CHAPTER IV
With *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Edward Albee returns to Broadway Theatre signalling that he is no longer a promising young playwright but a playwright of the great play. It is also his first long full-length play whose performance in the theatre lasted for a little over three hours. The play also evoked mixed response from the audiences and critics, some calling it a bad play, bad theatre while others ranking it with the plays in English. Gilbert Debusscher observes:

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was a huge success. Presented for the first time on October 13, 1962, at the Billy Rose theatre in New York, it marked Albee's arrival on Broadway. This time the critics were unanimous. Even Robert Brustein commended its language, and noted its kinship with the Greek theatre. But in discovering elements of the myth of Aphrodite, Ares and Hephaestus blended
with those in the story of Aphrodite and Adonis, he was still one of many who would try to diminish Albee's merit by identifying such influences, as if the artistic renown of those supposed to have served as his models, and with whom he was compared, did not indirectly reveal the measure of his success. Some would trace the Ibsen of The Wild Duck and Hedda Gabler in the theme of the life lie and the destructive folly of the Woman imprisoned in the pretty bourgeois Vice; others the Strindberg of The Dance of Death in the violence and tension of the Conjugal Combat. Devotees of the avant-garde saw in the ritual an element taken from Jean Genet and translated into the games of Anglo-Saxon Society. Others more traditionalist favoured the autobiographical meanderings and the revealing confessions of the later O'Neill, or the final ambiguity of Tennessee Williams. While no one observed that the play was, in sum, the logical successor to the four preceding ones, all had to agree that, through a skillful blending of tradition and avant-grade, of naturalism and symbolism, Albee had developed a personal style and had just given the American stage its first great work in years.¹

The action of the entire play takes place in the living room of the campus professor who works in a small New
England College. In a way it has the setting of a drawing room comedy. There are just four characters who make two couples: the elderly couple, George and Martha, Honey and Nick the younger. When the play opens we find Martha and George returning home after attending an evening party at the home of Martha's father. They are drunk and although it is late they have invited newcomers to their home. Before the guests arrive George reproaches Martha for inviting the guests for the great night party. This is the beginning of quarrel between the couple which never ends:

GEORGE: Well, I'm tired .... If your father didn't set up these goddamn saturday night orgies all the time ....

MARTHA: Well, that's too bad about you, George ....

GEORGE: (Grumbling)
Well, that's how it is, anyway.

MARTHA: You didn't do anything; you never mix.
You just sit around and talk.

GEORGE: What do you want me to do? Do you want me to act like you? Do you want me to go around all night braying at everybody, the way you do? (p. 7).2
Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?
with (l. to r.) George Grizzard,
Uta Hagen, and
[Friedman-Abeles]
The guests arrive and find George and Martha quarreling:

NICK: (Without expression)
Well, now, perhaps we shouldn't have come ....

HONEY: Yes ... it is late, and ... (p.20)

Martha has become quarrelsome and cantankerous after series of disappointments, disillusionments in twenty years of her married life. For example, "Martha never tires of scoffing at George for not being thought worthy of taking over the History Department. But instead of retaliating verbally in anything like so abusive a tone as the one she has already adopted -- derisive though he is about her putting gin bottles out after midnight he quietly refuses to light her cigarette. Her reprisal is to start showing nearly the same kind of interest in Nick's body as Mommy did in the Young Man's in The American Dream, and she goes in to tell the young couple about the "boxing match" she had with George during the War when her Daddy had the idea that all the men in the University ought to get interested in self-defense. When George refused to box with Daddy—whether from reluctance to toe the line, for fear of getting hurt or, as Martha says, of bloodying up his meal ticket -- she had put on the gloves and caught him a blow when he was off balance, sending him sprawling into a huckleberry bush. To revenge himself on Martha for reviving his humiliation now by talking about it,
George takes aim at her with a short-barrelled shotgun. When she turns round and he pulls the trigger, a large Chinese parasol blossoms from the mouth of the gun. The blossoming parasol has a symbolic function. Anne Paolucci observes:

The existential mood is caught by means of ambiguous explanations, unfinished or incomplete stories, emotional climaxes suddenly deflated into absurdity. The scene where George "Shoots" Martha is a striking example of the explosion of emotional tension into frivolity. Martha is playing up to Nick, as George watches; when she brings up the story about the boxing match in which she managed to stun George, he leaves the room. Martha goes right on - it's all part of their repertory - and George eventually returns with a shotgun which he raises, aims ... and shoots. But what bursts out, without a bang, is a Chinese Parasol. The tension breaks; there is a moment of hysterical relief - but it is only the prelude to a new emotional buildup.

