeing how upset Honey is, suggests they play "Hump the Hostess" later and that now they play "Get the Guests." Martha tries to get him to stop but George goes on, telling them all about his second novel - the story of a young couple who knew each other when they were kids, got married, and when the girl's father died discovered that he left them lots of money. As he continues Martha tries to get him to stop, Honey begins to realize she's heard the story before, and Nick threatens George with violence if he doesn't stop. George orders Nick to beg, and tells how the story contains a flashback to how the girl got pregnant, the kids got married, and lost the baby. Honey realizes that Nick told them about their life, reacts with horror, and runs off to throw up.

Nick shouts at George, but Martha tells him to go look after his wife. Nick promises to get his revenge on George by becoming exactly what George thinks he is, and goes out.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

Emotional and physical violence peak in this scene as both Martha and George attack the people whom they think are the most vulnerable, with Martha going after George and George going after Honey. They both come across as merciless bullies, willing to do anything and say anything in order to get a rise out of the other, making the feelings of Nick and Honey little more than irrelevant.

When Martha and Nick dance, it is the first time that their mutual appetite for each other actually becomes physical. For both of them at this point it is not much more than a chance to get at George, although there is the sense that with Martha it is actually coming close to a serious attempt at seduction. For Nick it is still just flirting, and George does not take it very seriously either. He even makes a joke about it when he talks about playing "Hump the Hostess." The seduction of Martha becomes more serious when George goes after Honey. At that point Nick realizes that having sex with Martha is not just possible, it is also a way to get back at George. George, however, knows that Nick does not know what he is really getting into, and is less worried than he might otherwise be.

The truth behind George's story of the boy who killed his parents is revealed in this scene, to a point. There is the understanding that the events of the book did happen to George, but Martha's statement that "the boy" killed his parents deliberately mocks George's very real pain and sends him over the edge. This, combined with his earlier humiliation at Martha's hands, propels George into the anger which fuels the playing of "Get the Guests" and his later attacks on Martha.

Act 2, Part 3

Act 2, Part 3 Summary

Martha congratulates George, saying that that was the most energy he's shown in a long time but what he did makes her sick. He comments that she can go ahead and say whatever he wants and it's fine, but as soon as he attacks in the same way she can't allow it. He goes on to say he's had enough, but she shouts that her abuse is what he married her for and he can take it. He calls her sick and she completely loses her temper, tells him that she's finally "snapped" and tells him that she's had enough of the whole arrangement, their marriage, the games they've been playing, everything. She says that there was maybe one moment in their past when she thought she could make the marriage work, but that she's ready to call it all quits. George says he'll fight her, she says he hasn't got the guts, he asks for total war, and she agrees.

Nick returns, saying Honey is curled up on the floor in the bathroom and that she likes it there because it's cool. He asks if there's any ice, presumably to put some on Honey's head. Martha tells George to go get some so she and Nick can be alone. George, saying he's not surprised at that, picks up the ice bucket and goes out.

One he's gone Martha starts actively seducing Nick, getting him to kiss her and caressing his leg. Nick hesitates, but Martha winds him into her with both words and her arms. As they twine around each other George comes back, watches, smiles, and goes back out. Nick puts his hand inside Martha's dress, and that's when she tells him to stop. He doesn't, but offstage George starts singing the Virginia Woolf song and Nick pulls away.

George comes back in with ice and puts it on the bar, acting as though he didn't see what he just saw. He says that he saw Honey in the bathroom, and that she looks peaceful. He refreshes Nick's and Martha's drinks, then announces he's going to sit and read. Martha can't believe what she's seeing and says they've got company. George doesn't seem bothered and sits down with his book. Nick puts his arm around Martha and Martha gets an idea. She embraces Nick and picks up where they left off, all the while telling George what she's doing. George doesn't react, which makes Martha get angrier. She kisses Nick, and when George doesn't even respond to that she starts to go to him, staggering and bumping into the wind chimes by the door. George continues to read his book. Nick can't believe that George isn't reacting and calls him disgusting, but George just laughs, saying that Nick is about to have sex with Martha and he (George) is disgusting? Martha tells Nick to go wait in the kitchen. When he's gone Martha warns George that unless he pays attention to her and what she's doing she'll go out into the kitchen and have sex with Nick. George says "So what?" Martha goes out shouting that she's going to make him sorry he ever married her. George is alone for a long, quiet moment.

Honey staggers in, only half awake and saying she's been hearing bells. George tells her to leave him alone but she continues, saying that the bells sounded in a frightening dream. As George mutters to himself about getting even with Martha, Honey remembers her dream; that someone came to her when she was cold and alone. She starts shouting that she doesn't want to have children, that she doesn't want to be hurt. She starts crying for Nick and asking for a drink. As George tells her to crawl over to the bar and make one, sounds of dishes breaking and Martha's laughter come from the kitchen. George asks Honey whether she knows what's going on in there, Honey says she doesn't want to know and hysterically starts asking who was ringing. George asks what she means and she insists she heard someone ringing at the front door. George suddenly has an idea, and as Honey collapses, realizes he's discovered the perfect way to get back at Martha. He tells Honey that somebody was at the door, somebody with the message that his and Martha's son is dead. As Honey starts to cry George orders her to not tell Martha. Martha laughs again, and George quietly rehearses to himself how he's going to tell her.

Act 2, Part 3 Analysis

Martha's repeated use of the word "snap" in this scene is effective for several reasons. It works as a description of what happened to her at her father's party. It also works as an evocation of the way all the characters, especially George and Martha, talk to each other, and it works as foreshadowing of the later scene in which George throws snap-dragons as a symbol of how he's fed up with her and her games.

The beginnings of intimacy between Martha and Nick follow through on the several elements of foreshadowing that have gone before - Martha's references to Nick's looks, Martha getting changed, Nick's references to plowing pertinent wives, and Nick's vow to get even with George. This vow is also the main reason why he continues to seduce her once George has come back with his book.

At the same time the Virginia Woolf song, which as already indicated suggests the difficulty that George and Martha have with looking closely at reality, returns. The fact that George sings it at the moment when Martha's resisting Nick's advances suggests that she's not very comfortable with the reality of actually being intimate with him, and that she's fine as long as seduction is a game but as soon as it becomes real, like anything else in her life, she can't handle it. George's smile when he comes back, sees them and leaves again suggests that he realizes this about her, and that he knows she's not actually going to follow through. It also suggests that he knows that Martha thinks sleeping with Nick will make a difference to him but in fact it doesn't.

Martha's fear of reality comes into play once again when she realizes that George is not going to react to her being intimate with Nick. George calls her bluff, and Martha realizes that she has no choice but to follow through with her threat. Her fear of actually facing something real fuels her anger, which in turn makes her vow to make him sorry.

The action through this act has built to the point at which George and Martha both indicate that they have had enough; Martha in the "snap" sequence and George in the sequence where he snarls "so what" at her. In Martha's mind, her having sex with Nick is going to be the breaking point, but she does not seem to realize that George has already accepted that it will happen. This makes her actions ironic, and almost pathetic. Meanwhile, George's idea of "killing" their son, triggered by Honey's dazed ramblings, convinces him that he has found Martha's breaking point. George knows that "killing" the son will destroy the most important of all the games they play in their marriage, and because there is nothing left of the marriage except those games, the marriage - and therefore Martha - will be destroyed as well.

Act 3, Part 1

Act 3, Part 1 Summary

The room is empty as Martha comes back in. She imagines herself ordering George to make her another drink, and then as she pours her own she imagines herself talking to her father. She talks about him having red eyes because he cries all the time, and confesses that she and George both cry all the time, only on the inside where nobody can see. She imagines that they freeze their tears in ice cube trays and later put them in their drinks. She clinks the ice in her glass and laughs.

As she's clinking and laughing Nick returns, saying that everybody's gone nuts. He tells how George has disappeared, how Honey is upstairs in the bathroom peeling the label off the brandy bottle, and Martha's just sitting alone clinking. Martha tells him to calm down and tells him he's just as much a flop, in some areas, as anybody else. When he protests, she goes into a long speech about how all the young men she's had affairs with have ultimately been flops, and how there's only one man who's satisfied her and loved her even in the face of all her problems. Nick finds this idea completely ridiculous but she goes on talking about how wonderful George has been to her and admits that she knows she'll go too far some time and she'll either break his spirit completely or send him away for good. Nick comments that from what he's seen, George's back is already broken. Martha laughingly tells him he doesn't know what he's talking about. The doorbell rings and Martha tells Nick to answer it. He protests, but she says he has to start learning to do as he's told if he's actually going to pursue the kind of career advancement techniques he's already started to practice on Martha. Nick says he can't believe Martha's cruelty, and she cheerfully tells him to get used to it.

