The Blinding Light in all this Hopeless Darkness: The Theme of Illusion in edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?".

Beth Anne Spanninger

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The Blinding Light in all this Hopeless Darkness:
The Theme of Illusion
in
Edward Albee's
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

by
Beth Anne Spanninger

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April 3, 1975

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Abstract

A major theme of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is the human need for illusion. Albee deals with the theme in this play by dramatizing the escapes from harsh reality that George and Martha take through games, alcohol, and the creation of an illusory son. He also demonstrates a denial of reality by Nick and Honey, whose values are based on appearances, and whose lives are geared to gaining success they define by wealth and power. Albee emphasizes the sterility of both marriages but does not suggest that lack of progeny is the root of his characters' misery. (And the sterility he exposes is emotional and psychological as well as physical.) Ablee seems to accept misery as part of reality. Fear of failure, loneliness, meaninglessness, and death are part of the human condition. Albee therefore concerns himself not with the cause of his characters' fear and pain but with their responses to an existence that necessarily includes fear and pain.

Focusing on the relationship between George and Martha, the play examines the response of clinging to illusions to numb the pain of reality and exhibits the paradox that it is both necessary and impossible for human beings to live with illusions. Though George and Martha need their games, their verbal battles, and their son-myth to sustain them, their ability to distinguish games from reality fades, and they are
totally absorbed by games and illusions they use to injure one another. Albee's grimly comic tone become more serious as he gradually reveals George and Martha's response to reality as negative, destructive, and false. The conclusion of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* shows George and Martha stripped of their illusions and aware that they must face reality. The rhythm and language of the closing lack the energy of other sections of the play, but the change reflects the loss of annihilative energies and shows George and Martha close together, close enough to whisper and to touch. Albee's ending is ambivalent; the future of his characters is unresolved. But Albee's message concerning the theme of illusion is more clear. Rather than endorsing illusion, Albee attacks it by exposing its destructive nature and by showing that only when they are rid of it are George and Martha able to establish real contact. Because Albee brings his characters to an awareness that they must confront reality and, by implication, suggests that all human beings should face their condition as it is, his vision connects him to the theater of the absurd and to the absurd point of view articulated by Albert Camus.
I. Introduction

Who's afraid of Edward Albee? If they fear him, theater critics and scholars of dramatic literature have certainly not avoided attempts to analyze, criticize, and interpret Albee's plays. Since the success of his first full-length play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which opened at New York's Billy Rose Theater in October, 1962, Edward Albee has received more critical attention than any other playwright who emerged during the 1960's. Though the attention has not been unanimously affectionate and reveals varied and contradictory responses to Albee's works, even those critics who have made negative comments about Albee's style, form, or content or have condemned what they think to be his themes, message, or vision do not deny that Edward Albee has made a significant contribution to American drama.

That part of the contribution most often judged as uniquely Albee's is his use of language--his ability to capture the American idiom and cliché and to write pungent dialogue and repartee which pierces and punishes as it entertains. The reason that Albee's contribution is significant is not that he makes a radical departure from theatrical conventions. In fact, suggested influences on Albee are numerous. It is generally agreed that Albee is part
of the tradition of the theater of the absurd and has been influenced by Ionesco, Beckett, Genet, and Pirandello. His style and content have been linked also to Strindberg's expressionism and Ibsen's social drama, and his philosophy to that of French writers Anouih, Giraudoux, Sartre, and Camus. The concerns in his plays place Albee also in the shadow of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller. If he indeed fuses elements of naturalism, realism, expressionism, and the theater of the absurd, however, Albee does so in a body of dramatic literature which is undeniably American.

Albee's plays not only contain language which is very American but also have at their center an unrest with American values, practices, and institutions. Albee unequivocally exposes the vapidity and vacuity of the "American dream", not only in his 1961 play given that title but also in his other works. Success, security, and satisfaction are not even hiding under the surface of Albee's drama. Like many other twentieth-century American writers, Albee demonstrates that the "American dream" has turned out to be a horrible nightmare. His plays provide portraits and sometimes grotesque caricatures of helpless and hopeless lives: people who find no satisfaction in their relationships with other people or from their involvement in social institutions; people who are impotent not only biologically, but also psychologically and spiritually; people who try to
shield themselves from a harsh and futile existence by wearing masks, playing games, or clinging to illusions; people who, at best, maintain a kind of numbness in the face of one another's cruelties and a world without meaning.

It seems clear that Albee accepts meaninglessness and absurdity as données of existence. This vision connects Albee to the theater of the absurd as significantly as the form he employs in those plays most often labeled "absurd" (The Sandbox and The American Dream). Though all critics have not agreed about the nature of Albee's vision, many have devoted time to considering the truth or honesty of their interpretation of the vision Albee's plays illuminate. Most agree that one of Albee's major themes concerns the human need for illusion. This theme certainly explains why Edward Albee has been grouped with Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller, and it is also the reason that Albee's plays, though dealing with American people who speak an American language in American places, are vehicles for contemplating a universal situation—the human condition. Albee's response to that condition has been to create characters and powerfully and poignantly dramatize their responses to an irrational world.

Perhaps Albee's most powerful dramatization of
particular people trying to cope with the absurd human condition, a play that focuses on the tendency and necessity to live with illusions, is his critical triumph *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? This play combines all of what Albee does best with language, characterization, tone, symbols, and dramatic structure and deals, though ambivalently, more interestingly and pervasively than his other plays with the tension and conflict between illusion and reality. Examining *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? certainly raises the following question: does Albee endorse living with illusions as a sustaining and, perhaps, creative response to life's absurdity, or does he view clinging to illusions as a negative and destructive reaction to reality? This thesis will attempt to answer that question, using the thoughts, words, and actions of the characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? as support and evidence. It will also attempt to show how Albee's play reflects the absurd vision articulated by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* and discussed in connection with theater by Martin Esslin in *The Theatre of the Absurd*. A summary of the critical response of Albee's plays, emphasizing the criticism of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?, will accompany my interpretation and analysis of that play. Albee's own comments about his work, available in published interviews with the playwright, will also receive consideration.
II. Critical Response to Edward Albee 
and 
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Despite Edward Albee's assertion that it is not "...the responsibility of the playwright to present a dilemma and then give its solution..." or to "resolve" questions, especially questions that have no answers,"¹ countless critics not only assume the responsibility to discuss the dilemmas and questions Albee's plays present but also claim to find solutions and answers in his drama. The playwright was probably correct in denying the presence of such solutions, for, collectively, critics have displayed confusion rather than consensus regarding supposed resolutions to problems Albee probes. There has not been agreement, either, about what those problems are or even about Albee's method in revealing them. Albee would probably approve of that disagreement, admitting that he considers himself "...in a way, the most eclectic playwright who ever wrote."² Albee was amused when he calculated that critics had mentioned twenty-five different playwrights as major influences on his works, five of whom he did not know.³ Albee may also be amused by the myriad of labels given to his drama in attempts either to place it in a particular school or tradition or to distinguish it from established traditions in drama: modern morality plays; modern tragedy;
tragi-comedy; social satire; social protest; naturalism; realism; neo-realism; existential drama; theater of the absurd; theater of revolt; theater of cruelty; theater of protest; theater of the irresolute. Though it is not impossible for many of these labels to be simultaneously appropriate, the variety certainly indicates the multifarious responses to Edward Albee's plays and correctly implies a complexity in his drama which has caused confusion about its style, scope, and meaning.

Perhaps the most interesting, revealing, and relevant responses to Albee are those dealing with his tone and vision. Among them, contradictions abound. Albee has been criticized for being "nihilist, immoral, defeatest" and praised for presenting a "romantic and moral affirmation" that "man can give his life a unique worth and significance." Richard Duprey suggests that "philosophically, Albee's plays both celebrate and cause sterility, give no hope of anything better to come," and "only in his consistently pessimistic point of view does there appear to be any genuine consistency in his work." Like Duprey, Allan Lewis believes Albee's is a philosophy of "despair, emptiness, and sterility." Drama critic for The Nation, Harold Clurman, writes that Albee's tones are of "pessimism and rage." Praising Albee's ability to write dialogue but also criticizing his vision, Anthony Hilfer calls Albee "a brilliant comedian of sickness."
Many critics, however, oppose the scholarship and reviews assessing Albee's tone as pessimistic and his vision as sick. Calling them "modern morality plays," Wendell Harris thinks Albee's plays "contain more assurance of the possibility of meaningful moral choice than has generally been offered by recent drama." Rieter Norton maintains that Albee displays an undeniable aspect of renewal and hope. Victoria Levene describes Albee's works as life-affirming, a dramatization of "the achievability of order and change through the exercise of individual will and moral involvement." C.W. Bigsby devotes an entire book to demonstrating that Albee's tone is clearly hopeful, that his plays are "gospels," teaching "the primacy of human contact based on an acceptance of reality." Rather than assuming that Albee's vision is either definitely optimistic or definitely pessimistic, Robert Brustein claims that Albee offers no vision at all or, at best, one that is falsely conceived:

Albee proves...that he has wit, cunning, theatricality, toughness, formal control, poetry--in short, all the qualities of a major dramatist but one: that selfless commitment to a truthful vision of life constitutes the universal basis of all serious art.

Brustein thinks Albee's is merely a "drama of impersonation," a recapitulation of themes and attitudes of other dramatists in plays built around well-worn problems: the conflict between illusion and reality; the inability of
humans to communicate; the "nightmare vapidity" of middle-class family life. He says that Albee is concerned also
with

...narcissism, impotency, sado-masochism, and homosexuality,... with protagonists whose sensual lives are paralyzed or perverted, ...but he is unwilling to be explicit about his characters' problems and his plays conclude with ambiguous religious affirmations or garbled philosophical generalities.... His plays are too shallow in conception, superficial in design, facile in feeling.

Brustein is correct in pointing out that Albee's plays concern "well-worn problems" and conclude ambiguously, and perhaps the observation that Albee is not always explicit about his characters' problems is also correct, but these characteristics need not be negative qualifications or preclude the possibility of a "truthful vision." The problems Albee's plays expose may be well-worn for the very reason that they cannot be explicitly explained or unambiguously resolved. Albee's ambiguity and ambivalence are intentional: "If I've been accused of writing plays where the endings are ambivalent, indeed, that's the way I find life."  