The parasol is perhaps the neatest symbol of George's impotence in his destructive relationship with Martha. It is given sexual overtones by Martha's exchange with Nick, of few moments later: "You don't need any props, do you baby?" "Unh-unh." "I'll bet not. No fake
Jap gun for you, eh?" Nick too will turn out to be another "pointless infidelity", and will be relegated to the humiliating role of "houseboy" at the end. No one can match George, but George cannot altogether satisfy her shifting moods. He understands them and adjusts to them — but at his best he must appear weak. He is her scapegoat, the articulate challenger who keeps Martha on her toes, the constant reminder of her own inadequacies. Martha need victims, and she can pick them up anywhere; but George is the only one who rises to the occasion each time she lashes out. There is some secret understanding between them; she has ruined him with her excessive demands and her domineering ways; but he has not been crushed. His strength reassures her, even when she forces it against herself. George is her conscience and her accuser. In her soliloquy she admits that all the things he says are true— even to Daddy's red eyes — but she fights him for having said them. In some strange way, their fighting is their only means of real communication. George's obstinacy is the reassurance that he has understood the script and can play it out. Martha accuses him of wanting the flagellation she inflicts, but the statement is only partly true. He wants it because he knows she needs it
as an excuse. She herself can't say this, but there is every reason to believe that she has grasped and accepted that conclusion. She comes close to confessing it in the soliloquy.

George tries to save himself from his terrible wife by seeking refuge in books. He does not have the aggressiveness to become the Head of History Department where he is teaching. He is a big disappointment to both his wife and his father-in-law. Each day he is teased and tantalized by his wife who constantly reminds him about his inefficiency. Martha has become an Alcoholic.

The series of failures in life have resulted in their loss of faith in a world in which they live and have started to live in a world of fantasy which serves as a protective life against the real world. They have an unwritten code and an arrangement which they try to put into practice without violating them. The situation in which George and Martha find themselves is a common situation in Albee's society. Modern men, solitary and isolated, is obliged to secure himself against himself, against his neighbour and against the world which he has built. Of course there are critics who consider the situations as impossible and charge the dramatist with search for sensational material. In the entire first part of
the play, "Fun and Games" in which George and Martha go on drinking. George says that in their Fun and Games everything is permitted except reference to their "Son", before strangers.

This gives occasion to Martha to snipe at George. She wonders whether his anger was not due to his uncertainty about the son's fatherhood. George endures his wife's insinuations about his sterility and lack of ambitiousness for a while but begins to attack Martha's father as a white mouse with beady little red eyes and a great stock of white hair. But Martha, who has a great regard for her father, recalls how her father set a standard to which George never measured up. She also tells how she fell in love with George when her father was looking for a successor.

George does not object to Martha's narrating the story of their courtship. He even is delighted to fill the gaps in the narration. He tells how Martha sat in the lawn outside his room at night, howling and clawing at the turf. But he does not want Martha to tell him how her father had planned to groom him for the presidency. When Martha continues with her account George shows his displeasure by breaking a bottle against the portable bar, and turns his sack to the guests. George is sad and is in tears but Martha goes on baiting him. He began her not to go ahead with the story and when she does go ahead with her story he begins to sing "Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?"
The second act of the play called "Walpurgisnacht" starts with George and Nick. Nick tells George about his wife Honey. The story of Nick and Honey is not interesting either. He tells about his wife's indifferent health. When he married her, he believed her to be pregnant which proved later to be a hysterical pregnancy. "She blew up, and then she went down." (p. 94). Nick is trying to tell him about his love affairs with Honey since childhood at the same time as George is trying to tell him about the relationship with Martha. George guesses accurately that Honey had a lot of money and Nick married her because of her money. Anne Paolucci's observations on this part of the play are interesting;

