



## Sense of Loss in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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**Abstract:** Albee was one of the first American playwrights who introduced the American audience to the theater of the absurd, which was spearheaded in Europe by Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. His literary works showed his ingenious ability to "Americanize" the theater of absurdity which was made famous by European playwrights. The aim of this paper is attempting to analyze one of Albee's most prominent plays, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Which mainly focuses on the conflict between reality and illusion as reflected in one of its main characters, Martha. This paper also will touch upon the themes of materialist marriage, social hypocrisy complexities of motherhood, frustration, and self-delusion. These conflicts were in turn ascribed to the psychological distress and sense of loss felt by Martha. As well as, this paper will explore Albee's message to his audience about the right foundation on which marital relations should be based.

**Keywords:** Frustration, Illusion, Isolation, Loss, Self-delusion

### INTRODUCTION

The play features Martha and her husband George, who are playing the main characters, as well as Nick and his wife Honey, who are playing the secondary characters. Martha is a 52-year-old professor at the university who always used her husband's name to introduce herself. Losing her mother at an early age, Martha entered a relationship with the son of her family gardener and married him without her father's consent, who then rushed to annul their marriage. Martha then married George in hopes that he would become the head of the history department and eventually succeed her father as the university dean. However, much to Martha's disappointment, George failed to realize these ambitions, thereby resulting in a feeling of loss throughout her married life. Martha then became dependent on alcohol and lived in a state of loss, isolation, and fear of facing her reality. To cope with these issues, Martha resorted to insulting her husband and humiliating him in front of other people.

George is a 46-year-old professor in the history department of the same university where Martha teaches. During his childhood, he accidentally shot and killed his own father. He became the head of his university's history department during the war after most teachers joined the army. He wrote a self-narration that was published by Martha's father. George's personality seems very weak when compared with the character of Martha, and he spends most of his time dodging the insults thrown at him by his wife. At the end of the play, after Martha loses control and begins to humiliate her husband in front of their guests, George decides to punish her by killing their imaginary child.

Nick is a 30-year-old professor in the university's biology department. He has the right amount of intelligence and opportunities to reach his aspirations, and he even engaged in a sexual relationship with some of the faculty wives to fulfill his personal interests. Nick is married to Honey, whom he has known since childhood. Unbeknownst to his wife, Nick only married her for her wealth and because she is expecting their child. He actively participates in Martha's humiliation of George.

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Honey is the 26-year-old wife of Nick, whose weak personality greatly contrasts that of her husband. She has inherited a large fortune after her father's death, appears in most scenes of the play, drinks brandy, and claims to suffer the symptoms of pregnancy. She is the most innocent and least talkative character in the play.

Taking place on the campus of a small university in New England, the play begins with the return of Martha and George from a party thrown by the university dean, who also happens to be Martha's father. Although they arrive home at 2 in the morning, Martha tells George that she has invited Nick and his wife Honey for an after party. George is upset by the news and tries to tell her about the time, but she does not pay heed to his words. The first events in the play clearly depict that George and Martha have spent most of their married life quarreling and insulting each other even though they try to make themselves appear decent in the community.

The play is divided into three parts. The first part presents the ideals and principles carried by each character. These characters generally talk about their convictions, interests, and views on various professional and life topics. In the second part, the characters drink too much and start divulging their secrets. Nick and Martha watch as Martha humiliates George. In the third part, Martha loses control and continues to humiliate George by trying to seduce Nick. George takes revenge by telling their guests about their imaginary son. After the big reveal, the guests leave and Martha collapses while she talks to George in a state of despair and loss. George embraces Martha and asks her to try facing reality and rebuild their lives.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee endeavored to reveal the hollowness of modern American life, which reduces the human ideals and pushes Americans to achieve their goals through either legitimate or illegitimate means. Albee revealed the deceptiveness of modern American life by focusing on the family life of university teachers because they represent the intellectual class of the society. Albee introduced two family models from two different age groups. The first family, represented by George and Martha, is living with loss, isolation, and fear of facing their reality, all of which push them into hiding behind the image of their imaginary son. The second family is represented by Nick, a young American man who aims to increase his wealth and upgrade his position in society through perverse ways, such as by marrying Honey, a woman he only wanted for the wealth she inherited from her father.

Albee deliberately set the events of the play at night to create a rhetorical image of the reality of modern American family relations. Under the influence of alcohol, people tend to divulge their secrets and behave barbarically toward one another. These are the same characteristics of American families that Albee criticized in most of his plays because of the devastating damage that they cause to American families and societies.

