The Riddle of Truth and Illusion in Edward Albee's
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

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Abstract

This study deals with the analysis of Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? In search for illusion. It stops at certain incidents in the play where we find out how Albee has set certain traps of truth and illusion without giving a solution. He leaves the reader/ audience with a riddle of "what" and "why". For instance, what is the illusion of the phantom, why did George and Martha create it? Why did they destroy it? What happened to Honey's pregnancies? Why are they afraid? What is the cause of their fear? Is it the Big Bad Woolf? Their own lives? Or reality in general?

The study shows how Albee has made it impossible to distinguish reality from fantasy. He presents us with both reality and illusion, yet they are entwined in such a way that they cannot be separated.

1. Existentialism and the Play:

Alienation is closely related to existentialism. Each character in the play is believed to be alienated in a world of its own, and the four as a group are living in a world of illusion. Albee introduces us to a savage type of game playing, which are four ruthless games: Humiliate the Host, Get the Guest, Hump the Hostess, and Bringing up Baby.

The first game is about Martha humiliating George to the point that he tries to kill her. In the second game, George tries systematically to destroy the marriage of Honey and Nick. In the third game, Martha and
Nick try to seek revenge upon George. During the final game, George performs the exorcism of the fictional son. The implications of these events are felt during each game, but the games make true communication impossible. George and Martha would rather indulge in games and publicly humiliate each other than confront their alienated situation. During these games both couple come in brutal contract with the confusion of fantasy and reality that has kept them in a state of alienation.

As an absurdist Albee has made it impossible to distinguish reality from fantasy. He presents both concepts in an entwined way that they cannot be separated. Each character in the play is caught up in a world of illusion which keeps him/her alienated. The illusion of the son has been an essential element to George and Martha's avoidance of reality. The reality they try to escape from by creating a fantasy child is actually the reality of man's predicament in society (by its basic structure, has alienated man from himself and from other men).

The death of the phantom child confronts the characters with the realities of their lives. Only George and Martha are felt on the stage at the end of the play. They stand stripped of all illusions, there are no games left to play. Exhaustion overwhelsms them and they lay in each other's arms, finding comfort and maybe even love.

According to existential philosophy, a person cannot live his life through illusion. Man must learn to accept his aloneness, insignificance, and harsh realities before he can truly exist. George deals with those harsh realities at the end of the play when he decides to end the fantasy child even though it has been a comfort for them to have an imaginary child living with them. He has given up all his comforting illusions for the doubtful unknowns of reality. He has ultimately become enlightened and has accepted the responsibility for constructing a new life for Martha and himself. George, more than Martha, sees the danger this blurring causes, and his perspective allows him to make the decision to end the game. In the final scene George and Martha have been left alone. She asked him if he had to end the game, then he affirms that:

Martha: Did you... did you... have to?
George: [ pause] : yes
Martha: It was...? you had to?
George: [ pause] : yes
Martha: I don’t know.
George: It was... time.
Martha: Was it?
George: yes

(Act 3, P. 139).

Then George comforts Martha by assuring that things will be alright.

George: [long silence]: It will be better.
Martha: [long silence]: I don't … know. (Act 3, P. 139).
He continues the dialogue by interrupting her suggestion of the possibility of creating another imaginary child. George says "no" before she can even finish the sentence;

Martha: I don't suppose, may be we could …
George: No, Martha. (Act 3, P. 139).

The play ends with George quietly singing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf…" which concludes Albee's ultimate message that we must live without illusions.

George: [puts his hand gently on her shoulder; she puts her head back and sings to her very softly]:
Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf
Virginia Woolf
Virginia Woolf,

Martha: I … am … George …
George: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf …
Martha: I … am … George … I … am … (Act 3, P. 140).

