

FACULTY RESEARCH EDITION
of
The Savannah State College Bulletin

Published by

The Savannah State College

Volume 21, No. 2

Savannah, Georgia

December, 1967

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Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?:

Some Factors that Generate and Sustain Dramatic Conflict

by

Ollie Cox

Theatre goers seeking escape from their anxious existence are likely to view the seemingly endless round of partying by George and Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as no escape at all. The correctness of this assumption—that the marital conflict of George and Martha is no existence to be envied—is supported by two tragic factors that generate and sustain the action throughout this realistic and dramatic slice-of-life.

There is but one major conventional social pattern¹ in the drama: the "husband-married-to-the-boss's-daughter" pattern. The "wife domination" pattern and the "son-in-law-other-employees" pattern are so integral to the "husband-married-to-the-boss's-daughter" pattern that they cannot escape being considered as parts of it.

The two tragic factors which dominate the action are George's accidental killing of his parents and Martha's inability to have children. This analysis of *Virginia Woolf* will attempt to show how these two factors generate and sustain the conflict in the major pattern and how they merge to heighten the lancinating anguish of the play.

To understand the analysis better, the reader should have at least a reminding summary of the circumstances surrounding the action:

George had nourished a guilt complex for the accidental killing of his parents, and had never come to terms with himself. He had married Martha, the daughter of the president of a small New England college where he was a professor in the History Department. Martha was unable to have children. The problems of each become a problem for both. They have worried needlessly and faded further and further from the reality of things. Both have sought to escape their collective problem in the consumption of quantities of liquor and insulting verbal spats with each other. As a consequence, George has not made strides in the History Department but Martha has made strides in the direction of other men, not because of any real desire for them, but because of disgust with herself. Because Martha is unable to have children, she and George have invented an imaginary child to fill the void; that is, they created an imaginary son, perhaps first as a playful game, but they have so nourished

¹The term "pattern" is used here in the sense of a specific life situation that prompts actions and responses by the people involved.

their invention that now they, Martha in particular, view him as a real child. The invention must have occurred in their second year of marriage, since they have been married for twenty-three years, and seem now to expect the son on his twenty-first birthday. The androidson is very important because it is the core around which the action rises, falls, and is finally resolved.

The major or "husband-married-to-the-boss's-daughter" pattern is revealed in both expressed and implied terms in the opening scenes of the play. After they are home from her father's Saturday night party, Martha tells George, "You didn't *do* anything; you never *do* anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk." Now, one might hear this kind of remark from any wife to any husband, but Martha's domination of the major pattern is a bit clearer in George's own admission: "I wish you'd tell me something sometime . . . I wish you'd stop springing things on me." One of the clearest examples of the major pattern is seen in Martha's reply to George's accusation that she is a monster: "I'm loud and I'm vulgar and I wear the pants in this house because somebody's got to . . ." There are numerous other examples of the major pattern in the first two acts, but the point is that they are evident and that the major pattern is established.

Very early in the play theatregoers are apt to see through the mist of "bourbon and water" that George is the boy who accidentally killed his parents and that Martha can have no children. George's writing of a novel that tells the story of the accident, his preoccupation with the tragedy, and the constant always-the-same description that George gives of the fatal accident indicate his guilt:

On a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into . . .

Later in the play while reminiscing, George mentions his parents' attendance at his graduation and Nick asks him if that was the time that he had killed them. George replies, "maybe." The evidence in the play of Martha's inability to give birth is obvious. When Nick talks of Honey's hysterical pregnancies George tells him, "Martha doesn't have pregnancies at all," and in answer to Nick, who later figures out the truth of George and Martha's situation, George simply says, "We couldn't," meaning that he and Martha could have no children.

With the definitions given and the major pattern and two tragedies established, one can show with less difficulty how the "wife domination" and "son-in-law-and-other-employees" patterns generate and sustain the domestic conflict in the "husband-married-to-the-boss's-daughter" pattern.

George and Martha try to avoid reality through excessive drinking, extended verbal bouts with each other and their guests, the domination of George by Martha and George's submission to it, and by George's intentionally failing to advance in the History Department. The excessive drinking seems to lead into the other escapes in the order listed, so that together they form a series.

One need not stretch his imagination to sense that the mood, set in the first act, is in fact the mood of George and Martha's lives. The drama, operating within the unity of time, shows us this. It takes only three and a half to four hours, from two o'clock in the morning until about dawn, to give us the whole pattern of their lives through what is said and done. Viewed then as their life mood and tempo, the drinking pattern becomes a starting point of escape from the reality of the "wife domination" and "son-in-law-and-other-employees" patterns. The verbal sparring that follows is, in its early phases, really fun and games ("Get the Guest," "Hump the Hostess," and "Humiliate the Host") to George and Martha.

