

Araştırma Makalesi

# Edward Albee and Existentialist Theatre: Reality and Illusion in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

*Edward Albee ve Varoluşçu Tiyatro: Kim Korkar Hain Kurttan? Oyununda Gerçeklik ve İllüzyon*

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**Öz:** Bu makalede, Edward Albee'nin 1962 yılında kaleme aldığı *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* oyununun toplumsal normları ve idealleri sorgulama kapasitesiyle dikkat çektiği ve potansiyel liberteryen yaklaşımının izleyiciler üzerinde şok edici bir etki bıraktığı vurgulanmaktadır. Oyun, orta yaşlı çift George ve Martha ile genç çift Nick ve Honey'nin arasında geçen bir geceyi konu almaktadır. Temelde çiftler arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiler, gerçeklik kavramı ve varoluşun absürtlüğüne odaklanan oyun, karakterlerin geçmiş travmalarını ve hayal kırıklıklarını ele alarak insan psikolojisinin derinliklerine inmektedir. İletişim çöküşleri ve karakterler arasındaki çatışmalar, insan ilişkilerinin kırılganlığını vurgular. Oyunun ana temalarından biri hayal kırıklığıdır, karakterlerin geçmişteki beklentileriyle gerçeklik arasındaki uçurum vurgulanır. George ve Martha'nın ilişkisindeki iletişim eksikliği, seyirciye duygusal bağların ne kadar kırılgan olabileceğini gösterir. Existansiyalist tiyatro bağlamında, makale existansiyalist felsefenin temel ilkelerine odaklanarak, bireyin özgürlüğü, sorumluluğu, varoluşsal deneyim üzerine derinlemesine bir analiz sunar. Karakterlerin kendi varoluşsal gerçeklikleriyle yüzleşmeleri ve kimliklerini anlamaları sağlanarak existansiyalist temalar işlenir. Gerçeklik ile illüzyon arasındaki ince çizgi, Martha ve George'un ilişkisindeki karmaşık aracılığıyla ortaya çıkar. İllüzyonun çözülmesi, seyirciye karakterlerin içsel dünyalarını keşfetme fırsatı sunar. Bu bağlamda, oyun existansiyalist temaları işleyerek insan ilişkilerinin karmaşıklığını vurgulayan güçlü bir dramatik eserdir. Oyun, Amerikan tiyatrosuna önemli katkı sağlamış, modern dramatik yapıları etkilemiş ve edebî dünyada önemli bir konum elde etmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Varoluşçuluk, İllüzyon, Gerçeklik, Edward Albee.

**Abstract:** This article underscores that Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is notable for its capacity to scrutinize social norms and ideals, with its potential libertarian approach leaving a shocking impact on the audience. The play revolves around a night involving the middle-aged couple George and Martha and the young couple Nick and Honey. It primarily explores the intricate dynamics between couples, the concept of reality, and the absurdity of existence, delving into the depths of human psychology by addressing the characters' past traumas and disappointments. Communication breakdowns and conflicts among the characters accentuate the fragility of human relationships, with disappointment being a central theme that underscores the disparity between past expectations and reality. The play, analyzed within the framework of existentialist theatre, provides a thorough examination of individual freedom, responsibility, and existential experience, focusing on the fundamental tenets of existentialist philosophy. It addresses existentialist themes by enabling characters to confront their own existential realities and understand their identities. The intricate relationship between Martha and George reveals the fine line between reality and illusion, and the dissolution of this illusion provides the audience with the opportunity to explore the inner worlds of the characters. In this context, the play emerges as a potent dramatic work that underscores the complexity of human relations through its engagement with existentialist themes. The play has made a significant contribution to American theatre, influencing modern dramatic structures and securing a prominent position in the literary world.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Illusion, Reality, Edward Albee.