Nick opens the door and comes in with a huge bunch of snapdragons. He makes the comment "*Flores para los muertos*," which translates as flowers for the dead. He then pretends that Nick is their son, come home for his birthday. Martha laughs as Nick backs off, and tells George he's their houseboy. George and Martha mock Nick, he makes as if to go, but Martha tells him to get George a drink and George tells him to put the snapdragons in some gin. Nick drops the flowers to the floor. George tells him it was a terrible thing to do to flowers he picked especially by moonlight. Martha tells him there is no moon, they argue over whether there is a moon and whether it can come back up after it's gone down, and then George tells a story of how he saw the moon set and then rise again on a trip he took with his parents. When Nick asks whether it was before or after he killed them George and Martha are both suddenly quiet, and Nick says he can't tell anymore whether or when they're lying.

George picks up the flowers and starts talking about how nobody knows the difference between truth and illusion, and asks Martha who's telling the truth about whether he and Martha slept together. Nick begs Martha to tell George he's not a houseboy, and Martha does. As Nick thanks her, George comments that finally it's a moment of truth and starts flinging the flowers at Martha, saying snap with every flower. Martha tries to get him to

stop but he throws more and more flowers. Martha gets angrier and angrier, Nick tries to intervene, and George starts flinging flowers at him as well. As Nick tries to leave, George announces there's one more game to play, called "Bringing Up Baby," and insists that Nick bring Honey down so she can play, too. Nick protests, but when George starts shouting for Honey to come down, he goes out and gets her.

Martha tells George that she doesn't want to play, that she's frightened and tired. He doesn't seem to be listening. She tries to caress him but he shoves her away and slaps her lightly across the face, saying he wants her up and angry for this game. She gets angry very quickly, and when George says they'll play this game to the death she says the death will be his. He says she'll be surprised.

Act 3, Part 1 Analysis

The image of frozen tears in the ice cube trays represents the idea that Martha and George are recycling old pain. As the tear ice cubes melt in their drinks, they drink their pain in again and let it all out in their attacks on each other and on their guests. It also suggests that Nick and Honey are being infected, as it were, by George and Martha's pain. This fits with what has been seen of how Nick and Honey have started to treat each other.

Martha's speech about George is another one of the few honest moments in the play, and is the first time that Martha is at least a little bit aware, and somewhat remorseful, about who she is and what she has done to her husband. Coming at this point in the play, however, this remorse is deeply ironic because the point has already been made that George is preparing to "destroy" her.

The Spanish reference to flowers for the dead foreshadows what George is about to do to Martha. It is the first step in a steadily building momentum towards his final revelation that their "son" is dead. The second step is his forcing her to be up and ready for the next game he is about to play. The third step is when George sends Nick to get Honey, and George literally slaps Martha back into life. By the end of the scene the stage is set, emotionally and dramatically, for the final confrontation, the final battle.

The flowers and George's repeated use of the word "snap" echo what Martha said to him earlier about snapping. His flinging the flowers at her indicates that he has snapped as well, that he is ready to give as good as he has gotten for his entire married life, and that the last big game is on.

The discussion about truth versus illusion is the first time the play's theme is actually put into words. Ultimately, this play is about the emptiness of living a life based on illusions, false ideals, or fantasies. The action of the play demonstrates that while coming face to face with the truth is painful, ultimately, there is hope and the possibility for renewal once the illusions are stripped away. This possibility is clearer in George and Martha than in Nick and Honey, but the possibility of a new and better life together is nevertheless present for them as well.

Act 3, Part 2

Act 3, Part 2 Summary

Honey and Nick come into the room. They joke about her name, rhyming it with "bunny" and "funny." Honey announces that she doesn't remember a thing about what's happened that night, and hints to Nick that he shouldn't either. George sits everybody down and talks about how they've played a lot of games that night including "Snap the Dragon." Honey comments that she's played "Peel the Label," and George talks about how they've all been peeling the labels. He tells them they're going to play the last game of the night called "Bringing Up Baby," and asks Martha whether she'd like to start. She says that she's tired. George starts talking about how their son resented and feared Martha which gets her angry and makes her start a long story about how wonderful and beautiful he was, how peaceful and loving his childhood was, and how much she loved him. As Martha loses herself in happy memories, George makes sarcastic comments and later starts speaking Latin, which after a while starts to sound like prayers at a funeral.

The beauty of Martha's memories makes Honey start to cry, and she starts talking about how she wants a child. Martha starts talking about how the boy started to resent George, but when George asks her to explain why she changes the subject and says their son is now happy, away at school. George takes over and starts talking about how their son resented and feared Martha, which makes Martha jump back in with stories about how he resented and feared George. Soon they're speaking together: Martha saying how hard she tried to be a good mother and protect their son from George, George praying in Latin.

Honey, almost in tears, shouts for them to stop. In spite of her protests, George gently tells Martha that earlier in the evening there was a telegram about their son. Martha starts to understand that something awful is about to happen and pleads with George to stop. As he continues, Nick, Honey and Martha all plead with him to be quiet but he refuses, and finally tells Martha that the telegram was to inform them that their son had been killed. Martha completely loses control, and shouts repeatedly that he can't do that. He shouts back that he has every right because she brought their son up in the first place. She starts to cry, explaining that sometimes her loneliness is so great that she forgets their rules and comforts himself with the idea that she is loved, for example, by her son. Nick realizes the truth of what's been going on, but at this point he's all but forgotten as Martha's bravado is disintegrating and George is so wrapped up in watching. George says one final phrase in Latin, which translates into rest eternally in God, and Honey chimes in with a Latin phrase that translates into rest in peace.

Act 3, Part 2 Analysis

The reference to peeling labels is another reference to the play's theme of truth versus illusion. In this image, illusion is represented by the labels that have been peeled from all the characters to reveal their respective truths: Honey's fear of childbirth, Nick's ambition, Martha's need for George, and George's resentment of Martha. The last and biggest label/illusion, the illusion of the true nature of George and Martha's son, is about to be peeled back. This means that the image of labels is also a foreshadowing of the truth that is about to be revealed.

Martha's long story about her son is written in language rich in evocative imagery, and is easily the most poetic writing in the play. This shows how much of her deepest self, of her hopes and her capacity for love that she has put into this fantasy. It also shows how much she needs the fantasy to sustain her. It is all so beautiful that Honey drunkenly starts wanting a child of her own, something that is not necessarily true because it is clear she is caught up in Martha's moment. As the intensity of the debate between Martha and George builds, however, George's comments suggest that he is deeply resentful of the fact that Martha has not put these good parts of herself into their own relationship, which is another reason why he has decided to do what he is about to do. The tension builds intensely through their confrontation to a point that becomes unbearable for Honey, and in all likelihood just about as unbearable for an audience.

George's story of the death of his and Martha's son is the climax of the play, and lives up to the foreshadowing. Martha falls apart completely, and what is revealed is the loneliness and vulnerability that has led her to the construction of all her illusions: the same loneliness and vulnerability glimpsed earlier in this act when she confessed to how much she needed George. Her illusions about her son, her vicious attacks and her attempts at seduction have all been masks she has constructed to defend and protect her. Initially, one may share in the astonishment, disgust and anger that Nick feels; there is no doubt that what George and Martha have done is extreme. Nevertheless, there is one more surprise to come, albeit a very quiet one.

Act 3, Part 3

Act 3, Part 3 Summary

George says quietly that the party's over. Nick asks whether they couldn't have children, and George and Martha agree, they couldn't. George says it's time for Nick and Honey to go home, and when Nick starts to say something else he firmly ushers them out.

Martha sits quietly as George tidies up. They talk about it being time to go to bed, and then Martha asks whether George had to do what he did. Very gently he says it was time, and then suggests that maybe things will be better. Martha is very doubtful, and George comforts her. After a long silence, George sings the Virginia Woolf refrain one last time. "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Martha says she is. George nods. The play ends.

Act 3, Part 3 Analysis

In these very quiet final few moments it becomes possible to see that George did what he did because on some level he knows that Martha's illusions have become too real for her, and he has to destroy them for her own good. It then becomes clear how pathetic and vulnerable Martha truly is; and, in spite of everything that has been seen of her behavior before, the beginnings of pity for her are possible. It also becomes apparent that George has much more strength and courage than anybody has given him credit for.

In the end, it is evident that after the painful peeling away of all Martha's "labels," her illusions and masks, there is the possibility of hope and renewal. This is the play's thematic statement, reinforced by an image referred to by Martha at the beginning of George's story about the telegram. She says it is almost dawn, which symbolizes the idea that after years of darkness and illusion, the light of truth and vulnerability is about appear. There is hope of a new day.

Characters

George

George is Martha's husband. He is forty-six-years-old and a professor of history who has amassed a record of academic mediocrity. He married Martha, daughter of the college presidenf, early in his career but has failed to live up to the overwhelming expectations of his wife and her father, who hoped George would succeed him. George, as Martha is fond of saying, is a bog in the history department; after many years he is not yet even the departmental chair.

As a result of his professional frustralion. George feels threatened by up-and-coming young faculty members like Nick and tries to compensate through showy displays of intellectual superiority. George appears to have been responsible for the deaths of both of his parents, in two separate accidents which Martha claims were intentional. He is clearly traumatized by this fact, and tells Nick the story as if it had happened to someone else. While George's "killing" of the invented son is planned as an act of revenge for Martha's having humiliated him, it comes off more as a mercy gesture, a necessary step to free both him and Martha from destructive illusion.