### **AMERICAN DREAM AND SENSE OF LOSS**

Through *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee criticized the "American dream" project and the traditional view of the American society toward marriage. The modern American individual considers marriage as an economic deal by which he can achieve his goals, a social duty that complements his personality, or an institution for satisfying his procreation and sexual needs. Albee called for the restoration of marriage as an intimate relationship based on love, cooperation, and mutual understanding between two people to create a happy family that would serve as the nucleus of a healthy society.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Martha represented the aforementioned traditional view of Americans toward marriage. She married George to achieve her goal of succeeding her father as the university dean and to satisfy her yearning to become a mother. According to Stenz, Martha is "the product of a society which encourages a woman to believe that marriage and motherhood are the only solution to the problems of living" (28). Despite his opposition to the "American dream" project and his attempts to hold on to his ideals and values, George's marriage to Martha also had a personal purpose, that is, to escape the state of inferiority that he had

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been suffering from for being part of the lower class in the society. In this case, George and Martha's marriage was just an economic project from which they could mutually benefit. However, Martha was disappointed by George's inability to become the university dean and give her a child. Meanwhile, George did not find in Martha the person who he thought would complete his personality and help relieve his sense of inferiority. Therefore, George and Martha turned into a war of words and insults in an attempt to humiliate each other.

Nick's marriage with Honey reflected the emotional deficiencies in the traditional American view of marriage. Nick is among the most prominent figures in the play given his representation of a materialistic American individual who strives to achieve his desired wealth and social position. In the play, Nick tells George that he only married Honey in hopes of receiving the wealth that she inherited from her father and to fulfill his paternal role. Meanwhile, Honey is an uneducated woman who thinks that Nick, as a bright university professor, will greatly complement her lacking personality.

The confrontations between any of these couples clearly reflect their sense of despair, loss, and anxiety. Albee stressed the importance of standing in the state of anxiety that lives within the human consciousness as reflected in the actions and reactions that negatively affect family relations. He stated that "This play is about the ways people get through life" (Stenz 39). The marital relationship of the characters serves as a model for American families after the Second World War. Through these relationships, Albee highlighted the dangers of escaping from reality and preferring to live in delusion and isolation, which have become a haven for American individuals who are trying to escape from their miserable and the materialistic lifestyles. Albee also revealed the disguised nature of American family life at the time and attacked the social hypocrisy of American individuals. In this play, Albee highlighted the internal obstacles and problems being faced by American families as manifested in the characters' disappointment from failing to achieve their goals, their feelings of loss, and their failures in dealing with members of their community. The words of Martha and her strong desire to engage in a conversation with George reflect the emotional vacuum that she has been living in throughout her marriage. She seeks to avenge herself and escape from her state of anxiety and isolation by insulting George. Meanwhile, George clearly shows his anger and embarrassment from Martha's behavior.

The characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* All focus on how they can succeed and achieve personal glory, which is in line with the slogan of the "American dream" project. Specifically, this project is based on the achievement of success, happiness, and wealth through hard work and determination, all of which have a great influence on the American's perception of marriage, especially after the Second World War.

Albee exposed the way of life of American families and how they affected the success of the "American dream" project, which, as Albee claimed, is based on the abandonment of supreme human values and ideals. Albee stated that "The American Dream is based on a falsity of values" (Eisenmann 116).

George sometimes rejects the modern lifestyle and calls for a return to the right connections in human relations. He is essentially "A rebellious outsider who looks at cultural, political and social changes very skeptically" (Eisenmann 118) and does not meet the ambitions of Martha and her father because he refuses to become someone else's pawn. Therefore, throughout the play, George preserves the character of a history professor who advises the younger generation (Nick and Honey) and motivates them to adhere to their principles. Except for George, all characters in the play represent a picture or an aspect of the "American dream" project.

As mentioned earlier, Nick embodies the ideal American individual being advocated by the "American dream" project, someone who is handsome, ambitious, and, young as well as equipped with a high school degree and certain qualifications that make him admired by women. Nick married Honey just for her wealth and to become the father of her expected child. However, at the end of the play, Honey reveals that she had been lying to her husband about her pregnancy. Despite his apparent disappointment, Nick decides to stay with his wife because of her wealth. "Nick married Honey not as a result of love, but because of a hysterical pregnancy" (Albee

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85). Although seemingly shy and comic, Honey's relationship with Nick is based on lies. She is presumed to be pregnant while taking a birth control drug. Driven by her frustration and fear of her future with Nick, Honey searches for a way to maintain her husband's presence in her life in order to fulfill the "American dream" and to earn a socially acceptable status. "She is a person expressing frustration and terror" (Roudane 40).