2. The Search for Illusion and Realities in the Play:

If one focuses on the word truth, he will find that our world is full of people who will tell us what they perceive to be the truth, yet for the very face of it even without knowing the truth for ourselves, one can see what a fallen, confused world he lives in Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. This confusion is clearly noticed when it is difficult to separate between truth and illusion, reality and fantasy. When truth describes "things as they are"3, illusions are looked at as specific "perceptual experiences in which information arising from real external stimuli leads to an incorrect perception, or false impression of the object or event from which the stimulation comes"4. In this respect, "true illusions are … all of physical origin"5. In this play one is never sure whether anything is true or not because everyone has a different side of a story and he calls on other a liar. The audience/reader questions this play as each person of the story seems believable, in addition to the fact that the audience believe the truth.

Throughout Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Albee sets traps of truth that later spring upon the unsuspecting reader as illusions, or maybe not illusions, but who can be certain about that? For instance; Has George been involved in the death of his mother and father? Has he the Bergin boy? What is the real reason behind Honey and Nick not having children? The sarcastic tone of the play constantly reminds the audience/reader that what may, at first glance, be taken literally could be quite metaphorical, or just a downright lie. George and Martha's witty remarks leave us wondering whether or not the situation is real. For instance, how could one know whether or not George and Martha's son is in fact dead,
or could this just be an image of George's vindictive mind? George brings to the surface every possible imaginable truth ... the truth of Honey's hysterical pregnancy, the truth of Nick's illegitimate motive to marry Honey, the truth of Martha's infidelities and her empty hatred... or are these illusions? These are some of the major situations that Albee leaves in ambiguity. The very ambiguity Albee has created becomes a dramatic device to force the perceiver to the central issue of the play as Albee sees it himself: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? which means "who's afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf" means "who's afraid of living without illusions".

In the opening scene of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Martha argues of a George's failure to admire a joke Martha made earlier in the evening. She replaced the "Big Bad Wolf?" from Disney Cartoon The Three Little B crisis, with the name of the British writer Virginia Woolf (1882 - 1941). The reference to the famous writer is meaningful in terms of the literary allusion it suggests. For one thing, woolf went mad and committed suicide. Her self-destruction can be seen as a commentary on George and Martha's self-destruction. Also, as a fiction writer woolf created beautiful and elaborate stories, but ultimately illusory, stories just as Martha and George have created a perfect but imaginary son.

Albee first encountered this joke inscribed in soap on a mirror behind the bar of a local hangout, long before he wrote the play. He found it funny and remembered it years later when he was writing about a couple that have – and do not have – a son.

2.1 The Bergin Boy:-

The first act brings together the two couples, which are in contrast to each other. The difference between them lies in the skill with which George and Martha have learnt to mask their sterility and the way they purposely allow reality to mingle with illusion. George and Martha always have a story but it always seems to change; for instance when they talk about their son, they always have something different to say; George says "how bad a mother Martha is bringing home strange men". Another time, Martha accuses George of being "a bad parent". They are always trying to get back at each other, yet they still don't know what is real. Certain questions are raised, such as; has George really killed his parents? Do they really have a son? Are they really crazy and making – up their lives? Has George really killed his son? How? The profane beginning is only a small indication to the cruelty that George and Martha will unleash in the course of the play. They are alienated not only from each other, but from their own true selves. The play proceeds as George and Martha invite another couple, Nick and Honey, over for a night of drinking. Nick represents the wave of science, he is in control of himself but helpless in the association with humanity. The audience/reader also find that Honey continually finds ways by which she escapes reality. She avoids
confronting her husband's infidelity by pretending not to hear or see what is going on.