Honey

A twenty-six-year-old blond girl, "rather plain." Like her husband, Nick, Honey is from the Midwest, striving with her husband to make their way in new surroundings. Honey is not depicted as particularly bright, but she is capable of exerting her will. She is afraid of bearing a child, and as George suspects, she has avoided pregnancy without Nick's knowledge. The circumstance of her marriage to Nick, a false pregnancy, is a source of discomfort to both of them (Honey apparently either genuinely believed herself to be—or pretended to be—pregnant). She changes her mind later in the play, announcing abruptly, "I want a child." While the conversion seems scarcely credible it does appear sustained through the play's conclusion.

Martha

"A large, boisterous woman, 52, looking somewhat younger. Ample, but not fleshy." A traditional view of gender roles would depict Martha as "manlike," for her loud, coarse ways, and domineering treatment of George, against whom she has waged for years a war of attrition. Martha had dreams of power which she feels were defeated by George's lack of ambition As susceptible as George is to Martha's relentless ridicule over his professional failure, Martha is very sensitive to George's criticisms—of her heavy drinking, her sometimes lascivious behavior, and her "braying" laugh. George also attempts to pass himself off as her intellectual superior.

Martha is also very well educated, however, if not graduate degreed, and much of the struggle between the couple takes place on intellectual terms (even if it occasionally degenerates to a string of insults in French). During the course of the play, Martha violates the most important rule of the game-playing province she inhabits with George: that then- invented son never be mentioned to anyone. George's act of revenge is to "kill" the son, which has a profound effect on Martha, breaking through her obstinate strength. The play's closing moment is perhaps the most tender in the entire play, as Martha is able to let her guard down enough around George to admit, for once, being subject to real human fear.

Nick

Nick is described as blond and good-looking, around thirty-years-old. He is a young biology professor who represents a threat to George on a number of different fronts, with his youth, his good looks and sexual energy, and his ambition and willingness to prostitute himself for professional advancement. In short, he seems capable of achieving the promise to which George never lived up. (Although, significantly, the result of his encounter with Martha is impotency, and sexual and professional success are closely linked in the play.) Nick is emotionally empty, a state of being Albee associates (as he does in other plays) with a Midwestern upbringing. As a scientist, Nick's duty is to avoid surprise and establish predictable order. George, meanwhile, is fascinated by the unpredictability of history and seizes on this essential difference m their intellectual pursuits. Further distancing himself from Nick, George essentially accuses the biomedical profession of plotting to turn humankind into a genetically engineered, homogenous species Critics have suggested that Nick represents to George the threat of voracious totalitarianism, insinuated by the similarity between his name and that of the Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev (This is not so much a direct allegory as just one aspect to the depth of characterization in the play.)

Themes

Absurdity

Literally meaning "out of harmony," absurd was the existentialist Albert Camus's designation for the situation of modern men and women whose lives lack meaning as they drift in an inhuman universe. *Virginia Woolf* probes the question of what happens to human beings when they no longer have recourse to the illusions which had previously given their lives meaning. The theme of absurdity is a prevalent one in Albee's plays, as is suggested by the frequent references to the theatre of the absurd in analyzing his writing. Albee describes the philosophical notion of absurdity as "having to do with man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense ... because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed." Perhaps the most articulate and sustained expression of the absurdity of existence is found in George's speech near the beginning of the second act, in which he concludes that despite all "the trouble to construct a civilization," when the last trumpet sounds, "through all the sensible sound of men building," the message to humanity will be, simply: "Up yours."

American Dream

Albee's early plays all express discontent with the optimism and conformity of the 1950s with the materialist ideals that prospered in America during the economic boom following World War n. Albee's early play *The American Dream,* as one would suspect from the title, is a much more explicit treatment of the theme, but in *Virginia Woolf,* Albee also parodies the ideals which in western civilization are supposed to give life meaning. The historical resonance with the Washingtons (George and Martha) is not meant to go unnoticed, as the play attacks the edifice of dreams and self-deceptions that constitute American mythology as Albee sees it The decline of the American Dream (and of the country in general) resonates throughout *Virginia Woolf.* George observes, for example: "We drink a great deal in this country, and I suspect we'll be drinking a great deal more, too ... if we survive."

Fear

As suggested by the title, the emotion of fear is a central thematic component of the play. To be afraid of "Virginia Woolf," as Martha says she is at the play's conclusion, is to admit a very human fear about the lack of inherent meaning in one's existence. In order to feel fear, one has to have shed all of the illusions which had previously seemed to give life meaning. Thus, the play presents Martha's fear (and George's, which he acknowledges by nodding silently in response to her) as a life-affirming phenomenon. Better to acknowledge the fear and work through it, the play suggests, than to continue living a lie

Revenge

The will for revenge appears to be a major force in George and Martha's life. Each seems eternally to be seeking retribution for some past slight or insult. George's "killing" of the invented son is planned as the ultimate act of revenge, for a series of humiliations public and private, and especially for Martha's having broken a fundamental rule of their relationship, by mentioning the son to Honey. In the end, however, killing the son comes off more as a gesture of mercy, a necessary step to free both him and Martha from a destructive illusion.

Science and Technology

The play hints strongly at a mass progress towards impotence and depersonalization by the declining western world, which George at least, as a historian and a humanist, blames on scientific advancement. He concocts a doomsday scenario upon which many of his attacks against Nick, the biologist, are based: through genetic technology, "All imbalances will be corrected, sifted out.... We will have a race of men... test-tube bred... incubator-born ... superb and sublime.... *But!* Everyone will tend to be rather the same.... Alike." One could argue whether or not George's perspective is reflected in the play as a whole, but as American culture at the time was growing more culturally homogenous through technological inventions like television (which portrayed ideals for how people should look and behave), Albee's resistance to such a process shows through in his play.

forcing the characters to confront the consequences. The primary "exorcism" in the play is the killing of Martha and George's imaginary son, but other explosive confrontations with realities past and present abound in the play, for example: Nick's confession of his material motives for marrying Honey, Honey's revelation of her fear of bearing a child, and George's trauma at having caused (if even accidentally) the deaths of his parents. At one point, George observes about his relationship with Martha: "accommodation, malleability, adjustment... those do seem to be in the order of things, don't they?" Throughout the play, characters go through the more difficult process of peeling off layer after layer of pretense and artificiality. The play seems to suggest that even at the naked core of an individual there are destructive illusions, and the pain of losing them is staggering.

Truth and Falsehood

Martha comments to George "Truth and illusion ... you don't know the difference," and his reply is, "No; but we must carry on as though we did." The growth of these characters through the course of the play rests in the attempt to cease "carrying on," and to attack falsehood on a number of levels, in the hopes of finding something true. Many deep secrets are revealed in the process,

Style

A good part of the reason *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* appeared so vibrantly new, so challenging, to theatergoers in 1962 is the novel and often surprising manner in which its author combined different theatrical styles and techniques. In particular, Albee straddled a divide between a predominantly naturalistic American playwriting tradition of social criticism, and what was beginning to be called the "Theater of the Absurd" (Martin Esslin published a landmark study with that same title in 1961). Philosophically almost all of Albee's dramatic writing is aligned with the absurdist idea that human existence is essentially pointless. In describing Albee's mature work, traditional terms such as realism, surrealism, expressionism, absurdism, and naturalism have limited value (especially given that terms like absurdism and expressionism have often been removed from their historically specific context and expanded to mean essentially any form of modern theatre that does not appear realistic).

The divergent aspects of Albee's style are highlighted by the wide-ranging list of dramatic influences usually ascribed to him: Eugene O'Neill *(Long Day's Journey into Night),* most predominantly, accompanied both by American realists Arthur Miller *(The Crucible)* and Tennessee Williams *(Cat on a Hot Tin Roof)* and absurdists like Eugene Ionesco *(The BaldPrima Donna)* and Samuel Beckett *(Waiting for Godot)*—indeed, for the American premiere of *The Zoo Story* Albee's play was paired on the bill with Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape.*

Albee does not usually take issue with the conjectures of critics regarding his influences but at the same time dismisses the singular importance of any one name."I've been influenced by everybody, for God's sake," he stated *m Newsweek.* "Everything I've seen, either accepting it or rejecting it. I'm aware when I write a line like Williams. I'm aware when I use silence like Beckett." Trying, with other playwrights of the early 1960s, to prevent theatre in the United States from retreating into lethargy, Albee turned toward Europe for new forms with which to experiment, as O'Neill had done in an earlier generation. The nature of human experience to Albee could not be represented either by a straightforward realism or a casual departure from it.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is realistic in form and structure: it is located in a recognizable setting, the plot unfolds in linear progression, and the characters are fully-realized individuals. Albee, however, does not write in a strictly realist vein; Cohn commented in *Edward Albee* that "the play has been viewed as realistic psychology But credible motivation drives psychological drama, and Albee's motivation is designedly flimsy." Albee challenges audience expectations about genre with elements out of place in a strictly realistic environment, such as the play's almost unbelievably merciless sense of humor.