All this talk serves, paradoxically, to underscore the incommunicability which is the heart of the play. Nick tolerates his wife and uses her - and, presumably, her money - for his own private ends; Honey is too preoccupied with her own puffed-up fears to realize what is going on and face up to the difficulties in her marriage; George and Martha prefer to indulge in private games and public hostility rather than face their shared loneliness. Occasionally, some attempt is made to reach out - as when George warns Nick about the danger of being overconfident and using people callously to get what he wants. To Nick, George
is simply a jealous husband, the impotent male wounded in his vanity.  

Frustration is the dramatic impulse of the play. The invitation to Nick and Honey is a frenzied attempt at oblivion through a kind of saturnalia; the verbal skirmishes are frustrated attempts at communication; the history of the two couples is the story of frustrated love; the accusations are frustrated attempts at understanding; a frustrated prayer celebrates the end of the nightmare.

In the course of this act, Walpurgisnacht, contracts and parallels between the two couples are presented. In the no ending drinking out the men and women drink beyond themselves. George Whispers to Honey about his wife and Martha tells Nick about George and also attempts seduction when Honey breaks down and George returns to read. Honey comes back to the stage with Martha and makes her own reference to the illness she had before marrying Nick, that she was suffering from appendicitis. Martha blames George for making Honey sick and then of making their son sick. George seems genuinely disappointed and he attacks her for savaging himself. This provokes George into talking himself about their imaginary son. George has written a novel which is based on "something funny in his past." Martha's father, the college president, was shocked when he read the novel, which
ia about a fifteen year-old naughty boy who killed his father in a car accident and his mother with a shotgun, himself recovered consciousness in the hospital. While talking about a fifteen-year-old naughty boy who had killed his parents accidentally, goes back to his teenage and tells about the peculiar experience he had:

When I was sixteen and going to pre school, during the Punic Wars, a bunch of us used to go into New York on the first day of vacations, before we fanned out to our homes, and in the evening this bunch of us used to go to this gin mill owned by the gangster-father of one of us - for this was during the Great Experiment, or Prohibition, as it is more frequently called, and it was a bad time for the liquor lobby, but a fine time for the crooks and the cops - and we would go to this gin mill, and we would drink with the grown-ups and listen to the jazz. And one time, in the bunch of us, there was this boy who was fifteen, and he had killed his mother with a shotgun some years before - accidentally, completely accidentally, without even an unconscious motivation, I have no doubt, no doubt at all - and this one evening this boy went with us, and we ordered our drinks, and when it came his turn he said, I'll have bergin ... give me some bergin please ...
bergin and water. Well, we all laughed, he was blond and he had the face of a Cherub, and we all laughed, and his cheeks went red and the color rose in his neck, and the assistant crook who had taken our order told people at the next table what the boy had said, and then they laughed, and them more people were told and the laughter grew, and more people and more laughter, and no one was laughing more than us, and none of us more than the boy who had shot his mother. And soon, everyone in the gin mill knew what the laughter was about, and everyone started ordering bergin, and laughing when they ordered it. And soon, of course, the laughter became less general, but it did not subside, entirely, for a very long time, for always at this table or that someone would order bergin and a new area of laughter world rise. We drank free that night, and we were bought champagne by the management, by the gangster-father of one of us. And, of course, we suffered the next day, each of us, alone, on his train, away from New York, each of us with a grown-up's hangover ... but it was the grandest day of my ... youth (pp. 94-95).