Like Edward Albee's entire canon, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? prompted varied and often contradictory reactions from scholars and reviewers. The play ran for two years on Broadway and, though denied the Pulitzer Prize, received many awards, including the New York Drama Critics'
and Tony Awards for the best play of the 1962-63 season. It also appeared with great success in most European capitals. Lavished with praise by many, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? received labels like "brilliant and moving," a drama "alive and energizing," "a shattering play and a crucial event in the birth of a contemporary American theatre," "a powerful expense of passion," the best work of the "most skillful composer of dialogue that America has produced."

Some critics, however, condemned the play's language and action as vulgar and shocking, and reviewers for church-affiliated magazines like Commonweal and Christian Century attributed to Albee "a false view of life." Charles Samuels suggests that the play was a success because it "panders to the sadism of its viewers," and its "raciness, melodrama...and underlying vulgarity...make the play theatrically exciting." Alfred Chester sarcastically comments that Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? has most of Albee's virtues: "back-biting, butchery, bitchery, humiliation, verbal castration, exposure, physical mauling." Walter Kerr sees the vision Albee sets before us in the play as "weaving, bleary, bankrupt." Objecting also to the play's ending, he calls it "both thin and familiar, neither vigorous enough nor inventive enough to account for the size of the scab we have so painfully been
picking off." Kerr admits, however, that Albee's play is an admirable piece of writing with characters whose "damned dancing souls possess a naked vitality...that cannot in itself be challenged."28

A colorful kind of negative response to Albee's "smash hit" is contained in a 1963 review-article by Richard Schechner, editor of the *Tulane Drama Review*. Believing Albee to be a Broadway King primarily because of his "dirty jokes and wise cracks," Schechner views *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a sick and decadent play presenting perverse, false, and dangerous values: "bad theatre, bad literature, and bad taste," the play makes "...dishonesty a virtue, perversion a joke, adultery a simple party game" and contains "...morbidity and sexual perversity which are there only to titillate an impotent and homosexual theatre and audience." Following an ironic reference to the play as a "classic," Schechner explains that *...Virginia Woolf?* is a "classic example of bad taste, morbidity, plotless naturalism, and a misrepresentation of history, American society, philosophy, and psychology." His notion that the play is "corrupt and morally blind" results from his view that in it there is an "urge to escape reality and its...responsibilities by crawling back into the womb, or the bathroom, or both...." The play, according to Schechner, is "an endorsement of illusion."
Schechner's final comments are significant because they concern a theme Albee treats at length and a topic to which much Albee scholarship has been devoted: the desire or need to escape reality and cling to illusions. Schechner also expresses what seems to be a mistaken idea held by many critics, the notion that because Albee's plays, particularly *Virginia Woolf,* often dramatize the human urge to escape reality, Edward Albee necessarily supports and encourages that urge. Likewise, many critics have pointed to examples of sickness, immorality, perversion, and dishonesty in Albee's plays and conclude that Albee's artistic vision is therefore sick, immoral, perverted, and dishonest!

In strong and angry response to Richard Schechner's accusations in *Tulane Drama Review,* Alan Schneider, the Broadway director of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* wrote an article for the same periodical in which he asks, "Is Albee to blame for the sickness of his subject matter?" The director claims that in his experience, "a more honest or moral...playwright [than Albee] does not exist--unless it be Samuel Beckett." Contradicting Schechner, Schneider says Albee is dedicated to "shocking us with the truth of our present-day behavior and thought, striving to purge us into an actual confrontation with reality." Many interpretations and analyses of *Who's*
Afraid of Virginia Woolf? support Schneider's view, and in interviews, Albee has implied that he indeed writes dramas that attempt to make man "face up to the human condition as it really is." To find out what ...Virginia Woolf? dramatizes about the human condition and responses to it, one must turn to the play, the thing, itself. An examination of the play should yield the realization that critics who suggest that Albee implicitly encourages or thrives on the sadness and horror he describes are more shallow than the vision they blindly censure; critics who try to prove either that Albee's vision is totally pessimistic or totally optimistic have not "faced up" to the play (or the human condition) "as it really is;" critics who find definite resolutions at the end of Albee's drama attempt to diminish complexity Albee compounds. Like any honest contemporary writer, Albee offers in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? a vision that neither finds nor fakes easy solutions or definite resolutions, but a vision that shockingly and sensitively illuminates problems, pains, fears, and failures of human beings in an absurd world.
III. What Happens in Who's Afraid...?

A Peeling Process that Transcends a Battle of the Sexes

Though Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? has been called an important step in the birth of a contemporary American theater, its content and themes are often associated with processes of decay, decline, destruction, and death: "death lies like a sediment in Martha’s gin, Nick's bourbon, Honey's brandy, and George's bergin."¹ The drama has been described as charting the final decay of a sick marriage, the destruction of the American family, the death of the American dream, the downfall of academia, the decline of the West. Each of these collapses is present on some level, at some point in the play, but none is alone sufficient to explain what happens in the sometimes living—and sometimes dying—room of Albee's play. Like the young man who embodies the empty American dream in Albee's 1961 one-act drama, the characters in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? have certainly experienced falls, "...have suffered losses.... A fall from grace...a departure of innocence...less...less."² But unlike the characters in The American Dream (except Grandma), George and Martha and Honey and Nick, though not equally, are still alive and kicking, though not well, and have not completely lost the capacity to feel. In fact, it is the very capacity to
feel that causes Martha and George the pain they attempt to escape through games, sex, booze, and battles. They never stop feeling (even when George says he is "numbed enough," he feels his numbness), but they try to flee or forget feeling by maintaining a kind of detachment, by wearing "windshield wipers on [their] eyes" and "putting [their] tears in the ice box" (186). Nick, too, remains detached in his cool chromosomological cocoon of wave-of-the-future science, and Honey by not wanting to know anything or vomiting when nauseating knowledge or insight are forced on her. If they are falling, George, Martha, Nick, and Honey try to evade feeling or acknowledging that fall.

More prevalent than a process of falling is the process of "peeling" in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Upon finding out that Honey has been playing "peel the label" while curled up on the bathroom floor, George says:

We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all those layers, through the muscle, ...the organs...and...the bone...you know what you do then?...There's something inside the bone...the marrow...and that's what you gotta get at. (212 - 213)

Though compared by Robert Brustein to Pirandello's "comedy of concealment," Albee's play is also a tragedy of revelation as it gets at the marrow of the failures and inadequacies of its characters. Through gruesome games and verbal battles, violent and brutal, George and Martha draw
Nick and Honey into a long night of "peeling labels," of tearing off masks, of scraping through the skin and sloshing through organs of living illusions to which each character clings. No one escapes being stripped to the marrow; no one’s illusions are left unattacked. What remains after the peeling process is naked fear of facing oneself, facing one another, facing life without fantasies and illusions the play has slashed.

Ostensibly, especially before any beneath-the-surface incisions occur, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a "Strindbergian battle royal" with a mixture of love and hate, repulsion and desire, the term implies. Set in a home near a fictional New England university in fictional New Carthage, the play presents a few post-party, post-midnight hours in the lives of two faculty colleagues and their wives. Late one Saturday night George and Martha return rather drunk from a faculty party at the home of Martha's father, the president of the college where George is an assistant professor (albeit "bog" in the history department. Without telling George, Martha has invited Nick and Honey, a new member of the biology department and his little "slim-hipped" wife, to join them for a few more hours of drinking and entertainment. As the title and predominant tone of the "Fun and Games" first act suggest, the entertainment that ensues is sometimes comic,
but as the night wears on and the booze goes down and the labels are peeled, Honey and Nick witness Martha and George wound each other with words and games that, if comic, are "mercilessly comic," sade-masochistic, and deadly. Though their "death-dipped gamesmanship...exposes an anatomy of love," they spout cruelty more than kindness, especially in the first two acts of the play. Martha mocks and digs into George about his failures and flops, past and present, as historian, writer, husband, and man. According to Martha, George is a man who

...didn't have much...push...he wasn't particularly...aggressive. In fact he was sort of a...a FLOP! A great...big...fat...FLOP! ...He is some nobody, some bookworm, somebody who's so damn...contemplative, he can't make anything out of himself, somebody without the guts to make anybody proud of him....

(84, 85)

George combats Martha's cruelty wittily though rather coolly and passively during the first act, but he gradually becomes more active and malicious in return, spitting out his disgust with her alcoholic and sexual exploits, her "dirty underthings in public"(155), her filling the house with "empty bottles, lies, strange men..."(226). He calls Martha a "harridan" who is "spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded, liquor-ridden..."(157).

By the middle of Act II, George and Martha declare "total war"(159) on each other. Spurred on by George's
initial pose of indifference, Martha and Nick attempt adultery. This attempt and Martha's having broken the rule of a very important game by mentioning to someone else the existence of their mythic son push George to action. He forces Nick and Honey to acknowledge the emptiness of their marriage and decides to destroy the "bean bag"(98) child Martha has thrown out into the open. But beneath the "total war" struggle, beneath the games of humiliation and hurt, there is a core of emptiness, loneliness, and fear that goes beyond the blistering problems of a sick and sterile marriage. Though the focus of Albee's four-character play is on the complex relationship of George and Martha, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is more than a Strindbergian battle of the sexes. The revelation that George and Martha are childless does not account for the extreme intensity of their pain or ferocity. Their specific sterility is not the real plight, but their lostness, their fear of life, of death, of nothingness, of the reality that is the human condition is the plight both revealed and concealed by their love-hate duet.

A naturalistic sexual conflict is "enlarged and enriched" in *...Virginia Woolf?* "not only by its existential problem but also by an allegorical content...which transcends the immediate events of the play." Like the story George spontaneously creates in his game of "Get
the Guests," one that "can be read as straight cozy prose," the entire play is "an allegory, really--probably..."(142). The characters are not merely personified abstractions (though Albee declared in an interview that the play is concerned with George and Martha Washington, the fall of America, and the decline of the West), 12 but they are at times, even if in jest or as parody, representatives of certain attitudes, stances, states of mind:

...the dichotomy between George and Nick is not only that which separates failure, lost illusions and renounced ambitions from opportunism and the determination to arrive; it is also a conflict between the humanist and the technocrat, between originality which refuses to let itself be subdued on the one hand, and standardized conformism on the other; between the representative of artistic thought, and the scientist.13

Certain critics have pushed symbolic interpretations to an extreme, succumbing to a danger in reading Albee's play pointed out by Daniel McDonald:

... the individual who is largely concerned with the symbolism will miss the point of a fine drama.... The play is not an allegory about Godot, or Good Deeds, or the American Dream; it is a story of real people and their illusions....14

Rictor Norton, for example, pays more attention to Albee's characters as fairy-tale caricatures or mythical characters than as people. Based on the allusion in Albee's play-on-words title, Norton analyzes Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? as the story of the three little pigs: Nick is the big bad
wolf, who huffs and puffs; Honey is the first little pig, whose house of straw makes her fear the wind and cold; Martha, the second little (?) pig, builds a house of sticks which is torn away, leaving her exposed; George is the third little pig, whose house of bricks survives the wolf's power of destruction. Norton points to many examples of allusions to myth, folklore, and religious rituals in Albee's play. The presence of names, words, gestures, and activities with symbolic significance is undeniable, but McDonald correctly implies that Albee does not merely play with symbols in ...Virginia Woolf.