Played at such an intense psychological level, *Virginia Woolf* almost resembles expressionist drama (meaning that there is a more pronounced expression of the unconscious, rather than character only being revealed through outward action). The *Nation's* Harold Clurman, for instance, observed that the play "verges on a certain

expressionism." The interior, psychological element of the play is a heavy presence, for even while the plot moves forward in real time, it also digs deeply into the past and into the psyche of each of its characters. (Perhaps the strongest example of this tendency is the central importance of the invented—and constantly shifting—history of Martha and George's son.)

While the play is "a volcanic eruption," wrote Howard Taubman in the *New York Times,* one might as well call it "an irruption, for the explosion is inward as well as outward." Realistic drama usually unfolds by presenting a conflict, then resolving it with each event in the plot connecting to the others in a cause-and-effect manner, but in *Virginia Woolf,* the most dramatic conflicts and their potential resolutions seem to he deep within the minds of the characters.

Theatrical elements of the absurd are much more pronounced in Albee's experimental one-acts like *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream.* Nevertheless, Albee's writing, *Virginia Woolf* included, shares with the absurdists certain philosophical concepts "having to do," in Albee's words, "with man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense ... because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion* himself have collapsed." In illustrating the collapse of such meaning-endowing structures, Albee also to some extent affirms as a spiritual necessity the need to search for transcendent meaning. Therefore, his work differentiates itself from the utterly nihilistic vision found in much absurdist theatre (nihilism refers to a philosophical doctrine that all values are baseless and nothing is truly knowable or can be communicated). Albee has never liked the phrase Theatre of the Absurd applied to describe his plays, finding negative connotations in the term. To Albee (as he expressed in a 1962 article in the *New York Times Magazine),* the "absurd" theatre is the Broadway, commercial one, in which aplay's merits are judged solely by its economic performance.

Just as the challenge of Albee's stems from the fact that it closely resembles realism in form and structure while departing from it in important ways, so the language of the play reflects this same dichotomy. Albee's characters talk not in fully "realistic" dialogue, "but a highly literate and full-bodied distillation of common American speech," as Clurman described it. The speech manages to sound real within its context but the language is also heightened, and one almost cannot believe what one is hearing Albee himself observed in *Newsweek,* "It's not the purpose of any art form to be just like life.... Reality on stage is highly selective reality, chosen to give form. Real dialogue on stage is impossible."

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? has been described as a blood sport whose "weapons are words—vicious, cruel, unspeakably humiliating, unpredictably hilarious—the language of personal annihilation" *{Time).* Albee's ability to use the incongruity of little-child talk for dramatic effect has also been widely noted as a strength of his theatrical language. First appearing in *The Zoo Story,* the technique became even more of a satiric weapon in his subsequent plays, especially *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* his first full-length work.

Historical Context

In 1962, the year *Who's Afraid ofVirgina Woolf?* premiered on Broadway, the major shakeup of Amencan society in the late 1960s was still several years away. But already civil rights protests and riots over desegregation at such educational institutes as the University of Mississippi were showing Americans that the unprecedented optimism and economic growth following the second World War was far from a reality for many. Meanwhile, certain artists and other individuals began expressing a dissatisfaction with the social conformity of the 1950s. For the most part, however, American society continued to revel in a complacent idealism, and would do so until President John F. Kennedy's assassination in November, 1963.

Economically and socially, America was being homogenized through planned suburbs, fast food, and shopping centers; a conformity of thought was strongly encouraged by the social politics of the Cold War. Dissenting voices like Albee's registered discontent with what they saw as the corrupt and/or empty values of American society; to such a perspective, past notions of objective reality were no longer reliable guidelines.

Free expression (particularly in the area of political thought) in American society was not as sharply curtailed as it had been during the era of the McCarthy hearings on "un-American activities" (the McCarthy proceedings sought to "root out" communist elements in American society), but several circumstances contributed to a consolidation of political opinion around an aggressive national stance toward the communist Soviet Union. The first had been the launch of the satellite *Sputnik* on October 4, 1957, which suddenly undermined, technologically and psychologically, America's unquestioned position as the world's superpower.

The Soviet conquest of space castrated the American psyche, and the perceived threat presented by *Sputnik* and the Soviet's subsequent success in launching a human being into space cannot be underestimated. In 1962 an upswing in Amencan self-image followed the success of astronaut John Glenn in completing the first U.S. Earth orbits on February 7. (The successful launching of the American satellite *Telstar I* followed on July 12.) Still, political anxiety over the spread of communism throughout the world did not abate, and in the brewing civil conflict in South Vietnam it prompted increased Amencan support toward the elimination of communist Vietcong guerrillas, in the form of money, arms, and field observers (Amenca's support of democratic forces in Vietnam would soon escalate to full military involvement). Meanwhile, with the Cold War seemingly dividing global politics into only two massive spheres, American (democracy) and Soviet (communist), 1962 also saw the establishment of an independent organization of African states and national independence for Jamaica, Algeria, Tnmdad and Tobago, Western Somoa, Uganda, and Tanganyika.

The Cold War also focused attention on the island nation of Cuba in 1962. President Kennedy on February 3, ceased all U.S. trade with Cuba as punishment towards the communist government established there by dictator Fidel Castro's coup in 1959. U.S. surveillance photographs revealed the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, prompting

Kennedy to order an air and sea "quarantine" of Cuba to prevent any further shipments of arms to Castro. Soviet Premiere Nikita Khrushchev offered to remove the missiles if the U.S. would withdraw its own missiles from Turkey. President Kennedy rejected the offer, and for several days, during what became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the threat of nuclear confrontation loomed large. The situation was quietly diffused and both the Soviet missiles in Cuba and the U.S. missiles in Turkey were removed. Yet the standoff left a permanent scar on the American psyche; the plausibility of nuclear weapons would subsequently be viewed with greater fear and skepticism in the coming decades.

Culturally, the American theatre in 1962 continued a downward trend in creative energy. Some large musical productions did well during the year, but Broadway continued its protracted decline— both economically and especially in artistic terms. While theaters across Europe were typically staging challenging plays of ethical significance (in 1962, for example, Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Physicist,* and Eugene Ionesco's *Exit the King),* American theatre was becoming progressively safer. Producers were increasingly unwilling to take a chance on any new work which might not succeed commercially. In terms of new Broadway productions, the fifty-four plays in the 1962 season were only six more than the all-time low up to that point. By bridging the gap from the experimental off-Broadway (where Arthur Kopit's *Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and We 're Feeling So Sad* was another success of the year) to Broadway, Albee breathed new life into the mainstream of American theatre.

Critical Overview

Upon the premiere of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* some critics praised virtually every aspect of the play, while others faulted it as too long, too vulgar, or too pessimistic; almost everyone, however, saw in the play the potential to breathe new life into a Broadway theatre that was no longer the creative force it had been. "An exciting play," after all, "is good antidote for what ails Broadway theater," Taubman noted in the *New York Times.* Whether they admire or detest the play, Taubman observed, "theatergoers cannot see it and shrug it off. They burn with an urge to approve or differ."

A reviewer for *Time* claimed that Albee's play "has jolted the Broadway season to life." Similarly, a reviewer for *Newsweek* called the play a "brilliantly original work of art—an excoriating theatrical experience, surging with shocks of recognition and dramatic fire. It will be igniting Broadway for some time to come." Although he found *Virginia Woolf* important in the context of the Broadway season, Harold Clurman of the *Nation* called the play" a minor work within the prospect of Albee's further development." (In this his opinion differs greatly from the popular notion that *Virginia Woolf* was the high point of Albee's creative career.)

Critics praised the density of Albee's writing, the challenge presented by his complex merging of multiple theatrical elements. Henry Hewes in the *Saturday Review* observed that *Virginia Woolf* contained some of the same complex Freudian psychology of Albee's earlier plays but that the new work "is more recognizably real and self-generating than were its predecessors." While the play also has a "sense of the ridiculous ... things are hardly exaggerated enough to be called 'Theatre of the Absurd,' either." John Gassner commented in *Dramatic Soundings: Evaluations and Retractions Culled from Thirty Years of Drama Criticism* that "Mr. Albee has written a terrifying thing —perhaps *the* negative play to end all negative plays, yet also a curiously compassionate play " The powerful sense of recognition inspired in audiences by the play rested, most critics observed, in the speech of Albee's characters, what Cohn called "the most adroit dialogue ever heard on the American stage." Clurman wrote that the dialogue "is superbly virile and pliant; it also *sounds."*

Reviewers who were generally positive about the quality and importance of *Virginia Woolf,* however, criticized certain aspects of Albee's technique. Taubman in the *New York Times* expressed mild reservations about a key plot device and whether Martha and George are "believable all the way." The *Time* reviewer, meanwhile, found the plot resolution "woefully inadequate and incongruous, rather like tracing the source of the Niagara to a water pistol." The review also found the play "needlessly long ... repetitious, slavishly, sometimes superficially Freudian, and given to trite thoughts about scientific doom."

