

# A STUDY OF EDWARD ALBEE'S WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? (AS AN ABSURD PLAY)

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## **Abstract**

*The term 'The Theatre of the Absurd' was first coined by Martin Esslin for the plays written around the 1950s and 1960s. This term is derived from the essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus' which was written in 1942 by Albert Camus in this essay Camus for the first time described human life as aimless and absurd. This movement became more popular just after World War II when there was total emptiness in the lives of the people due to the annihilation; people lost their hope in human existence, old values and morals. This movement was actually an attempt to restore all those lost values through plays and enactments. Edward Albee (1928- 2016), an American playwright also belongs to this Theatre of Absurd movement. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is Albee's first three-act drama and is full of various characteristics of absurd drama. In this play, all the characters have developed some illusions individually and are always ready to cheat and humiliate each other. Their dialogues are vague and incomplete; all are selfish and never ready to face the reality. So this paper will aim at describing and discussing all those various elements which make it an absurd play such as the meaninglessness in the life of all the four characters, uncertainty, illusions, lack of morals and values, miscommunication, improper or repeated dialogues etc.*

**Keywords:** *Absurd, Truth or Illusion, Moral, Values*

## **About the Play**

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an absurd play written by Edward Albee, an American writer? In his play, Edward Albee has followed the Absurdist movement of 1950s and 1960s. Through the drama *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The play produced in 1962, has three acts, spread over a few hours from 2 am to dawn.

The first part of the play is known as 'Fun and Games'. It starts at 2 o'clock early in the morning as George and Martha have just returned to their home in the college campus at New Carthage. They have come from the party arranged by Martha's father who is the president of the college in which George works. Both are completely drunk and thus attack each other verbally. Soon George learns that Martha has invited Nick, a Prof. of Biology and his wife, Honey, to their house. Act one ends with Martha creating the illusion of a son and also blaming her husband.

The second act is named as 'Walpurgisnacht', a German word, which means- 'the night on which witches

ride on an appointed meeting place in order to hold revels with their master i.e. Devil'. In this act, George and Nick share their confidential matters with each other. Martha and Nick humiliate George, then George humiliates the guests and at the end of this act, Martha flirts with Nick.

The third and final act is known as 'The Exorcism', which means driving away ghosts. In this act, Martha humiliates Nick and finally, Martha is afraid to accept the reality. The title of the play, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" is also symbolic. It means "Who is Afraid of Reality".

### **The Theatre of the Absurd and its Characteristics:**

The term, Absurd was used for the first time in Albert Camus' book *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This book was written in 1942. In the myth of Sisyphus, Camus has given his view about the absurd as –

“In the universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile ...this divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity”.

Page 1, 'A Glossary of Literary Terms'.

Later on, Albert Camus wrote a novel, *The Outsider* in 1943 and applied this absurd situation to humans. When this term is applied to drama, it shows that there is no purpose in the universe as well as it also reflects the view that human life is meaningless and futile. It shows that when a man lives in this condition his/her life becomes absurd. In absurd plays human beings are portrayed as they are in isolation from other, this situation existed in Europe, during and after the Second World War.

Martin Esslin was the first who discussed the features of the absurd drama in his book- *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). The absurd play doesn't have conventional plots, dialogues or characters. Even the dialogues are repeated. In the absurd drama, there are no accepted forms and the characters, their speech and action convey no meaning and logic. So, in the true sense, we can say that in the absurd drama there is the true absurd condition of man, whose existence is purposeless. The main theme of such a play is the failure of communication.

### **Major Characteristics of the Absurd Theatre:**

- In absurd drama life is essentially meaningless, hence it becomes miserable. There is no hope because of the inevitable futility of man's efforts
- In these dramas reality is unbearable so, there are illusions
- There is no conventional plot in these dramas
- In these dramas dialogues are repeated
- There are no purpose and specific reasons because it doesn't solve any problem
- Its main theme is the failure of communication
- In absurd drama there is a mingling of comic and serious elements

**How *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is an Absurd Play-****1. Failure of Communication:**

The main characteristic of the absurd drama is the failure of communication between characters. There is a breakdown of communication between individuals. This quality is found in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* too. When we read the play, we learn that there is no communication between all the four characters. George and Martha always quarrel. They attack each other verbally. We also see that at the end of act two Martha flirts with Nick and also tries to commit adultery with him. But both can't get success in it because Nick has drunk a lot. Then in the beginning of Act Three Martha humiliates Nick and also hates him as he doesn't fulfill her sexual desire. The second example is Nick and his wife Honey. Nick and Honey also don't have a true love for each other. Before their marriage, both had relationships with each other. And later on, Honey tells Nick that she becomes pregnant with his child so, they marry each other. Nick also doesn't have a true love for his wife and he marries her for the sake of money only.