To accept McDonald's view is not to deny, however, that Albee's play is more than a slice-of-life representation of conjugal combat in a particular home on a particular night. "These four people are together to dramatize more than themselves." The breakdown in the relationship between husband and wife is indicative of a more fundamental failure in communication. Impotence belongs not only to Martha, George, Nick, and Honey but also to the contemporary world. "Albee's real subject is not marriage but society; his real aim human contact and not sexual reconciliation."

The fictional New Carthage setting is an Everywhere, though the name has real and specific reference to Carthage (which means "new city"), a city whose success
contained the seeds of its own destruction and whose society adhered to false and materialistic values:

...founded in the ninth century B.C. by a semi-legendary, deceitful Dido, [Carthage]... was razed to the ground by very real Romans in 146 A.D. By the fifth century it had again become a power, which St. Augustine in his Confessions called "a cauldron of unholy loves." Albee uses the historical conjugation of sex and power as spice for the American stew he simmers in this cauldron.

The play's references to sterility and destruction certainly involve more than the lives of two married couples. Albee suggests the inclusiveness or universality of the setting (connected to a universality) in an early stage direction. When George characterizes the region they inhabit as "Illyria...Penguin Island...Gomorrah..." (40), (realm of fantasy, realm of social satire, realm of sin),

with a "handsweep" he takes in "not only the room, the house, but the whole countryside" (40). In Act II, when Martha "swears to God" she'll "do it" (173) with Nick in the kitchen, George reads Oswald Spengler's prophecy that "the west...must...eventually...fall" (174) and then throws the book at the door chimes, an action that sounds the death knell.... In a conversation with Nick, George claims that he wants to defend all of Western civilization against inhuman scientists and mathematicians who want to construct a super-sexed and super-successful super-civilization. He tells Nick that he "will not give
up Berlin" (67). George also makes references to Parnassus, Majorca, the Aegean, China, Manchuria, and Crete at various points in the play: the world Albee's play includes is a wide one.

Universality is suggested not only in geographical references but also in the play's time scheme. A sense of timelessness comes from George's wit: Martha is "archaic" (166), has "taken a new tack...over the past couple of centuries" (155), and is "108 years old" (35). Martha's father is "over 200 years old" (41), and it is "rumored" that "the old man is not going to die" (41). George went to prep school "during the Punic Wars" (94), and when Nick asks how long he has been in New Carthage, George replies, "Forever" (32).

If the term "realism" is to be appropriately applied to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, it must be carefully defined. Broadway director Alan Schneider claims, "We certainly never thought of it as being realistic" in the sense of attempting a literal view of life in 1962 on a particular campus."^{22} The apparently realistic setting is intended metaphorically, says Schneider, emphasizing that Albee wanted the set to be "an image of a womb or a cave, some confinement."^{23} If the play were to be called realistic, Albee insisted that it would be necessary to re-define the term to mean that drama which faces "man's condition as it is."^{24}
Realizing, therefore, that Albee's play transcends straight realism and concerns not only a New Carthage living-room but also America and all civilization is not becoming "too involved with symbolism"; recognizing in the play elements of corrective satire concerning marriage and parenthood, phony intellectualism, the American dream, and science-versus-humanism is not "missing the point of a fine drama..." Multi-layers of tone, topic, and concern must be recognized in Albee's work. The real issue of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, however, involves the play's central symbol, one created by the playwright for the audience and by the characters for themselves: the illusory son.

Martha and George have tried to anesthetize themselves to despair, failure, and loss by creating an imaginary "blond-eyed, blue haired" (72) son, who has become the focus of their most serious game and the focus of their marriage. Their "own little sonny-Jim" (196) is the "survival kit" (115) for their relationship, the "bean bag" (98) they wield as weapon and shield against one another and against the reality they so desperately want to escape. Having defied George's warning not to bring up "the bit" (18) about "the little Bugger" (71) soon after Nick and Honey arrive, Martha is later called on to recite what "the bit" really means in their lives:
...he walked evenly between us... a hand out to each of us for what we could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love... and those hands... to hold us off... for mutual protection, to protect us all from George's... weakness... and my... necessary greater strength... to protect himself and us. (222)

According to Martha's "our son" recitation, the child is "the one thing" she has tried to carry "pure and unscathed" through the "sewer of [their] marriage" (227):

...through the sick nights, and the pathetic, stupid days, through the derision and the laughter... through one failure compounding another failure, each attempt more sickening, more numbing than the one before; the one thing, the one person I have tried to protect, to raise above the mire of this vile, crushing marriage; the one light in all this hopeless... darkness... our son. (227)

The vehicle through which they try to transcend "the mire of [their] vile, crushing" existence, the son is a fantasy abstraction conceived by Martha and George to sustain them. Drinking and verbal boxing are not enough to nurture their love or hide their hate and are merely temporary opiates, activities for "exercising" and "walking what's left of [their] wits" (33, 34). To transcend that "consciousness which is pain," they create and grasp an illusion that allows them to forget that they have not had or created anything else. The imaginary son may have been Martha's idea, but George, even if unwillingly or hesitantly, has participated in its creation: "...the one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of
is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the...creation of our...blond-eyed, blue haired...son" (72).

If the son myth serves as a kind of symbolic transcendence for Martha and George, it is also a symbol for Albee, a symbol of abstract ideals that are part of the American dream (George calls the son "our own little all-American something or other" (196), a symbol of illusions through which any human being tries to escape reality. Albee deals with this escape-through-illusions theme, to some extent, in most of his plays, but its emphasis in ...Virginia Woolf? becomes particularly perplexing in the play's third act, when the symbol of illusion is directly attacked and destroyed through George's invented murder of their invented son. Does Albee imply that the purgation of illusion is ultimately positive, or that human beings stripped of their pipe-dreams are unable to survive? The soft, simple, but ambiguous dialogue spoken by Martha and George after the painful death of their illusion does not resolve whether or not they will be better off without their "escape goat" son. Was the fantasy they invented imaginative transcendence or, at most, "transcendence downward?" (26) In their nakedness and fear, without weapon or shield, "is intimacy imminent or is their existence finished?" (27) Without the "one light in all (their) hopeless darkness," can their relationship
be sustained or improved? Are illusions satisfying avenues away from despair or imprisoning paths preventing love or communication and denying life? Though "an absurd work...does not provide a reply," Albee's play reveals an absurd point of view that implies a tentative and paradoxical conclusion about clinging to illusions, even if the future of Martha and George remains unresolved. The progression through "Fun and Games," "Walpurgisnacht," and "The Exorcism" demonstrates both the necessity and the impossibility of lying about reality. Understanding Martha and George as absurd characters who come to this absurd awareness may help to clarify the confusion surrounding the play's central theme and conclusion. Or viewing Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? in light of an absurd point of view should convince us to stop asking for clarification!
IV. "Fun and Games":

"The Refuge We Take When the Unreality of the World Weighs Too Heavy On Our Tiny Heads"

The first act of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* introduces themes, tones, and tempos that Albee expounds and expands with language and gestures of games and rituals throughout the play. "Fun and Games" initiates a kind of "comic inferno" in which George and Martha fence with words that are both "playful and deadly." Albee's use of swift and biting repartee reveals early in the play his talents with language and rhetoric, his sense of timing and nuance, his ability to juxtapose horror and humor. George and Martha speak a language of violence, yelling at one another, name-calling, indulging in invectives; but a semi-comic tone, through which they attempt to mask bitter reality and through which Albee "...in an American way... attempts to temper unpalatable truth," accompanies their verbal games. Though the fun and games are sometimes humorous, however, one critic refers to the humor as "gallows humor of those sentenced to die." An ambivalent tone is appropriate: like the boxing match in which Martha knocked George into a huckleberry bush, the surface and beneath-the-surface games
Martha and George play with words are "awful, really... funny, but...awful" (57).

The first act establishes not only Albee's talent with language but also the efficacy of language for his characters, which lies in manipulating themselves, others, and the unknown. "For Albee's characters in...Virginia Woolf?, verbal games are ways for asserting their hatred, disappointment, and worth." Unable to "relate," Albee's characters turn to language to "forge whatever identity and relationship their lives have lacked."

Their assertive language is often evasive and ambiguous, however, and confuses fact and fantasy. The web of words they weave "alternates between exposing and hiding what they would say." The ambiguity in language points to a central concern in the play, the difficulty for the characters to distinguish between illusion and reality. Sometimes they are purposely ambiguous, consciously concealing "the truth"; often, however, their ambiguity results not from evading reality but from forgetting or not knowing the difference between what is real and what is not. The inventive and confusing use of language in the first act thus implies a situation that is made explicit later in the play:
Nick. Hell, I don't know when you people are lying or what.

Martha. You're damned right!

George. You're not supposed to. (200)

Martha. Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference.