Martha, as another example of the "American dream" project, differs from Nick and Honey. She is an authoritarian figure who sees in her father the ideal husband with whom she wants to associate herself. Martha worked hard to push George into becoming the university dean, but George's failure to secure such position, in addition to his inability to provide his wife with a child, turned Martha into a broken, isolated, depressed, and frustrated wife. However, by playing the leading role in her family and constantly humiliating George, Martha found an outlet to alleviate her internal conflicts.

### **ILLUSION**

The presence of a child in the family helps perpetuate the emotional bonds between husband and wife as well as strengthens the feelings of affection between them by establishing a common link. By contrast, the failure to produce a child leads to a vacuum and a feeling of inferiority, especially for the wife.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Martha yearns for the status of motherhood because of her inability to have children. Martha tries to realize her dreams of motherhood and fill the void in her life by inventing an imaginary son. "...but as she and George have not been able to beget a child, both have created the illusion of an imaginary son" (Eisenmann 119). Similarly, Honey embodies an image of a woman who lives in a world of fear and anxiety about infertility. Although she told Martha that she was taking birth control pills, she married Nick by deceiving him with a story about her false pregnancy.

George and Martha's imaginary child represents an attempt to escape their reality because they believed that this child will help them continue with their married life despite their knowing that this child does not exist in the physical world and does not provide a logical solution to their problems. However, this child may also increase their frustration, anxiety, fear of the unknown, and state of loss. "The real child would have born into the unholy cauldron of his mother and his father, unresolved personal and emotional problems" (Stenz 33).

The marital relationship between George and Martha is based on their shared secret of living in a world with their imaginary child because this child gives them an outlet to forget their boring married life. However, they have also used this secret as a weapon to threaten each other. For instance, in the scene where Martha loses control of herself under the influence of alcohol, hurls repeated insults toward George in front of their guests, and begins hinting about their imaginary child, George threatens and warns her to avoid bringing up the subject (Choudhuri 132-134).

George: "Just do not start in the bit about the kid, that's all" (42).

George and Martha created a world of illusion where they preferred to live instead of confronting their reality. In other words, they built their life on a lie to hide themselves from the outside world.

Martha: "...it is the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads" (40).

Although Martha represents the strongest personality in the play, the decision maker in her household, and the first to directly insult her husband, George gains the upper hand at the end of the play by destroying the world of illusion in which he and Martha have lived together, thereby waking Martha from her illusion and breaking her state of unity. George suddenly decides to kill their imaginary child in front of the guests amid the astonishment and attempts of his wife to stop him from speaking. George starts to reveal their secret by saying that their child has been killed in a car accident. Although George brutally punishes Martha by revealing their shared secret, he also holds Martha responsible for pushing him to kill their child.

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George: "You broke the rules, baby. You mentioned him to someone else" (138)

George is more eager than Martha to destroy their illusion of having an imaginary child who has been living with them throughout their married life. He decides to reveal their secret to return Martha back to her senses, although this action comes as a shock to the latter because this imaginary child has satisfied her yearning for motherhood. Destroying such illusion has also rebalanced their marriage and opened a new chapter in their lives.

Martha: "Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference" (119)

The killing of the imaginary child has also driven Martha to revisit and find a meaning marital relationship with George by adopting a new style, getting rid of her illusions, and confronting reality.

Some critics have pointed out that the myth of the delusional child has remained with George and Martha because George has never denied its existence throughout the play. Rather, he simply replaces the myth about his imaginary child with another myth about the death of the same child. In other words, George and Martha are still living in an imaginary world, but maybe in a more acceptable way. However, Albee denied such claims by saying "...They are not self-deluding people by the end. They're not even self-deluding people at the beginning of the play. They are always totally aware that they are dealing with a myth and not reality" (Rutenberg 256). He added that "they are not deluded, people. At no point, they have deluded themselves about the fact that they are playing a game" (Flanagan 59). After George kills their imaginary child, Martha collapses to the ground and shows signs of fear in facing her reality. George embraces her as a sign of compassion and support while singing the nursery rhyme *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, to which Martha replies:

Martha: "I am George... I am" (last words of the play)

George and Martha spent their marital life with a third person who they invented themselves to escape their lonely lives. Despite feeling psychological comfort, their imaginary child and fantasy world were devoid of the complexity of their real world, and George's efforts to end to this delusion gave a different meaning to his married life with Martha. Specifically, George brought out a person living in a fantasy world who began to affect his and his wife's behaviors. Therefore, by driving this illusion out of their lives, George and Martha successfully cured themselves of their isolation.