**2. The Need to Face Reality:**

One of the characteristics of the absurd drama is that reality is unbearable so there are illusions. We find this element in this drama. From the beginning of the play we see, Martha drinks a lot. Her life is too hollow and empty because she is childless. She fears to face reality so she lives in the world of illusion. She creates the illusion that she has a child, aged 16 and his eyes are like her only. In the act one, Martha tells Honey that they have a child and tomorrow is his birthday. Then George becomes angry with her as she opens the secret of their child and it causes a quarrel. But finally, George tells Martha that their son has died.

“George: Martha ... [Long pause]...our son is ...dead. [silence]  
He was ... killed... late in the afternoon... [Silence]  
[A ting chuckle] on a country road. With his learner's  
permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove  
straight into a ...”

(Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? pp135)

This reality is unbearable to Martha. But finally, she has to accept it though she is afraid of it. The concluding lines of the play reveal the truth of the fact.

“George: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf...?  
Martha: I ... am... George ... I ... am...”

(Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? pp140)

**3. Alienation:**

It is another aspect of the absurdist play. The characters in the absurd drama feel alienated from society and are highly affected by it. When we think about the readers, it becomes difficult to identify themselves

with the characters of the absurd drama. So, the readers laugh at them. According to Martin Esslin, the absurd drama speaks to a deeper level of the audience's mind. This is true when we look at the characters of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The characters feel alienated from each other as we see that they always quarrel with each other. Once, Martha starts talking about their son. She doesn't care about George's warning and goes on talking about their son so, George becomes angry and grabs her by her throat. Nick throws George on the floor in order to recluse Martha. Thus, George is humiliated by his wife and Nick. Later on Martha and Nick humiliate George and again Nick is humiliated by Martha. In this way there are lots of scenes, which show alienation. In the drama, the characters are highly affected by this alienation. They are childless and have no love for each other. They hate each other. Yet we laugh at them as their condition is absurd.

#### **4. Mixture of Comic and Serious Elements:**

Like an absurdist play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has comic nature with serious aspects. For instance, the practical jokes created by George create comic situations. At one point, he aims a shot-gun at Martha's head but when he pulls the trigger, a Chinese parasol (umbrella) blossoms from the barrel of the gun. This creates comedy. Later, in the play George brings a large bunch of snapdragons, which he has stolen from the house of Martha's father. He also throws the flowers at Martha and Nick as if they are spears. Then the names of various games create much amusement among the readers. The first game is called as "Humiliate the Host". But George himself is the victim of the game. Martha and Nick humiliate him. He is so much hurt that he decides to take revenge upon his rivals. So, he suggests another game named "Hump the Hostess". It means that the male guest may seduce the female host. It is amusing that he tries to humiliate his own wife, Martha. He does so because he is annoyed by her efforts to flirt with young Nick. The next game is called as "Get the Guests". In this game George and Martha humiliate the guests and particularly, Nick. The humiliation causes much comedy for the audience. Next George's comment about Martha's father is also humorous as he calls him a large White mouse with Red eyes. In this way, there are lots of comic scenes in the play, which create comedy.

As we have seen above comic scenes in the play there are some serious elements too. The ending of the play is pathetic and the first two acts too contain tragic elements. For e.g. the story of the boy who kills his parents narrated by George is serious and pathetic because later on we learn that the boy is not other but it is he himself who kills his own parents. Then, in the play, there are humiliations of George, Martha and Nick, which provide much comedy. But in this humiliation, they all are actually hurt. This contributes the serious element in the play. Then ending of the play is quite pathetic and even tragic. It is concerned with the game "Bringing up the Baby". Martha and George are childless. So Martha and George both have created an illusion of having a child in their life. But Martha learns the truth finally when George makes her realize the truth of not having any child and she becomes pitiable as she has to face "Virginia Woolf" i.e. the harsh reality. In this way, in the play there is a mingling of comic and serious elements.

#### **Conclusion:**

The term 'Absurd', which came after the Second World War, affected the thinking of individuals, society and literature. As a result of it, one can find several changes or causes such as – breakdown of communication, hollow life, intolerable reality, illusions, fear, and defenselessness in the later part of the

20th century. In conclusion, we can say that these elements of the absurdist drama, which we have discussed above, are found in the play Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The study is done from the point of view of plot, characters, dialogues, situations, and illusions. Hence, the play belongs to the theatre of absurd. These elements show serious as well as comic effects on the spectators and readers. Last, the dramatic technique applied by Albee is appreciated as he used it very skillfully.

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