George. No; but we must carry on as though we did. (201)

As George and Martha "carry on" in Act I, even before their audience of two arrives, they suggest a feeling that they enjoy each other's performances, that "they are as attracted to each other as they are hostile." They also reveal a mood of disenchantment, discontentment, and frustration that begins when Martha walks in the door screaming "Jesus...H. Christ!" (3) and continues as she imitates Bette Davis in some "goddamn Warner Brothers epic": "What a dump!" (3). She boisterously and rudely demands that George help her remember the name of the movie, and by the time she describes the character Bette Davis plays as "discontent" (6), there is a strong implication that the dump she describes and discontentment she impersonates are hers. This opening scene is the first example of "actuality scorned indirectly" and displays "the motif of a loud, deprecating wife and pacifying husband and a departure from this unpleasant reality or judgment on it by means of impersonation."
The scene also begins Martha's role as name-caller and torturer, an identity in which she is as trapped as tortured George is imprisoned on a path of guilt, weakness, and failure to which he has resigned himself. In Act I, Martha calls George "cluck" (3), "dumbbell" (4), "simp" (14), "pig" (16), "blank" (17), "cipher" (17), "zero" (17), "sour-puss" (20), "muckmouth" (21), "paunchy" (53), "bastard" (58), "prick" (59), and "S.O.B." (76). She accuses him of not knowing anything (5), never doing anything (7), and making her puke (13). Most of the insults refer to George's passivity: "If you existed I'd divorce you.... I can't even see you."(16) After Nick and Honey arrive, they are drawn into the game of "Humiliate the Host," and by the end of the act, "Georgie-Porgie-put-upon-pie" (12) is more than a meaningless phrase Martha has taken from a nursery-rhyme. The phrase is an example of Albee's using a cliché to reveal the truth. Evidently, George has been "putting up" with being "put upon" for a long time.

George wants to avoid humiliation, but he cannot because he has adapted himself to a situation he despises. being married to the daughter of the president of the university (there are easier things in this world..."[27]), he has lost his "integrity, individuality, and manhood."10 His professional career has been stalemated, and, at most, George represents "...dashed hopes,
and good intentions. Good, better, best bested" (28). Since he "didn't have the stuff, he didn't have it in him" (84) to become head of the history department, in Martha's eyes George is "a bog...A fen...A G.D. swamp" (50). And as the play progresses, it becomes obvious through statements, stories, and symbols that George has resigned himself to "accommodation, malleability, adjustment" (102) not only in his career but also in his marriage, in his life.

On one level, introduced in "Fun and Games," George represents the failure of the American intellectual. He describes himself as "a Doctor. A.B....M.A....PH.D....ABMAPHID!" (37). ABMAPHID "has been variously described as a wasting disease of the frontal lobes, and as a wonder drug" (37). Though George's intelligence, wit, and imagination sometimes serve as opiates for him, his ABMAPHID identity has immobilized him. He has suppressed the emotional aspect of his humanness, and his concern for history, variety, individuality, and that which is human is established only on an intellectual level, in witty but sterile words, sentences, and speeches. Martha is not incorrect when she says to George, "You talk like you were writing one of your stupid papers" (156). In his Act I conversation with Nick, which sets history and humane concerns against science and mathematics, George
claims that he unalterably opposes the establishment of a uniform "smooth, blond,...superb and sublime"(65,66) race of men, "test-tube-bred...and incubator born"(65), that middleweight champ-biologist Nick represents. George says he will battle Nick to the death, "one hand on [his] scrotum, to be sure"(68), to preserve the "diversity, multiplexity, individuality...and liberty" that belong to the "rhythm of...history"(67). But George's threat is verbal. His strength lies in his use of words, words by which he avoids emotion or pain.

Whenever a painful experience occurs for George, he tries to retreat into a realm of imagination by playing a role or using a prop. For example, when Martha insults him by comparing him to Nick (to Nick) "Hey, you must be quite a boy, getting your Masters when you were... twelve" (49). George tries to ignore the subject but then pretends to enjoy the contrast between Nick's success in the biology department and his crippled position in the history department. "He strikes a pose, his hand over his heart, his head raised, his voice stentorian" and says, "I am preoccupied with history"(50). When Martha mentions George's paunchy and out-of-shape pectorals as she drools over Nick's "firm body"(52), George asks Honey to take a walk around the garden. When Martha tells Honey and Nick about the boxing match she and George had (a story that
may or may not be true, though, "all truth being relative" (it does not matter), an "accident" that George uses as an "excuse for not having gone anywhere" (57). George leaves the room and returns with a gun. He shoots it at Martha, but it pops only a Chinese parasol; it is merely a prop. This pattern pervades most of the first act: emotional tension, serious arguments, and painful moments are cut short or escaped through words and gestures on a game level.

George's vehicles to insulate himself from pain are the intellect and the imagination, but the "original game-girl" (207) Martha plays escape-reality games at more of an animal level, using her tongue and body as weapons to yowl, howl, bray, curse, drink, and fornicate her way through the play. George refers to her as a "sub-human monster" (19); she chews her ice cubes "like a cocker spaniel" (14), nibbles at her glass (167), and laughs like a hyena (25). George also calls her "vulgar" (24), "destructive" (46), "monstre," "bête," "putain" (100), and says, "Hark: Forest sounds... Animal noises" (100) when he hears her voice from upstairs. In a conversation with Nick, George refers to Martha as a "goddamn dog" (139). The sounds Martha utters, the names she is called, and the priorities of promiscuous sex and power she demonstrates characterize her as a bitch. Both George and
Martha are kinds of beasts: "college beasts who are the perversion of the passions and the intellect."  

Act I also reveals a childish or child-like side of Martha and introduces the emphasis she places on being Daddy's little girl. Not all of Martha's outbursts are loud, vulgar, and brutal. Sometimes she talks baby-talk (I'm firsty*flg; "C'mon over here and give your Mommy a big kiss†‡), and often she seems to drift back into an idealized childhood, in monologues describing her "Daddy," a strong, intelligent, wonderful, successful man whom Martha worshipped and still does. Martha likes to think she is the apple of her father's eye, though George considers her to belong to another part of him: "She is his ...right ball, you might say"(47). (What Daddy is really like we never know. We never meet him, and we hear only George's and Martha's opposing and extremely subjective points of view. But his invisible presence hovers over the play, and he is often used as a weapon in the verbal battles between George and Martha.) Martha's baby-talk and bragging about her father are merely additional escape routes from reality. Because she has been unable to be a mother, she exaggerates her role as daughter, and she uses Daddy as another knife to cut George, who has failed to measure up to his father-in-law. George has failed to be Daddy's son.
Honey and Nick provide an audience for George and Martha's fun and games and also serve as contrasts and parallels to the older couple. Honey is slight and slim-hipped; Martha is large and ample. Nick is a blond and well-built former "intercollegiate state middleweight champion"(52), and George is thin, going gray and bald. Honey is passive, "pure and simple"(24), unlike aggressive Martha, and Nick's scientific attitude and career are ostensibly contrasted to George's humanistic and historical concerns. On another level, the couples are painfully alike. All four characters attempt to escape or detach themselves temporarily from reality. Honey "gargles brandy"(142) instead of Martha's gin to numb herself. Nick clutches a scientific hope in the future and grasps values of the American Dream—success, power, wealth—instead of looking to history, as George sometimes does, to escape the present.  

When people can't abide the present they do one of two things...either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they set about to alter the future. And when you want to change something...you BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! (178)

Nick's banging toward the future is as impotent as George's retreat into the past, but he is not so aware of his impotence as George is. In Act I, Nick's values are probed and articulated by George, but later in the play,
loosened by more bourbon and led on by Martha, Nick demonstrates his opportunistic attitudes and expedient morals on his own. Nick is as "ineffectual"(111) as George, though his accommodations to reality are pragmatic rather than imaginative. He admits his stance of scientific detachment: "I don't like to...become involved..."(34). Despite his name (Nicholas means "Victory over the people"),(13) Nick will not become a "historical inevitability"(112); he will "never succeed in creating everyone in his image, in counteracting history through biological genetics....his solid gold loins are impotent."(14) Nick and Honey, whose built-in defense mechanism against reality is habitual vomiting, are childless like their hosts and as sad, but they are less interesting and less admirable. More like The American Dream characters than are George and Martha, they seem to be unaware of their emptiness and impotence. They are not adept at asserting their imaginations "to convert illness into drama and humiliation into a game"(15) like George and Martha, whose inventiveness gives them a certain dignity.

"Fun and Games" therefore lays a foundation for the second and third acts of the play by probing the personalities and values of the characters and introducing us to their methods of evading reality. It also displays their (and Albee's) use of language to disclose and cover
"truth." Most importantly, it initiates the gradual revelation of the life-lie George and Martha have been living by. This evening of games is only one of many exercise sessions in which George and Martha "hack away at each other, all red in the face and winded" (92), but this particular performance will differ from the others because while she is upstairs "changing," Martha introduces the subject of their son to Honey, an action George ambiguously cautioned her against before the guests arrived. When George finds out that she has ignored his warning, the tone of the play momentarily sharpens as George ignores all conversation and threateningly fumes to himself: "O.K., Martha...O.K....You goddamn destructive..." (45-46). When Honey mentions the subject again, Martha uses the child (à la Strindberg) to taunt George: "...deep down in the private-most pit of his gut, he's not completely sure it's his own kid" (71). George tries to feign indifference during this conversation about the child, but a strange and uncomfortable tension accompanies the subject every time it is brought up. It is already clear in Act I that George and Martha use the son to injure one another.

The tone of "fun and games" sharpens not only when "the little Bugger" is discussed but also at the end of the act when Martha delivers more than short and witty
thrusts at George's inadequacies. With building force and emotional crescendo, ignoring George's pleas to stop, she pours out anger, bitterness, and disappointment about George's being a flop and a failure in Daddy's and her eyes. For the first time in the play, George is unable to contain his pain, and he smashes a bottle against the bar. The crashing sound and silence that follows fore-shadow the dynamics and action of the play's ending, when George smashes the illusion of a son. In this first act, however, Martha does not take George's smash as a signal to stop. She continues to insult him until George puts on his mask again, resumes his role as player, and drowns Martha's voice by loudly singing the song that amused Martha at Daddy's party: "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf..." (85) to the tune of "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush." This time the song angers rather than amuses Martha, and her shriek of "STOP IT!" (86) ends the game. Honey exits to vomit, Nick follows her, and Martha's exit line to end the act is the same word she shouted to open the play: "Jesus!" (86). No laughter follows this exclamation, however; humor is not part of its tone. The tone has shifted, providing a transition into the more serious games of acts two and three. George is the only character left standing in the ring—a hint that his passive pose and role as victim of humiliation will change.
V. "Walpurgisnacht": "It SNAPS Finally"

The second act of Albee's play extends the "dance of death" Martha and George perform in front of their guests and moves from the game of "Humiliate the Host" to "Get the Guests" and "Hump the Hostess." "Walpurgisnacht" (the night of witch revels and orgiastic explosion of evil forces in German folklore) appropriately names this act, in which more hatred, rage, resentment, and painful truth are released through more games and "Faustian distractions --drink and sexuality." The games become increasingly caustic, and the characters' masks are gradually peeled away.