Early in Act Two, George and Nick are alone. Each reveals much of his past history. A reference to Nick's choice of drink, bourbon, prompts George to tell Nick a story about something that happened when George was 16 and went to a bar during prohibition with a group of friends. One of these friends was a boy who had "accidentally" shot his mother. This boy has innocently ordered "bergin" (bourbon whiskey) at the bar and the entire room that is full of people here laughed at his mistake. Is this boy actually George himself? This question is raised by Martha to George; "you used to drink bergin too", (Act 2, P. 76) hinting that it is George who has actually drunk bergin and killed his mother. From a different point of view, one should not be so hasty in accepting Martha's connection of George with the bergin boy. George notes that "everyone started ordering bergin"(Act 2, P. 62) so he too could have ordered bergin, without being the boy of whom he speaks. Sometimes later, George tells Nick that the boy was driving along a country road, his father beside him. Swerving to avoid a porcupine, the boy hit a tree, and the father has been killed. Since then, the boy has been in an asylum and has not uttered one sound, "and drove straight into a large tree" "That was thirty years ago".(Act 2, P. 62) One can add sixteen to thirty and get forty six, the age Albee specifies for George. So logically speaking George is the bergin boy, but he denies that.

2.2. George's Novel:-

George is humiliated by Martha's openly sexual conduct with Nick, she deepens the wound by telling one of his deepest secrets in a childlike chant. Secret concerns a novel George has written that mirrors the story he has just told Nick, about the boy who has been the cause the death of his parents. Is this novel true or not? Martha says that the novel is "A book about a boy who murders his mother and kills his father, and pretends it's all an accident!" (Act 2 p.161) to which Honey cries "An accident" meaning the accident of the bergin boy who, as George has stated;

"Had killed his mother with a shotgun some years before .......... accidentally, completely accidentally without even an unconscious motivation", (Act 2, P. 61).

and then;

"The following summer, on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket and his father on the front seat to his right, he swerved the car, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a large tree," (Act 2, P. 61)
"was not killed, of course, and when 
they told him that his father was dead,
he began to laugh". (Act 2, P. 62)

Nick seems to believe that story, he asks about the bergin boy "Is he.... still there?" (Act 2, P. 62) George's reply stretches one's credulity: "Oh, yes. And I'm told, that for these thirty years ha has .... not ... uttered .... one .... Sound"(Act 2, P. 62). If this is true literally, then the bergin boy cannot be George. If it is only a figurative statement, the thirty years without uttering a sound suggest George's failure for the past three decades to publish his novel. George has been bullied and degraded by his father, who has refused to let George publish the book, "Sir, it isn't a novel at all... this is the truth... this reality happened... To ME!" (Act 2, P. 82).

One final comment on the subject appears much later in the play, in Act Three George mentions his college graduation present from his "Mommy and Daddy"(Act 2, P. 117). Nick comments; "was this after you killed them"? (Act 3, P. 117) and George defies him, "maybe" (Act 3, P. 117) with Martha adding "yeah; maybe not, too" effectively reversing her earlier position on the subject. In reality one is not able to know whether George is the bergin boy, or the novel is a true story of his fifteenth and sixteenth years, but we can at best make a decision based upon the way we "feel" about it at the conclusion of the play.

2.3. Honey's Hysterical Pregnancy:-

On one level, Nick and Honey are necessary to the play because they provide an audience for George and Martha's verbal battle. On a thematic level, Nick and Honey are a contrast to George and Martha. Nick is on the way up; George is a failure. Martha is loud and aggressive; Honey is pallid and weak. George is a historian; Nick, a biologist. Martha cannot have children; Honey uses secret means of birth control. Finally, however, the outcome has been sad, George and Martha attempt to communicate with each other; Nick and Honey seem destined never to connect.

In Act Two, Scene Two, Martha and Honey return. Honey alludes to an appendicitis that turned to be a false alarm. George and Nick exchange glances. They know that Honey is referring to her false pregnancy, but does she know it? Is this a deliberate lie, or just a myth she has come to believe? The line between truth and illusion may be blurred for Honey too.

So, another major ambiguity of truth and illusion would be the question of Nick and Honey never having children. Can they have children, or do they just not want any? Honey fakes her pains, she throws up a lot and gets sick, occasionally all by herself, she says "I... don't...
want… any… children…. I'm afraid! I don't want to be hurt (Act2, P. 105).