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## Introduction

Edward Albee (1928-2016) an American playwright, displayed an early penchant for creative experimentation. One of his initial ventures into writing was “Aliqueen” (1943) a three-act absurd play penned at the age of twelve. His debut poem found publication in *Kaleidoscope* a Texas-based literary magazine, and his first one-act play in *Choate Literary Magazine*. While briefly enrolled at Trinity College, Edward Albee participated in a Maxwell Anderson play (Yaşar, 2013, p.768). Albee’s innovative perspective and contributions have established him as a significant figure in the theatre. His interest in theater and the inception of his literary journey trace back to the 1950s. At the age of 30, Albee completed *The Zoo Story*-a pivotal one-act play marking the commencement of his career (Yaşar, 2013, p.768). His early works reflect the social conditions and subversive culture of their time (Nabi & Ahmed, 2015, p.235). Associated with absurdist theater and psychological approaches, Albee has distinguished himself as a versatile and profound writer (Jaf, 2015, p.60-61). His adept handling of social problems and crises has positioned him prominently in modern American dramatic art and literature. Albee engages in critical observations about American society and the unrealized American dream. From this standpoint, his characters delve into the intricacies of modern life through their perspectives and interactions (Soomro, 2022, p.532). In the 2009 study by Zalokar, the profound influence of Edward Albee on the world of theater becomes evident. The research delves into four selected Albee plays, frequently performed in Slovenia, examining them within the framework of absurd theater. A detailed analysis is conducted on the presentation of these works in Slovenian theaters, highlighting Albee’s global impact (Zalokar, 2009. p.93). This underscores Albee’s significance in challenging traditional theatrical norms and addressing themes previously unexplored on stage. Edward Albee’s exploration of provocative atmospheres and metaphysical themes in *Tiny Alice* exemplifies the evolution of his thematic interests (Davidson, 1968, p.54). His works successfully portray individuals grappling with the social, cultural, and economic challenges prevalent in American society. Albee’s dramas assert the inevitability of raising awareness and rejecting conformist values, suggesting that the essence of his plays lies in the existential impasses of American society. This inclination prompts Albee to utilize existential philosophy as a means of critiquing societal norms. Throughout his plays, Albee communicates various themes, including individuals coping with issues such as alienation and loneliness, the pervasive lack of awareness among many Americans regarding life and self, the responsibilities placed upon them, the stifling pressure of societal harmony, and the anxiety accompanying the realization of the illusory nature of their lives (Çelebi, 2013, pp.1-2). Edward Albee’s contributions to contemporary American dramatic art are notable for his focus on social challenges and realities, influencing theater practice significantly (Nabi & Ahmed, 2015). Specifically, his play *The Zoo Story* stands out for its critique of illusions within the contemporary American social and cultural ethos, embodying the subversive culture of its time. Zaheer et al. (2022) further underscore Albee’s impact on modern theater, emphasizing the deconstructive and intertextual portrayal of psychological fragmentation and alienation in his selected plays, offering a profound exploration of complex human experiences (pp.442-443).

Edward Albee’s prolific career, commencing at a young age, has made a substantial contribution to contemporary American dramatic art. His works delve into societal problems and individual challenges, illuminating the existential impasses of American society and advocating for heightened awareness and rejection of conformist values. Extensively studied in the literature, the thematic consistencies, realizations, and changes in his works reflect the evolution of Albee’s

theatrical perspective and aesthetic preferences. Albee's influence on the global theater scene, analyses of his notable works, and the unique themes within them underscore his significance in modern American dramatic art. Edward Albee's enduring legacy in both American society and the global theater arena leaves a thought-provoking and controversial imprint on contemporary theatrical practice.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, penned by Albee in 1962, stands as a noteworthy American absurd play that garnered substantial acclaim on Broadway. According to Martin Esslin, a prominent scholar known for his work on the absurd theatre, this dramatic tradition provides audiences with a direct confrontation with the absurdity of human existence on stage, as opposed to philosophical discussions about the absurdity of daily life. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the inherent absurdity of human life (Coby, 2023, p.224). Esslin's analysis situates the Theater of the Absurd as a significant stage in the evolution of global theatrical art, offering audiences a perspective that life lacks meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. Moreover, Esslin highlights the portrayal of human conditions in absurd theatre as reflecting metaphysical anguish at the core of existence (Susandro et al.,2020, p.49). Esslin's interpretation aligns with existentialist thought, which emphasizes the absurd nature of human existence, highlighting the absence of intrinsic meaning in life, feelings of alienation, and existential confusion (Querido, 2017, p.688). Furthermore, the dramatic style of the Theater of the Absurd, as identified by Esslin in European plays, accentuates the absurdity of human conditions by often blurring the lines between dream worlds, nightmares, and reality, thus emphasizing uncertainty and existential questioning (Esslin, 1960, p.3). Esslin's examination of the absurd in theatre underscores the disorientation and existential crisis experienced by both characters and audience members, echoing broader existential themes such as freedom, choice, and the quest for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Renowned for its propensity to challenge societal norms, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* also offers a potentially libertarian perspective, eliciting a jolting and captivating effect on the audience (Pinder, 2022, p.180). The narrative revolves around an evening and night shared by George and Martha, a middle-aged couple, and Nick and Honey, a younger couple. Central themes include the intricate dynamics within couples, the notion of reality, and the absurdity of existence. The storyline unfolds gradually, revealing tensions and issues that surface between the couples during what initially appears to be an ordinary evening. The intricate relationship dynamics between George and Martha come to the forefront, exposing conflicts rooted in Martha's desire for control and George's intellect. Nick and Honey, initially observers, get entangled in the unfolding drama as the night progresses. George and Martha's relationship is laden with a history of miscommunication, lies, and past disappointments, underscoring the complexity of the characters' mental states and blurring the line between reality and fiction. The play delves into the depths of human psychology, laying bare the disappointments, past traumas, and pain harbored by the couple. Communication breakdowns in George and Martha's relationship underscore the fragility of emotional bonds, emphasizing the theme of disappointment and the dissonance between past expectations and reality. The audience witnesses how people evolve over time and the consequential impact on relationships. The breakdown of communication emerges as a pivotal element in the play, with conflicts underscoring the significance of silence, emphasis, and the emotions conveyed through speech. This prompts contemplation on how a lack of communication can detrimentally affect human relationships. The theme of identity exploration surfaces as characters grapple with understanding and expressing their own identities. The revelation of George and Martha's past secrets, coupled with the evolution and conflict of their identities, sheds light on the challenges inherent in comprehending