There are some variations in the verbal fencing of Act II—the act opens with a match of wits between George and Nick. Nick discusses Honey's frequent attacks of nausea and divulges her hysterical pregnancy. He also confesses that he never really loved her but married her for money, the inheritance from her religious-swindler father. Their marriage of convenience contrasts Nick with George, who implies that in his "clumsy, old-fashioned way...somewhere back there, at the beginning of it" (103-104), he loved Martha. (George and Martha indeed demonstrate that somewhere, beneath the surface, perhaps, love is a part of their complex relationship.) George
also prods Nick into admitting his plan to maneuver and manipulate whatever and whomever he must (he will even "plow a few pertinent wives") to gain a top and indispensable position at the college. George thus reveals Nick's values as "pragmatic idealism" and his marriage to Honey as opportunism, because she is "a pragmatic extension of the big dream." Realizing that their lives are as sterile as his and Martha's, George tries to give Nick a "survival kit"; he tries to "make contact" and "communicate" to Nick the necessity to change his life, discard his false and pragmatic idealism before he is "dragged down" into the "quicksand" in which George and Martha are wallowing, before he, too, "descends a rung or two on the...ladder" George has descended, a ladder on which "you can't reverse yourself...once you're descending." George realizes that Nick and Honey are "at the beginning of a life of emotional estrangement, procreational sterility, exploitation, and pseudo-tenderness of which his and Martha's life is the end phase." He wants to communicate this perception to Nick. Nick shrugs off this advice, shouting "UP YOURS!"

Motivated by more insults from Martha, later in Act II George uses what Nick has told him to "get the guests," to create a story that lays bare the vacuum of Nick and
Honey's marriage and shows that Nick's virility has functioned only to create a "puff" in his wife. The story causes Honey to vomit again because she can't stand too much truth. "Honey's direct, intuitive perception of the senselessness of life, her vomiting, parallels Camus' definition of the Absurd": "...this malaise in front of man's own humanity, this incalculable let down when faced by the image of what we are, this 'nausea'...is the Absurd."^6

Though George has become an active participant (and director) in games during "Walpurgisnacht," part of his conversation with Nick in the beginning of the act ambiguously reinforces his role as passive bystander. He tells Nick part of the plot of a novel he may or may not have written, a story about a boy who may or may not be George himself, a boy who was placed in an asylum because he was unable to face the guilt of accidentally murdering his parents. A "needle jammed in his arm, his consciousness removed," the boy has "not...uttered...one...sound...for...thirty years"(96). Whether this story is only George's fictional fantasy or his autobiography, it is an accurate image for the asylum of resignation to alcohol, games, and illusions that George inhabits.

On this night, however, Martha does not allow George to "maintain the...firm-skinned serenity"(97) of the...
insane. She yanks the numbing needle from his arm. In Act II her sexual advances to Nick are even less subtle than in Act I. She leads Nick in a "familiar" and more than suggestive dance, "a very old ritual" (131), to which George responds with typical indifference by laughing, mocking, teasing: "Do your stuff...Martha!" (129). This attitude provokes Martha to push him farther, and she mentions another apparently taboo subject, the novel about a "naughty boy child who...killed his mother and his father dead" (134). When she suggests that George is the boy in the novel, he is again unable to restrain himself, and he leaps at Martha, grabbing her throat and yelling, "I'LL KILL YOU...YOU SATANIC BITCH!" (137). Head bitch and head witch on this Walpurgisnacht, Martha wildly pushes George past his passivity, though his actions to this point are still only empty threats and indications of what is to come. So far George has shot only a Chinese parasol, smashed only a bottle, killed only with words.

Act II again shows George and Martha throwing their "bean bag" back and forth to hurt one another. This time Martha introduces the subject when Honey talks about her habit of throwing up. Martha says, "...our son...used to throw up all the time, because of George..." (120). George, however, disagrees: "...our son...used to throw up all the time...[because] he couldn't stand you fiddling
at him... breaking into his bedroom with your kimono flying,...your liquor breath on him..., and your hands all over him..."(120). After a brief argument about the subject, George admits that he would rather not discuss it: "I never want to talk about it"(121). But it is clear that by this time George has no choice. The son will be the major weapon in the "total war"(159) they declare. George admits that he has "reconciled" himself to Martha's dirty habits and humiliation, that he is "numbed enough"(155) to take her when they are alone. Martha implies that George not only tolerates humiliation but enjoys it: "YOU CAN STAND IT!! YOU MARRIED ME FOR IT!!"(152). There may be some truth to what she says, but she has finally gone too far. As though it is a sudden realization, George says: "you're deluded....I thought at least you were on to yourself. I didn't know. I didn't know"(153). George must take action because Martha has passed the point of knowing the difference between illusion and reality. In her mind, the games—especially the son-game—have ceased to be games. She has "moved bag and baggage into[her] own fantasy world now, and...started playing variations on[her] own distortions. .."(155).

Martha talks as though she, too, has come to a sudden realization on this night:
...It's snapped, finally....The whole arrangement. You can go along...for-ever, and everything's...manageable. You can make all sorts of excuses to yourself....But then...something hap-pens...and SNAP! It breaks. (157)

Martha claims that it "snapped" for her at Daddy's party, when she looked at George and realized that he was "nothing":

I watched you sitting there, and I watched the younger men around you, the men who were going to go somewhere. And I sat there and I watched you and you weren't there! And it snapped! It finally snapped! And I'm going to howl it out,...and I'm going to make the damned biggest explosion you ever heard. (158)

The "Walpurgisnacht" revels are only a part of the explosion that results from George and Martha's "arrangement"'s having "snapped finally." The explosion reaches its peak in Act III when George resounds the "pow," "crash," "pouf," and "snap" of the first two acts by shattering the chimera that has made their "whole arrangement...manageable."

Martha's first battle tactic after she and George decide to find "ways to really get at"(156) one another is to seduce Nick. She blatantly displays her intentions while George is out of the room, but George sees what goes on, unnoticed, before he returns. Again he tries to mask his pain by playing a role, this time using a book for a prop. Infuriated by George's act of apathy ("Why don't you go back to your necking and stop bothering me? I want
to read" (173), Martha threatens to go upstairs with Nick, and George says he couldn't care less. When Nick calls him "disgusting," George laughs and makes a reply that, like many of his comments in the play, suddenly reveals the truth of a situation while its tone conceals his real feelings: "Because you're going to hump Martha, I'm disgusting?" (172). Convinced that George is really going to read his book, Martha leaves the room to allow Nick to get on with the "Hump the Hostess" game. George's mask drops almost immediately and, shaking with fury, "... he looks at the book in his hand and, with a cry that is part growl, part howl, he hurls it at the chimes" (174).

Like most of the sounds in Albee's play, the "bing-bing-bong-BOOM" (174) of the chimes serves an important purpose. It frightens Honey into telling George about a dream she was having in the bathroom, a dream that reveals to George that Nick and Honey are childless because Honey is afraid of having children, afraid of being hurt: "I DON'T WANT ANY... I DON'T WANT... ANY... CHILDREN... I'm afraid... " (176). Albee again confuses truth and falsehood by never clarifying whether or not Honey has committed secret abortions, but it is clear that Honey's confessed fear is really an admission that her life, like her husband's and her hosts', is a desperate retreat from reality.
An appropriate image for that retreat is her escape into bathroom during the party, where she curls up on the floor in a fetal position. The sound of the chimes brings her out of a womb of ignorance, brings her to George, who tries to enlighten her about the truth of what is going on between Martha and Nick in the kitchen, among the onion skins and coffee grounds.

The sound of the chimes is even more important because George turns it into a death knell; he shapes it into a purposeful plot to kill their son: "the bells rang and it was a message, and it was about...our son...and the message was...our...son...is...DEAD!"(180). As George imagines giving the news to Martha, he has a "strange half-smile on his lips"(181), and his semi-hysterical mixture of soft laughter and tears at the end of the act is perfectly appropriate to precede the "exorcism" of illusion he executes in Act III. The blend of laughing and crying is also an appropriate end to the sad, cruel comedy he and Martha have enacted in the first two acts of the play.
VI. "The Exorcism": Death of Illusion

Act III is the culmination of the "peeling process" in which George, Martha, Honey, and Nick have been (willingly or unwillingly) participating. A new George, attacker instead of victim, is the prime mover of the process in this act, and he uses Nick and Honey for his chorus as he directs the long night's last game: "Bringing Up Baby." Sick of games, Martha is now the retreating victim. Tired of torture and hewn by humiliation, George reaches a "snapping point" in Act II that causes him to shed the "firm-skinned serenity" of resignation and intellectualism, and he rediscovers an active and animal part of himself through the urge to kill that absorbs him at the end of "Waldpurgnacht." George does not give up his expert use of role-playing and props as he carries out the plan to kill their son, but the roles and props he uses in "The Exorcism" are not defense or escape mechanisms. They are methods of offense, created and chosen by George rather than forced on him; George erases rather than escapes his impotence when he finally corners and kills the illusion he and Martha have followed as an alternative route to reality. Combining cruelty and kindness, George skillfully brings that route to a dead end.
That George's act is a paradoxical blend of kindness and cruelty, mercy and revenge, is illuminated by parts of Martha's monologues in the beginning of Act III. Disappointed by her unconsummated conquest with Nick, she enters the living-room alone, feeling "abandoned" because she has been "left to her own vices" (185). She implies not only being let down by Nick but also feeling deserted by George and her father. Exposing the complexity of her character as she quickly shifts from screamed profanities to soft baby-talk, from howling laughter to quiet tears, from nervous noise to sobering silence, Martha puts on a performance for herself in which she confesses the frustration and disappointment she has demonstrated (but tried to hide) since the play's opening line. As she pretends to talk to George and then to Daddy, she reveals the misery she has been unsuccessfully masking, the crying she has kept "deep inside" her, the knowledge that she and George have misjudged and mistreated one another despite their mutual need and love, the realization that their life of games has been empty, as hollow as the sound of the ice-cube tears she jiggles in her glass: "CLINK!...CLINK!" (186).