And, as with any work of art, there were those who, despite overwhelmingly positive reception, found little to praise in *Virginia Woolf.* The *New Yorker* review thought Albee imitative of O'Neill "without having much to talk about," and though granting him "a certain dramatic flair," found it "ill-directed .. in the present enterprise."

In the nearly four decades since the premiere of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* not only has the play remained luminous in the minds of critics and other theatergoers (as well as generations of readers), but so much so that almost the entire rest of Albee's career has seemed tarnished in comparison. While Albee went on to win three Pulitzer Prizes and other high honors, he has also occasionally been plagued by negative criticism and commercial failure of his productions. Richard Amacher wrote in his 1969 book *Edward Albee* that the playwright has earned a great deal of criticism precisely because he continues to experiment rather than shape his work to commercial taste or repeat his past successes, because he "does attempt a more difficult, a more deeply penetrating, view of reality than some of the older dramatists, who by comparison seem merely to scratch the surface of illusion."

But if such total artistic, critical, and commercial success never again coalesced around one single work for Albee, as it did around *Virginia Woolf,* his new work in subsequent decades has nevertheless had an impact. *Virginia Woolf,* meanwhile, continues to draw close interest and is continuously revived, extensively read and studied, and widely written about; the play's richness shows **itself** in the variety of topics of inquiry. Many wriiers have explored it as a social phenomenon, a challenge to corrupted values particular to its time. Psychological readings of the play have also been quite popular—both Freudian readings of the psyches of the characters, and studies of external behavior and modes of communication using other psychological models. Joy Flaseh, in her *Modem Drama* analysis of the play inspired by Eric Berne's study *Games People Play,* saw the conclusion of the play as an "attempt to put aside the destructive Games which have taken the place of true Intimacy. It will be difficult, perhaps impossible."

The differing perspectives the work has inspired, in addition to the pure entertainmeni **value** that it provides, have made *Who '$ Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* a hallmark of contemporary American theatre. That new ideas and fresh perspectives continue to be discovered within the play's text—and that multiple generations have found merit in the work— is a testament to ihe depth of Albee's creation.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Busiel is a Ph.D. candidate with a specialty in drama. In this essay he examines the bond between George and Martha: white their relationship may be antagonistic. Busiel proposes that it may be love that keeps them together.

The complexity of the marital relations between Martha and George is one of the central strengths of Albee's technique in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Audiences and critics alike were often repelled by the depth of George and Martha's viciousness toward one another. *Time* magazine commented that for Eugene O'Neill "marriage had its serpents, but they were invaders in Eden. To Albee, marriage seems to be a no-exit hell in which the only intimacy is a hopeless common damnation." Some criticism of the play suggested that it constitutes a critique of heterosexual relationships from a gay perspective (Albee has never acknowledged or denied being gay). This is one eminent possibility, yet it is only one level on which the play functions.

While George and Martha's marriage seems utterly destructive, the play is especially captivating because the couple nevertheless appear inextricably bound to one another. Given the richness of Albee's dialogue and the depth of characterization in the play, George and Martha's marriage cannot be summed up easily as a "love-hate relationship" or even as a sadomasochistic need to inflict hurt upon one another. Audiences in 1962 found Martha and George's marriage perplexing, and subsequent years, rather than revealing its mystery, have only highlighted its enduring complexity.

The cruelty of George and Martha's fun and games is not gratuitous but borne out of thwarted passion (one thinks not only of their childless marriage but moments like Martha's invitation to George to "give your Mommy a big sloppy kiss," which he is too preoccupied to reciprocate). There is a loving bond between them which persists even in their assaults: "You're going bald," Martha tells George; "so are you," he replies, after which they pause and "both laugh." They seem particularly close when, after so many years, one of them manages to surprise the other. Martha is delighted by George's trick with the shotgun which produces a Chinese parasol, laughing heartily and asking, "Where'd you get that, you bastard?"

The incongruity is readily apparent, for the joke only functions because the characters (and perhaps the audience) believe for just a moment that George might actually shoot Martha for having once again humiliated him publicly. While the marriage appears so destructive, it may exert its greatest damage on outsiders who do not understand the mutual affection that runs as an undercurrent to George and Martha's most outrageous attacks on one another.

Ruby Cohn observed in *Edward Albee* that the play offers repeated "views of the togetherness of George and Martha, and during the three acts each is visibly tormented by the extended absence of the other. However malicious they sound, they *need* one another—a need that may be called love." Other critics view the relationship quite differently; Harold Clurman, for example, commented in the *Nation* that "Martha and

George, we are told, love each other after all. How?... What interests—even petty—do they have or share?"

Clearly, one interest they share is the verbal fencing which tests their inventive minds; each genuinely admires the other's mental agility. While they occasionally hurt one another, they both seem to live to play the sport. This point is made explicitly by Martha, who chastises George for going too far after his game of "Get the Guests" has driven Honey and Nick from the room. George tries to rationalize his behavior in terms of Martha's treatment of him throughout the evening. "[Y]ou can humiliate me, you can tear me apart ... ALL NIGHT ... and that's perfectly all right... that's OK." The exchange which follows is one of the most revealing in the play:

MARTHA. You can stand it' GEORGE-1 cannot stand it'

MARTHA: You can stand it"' You married me for it![1]*(silence)*

GEORGE: *(Quietly)* That is a desperately sick lie. MARTHA. Don't you know it, even yet'

George continues to deny the validity of Martha's point, as have some critics. Clurman suggested that Martha merely "rationalizes her cruelty to George on the ground that he masochistically enjoys her beatings." In the context of the play, however, Martha's observation has the ring of truth. George, as she points out to Nick, is stronger than he appears, and the possibility exists that he enjoys the verbal sport on a level which far exceeds masochism.

That George and Martha may ultimately respect one another despite virtually ceaseless verbal abuse is suggested by the fact that each passes up the opportunity to blame their lack of children on the other. When Nick realizes that Martha and George's son is a fantasy, he asks George: "you couldn't have ... any?" If Martha is barren, George could have taken advantage of this opportunity for revenge, but he responds, *"We* couldn't " The same opportunity exists for Martha if George is infertile, but she, too, asserts, *"We* couldn't." George and Martha have ruthlessly exposed other equally humiliating facts about each other during the course of the evening, yet their mutual sadness over the issue of children constitutes a basis for mutual support.

Martha seems to regret much of what has passed between her and George in a speech at the beginning of the third act, after her failed sexual encounter with Nick Perhaps it is only the disappointment of the moment (and Albee challenges the audience whether or not to believe a woman's tender words about a husband on whom she has just attempted to cheat), but Martha does seem to regret her treatment of George throughout the years: "George who is good to me, and whom-I revile ... who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules ... who has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it.... Some day ... hah! Some *night ...* some stupid, liquor-ridden night .. I will go too far... and I' 11 either break the man's back., or push him off for good, .which is what I deserve." Of course, the night she speaks of has arrived (as the audience is aware, but Nick does not seem to acknowledge). The irony of her observation is that, indeed, George's back

will not be broken, but rather he will take an action that not only assures his "victory" in the evening's games but will force the couple to reconstitute the basis of their marriage.

While George's "killing" of the invented son is planned as an act of revenge, the ultimate rebuke to Martha, it comes off more as an act of mercy. George and Martha recognize at the end of the play that continuing to live with this particular illusion is destructive to both of them ("It was time to do it," George says simply). Cohn observed that George and Martha "have cemented their marriage with the fiction of their child," but they learn that "such lies must be killed before they kill " George's difficult action brings about perhaps the most tender moment of the entire play, as Martha is able to let her guard down enough around George to admit, for once, being subject to real human fear:

GEORGE. Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf.... MARTHA-1 .am... George .. I. am .
(GEORGE nods, slowly)

There is an absence of love in a marriage which has had its unconfronted truths covered over; once the veneer has been removed, could we say George and Martha do seem to love one another by the end of the play? In the dawn breaking at play' s end there is renewal, an affirmation of the strength gained from mutual support and the abandonment of a lie. C. N. Stavrou observed in the *Southwest Review,* "A splinter of light is discernible amid the gloaming of nihilism's smog." Certainly, the conclusion of *Virginia Woolf* constitutes a fundamental break with the spirit of the play to that point. For some, this transition does not ring true; *Modern Drama's* Richard Dozier, for example, found George and Martha's "sentimental reconciliation" to be "hardly in keeping with the rest of the play."

Ultimately, the question of whether Martha and George love one another is not clearly resolved for the audience; indeed, the answer may depend most upon one's own definition of love. Despite their destructive behavior, the couple has a close bond, a mutual dependency that has sustained them through the years. Dependency is not widely considered a healthy substitute for love, however, and one may view George and Martha's need for one another as sadomasochistic desire or unhealthy obsession rather than love. Indeed, that such dependency passes for love in the modern age may constitute part of Albee's larger critique of martial relationships. Clearly, however, Martha and George's relationship moves into a new phase at the conclusion of the play. If they do truly love one another, the "exorcism" of the lllusionary son provides their best opportunity to rebuild their marriage on a new basis. Whether they will be willing and able to take advantage of this opportunity, however, the audience is merely left to ponder

Source: Christopher G Busiel, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this brief article, Carter explains how the play's religious imagery and its wordplay interact.