When the boy was told what had happened to his parents, he could not stop laughing until he was injected
a needle into his arm. It is found that the novel has a relation to the "bergin" story which we have already heard from George. The theme of the novel really appears to be his own life. But the play does not reveal what really did happen between George and his parents. It is Albee's obsession with the negative aspects of parent-child relationships which does not come into clear focus in the play. It happens that in the particular scene between George and Martha who are left alone together there is nothing to say or argue with each other, no solution for compromise and no understanding can come forth with. They are both too tired, too drunk and too angry. This scene prepares us for the mutual understanding they reach at the end of Act Three. In the unpleasant evening the scene is a combination of kindness and cruelty with teasing emotion. George is an academic who is going to teach Martha something with cruelty and unkindness. The older couple declare total war on each other and this pitches the theatrical tension even higher. While passing Nick, Martha slips her hand between his legs and teases him to kiss her. Coming into the room, George finds them together close and goes back again, unnoticed, makes a noise as a signal and reenters after giving them time to separate and adjust their rumpled clothes. George puts on a convincing show of total indifference, and undergoes calm by Martha's announcement of what she is going to do with Nick. While they are in the
kitchen together, he reads out a sentence about the decline of
the West— from his book and then— releasing the inner tension
cries out, and throws out the book at the door. This makes
Honey wake up from her bed. She has been sleeping, curling
up like a fully developed embryo in the womb, sucking her
thumb on the bathroom floor. With half sleep Honey admits
that she never wants any children with Nick.

The third act called "The Exorcism" opens with the
monologue of Martha which expresses her misery. Martha, as
a daughter neglected by her father in childhood, dissatisfied
badly and bitterly in domestic life by her husband talking to
herself unconsciously in this manner:

Hey, hey .... Where is everybody ...? (It
is evident she is not bothered) So? Drop
me; pluck me like a goddamn ... whatever
it — is ... creeping vine, and through me
over your shoulder like an old shoe ...
George? (Looks about her) George?
(Silence) George! What are you doing:
Hiding, or something? (Silence) George!!
(Silence) Oh, fa Chri ... .... ... (Goes to
the bar, makes herself a drink and amuses
herself with the following performance)
Deserted! Abandoned! Left out in the cold
like an old pussy-cat. AH! Can I get you a
drink, Marth? Why, thank you, George;
that's very kind of you. No, Martha, no;
why I'd do anything for you. Would you, George? Why, I'd do anything too. Would you, Martha? Why, certainly, George. Martha, I've misjudged you. And I've misjudged you, too, George. WHERE IS EVERYBODY!!! Hump the Hostess! (laughs greatly at this, falls into a chair; calms down, looks defeated, says softly) Fat chance, (even softer) Fast chance (baby-talk now) Daddy? Daddy? Martha is abandon-ed. Left to her own vices at ... (peers at a clock) ... something o'clock in the old a.m. daddy white-mouse; do you really have red eyes? Do you? Let me see. Ohhhhh! You do! You do! Daddy, you have red eyes ... because you cry all the time, don't you, Daddy. Yes; you do. You cry allllll the time. I'LL GIVE ALL YOU BASTARDS FIVE TO COME OUT FROM WHERE YOU'RE HIDING!! (pause) I cry all the time too, daddy. I cry allllll the time; but deep inside, so on one can see me. I cry all the time. And georgie cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put'em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays (begins to laugh) until they're all frozen (laughs even more) and then ... We put them ... in our ... drinks. (more laughter, which is something else, too. After sobering silence) Up the drain, down the spout, dead, gone and forgotten ... Up the
spout, not down the spout; Up the spout:
THE POKER NIGHT. UP the spout....(sadly)
I've got windshield wipers on my eyes,
because I married you ... baby! ....
Martha, You'll be a song-writer yet.
(Jiggles the ice in her glass) CLINK! (Does
it again) CLINK! (Giggles, repeats it
several times) CLINK! ... CLINK! ...
CLINK! ... CLINK! (pp 185-186).

NICK enters while Martha is clinking. He cannot understand
her at that time, he stands in the hall entrance and watches
her.