In sum, through *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee underscored the need for people to abandon their delusions because of their devastating effects on their behaviors. Although living in an imaginary world may provide psychological comfort to some people, this relaxation is only temporary. Therefore, despite the difficult circumstances, facing reality is the best way for people to live in a stable married life rather than in a state of anxiety and instability as manifested in their behaviors and daily activities.

### **FRUSTRATION**

By watching closely Martha's scenes, one can notice that she conceals a great deal of anxiety, loss, and uneasiness as reflected in her behavior with her husband and her society. These behaviors can be ascribed to the disappointments she frequently encountered over her lifetime.

Martha lived an unstable childhood. For instance, she lost her mother at an early age. Shortly after the death of her mother, Martha's father married another woman and became preoccupied with his newfound family in addition to his work as the university dean. Therefore, Martha lived through her childhood without any sense of parental tenderness. Martha's first disappointment can then be attributed to her father, who was preoccupied with other things and did not give her the care and tenderness that she would have received from her mother (Dozier 43-46).

With her mother's death and her father's lack of attention, Martha lived in a state of loneliness and isolation during her childhood. She continued feeling the same anxiety and frustration until her adolescence, during



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which she tried to escape these feelings by entering a relationship with the son of her father's gardener. Martha eventually married her lover without the knowledge of her father, who immediately annulled the marriage upon receiving the news and sent Martha to a school for nuns. Martha's separation from her first lover not only brought her a great amount of shock and disappointment, but also sent her back to the state of loss that she experienced during her childhood and early adolescence.

Martha then moved to a new stage in her life by studying hard and specializing in biology to become a professor at her father's university. During this period, Martha saw in her father—given his prominent position in the university and influential role in the society—an example of a successful person and an ideal husband. In a way, Martha did not marry a man just to fulfill her purpose as a woman, but rather to achieve her personal and material goals regardless of her human feelings or role as a wife. In other words, she was merely looking for what she can get from a man and not for the man himself (Schnieder 18).

During Martha's work in the university's biology department, she met George, a professor in the same department, and married him in hopes that he will become the head of the department and succeed her father as the university dean. Martha's ambitions, which she sought to achieve through her marriage to George, were closer to her than to George himself. She wanted the marriage to compensate for the state of deprivation and anxiety that she experienced during her childhood. Martha had great hopes for George to achieve her ambitions, but instead, her marriage had caused her the greatest disappointment in her life because of George's weak personality and inability to secure the post of the university dean, which was an important goal for her (Flash 121-129). She always labeled her husband a flop, "...a great big fat flop" (210).

Martha's psychological problem lies in her perception of men. She expects her husband to be socially successful and have a strong and influential role in the society, regardless of her family relationship or feelings as a wife. In other words, she only wanted a man that she could show off to her community. By contrast, George does not want to give up some of his values and principles just to achieve the material goals set by Martha. Another problem that triggered Martha's psychological anxiety and disappointment lie in her constant comparison of George with her father. However, her father's success greatly contrasted George's failure, thereby prompting Martha to throw verbal insults at her husband to express her disappointment and frustration; in fact, she often blamed George for not achieving her aspirations and ambitions (Kastely 43-57).

Martha: "And I sat there at daddy's party and I watched you, and you weren't there! And it snapped! It finally snapped!" (261).

In addition to her habit of repeatedly insulting George, Martha relies on alcohol and often loses control of herself to alleviate the internal conflicts caused by her infertility and inability to achieve her goals. Instead of helping herself or her husband improve their family life, Martha has surrendered herself to a lonely, isolated, and miserable life. Throughout the play, Martha is evidently dissatisfied with herself or her life.

Martha: "I disgust me. I pass my life in crummy, totally pointless infidelities" (276).

Stenz argued that "With nothing to do that interest her and nothing to live for, she spends her nights, leaving a trail of half-filled glasses of gin around the house and her days sleeping off her drunkenness" (43).

### **LOSS OF SELF-ESTEEM**

Throughout the play, one can find that George remained in balance and did not sacrifice his principles for what Martha and her father wanted. This behavior clearly reflects George's self-esteem as his character and personality do not belong to the competitive world that Martha wants. Albee described George "as a promising young man who fell in love with the college president's daughter in his clumsy old fashioned way" (Stenz 42).