The ambiguity lies in the question "what does the word "hurt" refer to"? Does Honey fear the physical pain of childbirth, or does she fear the psychological hurting a child can bring, unwittingly or otherwise, to its parents? George questions Honey; "How you do it? Hunh? How do you make your secret little murders stud-boy doesn't know about, hunh? Pills? PILLS?" (Act 2, P. 106). Even though George accuses Honey, he does not reveal any truth, Honey has said nothing, she is silent and afraid. We begin to realize that the "truth" about Nick and Honey's reproductive dilemma will never be revealed. This scene is then concluded by another ambiguity where Nick admits that he cannot separate truth from lies:

George: "Once ... once, when I was sailing pas Majorca, drinking on deck with a correspondent who was talking about Roosevelt, the moon went down, through about it for a little ... consider it, you know what I mean... and them, POP, came up again... Just like that".

Martha: "That is not true! That is such a lie!"

George: "You must not call everything a lie, Martha (To Nick) must she?"

Nick: "Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what.

Martha: "You're damned right!"

George: "You're not supposed to. (Act 3, P. 118).

2.4. The Imaginary Child:

The biggest illusion of all is the imaginary son. At the very beginning of the play we realize that there is a hint about that child when George warns Martha "Just don't start in on the bit about the kid, that's all. While Martha mentions him to Honey when they were at "euphemism", George and Martha both bring him into the conversation after that.

George, however, forces Martha to tell the story of their son, to play the last game, Bringing up Baby. She begins, "it was an easy birth... once it had been .... Accepted, relaxed into". (Act 3, P. 127) then George questions Martha whether it was a son or a daughter? She answers only "A child!" (Act 3, P. 128) as if she were referring to an "it" rather than a "she" or "he". Already one must wonder how true the story is. Honey demands the couple to stop what they're doing. She believes a telegram has arrived announcing the son's death. George prepares Martha for the news, slowly and deliberately.

George: "Martha ... (Long pause)... our son is ... dead.

(Silent) (A tiny chuckle) on a Coventry road,
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with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight in a ...

(Act 3, P. 129).

The circumstances he describes are precisely those of the boy in the "bergin" story, which turns this into an evidence that the story George has told Nick is pure invention.

Martha (Rigid fury):- "You ... CANT... DO... THAT!"

George: "...... large tree".

Martha: "YOU CANNOT DO THAT! (Act 3, P. 134).

At this point Nick thinks that the son is actually dead and therefore, actually did not exist.


Little by little Nick begins to put the pieces of the puzzle together. George then announces that he has eaten the telegrams which carry the news of the son's death and Nick senses something wrong. Nick at first attributes her reaction to be shocked over the news. But, when Martha challenges George's right to the act of murder, he replies "YOU KNOW THE RULES, MARTHA! FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, YOU KNOW THE RULES!" (Act 3, P. 137).

Nick: "What are you two talking about?" (Act 3, P. 137).

George: (to Martha):- "I can kill him, Martha, if I want to."

(Act 3, P. 137).

Martha: "You have no right... you have no right at all ..."

(Act 3, P. 138).

George: "I have the right Martha. We never spoke of it; that's all. I could kill him anytime I wanted to".

(Act 3, P. 138).

Nick finally comprehends what the reader has already suspected that George and Martha's son is imaginary, yet: another of George and Martha's games, complete with its own set of rules. Nick the asks George: "You couldn't have... any?" which George corrects, "we couldn't," (Act 3, P. 138), and Martha echoes "Not only couldn't but didn't, for the child was only an illusion, created with words, and destroyed by them" (Act 3, P. 139). For once George shares with Martha the responsibility of their failure to have children.