When Nick joins Martha, she "clinks" at his failure, scorns him for being a flop at humping the hostess, but continues to admit the truth about her life, even if in
a lighter tone now, in speeches that are less for Nick's benefit than for her own. She knows that the games of sex and booze are "the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads" (188). She is aware that her promiscuous attempts, most of them thwarted by "boozed up...impotent lunk heads" (189), suffocate rather than yield happiness: "You're all flops. I am the Earth Mother, and you're all flops. I disgust me. I pass my life in crummy, totally pointless infidelities...would-be infidelities..." (189). She tells Nick, who is yet less aware of the truth she speaks than we are, that George is the only man who has ever made her happy. With a refrain of "George and Martha: sad, sad, sad" (189), Martha describes the paradox that is the source of their frustrating and frustrated relationship, the indissolubly bound loving and punishing that sustains and destroys them...

...George who is good to me, and whom I revile; who understands me, and whom I push off; who can make me laugh, and I choke it back in my throat; who can hold me...so that it's warm, and whom I bite so there's blood;...who tolerates, which is intolerable; who is kind, which is cruel;...who can make me happy, and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy....whom I will not forgive for having come to rest; for having said: yes, this will do; who has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it. (190-191)

By being too kind, too understanding, too permissive, George has punished Martha and himself. He has been
willing to learn her games "as quickly as [she] can change the rules" (191). But Martha's prediction that on "some night... some stupid, liquor-ridden night... [she] will go too far" (191) is correct and given ex post facto. George has already decided to play a new game, using his own rules, leading up to the murder that is as merciful as it is vengeful, more motivated by love than by hate. The mixture of loving and punishing that defines the relationship between Martha and George is the paradox that allowed the birth of the son and will allow its death.

George begins his act by ringing the door chimes and posing in the doorway with snap-dragons, affecting the embarrassment and language of a child (196). He claims to have picked the flowers for Martha and for "sonny-boy tomorrow, for his twenty-first birthday" (197), but his entrance line ("Flores; flores para los muertos" [195]) and his gestures with the "flores" indicate that this will be a death day. Snapping the snap-dragons at Martha and Nick as though they were knives or spears, George subtly introduces his intention to slay the dragon of their illusion. His first conversation with Martha concerns the moon. As they argue about whether the moon is up or down, in a manner that sounds as if they have played this game before, neither of them looks out the window. For George and Martha, reality is a matter of agreement.
Hidden and temporarily avoided by the moon argument is another topic that seems to be a matter of agreement: Nick's status as stud or houseboy. George wants to know "which is it: make up your mind. Either way..." (203). But the truth about what actually happened between Martha and Nick (never completely clarified) does not really matter to George:

Martha. Does it matter to you, George?

George. (throws a snap-dragon at her)
SNAP! No, actually, it doesn't.
Either way...I've had it.

Martha. Truth or illusion, George. Doesn't it matter to you...at all?

George. SNAP! (silence) You got your answer, baby? (204)

Though Nick is confused about Martha's first siding with him and then with George in the stud-houseboy conflict, and Martha is scared and confused about what George's performance is intended to initiate, it is clear to us that George's snapping of their illusion is imminent. Like a sleepy child, Martha pleads for no more games: "It's games I don't want. No more games....Ugly games...ugly" (207). But George grabs her and slaps her into a battle position, ready to "play...to the death" (209). George rounds up his audience for the last game, and when Honey enters she again verbalizes her chosen retreat from reality: "I've decided I don't remember anything...."
Don't remember; not can't"(211). George, however, will no longer allow anyone to forget anything or avoid anything. Getting at the "marrow," he will force knowledge and revelation on everyone. He begins "Bringing Up Baby" by again using their "bouncey boy"(214) as a weapon, forcing Martha to talk about the child by making her angry:

He's a nice kid, really, in spite of his home life; I mean, most kids'd grow up neurotic, what with Martha here carrying on the way she does;...climbing all over the poor bastard, trying to break the bathroom door down to wash him in the tub when he's sixteen....(215)

Rising to the occasion and accepting another glass of gin to help her, Martha begins "by rote" an "almost-tearful recitation"(216) about their son, a nostalgic, vividly detailed and apparently well-worn description of her son's birth and childhood. George aids her, at first, though they argue about the conditions of the birth of their illusion:

Martha. It was an easy birth....

George. Oh, Martha; no. You labored...how you labored.

Martha. It was an easy birth...once it had been...accepted, relaxed into.

George. Ah...yes. Better. (216)

In a dream-like state, with a soft and sensitive tone, Martha describes how she raised the idealized and idolized "perfect, wise and beautiful...boy"(222), but her
tone shifts to bitterness when she turns her attention to describing George's negative influence on the son and the boy's shame at the "shabby failure his father had become" (225). When Martha's tone shifts, George flings accusations and recriminations back at this "slashing, braying residue"(225) calling itself "Mother," hitting Martha where it hurts. He tells Nick and Honey that Martha's father "doesn't give a damn whether she lives or dies"(225) and finally states what we have already witnessed, that Martha uses the child as a weapon, as a "goddam club, whenever [she] didn't get things like [she] wanted them!" (225). The quarrel rises to a pathetic climax as Martha breaks down and admits that her son has been one attempt to find love and meaning in the sickness and mire of her life.

While Martha speaks, George intones the Requiem Mass in Latin, joining Martha in a "discordant duet" as at the end of Act I. The realistic level of the play disappears as Martha recites the detailed mythology with which she and George have given substance to their fantasy and George chants Latin. A kind of religious awe or mystical mood pervades the scene. Disjointed and sometimes purposeless words that were part of previous games are now transformed into exact words of a ritual. The chaos of the evening suddenly falls into place when Martha shows how real the myth has been to her, and George's parody

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of the Mass allows no doubt about his intentions. This duet is the theme of the play in reduced form: an account of the creation and life of a necessary illusion accompanied by words and a tone that call for its death.

After brief protests from Honey when Martha has completed her recitation, George shouts that he is "RUNNING THIS SHOW" (229) and proceeds to announce, rather triumphantly, that sunny-Jim is dead. He gives the account of the death, using words from his supposed novel about the boy who killed his parents. Describing the son's death as the death of the character in the novel, who is really or symbolically George, is another indication that passive George, silent George, George with a needle jammed in his arm, is dead.

As George shatters their illusion, he maintains a calm and confidence that were not present when he shattered the bottle over the bar or threw the book at the chimes. He is completely sure of himself as he plays the role of priest and directs the final game, so sure of himself that he is able to joke in the midst of Martha's wails of grief and pain. When she begs to see the telegram bearing the "sad news," George says that he ate it, and Honey, whose cries and comments provide a chorus for George throughout the scene, supports him.

It is Martha who hits an emotional peak in this scene
as she leaps and spits at George and falls to the floor, hysterically howling with rage and loss. She does not merely mourn the loss of her illusion but resists it violently, with pains probably more laborious than those accompanying its birth. She screams at George: "YOU CANNOT DO THAT! YOU CAN'T DECIDE THAT FOR YOURSELF! I WILL NOT LET YOU DO THAT!...YOU CAN'T KILL HIM! YOU CAN'T HAVE HIM DIE!" (232, 233). And then pathetically, realizing that George has indeed pushed the offspring of her illusion "over the EDGE" (233), Martha moans: "NOOOOO-OOooooo....No; no, he is not dead; he is not dead" (233).

When the exorcism of the son's spirit is fully realized and Martha sits silently, drained, on the floor, George resumes his Latin chant to the end of the death ritual: "Requiescat in pace" (237). After a long silence, he declares the party is over, and he sends the guests home.
VII. Denouement of Ambivalence

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? ends at dawn as George and Martha, alone together, very softly and very slowly discuss the change they have effected in their lives on this "long night's journey into day." Stripped of the shared myth that was the core of their games, battles, and their marriage, a myth they supposed to be their only escape from meaninglessness and sterility, George and Martha are naked, afraid, and confused. The sound, rhythm, and meaning of the crawling mono-syllabic language that ends the play reflect their uncertain condition:

Martha. Did you...did you...have to?
George. Yes.
Martha. It was...? You had to?
George. (pause) Yes.
Martha. I don't know.
George. It was...time.
Martha. Was it?
George. Yes.... It will be better.
Martha. I don't...know.
George. It will be...maybe.
Martha. I'm...not...sure.
George. No.
Martha. Just...us?
George. Yes.
Martha. I don't suppose, maybe, we could....
George. No, Martha.
Martha. Yes. No.
George. Are you all right?
Martha. Yes. No. (239-241)

The violent rhythm and articulateness of verbal battles have softened and sifted down to simple dialogue—not an exchange of "monologues between two deaf people" talking to each other, but a dialogue between two people who "hear each other with pity and sympathy." Following the exchange of ambivalent questions and answers, George repeats the song he sang to Martha after the crash and silence at the end of "Fun and Games." This time, however, he sings to her softly, tenderly, as he puts his hand "gently" on her shoulder: "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf..."(241). Martha answers three times with the same response; "I...sm...George..." (242).

The question of salvation for George and Martha and even for the departed guests, Honey and Nick, is a problem many critics have tried to solve by their interpretation of the play's ending. Most agree, rather sensibly, that Honey's conversion to wanting to face the reality of
having children is too sudden to be credible. That her "nausea" from fearing or having to face reality is cured when she exits has not been demonstrated. If she gives revelations of truth about herself or her marriage during the night, she does so without fully comprehending it. Likewise, though Nick is more aware than Honey that their marriage is a farce, and he claims sudden comprehension that the relationship between Martha and George has been built on a life-lie ("JESUS CHRIST I THINK I UNDERSTAND THIS!")^239), there is no evidence in the play that he has been taught or changed or saved by what he has witnessed. He probably leaves the party only to return to the vacuum of his sterile marriage and the false idealism of his career, not armed with the "survival kit" George tried to give him.

George and Martha have changed, however. The major myth of their lives has been traumatically and finally exorcised, and they now have only each other to lean on as they face reality. When Martha admits she is afraid of "Virginia Woolf," she admits fearing "life without false illusions."^4 Many critics have mistakenly interpreted Albee's ambivalent ending to the play as a definite sign that George and Martha are finally saved from a life of "sadness, pain, futility, contempt, and despair" because their "oh-so-sad games" are over. In the filmed version
of *Who's Afraid...?*, director Mike Nichols emphasizes this positive interpretation by ending the movie with a view of George's and Martha's clasped hands in front of a window through which day is breaking. Some of the positive interpretations of the denouement use Albee's religious allusions and images as support. George says that his final game will make Martha's performance...look like an Easter pageant"(208). He then proceeds to crucify and sacrifice the "poor lamb"(221) after hearing Martha's "confession," in a religious ritual in which he plays high priest:

In the reading of the Latin service, George celebrates the death of the son that will allow his and Martha's redemption and rebirth....In a symbolic act of transubstantiation, he claims that he ate the telegram, just as the priest at the elevation eats the consecrated Host in remembrance of Christ's last supper.  