individuals' identities (Adhikary, pp.47-50). In this context, it is apt to assert that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has made a substantial contribution to the evolution of American theatre, influencing modern dramatic structures and securing a prominent position in the literary realm. The play stands as a potent dramatic work, offering a critical and profound analysis of the complexity and tragedy inherent in human relationships through Albee's insightful character portrayals.

### 1. Existentialist Theater

Existentialism is a philosophical orientation centered on radical individual freedom, responsibility, and societal engagement, as defined in the 2008 *Dictionary of Historical Existentialism*. It seeks to unveil the contradictions inherent in conventional, "serious" values, advocating instead for a doctrine that underscores individual choice and creation (p.14). This philosophical movement accentuates individual freedom, choice, and responsibility by scrutinizing the foundations of human existence. Proponents of existentialism argue for absolute freedom and the acceptance of personal responsibility for one's actions. David Cooper offers a thorough exploration of the philosophical investigation into existentialism, reconstructing its foundational principles and impacts. According to him, existentialism can be defined as a philosophical approach that examines the fundamental characteristics of human existence and its effects on human life. This approach focuses on human freedom, choices, and responsibilities, questioning the meaning and value of existence. Existentialism also addresses basic human experiences such as loneliness, helplessness, and confronting death (Cooper, 1991). Consequently, its emphasis on individual freedom, responsibility, and the nature of human existence has rendered existentialism widely influential and applicable across diverse fields. Describing existentialism or existential philosophy as the "culmination of the contemporary individual's rapid self-examination and effort to comprehend their existence within swiftly changing historical and factual conditions" implies that the leading figures of existentialism essentially embodied the spirit of their time. This suggests that these prominent figures while reflecting on and expressing themselves amid the profound anxieties, concerns, troubles, longings, and demands of the contemporary individual, ultimately mirrored the ethos of their era. Therefore, a fundamental tenet of existential philosophy shaping its outlook on human existence is the acknowledgment of the inherent uncertainties and ambiguities characterizing human life. Existential philosophy contends that attempts to eradicate these uncertainties do not epitomize genuine freedom; instead, true freedom arises from embracing the inherent uncertainties of existence (König, 2020, p.614). By existentialism, the exploration of existence necessitates individuals to navigate between various possibilities. In essence, existential philosophy posits that existence precedes essence, signifying that individuals first exist and subsequently comprehend their existence by defining themselves and crafting their essence. Given that these opportunities for individuals to shape their essence are influenced by their interactions with other beings and the world, existence is perpetually circumscribed by the imperative to exist and make choices within a concrete and historical context (Çavuşoğlu, 2017, p.773).