Most critics of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are mindful of the play's rich array of religious signiflers, from Martha's deified father (George: "He's a god, we all know that," 26 [New American Library edition of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* 1962]), to the sacrificial son (Martha: "Poor lamb," 221); from George's Requiem Mass ("Domine: et lux perpetua luceat eis," 227), to the Sabbath denouement (George: "Sunday tomorrow; all day," 239), and so forth.

The self-rerlexivity of the play's language has also served as a *point d'appui* for critical inquiry. Similar words and phrases bounce back and forth throughout all three acts:

Martha. George and Martha, sad, sad, sad (191) *Nick.* George and Martha, sad, sad, sad. (191)

Honey, and so they were married___

George and so they were marned . (146) *Nick.* Lady, please. (232) *Honey.Lady .* please . (233)

What has gone unnoticed, so far as I know, is the conjoining of these two essential motifs. This linkage occurs during two critical moments in the play: one at the beginning of act 1, the other at the conclusion of act 3.

It is Martha who utters the play's first word: " *Jesus."* Terribly shaken at the very end of the play by the death of the imaginary son, she echoes this initial line: "Just... us[9]" On both occasions, she and George are alone on stage (3, 241). This subtle play on the off-rhymes *"Jesus"* and "Just.. .us?" accomplishes three things: It links up the aforementioned motifs of religion and language, making of them in effect a single, overarching motif; it brings Martha, the uncertain atheist who is also scared of being alone, to a crossroads; and it refreshes, in a single homophone, the audience's collective memory of the play's central conflict among George, Martha, and the son.

The transcendent son brings a double-edged sword to George and Martha's relationship. He gives them something to share above and beyond the disillusionments and recriminations of a tortured marriage. Ironically, however, the son also provides them with a doomsday weapon to use in their "total war" against each other (159). Martha's line, "He's not completely sure it's his own Md," simultaneously wounds George and reinforces the notion of Immaculate Conception. George's line, "He is dead. Kyrie, eleison ..." shatters Martha and reprises the Requiem Mass earlier in act 3 (71,223), From Martha's "Jes».v" to her "Just. . . us?" Albee's play *between* words foregrounds this tragic duality.

The italicized "us" in "Jesuj'" is, in short, a mnemonic clue to the play's ultimate irony: The cherished son must be sacrificed in order to redeem the ms, the barren marriage of George and Martha. Put another way, in tones meant to be spoken "very softly, very slowly," George and Martha transubstantiate the atonement of acl I to the **atone-rnent** of act 3 (239). The audience should now understand why Nick's question, "You couldn't have ... any?"

prompts George and Martha's " *We* couldn't." a mutual response, which is accompanied by Albee's stage direction, *A hint of communion in this* (238).

Source: Steven Carter, review of *Who's Afraid of Virginia WtH'tr.* m the *Bcplicmor.* Volume 55, no. 2. Winier, 1997, pp. 102-03.

Critical Essay #3

Hottan offers evidence that Albee's play, while a riveting character study, is also an allegory for the history of America, beginning with George Washington and the American Revolution.

Near the end of the second act of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George, the professor of history, is left alone onstage while Martha, his wife, and Nick are playing the preliminary rounds of "hump the hostess" in the kitchen. Attempting to control his hurt and anger he reads aloud from a book he has taken from the shelf, "And the West, encumbered by crippling alliances and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events must—eventually—fall." George is clearly encumbered with a crippling alliance—his marriage to Martha—and does seem to be burdened with a kind of morality that makes it difficult for him to respond in kind to her vicious attacks. At the same time, this observation on the movements of history, read in connection with the events of George's personal history, is a splendid example of how Albee has managed to endow the events of the family drama with a deeper significance, suggestive of larger events and movements. Various critics have noted a number of possible interpretations and levels of meaning in the play. I feel that one of the most profitable ways of looking at *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is to see it as an allegory for the American historical experience.

Indeed, Albee had previously used the domestic setting in just such an allegorical way, though not so subtly or successfully. *The American Dream,* produced off-Broadway in 1961, depicted a symbolic couple, Mommy and Daddy, who had mutilated and emasculated their adopted son when he showed signs of independence and who threaten to send Grandma, with her pioneer toughness and independence, off to a home. In replying to the attacks of certain critics on the play Albee remarked that it was "a stand against the vision that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy keen." (preface to *The American Dream,* [New York], 1960) Similarly, in talking about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* Albee told Michael Rutenberg that George and Martha were deliberately named after George and Martha Washington and that the imaginary child could represent the uncompleted revolutionary spirit of this country.

My argument is further strengthened by the fact that history figures so prominently in the play. The word or a variant of it runs like a leitmotif through the entire play, being used twenty-eight times in the first act alone. George is a professor of history who does not run the history department, Nick's timetable is history, Martha's father had a sense of history and, in the second act after the "get the guests" sequence, George remarks, "the patterns of history." It would seem appropriate then, before the play is examined at length, briefly to consider the special significance of history in American thought and experience.

One of the principal myths on which this country was founded was the notion that America was a New Eden, a second chance ordained by God or Providence in which man could begin all over again, freed from the accumulated sm and corruption of

Western history. Not only could the American become a New Adam and found upon the unspoiled continent an ideal human polity, but this new way of life and new order of society could serve as a shining example to redeem erring Europe from her own sinfulness. America had established a covenant with God or with Nature (the myth had its beginnings with the Puritan settlements and became secularized as time went on) and could remain free of the vicissitudes of history provided she kept the terms of the covenant, retained her simplicity, shunned European complexity and sophistication and avoided the twin temptations of urbanization and industrialization. Unfortunately, such a dream of perfection could not find realization in an imperfect world; the troubles and complexities Americans thought they had left behind began to invade the New World. Yet so strong was the myth that the tendency of American thinkers and historians was to locate the causative factor not in the nature of man nor the impossibility of the dream but in the failure of the new nation to keep the covenant, and to look backward to a golden age in the past before Americans had allowed themselves to be seduced by alien complexities and affectations. Thus the majority of American historians, says David Noble, have been Jeremiahs, decrying America's involvement within the transitory patterns of European history and calling Americans back to their duties and obligations. Having started with such a dream of innocence and perfection, much of the American experience has involved a deeply felt sense of loss and failure.

As one looks at the attitudes of George and Martha one is immediately struck by the fact that the orientation of both characters is to the past and is coupled with an acute sense of failure which, furthermore, has often involved a loss of innocence When George was first courting Martha, for example, she had liked "real ladylike little drinkies." Now her taste runs to "rubbing alcohol." Over the years she has learned that alcohol "pure and simple" is for the "pure and simple " The adjectives applied to Martha are ironic for whatever she may have been in the days of their courtship she is now obviously neither pure nor simple. The note of past failure is struck even more clearly a few minutes later in a scene between George and Nick:

NICK' , you .. .you've been here quite a long time, haven't you?

GEORGE What'Oh . yes Ever since I married uh, what's her name uh, Martha Even before that Forever. Dashed hopes and good intentions. Good, better, best, bested How do you like that for a declension, young man" Eh?

Through this scene, of course, the play remains on a comparatively realistic level. Martha's changed drinking habits and George's sense of failure in his career need not be taken allegorically. In the second act, however, matters become more complex Shortly after the beginning of the act George tells a long story about a boy who had ordered "bergin" in a speakeasy (an error growing out of innocence and unworldliness). He is described as having been blonde with the face of a cherub and as laughing delightedly at his own error. Yet this "cherub" had killed his mother with a shotgun some time before, "completely accidentally, without even an unconscious motivation," and later, when he learned that he had killed his father also, in an automobile accident, he went mad and has spent the last thirty years in an asylum. George follows the story with an observation about insane people. They don't age in the usual sense; "the underuse

of everything leaves them quite whole " Martha later indicates that the story came from George's unpublished novel and that George himself may have been the boy in question. The facts of the case are never clear. They are specifically contradicted m the third act; furthermore, George has obviously not spent the last thirty years in a literal asylum. The issue is clouded even further by the suggestion that even the unpublished novel may be an invention, another of the "games" with which the couple keeps themselves occupied In the light of the confusion over the "facts" an allegorical interpretation almost forces itself upon us George, in fact, gives the audience a nudge in that direction when talking about his "second novel"; "it was an allegory really, but it could be read as straight cozy prose."