Martha is shown to be disappointed. Nick has
failed her because he drank too much. She admits frankly that
there is only one man who has ever satisfied her and made
her happy - George her husband. While she is cursing Nick
she finds George coming into the house from the garden with
flowers. George suggests playing another game. Martha is
tired up with these games and she is no more interested in
any game. She says;

... George who is out somewhere there in
the dark ... 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, at night, so that it's
warm, and whom I will bite so there's blood; who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. George and Martha: sad, sad, sad. (pp. 190-191).

George starts to throw the flowers at Martha and Nick as if they were spears. The aggression is much more vicious now than it was when he shot Martha with the trick gun -- too vicious to be vented by throwing flowers. One last game, he insists. This is called Bringing up Baby, and Honey has to be present for it. Nick is sent to fetch her while Martha, who was at first reluctant to play any more games, squares up like a fighter.

Now Martha is looking for her son who will return the next day for his twenty first birth day. In this connection Martha tells about her son:

.... Our son. Our son was born in a September night, a night not unlike tonight, though tomorrow, and twenty ... one... years ago (p. 217).... Our son grew ... up; he is grown up; he is away at school, college. He is fine, everything is fine. (pp. 217-224).

George joins in and together they describe how they brought
him up, piling on the detail about childhood illness, childhood toys, childhood foods. Despite the undercurrent of sadness, Martha enjoys talking about him, and it is important for George to elicit this enjoyment, for this is her last opportunity of having it. Martha makes everything sound about the imaginary past so pleasant that Honey now says that she wants a child a volte face which seems slightly voulu, but it provides a necessary hint that the relationship between George and Martha is not the only one which may be altered by the experience of the evening.

Both Martha and George now maintain that the boy could barely tolerate the other, and the sequence come to a climax when they are telling simultaneously. Martha describes how she tried to protect their son from "the mine of this vile, rushing marriage." George listens to his son's death message from a Western Union messenger. He informs his wife that a telegram has just arrived announcing that he will not come back - he is dead. He cannot show it because he ate it.

GEORGE: ... Martha ... I'm afraid our boy isn't coming home for his birthday (p.230) ... Martha ... (Long pause) ... Our son is ... dead.

(silence)
He was ... killed ... late in the afternoon.
(A tiny Chuckle) on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a ... (p. 231).

...Martha; listen carefully. We got a telegram: there was a car accident, and he's dead. PoUF! Just like that! Now, how do you like it?

MARTHA: (howl which weakens into a moan)
NOOOOOOoooooo


GEORGE: There was a telegram, Martha.

MARTHA: (Up; facing him)
show it to me! Show me the telegram!

GEORGE: (Long pause; then, with a straight face) I ate it. (p. 234)

This news strikes Martha like a thunderbold because their "Son" in precisely the pathetic off-spring of her illusions, a defence mechanism against the world which has disappointed and beaten her. The son is only a myth but this very myth gives her the strength to face her existence. George realizes that he has no right to kill the image of the child which he and his wife created. Martha's despair makes Honey realize how terrible and foolish she has been in rejecting the motherhood. Nick understands that a life based on a lie perhaps
sooner or later will break. Thus we find both couples under going change. Nick extracts a confession from George and Martha that they couldn't have a child.

GEORGE: We couldn't

Martha: (a hint of communion in this) We couldn't

(p. 238).

Gerry McCarthy considers the third act sublime and suggests its relation to the Greek tragedy:

The final act, 'The Exorcism,' produces a catharsis in which the shedding of the last routine reveals the nature of their existence; it has the classic tragic quality of recognition and reversal. The play presents the emotional truth of the character relationship and the moment of a profound change of destiny. Like a classical tragedy the play works towards a catastrophe in which there will be no 'message' affirmed and no superior course of action advocated; but rather the moral values of the characters will be affirmed and the dignity and resource of humanity will be celebrated with an audience made aware of its own circumscribed happiness. In the spectacle of George and Martha's battle the audience does not see merely the violence that at one point so delights Honey, but also the pathos of thier
relationship and the courage of their insight. They are sustained by games, not illusions. George is or may be an orphan; Martha is discarded by the father she claims to admire: they are in a line of Albee characters who are abandoned and who makes something out of the loss.