Being an absurdist, Albee has left the readers with question marks printed on their faces: what has caused Martha and George to "create the child? They have taken out of God's hands the human miracle of birth, and have thus incurred the wrath of God, George recognized this finally: "I'm not God. I don't have the power over life and death, do I?" (Act 3, P. 136). This leads us to another point that if George's lines are
considered, it may be seen that his assertion of his ability to kill the child is not just an assertion of his right to, but his ability to as well:

"I can kill him, Martha, if I want to" (Act 3, P. 137)
"AND I HAVE KILLED HIM!" (Act 3, P. 137).
"I have the right, Martha. We never spoke of it: that's all I could kill him anytime I wanted to." (Act 3, P. 137).
"It was... time." (Act 3, P. 139).
"It will be better." (Act 3, P. 139).

Once the "Exorcism" of the child is done, everything changes. The last moments of the play are in vivid contrast to the first. The sharp cruel language is changed by short phrases and monosyllables. The sharp-tongued George of the earlier scenes is now gentle and tender. The abrasive Martha seems fail and complains of being cold. At one point Martha says, "I don't suppose, maybe, we could..." (Act 3, P. 140). What is she suggesting? Going back to the illusion? Or beginning a new one? "The song in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" becomes a lullaby that George sings to soothe Martha, who answers, "I... am... George... I... am." (Act 3, P. 141). Albee has referred to the song as being "Who is afraid to live without illusions?" Martha's fear reveals her as frail and vulnerable, fearing life without fantasy that has helped her live. This song has become a haunting rhythm to her realization that her future is uncertain and full of nameless threats.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? has no easy answers as all of Albee's plays, it challenges and stimulates the audiences, it holds certain possibilities and views such as: the play could possibly be taken as hopeful, and that the exorcism leads to more honest communication and clarity in George and Martha's lives. Now that they have got rid of a destructive fantasy, they can progress to release themselves from their other defenses-liquor, cruelty and more closer together. While if the play is bleak, leaving George and Martha totally defenseless against the horrors of the world, then some shields against life's dangers are necessary and that George's and Martha's fantasy child hurts no one. Another possibility is that the play is simply descriptive, suggesting that this is not a crucial evening for George and Martha, but part of a cycle they are doomed to repeat forever. The readers who follow this theory feel that George and Martha are engaged in yet another ritual that will repeat itself endlessly, without any hope.

2.5. Lappin and Lappinova

Albee has revealed that the punning phrase "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" which serves as both the title and the current motif of his play means "Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Wolf?" when Martha admits at the end of the play that she is afraid of Virginia Woolf, she is confessing that she is terrified of facing the future without the fictional
child whom she and her husband George have created and whom George has just "killed". There is another ambiguity here, which is the leap from the allusion to Virginia Woolf to the idea of the fear of life without illusions.

The key to relate the name to the notion is Virginia Woolf's short story *Lappin and Lapinova* which, like Albee's play, shows how a marriage can be created, held together, and then destroyed. The major characters of the story Ernest and Rosalind go on their honeymoon, they fabricate an imaginary world inhabited by rabbits. They themselves are Lappin and Lapinova, King and Queen of this secret wilderness. After a couple of years, however, Ernest grows bored with the game, Rosalind senses that and feels lost and afraid. One evening Ernest returns home and informs the frightened Rosalind that Lapinova is caught in a trap… "killed", and sat down to read his newspaper as if nothing had happened. The story concludes, "so that was the end of that marriage"¹⁰.

Like the couple in *Lappin and Lapinova*, George and Martha have tied their childless marriage together with make-believe. At the end of the play Martha is "Afraid that she, like Virginia Woolf's Rosalind, must face life without the props of the now defunct fiction she had shared with her husband.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* explores the concept of truth and illusion extensively. The treatment of illusion as truth and truth as illusion is shown mostly through the story of the phantom child. Albee has set traps of truth and illusion which were very difficult to solve. He has created each character in a world of illusion which keeps him / her alienated from the rest of the world. After the excorsim of the child, all illusions disappeared and the characters dropped down to reality.
Notes

2- Read insight through opinion.htm.p.2of2.
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Bibliography

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