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) a prominent figure in existentialist philosophy, delves into the roots of existentialism and outlines its key characteristics. His ontological and philosophical approach provides a distinctive framework for comprehending the fundamental essence of human existence and its interplay with the world. Sartre's philosophy, shaped by the intricate dynamics of the 20th century, reacts to the era's technological advancements, where individuals find themselves entangled in the dominance of tools and systems they have created. This context prompts a

fluctuation between a meaningful life and one fraught with uncertainty. The existentialist perspective championed by Sartre underscores the paramount importance of human freedom. Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical framework of existentialism revolves around key concepts such as radical freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and the inherent absurdity of human existence. In his seminal work, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), Sartre underscores the notion that existence precedes essence, suggesting that individuals are not born with a predetermined purpose but must instead forge their own meaning through their actions and choices (Sartre, 2007, p.22). This existential viewpoint challenges the notion of a fixed human nature and underscores the significance of personal agency and freedom in shaping one's identity and values. According to this viewpoint, individuals bear full responsibility for their choices and actions. Existentialism articulates a consciousness specific to human life, opposing the existence of mere objects. Human existence is initially marked by nothingness, and individuals not only exist but also actively create themselves. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, self-awareness is contingent upon being observed by another individual, enabling us to perceive ourselves. This concept is elucidated in the "The Look" section of his work *Being and Nothingness* (1957) where he asserts that his own existence is affirmed when someone else perceives him, and that he can only become aware of himself through the gaze of another. For Sartre, the self comes into being through the act of being looked at or recognized by another person (p.225). Essence is determined through one's actions and choices, constituting an ongoing process of self-formation. Sartre posits that human existence precedes essence, embodying a continuous journey of self-definition. This existentialist lens, applied to interpret the tumultuous nature of the 20th century, offers profound insights into human freedom and responsibility (Çavuşoğlu, 2017, pp.776-777).

In this context, the Existentialist theater, notably influenced by the philosophical contributions of Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre, prominent figures in French existentialism, underwent a profound transformation in terms of thematic content, aesthetics, and narrative styles. The philosophical concepts articulated by Camus and Sartre, particularly those revolving around absurdity, freedom, and the human condition, played a pivotal role in shaping and enriching existentialist theater (Rao, 2022, p.443). The impact of Camus and Sartre is evident in the incorporation of existential themes into theatrical works, bringing a profound depth to the exploration of human experiences (Mayer, 2021, p.1). Various aspects of existentialist theater, ranging from stage design to character interactions, reflect the influence of Camus and Sartre's existentialist thought. The emergence of the theater of the absurd, characterized by a questioning of societal norms and a reflection of existential philosophy, is a testament to their influence (Bashir, 2018, p.85). Furthermore, the influence of these philosophers extends to developments such as the adoption of existentialist narratives and the empowerment of women in the performing arts (Kahn et al., 2018, p.1). The existentialist philosophy of Camus and Sartre not only shaped the thematic elements but also deeply impacted the aesthetics and poetics of stage productions. Their contemplation on the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence is reflected in the incorporation of elements such as grotesque aesthetics and skaz poetics (Kahn et al., 2018, p.1). The ideas of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre have made substantial contributions to the evolution of existentialist theater. Their philosophical perspectives have left an indelible mark on the thematic, aesthetic, and narrative dimensions of existentialist theatrical productions, offering profound insights into existential issues like the human condition, freedom, and the quest for meaning.

## **2. *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

The play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* can be thoroughly examined through an existentialist lens, particularly by delving into the absurdity inherent in human existence. Adhikary's analysis sheds light on existential dilemmas within the drama, unveiling the existentialist themes embodied by Edward Albee's characters. The conflicts and struggles of these characters can be interpreted as their attempts to grapple with the perceived meaninglessness and purposelessness of their lives—concepts closely aligned with existentialist philosophy. Furthermore, Pinder's examination of the original Broadway production provides crucial insights into exploring impolitical elements and existentialist meanings within the context of American theater. This perspective facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the existential dimensions within the drama, meticulously examining how the play's themes and character dynamics intertwine with existentialist thought. The characters' experiences and their interactions with each other unveil a profound exploration of existentialist themes embedded in the narrative. Adhikary and Pinder's analyses offer valuable insights into the existentialist themes presented in the play, shedding light on the intricacies of human existence. This study provides a holistic perspective to fathom the profound essence of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* sculpted by existentialist thought, thereby allowing the audience to contemplate the intricacies of human existence.

The analysis of the characters Martha and George in the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as representing existentialism is a complex effort that requires examining the deep and multi-layered elements in Edward Albee's work. When evaluated in the context of existential dead ends and the search for meaning, Martha and George are characters that we observe facing the feeling of meaninglessness and purposelessness in their lives. Throughout the play, the deep emotional conflicts these characters experience as they struggle with existential dilemmas are a reflection of their efforts to confront the meaninglessness and emptiness of their lives. Martha and George are searching for meaning in their relationship and life in general, but their search often fails. While George deals with the meaninglessness of his own life through his meaningless and contradictory narratives about his parents' deaths, Martha feels frustrated and helpless, trying to recreate George by her own expectations. These efforts can be seen as an attempt to make sense of the meaninglessness of the characters' lives, but these efforts often fail to find a deeper meaning, and the characters are driven further into a dead end. In the context of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Martha and George's existential dilemmas and quest for significance stand out as fundamental themes, highlighting the complexity and vulnerability of their inner worlds. The play prominently portrays the disappointments in Martha and George's relationship and their pursuit of meaning. Martha's enactment of the big trap is particularly significant in underscoring these themes. Through her game, Martha endeavors to mold George to fit her own ideals, indicating her inclination to seek refuge in a realm of fantasy rather than confront the reality of their relationship.