'The Exorcism' begins with Martha's striking image of the struggle against despair— and concludes with the most simple and naturalistic contemplation of a future unsustained by pretence. Albee explained that he had retitled his play, originally to be called 'The Exorcism', after seeing the words 'who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?' scrawled on a mirror in a Greenwich Village bar. Its significance, he stated, might be seen as 'who's afraid of life without illusions?' As the concluding tableau of the play confirms, Albee's roles do express such a fear. The massive achievement of his play is that the fear is not disguised, but transformed within the complex roles into an expressive but ultimately unwinnable game.

Gilbert Debusccher finds that the unreality that Martha and George cultivate is a necessary evil:

Here is another play of denunciation, another criticism of the life—lie. Martha
and George have woven a plot, a net of illusions, around their existence, which, at least outwardly, permits them to live somehow or other. This permanent lie within which they live is a defence mechanism, as I have said, not only against their own deficiencies but also against an exterior world they fear or reject; not only against themselves, but also against a society which tends to create a test-tube humanity, like Huxley's all equal, all alike, or a universe worthy of Kafka where monotonous robots deprived of all diversity and human richness move about. It is therefore through fear of internal and external destructive forces that these two human beings seek refuge in unreality.

The question of salvation for these prisoners of their own contradictions is the problem which must be solved by interpretation of the play's ending. I have said elsewhere that, appearances to the contrary, I consider Albee's message to be positive. But I say this with reservations, acknowledging that the possibility of redemption offered us as the end of the play is without precedent in Albee's earlier works. The act of violence with which George destroys the fantasies in which his conjugal life has been swallowed up, the unilateral "murder" of the mythical son, exorcises the demons and re-establishes reality .... Honey opens her eye to her little crimes, Nick sees her for the first
time, and Martha can finally admire George's initiative. The decision to abolish pretense gives George a dignity which establishes a more balanced marital relationship. Martha, beaten at her own game, overcome by the crashing universe for which she is responsible, seeks help and protection close to her husband. While her world of illusion has only permitted a bond of relentless mutual scorn between them, the destruction of the myth brings back the possibility of tenderness and love. In the final moments of the couple discovers the value of contact: Martha moves close to George who "puts his hand gently on her shoulder; She puts her head back and he sings to her, very softly:"

GEORGE: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf
Virginia Woolf
Virginia Woolf,

MARTHA: I ... am ... George ...

GEORGE: Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf ...

MARTHA: I ... am ... George .... I ... am ...

....

(George nods, slowly)
(Silence; tableau)
CURTAIN (pp. 241-242)

Marital failure is an important theme in the play. The older couple George and Martha have been married for
twenty years but their material life is marred by sterility. Martha cannot conceive and she blames it on her husband. She often reminds him of his impotence and incompetence. Most modern writers have often chosen sterility as opposed to vitality as the theme for their works. In Eliot's 'Waste Land' there is the land blighted by a curse. Eliot suggests that there is only death and not life. There are other writers who have represented homosexuals in their works. Albee in this play does not present George as a homosexual but as one who lacks vitality and who is incapable of creativity. In a poet like Ted Hughes there is contrast between the world of man and the world of nature. The natural world is characterized by strength, vigour, vitality and life whereas the world of man is marked by weakness, dullness and death. So Albee has chosen a very important theme to dramatize it. If George and Martha cannot bring about a child, Nick and Honey do not want to bring about a child. Honey is always sick not because of any physiological disorder but because of psychological disorder. Since Honey is unwilling to be a mother she goes against nature. This suppression and inhibition which she cultivates lead to sterility in her. Thus the two pairs presented in the play adequately demonstrate Albee's theme that lack of vitality is one of the characteristics of modern life.
Another theme related to the theme of sterility that Albee takes up in the play is modern man's vision of super-civilization. This is sought to be achieved by the scientist especially scientist who specialises in genetics. By altering chromosomes and scientist can reorder the genetic make up of sperm cells so that "all imbalances will be corrected, sifted out ... propensity for various diseases will be gone, longevity assured. We will have a race of men ... test-tube bred ... incubator-born ... superb and sublime."(p.65) George is very sceptical about the scientists' efforts because cultures and races will eventually vanish. History will lose its glorious variety and unpredictability. Albee seems to be critical of the uniformity that the scientists have been attempting to achieve. Here he is one with George Orwell and many others who wrote about the utopian models very sarcastically.