Nick and Honey are representative of the guests who have come to George and Martha's parties over the years. But Nick and Honey are different from the other guests in that the host's problems come to their most crucial point while Nick and Honey are with them, and some decision to sink or swim has to be made. So Nick and Honey must have something in their makeup that corresponds or something that is in direct contrast to the make-up of George and Martha. To this reviewer, Nick and Honey have similarities to George and Martha, but the most important aspect is their direct contrast. Honey can have babies, but does not want them because she is afraid. But strangely enough, this contrast, if perpetuated, can lead Nick and her into the same type of existence that George and Martha share—a wasted, meaningless one. To prevent this downturn in Nick and Honey's marriage, Albee has chosen to place them as "morning guests" in George and Martha's home. Nick and Honey also give the play unity of time and closure because they have to leave soon; also, they unify the action because they are a part of its singleness and completeness. Once George is motivated to do what he must do to attempt a reversal of situation, the presence of Nick and Honey at the early morning "after party" is vital to the drama.

George and Martha's escape from the realities of the two tragic factors is short-lived. In fact, they don't really escape; they only intensify the agony of their lives. They are far more miserable at or near the end of their drinking-sparring bouts than they were without a drop of liquor. George puts it this way:

I'm numbed enough . . . and I don't mean by liquor, though maybe that's been a part of the process, a gradual over-the-years going to sleep of the brain cells—I'm numbed enough now to be able to take you when we are alone. I don't listen to you, I sift everything down to reflex response, so I don't really *hear* you, which is the only way to manage it.

Martha's words relate her inner chaos and resignation:

I cry all the time to Daddy. 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 goddam ice trays (begins to laugh) until they are all frozen (laughs even more) and then . . . we put them . . . in our . . . drinks . . .

The agony, the remorse, the numbness, the loneliness felt by these two is clearly communicated in these lines. They seem to say that the nothingness is too much to bear, that the half-life, half-death state will have to end. It is George who sees a way to change things. The invented child was a secret between George and Martha. When Martha makes a slip and tells Honey about the son, George seems to feel he has the right to destroy the invention. There is an implied, unspoken agreement between George and Martha when he reminds her that she has broken the rules. The method of destroying the son comes to George when Honey thinks that she hears the door bell chime. George, his mind whirling with the plan in the making (another "invention"), answers Honey, while half talking to Martha, to whom he has promised drastic action for revealing their secret:

. . . somebody rang . . . it was somebody . . . with . . .
I'VE GOT IT! I'VE GOT IT MARTHA . . . Somebody
with a message . . . It was a message, and it was about . . .
our . . . and the message . . . was . . . our son . . . is
. . . dead!

Noting Honey almost senselessly drunk, George seizes this chance to attempt a reversal of the fortunes of all the characters. He had, moments earlier, told Honey in commenting on Nick and Martha in the kitchen:

It's very simple . . . when people can't abide things as they are, when they can't abide the present, they do one of two things . . . either they . . . either 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 go BANG! BANG! BANG!

George has contemplated the past for too long; he has achieved nothing, merely multiplying the nothingness. Now he must set about altering the future; he must destroy the created child to bring Martha back to reality; he must, in the process, shock Honey and Nick into a realization of their plight, or else they will wind up just as he and Martha. In the same process, there's a chance that he will free himself of the past and his guilt complex. His language and manner are all-important now, for he must distill truth from illusion through the proper application of words and expressions. His sarcastic banter, so pronounced earlier, now disappears and a sober, naked reality replaces it. George is equal to the task; he is at once calculating, commanding, and insulting because he has to be, for he must really shock. Nothing could have been further from the manner of a real father telling a real wife about the death of a real son than the way George, surging onward, tells Martha:

All right. Well Martha . . . I'm afraid our boy isn't coming home for his birthday . . . No Martha . . . He . . . can't . . . He was killed late in the afternoon . . . on a country road, with his learner's permit in his pocket, he swerved to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a . . . I thought you should know.

This is the way George chooses to alter the pattern of life for himself, Martha, and in the process, Nick and Honey. The resulting effect on the others point toward a positive awakening and easement of their common problem. Nick's reaction is heard in an exclamation, "Jesus Christ, I think I understand this." Nick repeats this statement and later says to George, "You couldn't have any?" Honey agrees with George about the telegram that she really did not see. She does this because she realizes that George's plan is best for Martha. Honey at the same time is aware that she, herself, should begin to think about having children while she can, especially after seeing how much a child means to Martha and George who cannot have one. Honey is at last aware that she and Nick could wind up in George and Martha's predicament if she retains her fear of having children. With all these things in mind, she agrees with George about the telegram that she did not see, saying, "Yes, yes you ate it. I watched . . . I watched you . . . you ate it all down." Honey's lie reveals her own awakening.

Martha is hardest to bring around; the child was almost real to her; she has suffered most. She even suggests the possibility of another creation, not fully believing the first was destroyed or whether George really had to destroy the son: "It was . . . ? You had to? I don't suppose, maybe, we could?" But Martha gradually gives in to the reality of it all: ". . . Yes. No." George's very positive reply is, "it was . . . time . . . it will be better."

The author would like to acknowledge the debt owed to Charles I. Brown and Andrew E. Reiff in the preparation of this article.