Allegorically, then, how is the story to be taken? Clearly it is the passage from innocence to guilt and madness. America had begun as a fresh, unspoiled continent, convinced that it was unique m human history in its opportunity to create a perfect society In cutting itself off from its European tradition and history it had, in effect, killed its "parents " Yet one cannot escape history. Even if one kills one's parents, literally or symbolically, one cannot wipe out the objective fact of their having existed nor destroy the genetic and environmental influences they have given one. Only by retreating into madness can one escape the vicissitudes of history and live completely in one's own world It is clear that George envies those (the mad) who have remained untouched by life's experience; he would like to escape from reality, from aging, from history but he has been unable to do so Both George and Martha indicate at various points that "back there," "in the beginning," "when I first came to New Carthage," there might have been a chance for them. That chance was lost and now their "crippling alliance" exacts its toll from both of them George's failure to run first the history department and then the college fits well into this line of argument. The college seems to comprise the universe within which the two exist: it surrounds and encompasses them. The outside world rarely enters into the action or dialogue. Martha's father is president of the college and there are allusions, though admittedly subtle ones, to "Daddy's" divinity ("He's a God, we all know that,"; "The old man is not going to die,"; "I worshipped that guy. I absolutely worshipped him." Furthermore, Daddy had a sense of dynastic history. It was his idea that George should take over the history department, then eventually step into his place and take over the college. George was to be the heir apparent. Daddy, however, watched for a couple of years and came to the conclusion that George lacked leadership potential, that he was not capable of filling the role. George failed and Martha has never let him forget that failure.

Rutenberg has suggested that the six-year age differential between George and Martha may actually be six centuries (again there are subtle suggestions of this in the script), and that Martha, therefore, represents Mother Church while George stands for the new spirit of Protestantism. While Albee agreed that the interpretation was ingenious, he discounted it. If the play is regarded as an allegory of the American historical experience, however, there is another way in which the six-century age differential can be applied. Europe took the first steps toward her long climb out of the Middle Ages in approximately the eleventh century. This was the century of the Viking discovery of America (1000 A.D.), the Norman Conquest (1066) and the First Crusade (1095). The first settlement in North America (Virginia) was in 1607 and the founding of Plymouth

Colony and the Massachusetts Bay Colony occurred in 1620 and 1630 respectively. Thus, there is a difference of not quite six centuries from the dawning of national consciousness in Europe to the colonizing of North America. If we date backward from the ratification of the Constitution in 1787 to the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, we have five hundred and seventy-two years, again almost six centuries. Thus, George came, bright-eyed and bushy tailed as Martha describes him, into the history department and Martha, six years older, fell for him. Similarly, America, full of promise and hope for the future burst upon the scene of history and Europe did fall for America. The idea of America as a New Eden originated, after all, among Europeans who either looked toward or came to America. As George fell short of Martha's expectations, so perhaps did Albee's America fall short of the expectations of Europe and of Providence. Interestingly enough, George did run the history department for a period of four years during the war, but when everybody came back he lost his position of leadership. In the same way America's position of world leadership went virtually unchallenged during World War E but once the war ended and the recovery of Europe became a fact that leadership began to decline. By the tune *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was produced in 1962, Amenca was trying to exercise her hegemony over increasingly recalcitrant followers.

When all these threads are pulled together one can see that George's marriage and his career can be read as analogues for the American historical experience. America had begun by feeling that she could escape from history, control her own destiny and preserve her innocence, but that fond hope soon met with failure. The American dream —the child which was to be given birth upon the new continent— never really materialized; the paradise on earth was not founded. Instead America was increasingly caught up in the same corruptions, compromises and failures as the rest of the world That failure may have been all the more painful because America was the victim of her own idealism, unable to escape the realities of history but simultaneously unable to play the game of power politics with the same unscrupulousness as the older nations —"encumbered by crippling alliances and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events."

Within the contexts of the play there are two possible ways of dealing with this failure. One is to pretend that it never occurred, to create the child out of the imagination and stubbornly to insist, as does Martha, that "everything is fine." The other is to look backward, recognizing that something has gone wrong but rather than trying to rectify it or questioning the validity of the dream itself, merely to mourn its passing and try to place the blame on something or somebody else. It may be that Albee sees these two modes of dealing with the failure of the dream as characteristic of American behaviour.

But if, in Albee's opinion, America's attempt to escape from or to control history has proved to be a failure, other forces in the contemporary world have not learned her lesson. These other forces are represented by the young biologist, Nick. Albee was asked if Nick were named after Nikita Khruschev. He answered yes, in the same way that George and Martha were named after the Washingtons, but went on to assert that that fact was not very significant. Yet an examination of Nick's function in the play reveals a number of connections if not explicitly with Communism at least with the idea

that history can be "scientifically" organized and controlled. George accuses Nick of seeking to alter the chromosomes and to sterilize the unfit, thus creating a new super-civilization of scientists and mathematicians, all "smooth, blonde and right at the middleweight limit." In such a world history will have no relevance, diversity will vanish, and a condition of social, intellectual and biological uniformity will be imposed upon the world. Nick makes light of the accusation at first, later is angered by it, but never denies it. In fact, smarting under George's attack he sarcastically avers that he is going to be "the wave of the future." In the second act, with his guard somewhat lowered by George's confidences, he discloses his career plans:

NICK- . What I thought I'd do is... I'd sort of insinuate myself generally, play around for a while, find all the weak spots, shore 'em up, but with my own name plate on 'em become sort of a fact, and then turn into a a what'

GEORGE An inevitability.

NICK: Exactly ... an inevitability

Historical inevitability, a term George later twice applies to Nick, is, of course, one of the catch phrases of communism and it is possible to see the post World War n policy of the Soviet Union as a process of insinuating itself and shoring up weak spots. Furthermore, if we conclude for the sake of the argument that Martha represents a Europe originally enraptured but ultimately disillusioned with America, Nick's wooing of her (and hers of him) coincides once again with the patterns of history. Out of bis own bitter experience George tries to warn Nick of the folly of trying to control history but Nick, young, brash, and overconfident merely replies, "up yours." This interpretation clarifies George's two puzzling speeches, that in which he declares, "I will not give up Berlin" and that about "ice for the lamps of China." This latter line, especially coming as it does on the heels of Nick's wooing of Martha, suggests the presence in the world of the third force, in the face of which the seduction of Europe by the Soviet Union (or vice-versa) may be futile.

Yet in the "get the guests" sequence George manages to damage Nick heavily and later, when Nick gets Martha off to bed, he proves to be impotent. Indeed, Nick has provided George with the very ammunition that the latter uses against him, the revelation of the compromise and subterfuge on which his marriage is based Honey has trapped him with a false pregnancy and he has used Honey and her father's money as " a pragmatic extension of the big dream"; her wealth will help him attain his goals. Pursuing the allegorical interpretation, then, in what sense has the Soviet Union compromised?

One fact that comes immediately to mind is her perversion of Marx's understanding of the evolution of communism. The state, m the Soviet Union, has not withered away but has become even stronger than it was in the days of the Czars. Furthermore, Russia has had, to some degree, to adopt some of the methods of Western capitalism which she affects to despise. It is interesting in this context, that both couples are barren. George and Martha have an imaginary child; Honey has had at least one false pregnancy. If the communist revolution was to usher in the land of milk and honey, that

dream, too, has been stillborn, as surely as the dream of perfection which was to be brought forth on the American continent has failed to materialize. Nick's impotence might suggest that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States is capable of controlling history. Nick simply does not understand the forces with which he is dealing. Devoted to his own ideology—his own "scientific" understanding of the world—he fails to see that no matter how foolish or feeble George may look he is not yet defeated. Nor does he realize the full implications of his attempted affair with Martha. In courting her m order to further his own ambitions he has got himself into a position from which he cannot easily extricate himself. As a matter of fact, in the third act Nick is put through exactly the same paces as was George in the first. He is ridiculed for his failure, taunted with his lack of knowledge, and ordered to answer the door. Far from being in control of the patterns of history he too has become their victim, as George had warned him he would.

The exorcism of the third act functions also within this context. George first forces Martha to recount the tale of the imaginary son—the birth, the innocent childhood, the attempt to bring him up, with its failures and corruptions, but he will not allow her to stick to the pretence that everything is fine. He forces her to acknowledge the failure, to accept her part of the blame and at last "kills" the son. This act seems to create a sense of peace and the beginnings of communion between them and seems also to have a beneficent effect on Nick and Honey. If, as Albee has suggested, the child is taken to represent the notion inherent in the American dream that the new nation could escape from history and the failings of human nature and create a perfect society, that belief is shown to be an illusion which must be destroyed if the couple and the nation are to face the future realistically. The future is, of course, uncertain; there is no guarantee that once illusion is cast away success and happiness will automatically follow—thus the lingering fear of "Virginia Woolf" However, so long as George and Martha, and symbolically America, persist in living in dreams and in refusing to recognize that there is anything wrong, they cannot hope to survive. The end of the play is therefore ambiguous but perhaps guardedly hopeful.

In order for the illusion to be destroyed, however, a night of carnage and chaos has been required. It is undoubtedly significant that the name of the town in which the college is located is New Carthage, with its echoes of the struggle between two great powers, one destroying the other in the interests of Empire, and then destroyed in its turn.