Describing Albee's play as morbid, and as representing perverse and dangerous values Richard Schechner wonders how the American audience accepted the play as a classic. Here is a very scathing criticism of the play:

We want to believe that we are living in the last days, that the world is falling in on our heads, that only our sickest illusions are able to offer us any reason for living. Everyone wants to be Nero Watching Rome burn. To attend the last orgy, to be part of it, this is a comfortable and exciting escape from reality - the child's way out. Albee's characters, like the playwright himself,
suffer from arrested development. They play the game of decadence, just as he plays the game of creativity. There is no real, hard bedrock of suffering in Virginia Woolf—it is all illusory, depending upon a "Child" who never was born: a gimmick, a trick, a trap. And there is no solid creative suffering in the writer who meanders through a scene stopping here and there for the sake of a joke or an easy allusion that almost fits.

But even more, the value of Virginia Woolf are perverse and dangerous. Self-pity, drooling, womb-seeking weakness, the appeal to a transcendent "god" who is no God, the persistent escape into morbid fantasy—all these things are probably too close to our imagined picture of ourselves. It is the game of the child who thinks he is being persecuted, who dreams up all kinds of outrages, and who concludes finally that his parents found him one day on the doorstep. Albee wants us to indulge in this same game, this cheap hunt for love; he wants us to point to the stage and simper: "Oooo, there we are! How pitiable, how terrible!" The danger is that Albee may succeed; we are on the verge of becoming the silly role we are playing.
The upsetting thing -- the deeply upsetting -- is that American theatre-goers and their critics have welcomed this Phony Play and its writer as the harbinger of a new wave in the American theatre. The American theatre, our theatre, is so hungry, so voracious, so corrupt, so morally blind, so perverse that Virginia Woolf is a success. I am outraged at a theatre and an audience that accepts as a masterpiece an insufferably long play with great pretentions that lacks intellectual size, emotional insight, and dramatic electricity. I'm tired of play-long "metaphors" -- such as the illusory child of Virginia Woolf -- which are neither philosophically, psychologically, nor poetically valid. I'm tired of plays that are badly plotted and turgidly written being excused by such palaver as "organic unity" or inner form." I'm tired of morbidity and sexual perversity which are there only to titillate an impotent and homosexual theatre and audience. I'm tired of Albee. 14

Genet can raise sexual perversion to the level of ontological speculation—he is a poet and mighty intellect. Beckett can transform static dramatic situations into valid metaphors for man's condition -- he, too, is a poet and mighty intellect.
Albee can only follow meagerly and blindly in their path, patching together several of their insights and devices over the thinly disguised skeleton of Eugene O'Neill. I am ashamed of a theatre which welcomes Albee's new play as a classic, because this means only that we are starving for heroes and kings and will play almost any price, including our own theatrical self-respect, our self-respect as artists and citizens, for them. Virginia Woolf is doubtlessly a classic: a classic example of bad taste, morbidity, plotless naturalism, misrepresentation of history, American society, philosophy, and psychology. There is in the play an ineluctable urge to escape reality and its concomitant responsibilities by crawling back into the womb, or bathroom, or both.15

Notwithstanding the description of the play as an outrage on American theatre and audiences, there are critics who consider its existentialist and absurd elements as significant. For example in her book From Tension To Tonic, the Plays of Edward Albee, Anne Paolucci discusses the play from the absurdist and the existentialist angles. Crediting Albee with integrating realism and abstract symbolism in his play, she remarks that "Albee's experimentation in allegory, metaphorical cliches, grotesque parody, hysterical humour,
brilliant wit, literary illusion, religious undercurrents, Freidian reversals, irony on irony, here for the first time appear as an organic whole in a nature and completely satisfying dramatic work. What O'Neill had done in his _Long Days Journey into Night_ has been done by Albee in this play. He has woven into the fabric of a perfectly normal setting the aberrations, the horrors, the mysteries to create the illusion of total realism so that the abnormal and shocking have a powerful effect.