The crucifixion George carries out and the Mass he celebrates are "rituals of atonement, purgation, and purification," which allow them to be "reborn, resurrected, and reunited at sunrise on Sunday."  

Albee's play thus demonstrates the cathartic principle that destruction and violence are not ends in themselves but purge the actors and the spectators and prepare the way for rebirth....Purged by "the exorcism," George and Martha can find rest and renewal in each other's arms as they live a life of eternal reality.  

Some critics who give this positive interpretation point
to the change in language and tone at the end of the play as proof that Martha and George are saved from the violence of their games and the cruelty of their former existence.

Other scholars have gone to the opposite extreme in their interpretations of the conclusion, also using language and tone as evidence for their opinions. They view the soft and simple dialogue, the single syllables, not as the words of the saved but the words of the hopeless, the lost, the doomed. If "what we dream rather than what we are is our essential truth," then Martha and George are doomed to a meaningless future because their illusion has been destroyed. "By losing the Dream, [Martha and George] find themselves in the midst of a Nightmare." Using the allusion in the title to support this interpretation, one critic claims that Albee, like Virginia Woolf, writes of "people who cannot find happiness beyond the framework of their dreams....people whose hearts are broken when their illusions are broken." Referring to the changed manner in which George sings the title song at the end of the play, to the tune of a nursery rhyme song Eliot includes in "The Hollow Men," Emil Roy also maintains that Martha and George are destroyed without their illusion to cling to. He believes that Albee purposely ends his play with a tone and tune that recall the ending of T.S. Eliot's poem, reflecting a vision of despair, not hope: "This is
the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper. 12

It is undeniable that Virginia Woolf concludes with a whimper of fear from Martha, fear because the illusion that has been exorcised has not been concretely replaced. "Albee disposes of illusion without furnishing corresponding truth." 13 As she sits on the floor, wounded and punished, Martha is still barren. But the exact shape of the future is not a foregone conclusion. Albee does not demonstrate what happens next in the lives of George and Martha—we cannot go beyond the play in a discussion of its characters except by guessing. And the ending of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is uncertain as "subdued Martha reaches to George in a counterpoint of 'yes' and 'no'." 14 George himself tempers the statement that "it will be better" by adding, "maybe." There is no evidence in the play that George and Martha are either saved or damned. Their situation must be viewed in the light in which St. Augustine views the thieves on the cross (a view Samuel Beckett refers to in Waiting for Godot): "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned." 15 The word that must accompany any interpretation of what may happen to George and Martha, a "key word" for Samuel Beckett, is "perhaps." 16 We do not know their future—nor do they. Their existence as characters ends with the play's final tableau. 62
As the dawn breaks, Martha and George cling to each other instead of to an illusion. They freely admit their fear instead of sublimating it in fantasies or hiding it beneath a barrage of language. In their nakedness ("Just us?"), however, even if they have established tentative contact, they face the same absurd universe that caused them to create an illusory world for themselves. How much reality they are equipped to face is uncertain, but that George and Martha recognize the uncertainty of their condition and finally face it without illusions is a positive thing in itself, especially if we view Albee's play as an absurd work of art.
VIII. Absurd Awareness and "A Hint of Communion"

Though the uncertain conclusion of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? implies neither salvation nor doom for its characters, it describes two people still clinging to life despite their fear and lack of hope for a meaningful existence. Viewed from the absurd stance by Albert Camus, George and Martha's situation may be hopeful for its very lack of hope, and Albee's appropriately ambivalent ending may be positive because Martha and George have gained absurd awareness of the paradox the play dramatizes: the heartbreaking necessity for human beings to live with illusions and the heartbreaking impossibility of their doing so. The price George and Martha pay to arrive at this awareness may seem too high, too painful for their arrival to be called optimistic, but, as Jerry in Albee's Zoo Story tells us, "...sometimes it is necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly."¹

George and Martha have come to recognize the absurdity Camus defines as "the divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints,"² "the disparity between things as they are, and things as they should be"³ recognized by the nurse in Albee's The Death of Bessie Smith. Also like the nurse, who is "tired of the truth... and..."
tired of lying about the truth," George and Martha finally grasp the knowledge that escaping reality through illusions is not an escape from meaninglessness; in an absurd world, lying about the truth is as futile as facing it. It is not that George and Martha's condition (the human condition) has changed or improved by the end of the play; rather, they finally face their condition and realize their impotence to improve it. They admit a "conscious dissatisfaction" (Camus, p. 76) with the world and abandon that "stubborn hope in the human heart" (Camus, p. 76) that made them look for "clarity, unity, order, and purpose,... illusions defeated by life" (Camus, p. 75). Devoid of hope, they are like Camus' absurd man, who

must demand of himself... to live solely with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But this at least is certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned: he wants to find out if it is possible to live without appeal. (Camus, p. 39)

At the end of the play, George and Martha no longer appeal to illusions; they have "overcome their phantoms and approach a little closer to [their] reality" (Camus, p. 85). According to Camus, "the important thing is not to be cured, but to live with one's ailments" (Camus, p. 29), but before "the exorcism," George and Martha wanted to be cured. They tried to escape or transcend "...despair [as though it were] not a fact but a state" (Camus, p. 30).
Having lost their illusion, they have gained "lucidity and definite knowledge of the walls surrounding [them]" (Camus, p.21). If Albee's point of view is indeed absurd, this lucidity that brings with it a refusal to hope is positive. His conclusion shows George and Martha not "well off" but perhaps "better off," for they have "returned to consciousness... the first step of absurd freedom" (Camus, p.44). We do not know how Martha and George would exercise that freedom, but we do know that they have abandoned what Sartre called "bad faith," their actually believing in an untruth and acting on that false belief. They have stopped evading what they are.

Perhaps George and Martha began their life of "bad faith" with an absurd point of view, attempting "absurd creation" (Camus, p.69): to repudiate the absurdity they perceived, they exercised their imaginations, created their own meaning by playing games and inventing the son-myth. Not able to deal with each other, they invented illusions to have "some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people...with SOMETHING." What they gained from their inventions, however, was loss. Instead of expanding their vision, games limited them. Created as methods of defying and revolting against a "crushing fate" (Camus, p.40), the games were destructive rather than life-affirming; they alienated and isolated George and Martha instead.
of helping them to cope with meaninglessness. Despite the comic tone that accompanied some of their "fun and games," they stopped laughing at themselves and stopped laughing at the absurdity of their creating meaning, and they began to take their games too seriously. Imagination became a tragic flaw instead of a comic "survival kit" because George and Martha lost control of their own creations. In one interview Albee claims that George and Martha were "not deluded people," but George himself seems to be more correct when he accuses Martha of having "moved bag and baggage into [her] own fantasy world" (155). The son-fantasy became too real for Martha, began to "signify...more than itself" by turning into the only "end,...meaning, and consolation of [her] life" (Camus, p. 72). The imaginative illusion was transformed into a destructive delusion as George and Martha leaned too heavily on the "bean bag" they used to hurt one another. They forgot that the son was to be only a symbol. Though Martha claims that the son is the "one light" in all their "hopeless darkness," rather than giving illumination, the son-light blinded and scorched its creators. "What should have been a uniting link became the seed of dissension; [what could have been]...a blessing of the home turned into a curse." 9

In an unhappy world, harmless lies may provide temporary happiness. But the son-myth became a harmful
substitute for true intimacy or communication between its parents as they assumed "anti-life roles" that required "unfeeling, destructive, and betraying masks." Begun as a game (the most serious game in their lives), the fantasy of sonny-Jim became so real for Martha that she lost sight of the blurring line between fantasy and reality; George also gave up his distinction between the two:

George and Martha celebrated the son’s illusory birthdays, and his imaginary existence was woven into the fabric of their unreal, truly fantastic lives to such an extent that they held onto that existence like children in their games of make-believe; or like adults...who came to believe in the fictional image of their lives, sufficiently so to allow a brutally painful reality to be kept at least at the subliminal level of consciousness....

In Camus’ terms, Martha took "a leap of faith"(Camus, p.25) and committed "philosophical suicide"(Camus, p.31) by really believing in her illusion and imposing on it abstract meaning and purpose. By allowing and participating in Martha’s "suicide," by saying "yes; this will do," George responded to absurdity as negatively as Martha, resigning himself to a life smothered by illusion. George and Martha’s absurd creation thus became an act of negating life rather than affirming it. Their method of defying absurdity defied life. It is George’s absurd creation of their son’s death that becomes an ironic act of life. His ferocity frees both of them from the asylum of illusion.
Albee implies the creative and positive nature of the son's death by establishing undeniable compassion and communion between George and Martha after "the exorcism". As the title of the third act suggests (a title Albee once intended for the entire play), something evil is driven out of the relationship between George and Martha after the illusory son is dead. When Nick finally realizes that both the death and life of the boy are fictional, he asks, "You couldn't have...any?" (238). Martha and George both answer, "We couldn't" (238). There is mutual acceptance of their sterility. Albee's stage direction accompanying their response is "a hint of communion in this" (238). This direction is a broad hint that Albee's vision of life includes slight faith in abstracts like love and contact between human beings (a suggestion that is also given in some other works in Albee's canon). The "hint of communion" is revealed not only by Albee's stage direction but also by the tender tone, words, and gestures that close the play. This interpretation is not to deny the ambivalence, uncertainty, and fear that pervade the closing mood of Who's Afraid...? It is accepting Albee's hint that as Martha and George finally and fearfully face reality and the absurdity of their existence, they are together. They are clinging to each other in a relationship that is "necessarily imperfect, tentative, and perhaps foolish,"
...sure only of a need to renew itself in the face of ultimate failure," but it is a genuine human relationship, not held together by illusion. Albee's faith in a real human relationship does not preclude his having an absurd vision, for, according to Camus, "the end of the movement of absurdity, of rebellion, is compassion...that is to say, in the last analysis, love." The end of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? leaves George and Martha neither saved nor doomed but alive and together, though anguished and afraid, and aware that they must bear the weight of absurd lives and confront "Virginia Woolf" themselves.
IX. Albee and the Vision of the Theater of the Absurd

Following the lead of Martin Esslin, the man who coined the phrase "theater of the absurd" in his 1961 book of that title, many critics consider Edward Albee to be part of the theater of the absurd. Others maintain that rather than falling naturally into that position, Albee has been forced into it. Realizing that his phrase has often been carelessly and mistakenly used, Esslin explains the term as a "working hypothesis," a device to describe "certain features of certain plays...present in the work of a number of dramatists...in order to bring out certain similarities...and make them accessible to discussion."