Many critics may object to an analysis of this type. They may argue that the work of art is meant to have immediate impact in the theatre, primarily on the emotional level. Production of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* does, I think, fulfill that criterion, but it does something else. Like Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* or *The Master Builder,* for example, it teases the mind of the spectator and will not easily be erased from the consciousness. Albee once remarked that the trouble with most modern plays is that the only thing the spectator is thinking about when he leaves the theatre is where he parked the car. One cannot say that about the spectator of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?* In this play Albee has created a rich and troubling allegory for the American historical experience, the story of a nation that began in boundless optimism and faith in its own power to control

the future and that has had to come to grips not only with external challenges but with its own corruption, compromise and failure, that has reached the point where it must cast away its comforting dreams and look reality in the face.

Source: Orley I. Holtan, *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* And the Patterns of History" in *Educational Theatre Journal,* Volume 25, no. 1, March, 1973, pp. 46-52.

Adaptations

A sound recording of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with the original Broadway cast was released by Columbia in 1963 (catalog number CDOS 687); though out of print-, it is available in some libraries.

The play was also adapted into a highly acclaimed film in 1966, directed by Mike Nichols and released by Warner Bros. The film won the Academy Awards for Best Actress (Elizabeth Taylor as Martha) and Best Supporting Actress (Sandy Dennis as Honey), as well as three technical awards in the black and white division (Art Direction, Costume Design, and Cinematography) The film additionally received nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor (Richard Burton as George), Best Supporting Actor (George Segal as Nick), and Best Screenplay based on material from another medium (Ernest Lehman, for his adaptation of Albee'splay).

Topics for Further Study

What do you feel is the significance of each character's name in this play? What effects did Albee achieve by not giving either couple a last name?

Discuss in depth the subtitles Albee gave to each act: "Fun and Games," "Walpurgisnacht," and "The Exorcism" (which was Albee's working title for the play as a whole). What do you feel is the significance of each of these subtitles to the plot and themes of the play?

Research the physical and emotional effects of alcohol. Does heavy drinking appear to be a factor in the behavior of the characters in this play? How do you think it affects George and Martha's marriage?

Discuss some of the significant puns or plays on words in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (including the one found in the title). What does Albee achieve by using them, in terms of humor, dramatic themes, and character development?

Compare and Contrast

1962: The Cuban missile crisis in October makes the threat of global nuclear war seem an imminent possibility.

Today: The Cold War over, the United States no longer faces the consolidated military strength of a communist rival. The Berlin Wall, a powerful symbol of Cold War division, fell m 1989. The fear of nuclear war is no longer as great, although there exists widespread concern about the spread of nuclear technology to terrorist groups or so-called "rogue states."

1962: Cold War competition with the Soviet Union affects many aspects of American life. In space, prior Soviet achievements are matched by the U.S. this year, as Col. John Glenn achieves the first U.S. Earth orbit and the U.S. launches its first satellite, *Telstar.*

Today: The Soviet Union no longer exists as such, first withdrawing its control over the Eastern Bloc countries, and then fragmenting into independent states. While several other countries maintain economic influence of a par with the United States, the U.S. is widely recognized since the fall of the Soviet Union as the world's only remaining "superpower." The U.S. space program, NASA, is the world leader, with regular successful launches of space shuttles.

1962: Institutions of higher education enjoy substantial levels of federal funding and increased

enrollments which are the legacy of the post-war Baby Boom and grant programs like the G.I. Bill. College teaching is a secure and expanding profession in most academic fields.

Today: Under severe economic crises, colleges and universities are "downsizing" their faculties, increasing class sizes, and relying more heavily on part-time and adjunct instructors rather than tenured faculty. The inability to advance in academia that George demonstrates would not be viewed today so much as a personal failure as an economic factor of radically shrinking professional opportunities.

1962: The Broadway theatre is in decline as a force in American culture, both economically, and, more acutely, in qualitative terms Producers are increasingly unwilling to take a chance on any new work which might not succeed commercially.

Today: The decline of Broadway has continued. Fewer new productions than ever are mounted each year and fewer people look to Broadway as the indicator of the American theatre. The majority of new productions are large-scale commercial spectacles such as Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Phantom of the Opera.* In addition to the alternatives presented off-Broadway, new work prospers in important regional theatres across the county.

What Do I Read Next?

The Zoo Story, Albee's first play written as an adult. The one-act premiered in 1959 and suggests the future elements of Albee's work (especially the idea suggested in the title that beneath the illusion of civilization, human beings are essentially animals capable of startling vicious-ness). In the play, Jerry, an embittered outsider, confronts the conformist Peter on a park bench, mducing him to listen to much of Jerry's life story and then provoking him into defending himself and his way of life.

A Delicate Balance. Albee won his first Pulitzer Prize for this 1966 play, but many considered the award merely belated recognition for *Virginia Woolf.* This play revolves around similar elements (two couples in a living room engaged in a crisis, the death of a child, the failures of educated and well-intentioned people), causing critics to variously see it either as a compelling counterpoint to Albee's earlier work, or as repetitive imitation of it.

Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in theCloset and We're Feeling So Sad by Arthur Kopit, a theatrical parody of the Oedipus complex. This is the best-known play by an experimental dramatist whose work first appeared around the same time as Albee's, and who (along with Jack Gelber) is often discussed in relation to Albee.

Long Day's Journey into Night, one of Eugene O'Neill's dramatic masterpieces. O'Neill is regularly evoked by critics as an influence upon Albee's style, especially this realistic, autobiographical play which unfolds over a long night of emotionally intense dialogue. Albee has joked that critics might only be observing superficially that both plays "have four characters and they talk a great deal and nothing happens," but deeper connections definitely exist. Both O'Neill and Albee, despite their experimentation with a wide variety of styles, remain best known for their more realistic, psychologically complex dramas.

Further Study

Cohn, Ruby. *Edward Albee,* University of Minnesota Press (Minneapolis), 1969.

Early, significant assessment of Albee's work, not long but an excellent study of Albee's plays through its year of publication.

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Gale (Detroit). Volume 1, 1973; Volume 2, 1974, Volume 3, 1975; Volume 5, 1976; Volume 9, 1978; Volume 11, 1979, Volume 13, 1980, Volume 25,1983, Volume 53,1989; Volume 86,1995. The listed volumes of this reference series compile selections of criticism, it is an excellent beginning point for a research paper about Albee The selections in these ten volumes span Albee's entire playwnting career through 1995. For an overview of Albee's life, also see the entry on him in the *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography* (Gale, 1987) and Volume 7 of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Gale).

Bsslm, Martin *Theatre of the Absurd,* Doubleday, 1961. This is a work on the style of theatre associated with Existentialist ideas about the absurdity of human existence, expressed m an aberrant dramatic style meant to mirror the human situation. Esslm discusses Albee's early plays in the context of play wnghts such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pmter While a play like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is less absurdist in form than some of Albee's other work, many critics agree that it expresses a similar philosophical perspective but in a realistic form.

Giantvalley, Scott *Edward Albee. A Reference Guide,* G K Hall (Boston), 1987

An extensive annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources by and about Albee. Except for incidental mentions of Albee and some foreign items, this book encompasses most of the listings in previous bibliographies such as *Edward Albee at Home and Abroad* (Amacher and Rule, 1973), *Edward Albee An Annotated Bibliography 1968-1977* (Charles Lee Green, 1980), and *Edward Albee: A Bibliography* (Richard Tyce, 1986). The guide is organized by year, with extensive cross-listing of topics in the index.

McCarthy, Gerry *Edward Albee,* St. Martin's (New York), 1987.Considers selected plays of Albee's from a performance perspective Roudane, Matthew C Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Necessary Fictions, Temfying Realities, Twayne, 1990 The first full-length study of Albee's play, which Roudane says "did nothing less than reinvent the American theater " The author places *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolp* within the context of modern drama as a whole while also examining its histoncal and political backdrop Beneath the animosity, he finds in the play an animating principle which makes it, he asserts, Albee's most life-affirming work

Rutenberg, Michael E. *Edward Albee ¦ Playwright in Protest,* Avon, 1969 Rutenberg sees Albee as a writer of effective plays of social protest; he applies psychological and sociological thought to his explications of Albee's plays through *Box/Mao.* The book includes two interviews.

Wattis, Nigel, Producer and Director. *Edward Albee,* London Weekend Television, 1996

A one-hour documentary distributed through Films for the Humanities and Sciences Includes interviews with Albee and extracts from performances of his work.

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Hewes, Henry "Who's Afraid of Big Bad Broadway" in the *Saturday Review,* October 27,1962, p 29.

"Long Night's Journey into Daze" in the *New Yorker,* October 20,1962, pp. 85-86

Quinn, James P "Myth and Romance in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in the *Arizona Quarterly,* Vol 30,1974, pp 197-204

Stavrou, C. N. "Albee in Wonderland" in the *Southwest Review,* Winter, 1975, pp 46-61.

Taubman, Howard "Cure for Blues" in the *New York Times,* October 28,1962, sec 2, p. 1

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

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