Martha did not care about her role as a university professor and the daughter of the university dean. She only wanted to make her marriage a marketing agency for George in order to reach her personal goals, gain

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wealth, and secure an influential position in the community. George's ambition for success differs from that of Martha; specifically, George believes that success is not measured by monthly salary or social status, but is rather related to the principles being upheld by an individual. He refuses to become a commodity to Martha and her father; he maintains his balance and attempts to awaken Martha from her illusions by killing their imaginary child at the end of the play. Wasserman argued that "George goes his own way, he seeks individual relationships, his own inner treasures... and he does not concern himself very much with authority or permanence" (89).

Albee described George as a historian with constant, honest, and scientific intelligence that prevents him from being dragged behind Martha's quest for wealth and position. Despite her constant humiliation of George, Martha recognized her husband's scientific value and intelligence.

Martha: "...who understands which is beyond comprehension..." (277).

Therefore, George's refusal to be part of the competitive society in which Martha and her father lived is the main cause of his marital disputes with his wife. Contrary to Martha, George believes that a successful career can be achieved by building one's self-esteem and professional competitiveness instead of resorting to illegal means. George also believes in life's fairness because if all human beings have the same talents and scientific and creative abilities, the civilized growth of mankind will stagnate.

George: "...if scientists get successful in their designs, then the culture and races will actually vanish and the ants will take over the world" (199).

George believes that life is not a competitive race among humans as perceived by the capitalist society. On the contrary, he believes that each individual has a different set of abilities and talents, and such differences can lead them to the right direction and place without taking someone else's place or position. Unlike Martha, George believes in these principles and convictions, which also reflect his respect for himself and his personality. However, despite George's strong principles, Martha's dominant personality sometimes makes him weak and contented with merely listening to her insults. Martha's strong words sometimes force George to perform actions despite his lack of conviction. For example, George was not convinced of the imaginary child's story that Martha conjured to live in an imaginary world, but he still played along on the condition that she would not mention this secret in front of others. Therefore, George's biggest show of his self-respect can be found in the scene where he reveals to their guests about his and Martha's imaginary child, which subsequently leads to Martha's collapse. Paolucci commented that "Nothing happens in the play, but the reality is changed completely in the gradual discovery and recognition of what is inside us all" (46).

Although George endured repeated insults from Martha in front of the guests, he has maintained his composure to protect his and his wife's social status. However, Martha's loss of control as a result of her excessive drinking and her attempts to make her husband jealous by flirting with Nick have pushed George out of the humiliating situation in which he was placed by Martha. He takes the covers off their imaginary child and ends his wife's illusions.

Through Martha's personality, Albee presented an embittered American character who resorts to illusions to escape from his reality and a difficult materialistic society that makes him abandon his principles and self-respect. Meanwhile, through George's personality, Albee constructed a model of a person who remains committed to his principles and retains his self-respect amid all the pressures he is facing.

Similar to Jerry's character in *The Zoo Story*, and the other acts in Albee's theatrical plays, the aggressive behavior, anxiety, and sense of loss felt by Martha all reflect her state of lacking that was caused by her husband's failure to achieve her goals and aspirations as well as by her inability to reproduce and fulfill her maternal needs. These limitations have only increased the level of her emotional emptiness in a cruel and ruthless society. In sum, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* focuses on the lack of emotional bonding between George and Martha, their disconnection from reality, their marital problems, and their retreat to a delusional world where they have an imaginary child. "...in a life without any tangible extension of herself, Martha is in the stranglehold of nothingness" (Stenz 41). In the final scene of the play where Martha collapses and George shows his inner love and affection for his wife.

### CONCLUSION

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee suggested that people can move on with their lives by confronting their reality with their shared strength. By addressing the dangers of the American dream project in creating isolation, a sense of disappointment and loss, Albee worked to convey a picture of the state of American society after World War II. His message in this theatrical work was to call for a return to the values and principles of humanity that disappeared under the dominance of material concepts. In this play, Albee tells his audience not to be dragged behind the delusion of the American dream, which he perceived as the primary driver of transforming American families into community marketing institutions that make individuals spend their entire lives in a state of anxiety and fear of the unknown. Albee also emphasized that individuals must respect themselves, search for sources of creativity within themselves, and exploit such creativity in their practical lives without compromising their feelings.

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