He clearly denies that the theater of the absurd is an organized movement or definitive label precluding the artists he links to it from being widely different in many respects. The flexibility of Esslin's term and the vision Albee dramatizes allow an unforced connection to be made between Albee and the theater of the absurd.

According to Esslin, the theater of the absurd expresses "the tragic sense of loss at the disappearance of ultimate certainties" and tries to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition,...to shock him out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical, complacent, and deprived of

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the dignity that comes of awareness.\textsuperscript{2} The theater of the absurd can merely present, "...in anxiety or with derision, an individual human being's intuition of the ultimate realities as he experiences them; the fruits of one man's descent into the depths of his personality, his dreams, fantasies, and nightmares."\textsuperscript{3} In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Albee certainly dramatizes the descent of George and Martha into the depths of their fantasies and the rotten fruits of inadequacy, insignificance, impotence, and isolation yielded by that descent. He also demonstrates the "trite, mechanical, complacent" existence of Nick and Honey, who, like George and Martha, put faith in abstractions and empty ideals. Like other dramatists of the absurd, Albee "transcends the categories of comedy and tragedy and combines laughter with horror"\textsuperscript{4} as he reveals the false and destructive responses to reality his characters have chosen. Albee shows that escaping into illusion is its own punishment, that it "carries within itself not a safeguard but a destruction of self, not integrity, but a disintegration."\textsuperscript{5}

Because of the destruction and disintegration Albee describes, some critics suggest that his "...theater belongs in a nihilistic current..., that his voice denounces, destroys, mocks, or criticizes."\textsuperscript{6} Esslin places Albee in the category of the absurd because his work "attacks the
...foundations of American optimism" and the false confidence of modern society. Albee's attack and criticism, even when bitter, do not imply total despair, however. From an absurd point of view, despair is as absurd as hope. Neither is a viable response to a meaningless reality. The only genuine response to reality, Albee suggests, is confronting it directly, without evasion or illusion, and it is this vision that connects Albee most clearly to the theater of the absurd. Albee accepts that connection in a 1962 article published in the New York Times Magazine in which he cites Esslin's conclusions about the theater of the absurd:

Ultimately, a phenomenon like the Theatre of the Absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces but expresses modern man's endeavors to come to terms with the world in which he lives. It attempts to make him face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment. For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions—and to laugh at it.

Though George and Martha are neither laughing nor fearless at the end of Virginia Woolf? they are facing reality without illusions and have abandoned their laughter of evasion, different from the laughter of awareness to which Esslin refers in his comments. If the theater of the absurd is not "a defeatist celebration of emptiness and
despair,"¹⁰ as some critics have suggested, but an attempt to formulate a new aesthetic in terms of an ultimate confrontation of reality,"¹¹ then Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? belongs in the category.

Perhaps Albee differs most from other "absurd playwrights" because he not only calls for a confrontation of reality but also expresses the desirability and possibility of real contact between human beings. He accepts Camus' suggested progression from absurdity to love as he tries to show that "...genuine existence...lies not in pipe dreams or flight but in...an awareness of human limitations, ...an acceptance of reality and an establishment of true relationships between people."¹² Albee displays this view in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by showing that illusions are damaging not only to the self but also to relationships. George and Martha's life-lie alienated rather than unified them, and the love between them did not surface until their illusion was destroyed. Their games and lies, though shared, were barriers preventing real contact and communication. Verbal fencing kept them at swords' length from one another; the bean-bag son kept them at throwing distance. When he is convinced that Martha is totally deluded, George says, "there is no moment...there is no moment any more when we could...come together"(158). A "coming together" does occur, however, when George and Martha no longer have the son to use as weapon or shield.

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Albee's vision therefore differs from that of many absurdists. Eugene Ionesco, for example, one of the most prominent European absurdists, sees no possibility for love or communication in the absurd world his characters must confront:

I have no other image of the world except those of evanescence and brutality, vanity and rage, nothingness or hideous, useless hatred..., vain and sordid fury, cries suddenly stifled by silence, shadows engulfed forever in the night.... All men die in solitude; all values are degraded in a state of misery....

Though cries of rage, hatred, and fury are sounded in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, they are not stifled by silence or engulfed in the night. They are transformed at dawn to soft and simple dialogue of compassion and fear. There is no joy, hope, or resolution in the words George and Martha utter—the absurd world they face is one where hope is futile, certainty a delusion. But love and communication are not impossible in Albee's world, even if they are avoided most of the time.

Albee accepts and reflects the absurdist vision of a senseless world lacking a unifying principle. He is part of the theater Esslin describes as one that

...expresses the anxiety and despair that spring from the recognition that man is surrounded by areas of impenetrable darkness, that he can never know his true nature and purpose, and that no one will provide him with ready-made rules of conduct.

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Albee is dedicated, like other dramatists of the absurd, to urging that man face up to anxiety and despair and the "absence of divinely revealed alternatives"\textsuperscript{15} so that anxiety and despair can be overcome. He endorses the abandonment of illusions that only make impenetrable darkness darker. But he rejects that part of the absurdist vision that sees man as "forever lonely" and "unable to reach his fellow-man."\textsuperscript{16} Like Camus, Albee sees a possibility for love to accompany the acceptance of absurdity he encourages and the "conscious revolt against a crushing fate...that gives life its value."\textsuperscript{17} Order, purpose, and meaning are illusions defeated by life. Relationships between people are not.
Notes

II. (p. 7)


2 Diehl, p. 63.


17 Flanagan, p. 337.


21 Hilfer, p. 125.


24 Samuels, p. 198.


27 Kerr, p. 125.

28 Kerr, p. 126.


III. (p. 15)

1 Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p. 140.


3 Albee, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), p. 155. All subsequent references to this play will be indicated in the text by page numbers (from this edition) in parentheses.

4 Brustein, Seasons of Discontent, p. 146.

5 Brustein, Seasons of Discontent, p. 145.


7 Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p. 141.

8 Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama, p. 141.


12 Lee, p. 60.

13 Debusscher, 54.


15 Norton, pp. 161, 162.


17 Bigsby, Albee, p. 47.

18 Bigsby, Albee, p. 47.
19 Cohn, Edward Albee, p. 25.
20 Cohn, Edward Albee, p. 25.
21 Norton, p. 162.
22 Schneider, "Reality Is Not Enough," Tulane Drama Review, IX (1965), 146.
23 Schneider, "Reality Is Not Enough," p. 146.
24 Albee, "Which Theatre is the Absurd One?," p. 31.

IV. (p. 28).

1 Hilfer, p. 137.
4 Lewis, p. 37
5 Dozier, p. 434.
6 Oberg, p. 143.
7 Oberg, p. 141.

McDonald, p. 65.

Lewis, p. 36.

Bigsby, Albee, p. 38.

Norton, p. 165.

Norton, p. 166.

Hilfer, p. 139.

V. (p. 40)

Debusscher, p. 48.

Hilfer, p. 132.

Bigsby, Albee, p. 41.

Paul, p. 51.

Roy, p. 32.

Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 11.

VI. (p. 48.)

Albee, The Zoo Story, in Classics of the Modern Theater, ed. Alvin B. Kernan. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965), p. 531. In this play Albee reveals more explicitly than in Virginia Woolf? his notion that in order to be a complete human being, one should not suppress his animal instincts, but combine them with his emotional and intellectual aspects. George becomes most effective and, ironically, most kind, when he allows a cruel animalistic urge to kill to motivate him. Jerry in The Zoo Story states what George learns and demonstrates by killing the son: "...neither kindness nor cruelty by themselves, independent of each other, creates any effect beyond themselves;...the two combined, together, at the same time, are the teaching emotion."
Many critics have attempted to determine the meaning or significance of Albee's title, which the playwright claims to have found scratched on a mirror in a downstairs bar in Greenwich Village. Albee said it means, "Who's afraid of living life without false illusions?". Even those explanations involving connections between Albee's themes and themes in specific works by Virginia Woolf herself, conclude that Martha's response indicates her fear of truth, reality, life without illusions.


Roy, p. 31.


Lewis, p. 37.

VIII. (p. 64)

1 Albee, *The Zoo Story*, pp. 526-527.

2 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*.
All subsequent references to this book will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.


7 Albee, *The Zoo Story*, p. 531.

8 Flanagan, p. 338.


10 Lee, p. 53.

11 Falk, p. 416.

12 Harris, p. 256.


IX. (p. 71)

1 Esslin, p. x.

2 Esslin, p. 351.

3 Esslin, p. 353.
Esslin, p. 361

5 Debusscher, p. 82.

6 Debusscher, p. 82.

7 Esslin, p. 267.


11 Robertson, p. 40.


14 Esslin, p. 375.

15 Esslin, p. 375.

16 Esslin, p. 353.

17 Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, p. 40.
Bibliography


Vita

I was born to Feryl and Nancy Spanninger on July 3, 1950, in Sellersville, Pennsylvania. I received my primary and secondary education in the Pennridge School District and graduated from Pennridge High School in May, 1968. I received my undergraduate education at Muhlenberg College, where I was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and to the honorary English and Drama fraternities, Sigma Tau Delta and Alpha Psi Omega. I graduated Magna Cum Laude from Muhlenberg in May, 1972, with an A.B. in English.

In June, 1972, I began an intern-teaching program to work toward an M.A. in Education at Lehigh University, and while studying for that degree, I taught English at Pennridge High School from September, 1972, until January, 1974. Offered a scholarship from Lehigh University to do graduate work in English, I left my teaching position and became a full-time student in 1974 to study for an M.A. in English. During the summer of 1974, as a counselor for The American Institute for Foreign Study, I accompanied a group of students to France, Holland, and England. While in England, I attended classes at The Leys School, Cambridge, and took one graduate course in English taught by members of the faculty of Cambridge University.