Anne Paolucci also draws our attention to Albee's dramatising the existential dilemma with total sympathy. Albee makes the weak achieve their redemption in their helplessness and wishes their forgiveness in their tortured self-awareness. The dramatists create the existential mood by means of ambiguous explanations, un-finished or incomplete stories, emotional climaxes, suddenly deflated into absurdity.

Ronald Hayman in his work on Edward Albee remarks that Albee succeeds in dramatization of the way personalities can modify each other through nervous friction. Both the _Sand Box_ and _American Dream_ are concerned with the relationships between characters, but they do not dramatize their relationships in any real sense. George and Martha, Nick and Honey, their relationships modify each other's marital life. Referring to the criticism that Albee's handling of George's and
Martha's fantasy about their son constitutes a serious flaw in the play. Ronald Hayman contends that the fantasy in the play is central to the action of the play. He says that it is absurd to take the view that it's a good play except for the fantasy: "If the Fantasy is unacceptable so is the play." To support his point he quotes Albee himself who narrated the incident which made him fix the title for his play. It appears Albee had seen on a mirror in a tavern the phrase _Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf_ written on it in soap: "And of course, who's afraid of Virginia Woolf means who is afraid of the big bad Woolf ... Who's afraid of living life without false illusions." Commenting on the theme of the play, _Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf_? Hayman remarks that what Albee said about _American Dream_ is more true of _Virginia Woolf_. Albee had said: "the play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is Peachy-Keen." For Hayman _Virginia Woolf_ constitutes the greatest effort Albee was capable of making in the act of writing. According to him "Virginia Woolf, far more successfully than _The American Dream_, transcends the personal and the private, and has something to do with the anguish of us all".
Matthew C. Roudane considers *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as reflecting the anger of the playwright against the culture whose identity radically transformed during his youth: "In the late 1940s and through the 1950s, the young Albee took measure of, and became disenchanted with, the rapidly shifting industrial, social, and historical climate of the United States. A young man in his teens and twenties during this period, Albee felt as perplexed with American culture as good Jerry, his first antihero in *The Zoo Story.*"\(^\text{20}\)

Drawing on the parallel between the Greek plays, the great Shakespearean plays which are known for their structure of order and Albee's play Matthew C. Roudane remarks:

Through its presentation of destruction and tentative redemption, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* embodies precisely the kind of civilizing dimension to which Miller alludes; through its presentation of immense disorder, the play reflects its own "structures of order" that have since been infused within our contemporary "mental equipment"; and through the confluence of public and private experiences, the play attains the universal validity that Aristotle finds essential for all great art. Behind the contemporaneity of the play, then, lie some of the primal furies shaping Sophoclean tragedy.
Aristophanic comedy, and Elizabethan histories. And the overall influence, forged from the chrysalis of the performing arts, is militantly civilizing."21

Conceding the greatness of the play to its theatricality, to its spectacular heightening of emotion, Matthew C. Roudane suggests that the play's popularity owes itself to multiply layers, dramatic voices and philosophic textures, a quality akin to great plays. The play is Aristotelian in terms of its unity and its men and women are timeless. Though the play explores the particular people it quickly transcends local history and geographical place. The private experience of George and Martha define for Albee the public issues of a nation and finally of human existence itself. In this sense Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? may be held a classic text in that it centres on timeless issues and ideas much the way ancient Greek dramas did.
NOTES


5. Ibid., p. 52.

6. Ibid., p. 54.

7. Ibid., p. 54.


9. Ibid., pp. 77-78.


11. Ibid., p. 51.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Paolucci, Anne. _From Tension to Tonic_, p. 45.
18. Ibid., p. 65.
19. Ibid.