“Martha: 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... (Act 2).”

Martha's description of George reflects her desire to control and shape him according to her whims, indicating her preference for a fabricated reality where she holds the power. This passage suggests Martha's complex and manipulative nature within the relationship. She portrays George as a multifaceted figure who alternately fulfills different roles for her, highlighting her attempts to mold him according to her changing desires. The mention of “learning the games we play” hints at a dynamic where Martha sets the rules and George must adapt, reinforcing the idea of her

seeking control. By presenting George in this way, Martha reveals her inclination to create a narrative that suits her needs and desires, rather than confronting the complexities of their relationship. This desire for control and manipulation aligns with the broader themes of power dynamics and illusion versus reality in the play. Conversely, George's acceptance of Martha's game signifies his preference for perpetuating this make-believe scenario rather than confronting the truths of their relationship. This mutual inclination to escape reality rather than confront the challenges in their relationship reveals Martha and George's shared struggle with accepting reality and their inclination to seek escapism. These instances underscore how the disappointments in Martha and George's relationship, and their quest for meaning, constitute the central thematic underpinning of the play, highlighting the intricate nature of their inner selves. These themes are adeptly explored through the play's profound character analysis and intricate relationship dynamics. Martha and George's interactions bear the hallmarks of profound disillusionment and a search for meaning in their lives, aligning with the existentialist themes woven into the fabric of the narrative. Edward Albee's portrayal of the character George as a character deeply affected and consistent with the overall theme of the play is notable. George's actions are no longer solely driven by a desire for revenge; they also represent an effort to liberate Martha from her illusions, although whether this liberation would truly benefit her remains uncertain. George is profoundly impacted by pain; he acknowledges his involvement in the creation of their son, a partnership he is certain of amidst the uncertainties of the world: "*There are very few things in this world that I am sure of ... but the one thing in this whole stinking world that I am sure of ... is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the ... creation of our ... blond eyed, blue haired ... son*" (p. 72). Transitioning from a directorial to an actor's role in the play, George finds himself as an un-consecrated priest who has lost control over the play he hoped to control. The intertwining of reality and illusion is vividly portrayed: while George did create the "son," paradoxically, this "son" does not exist. This situation, where reality and illusion blur, is depicted with exceptional poignancy, emphasizing George's profound emotional turmoil and the complexities of his character (Meyer, 1968, p.68).

In the context of existential themes in character dynamics, we can consider how George's character and the dynamics in his relationships reflect existential themes. George's monologues and dialogues with Martha and Nick emphasize the meaninglessness and absurdity of life. These themes become evident, especially later in the play, with George's contradictory statements about his parents' death:

"Martha: You never sailed past Majorca...

George: Martha!

Martha: You were never in the goddamn Mediterranean at all... ever...

George: Certainly was My Mommy and Daddy took me there as a college graduation present.

Martha: Nuts!

Nick: Was this after you killed them?

(GEORGE and MARTHA swing around and look at him; there is a brief, ugly pause)

George: (Defiantly) Maybe. Yeah; maybe not, too. Jesus! (p.200)."

These contradictory statements by George about his parents' death may represent the character questioning the meaning of his own life and being in an existential impasse. These descriptions also reflect the complexity and meaninglessness of George's relationships. His dialogues and interior monologues reveal the character's existential concerns and sensitivity to the absurdity of life. In this way, George's character emerges as an important figure who delves deeply into the play's existential themes.

In Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Martha's use of language offers a window into her inner turmoil and existential angst. Her harsh and contemptuous words, often directed at her husband George, hint at a deeper sense of helplessness and meaninglessness. These expressions seem to serve as a vehicle for Martha to articulate her internal conflicts and existential anxieties. The dialogues between Martha and George also play a crucial role in highlighting existential themes within the narrative. Through their exchanges, the play delves into the absurdity and futility of life, highlighting the characters' existential dilemmas and internal struggles. Martha's language, particularly in her arguments with George, reveals her existential anxieties and vulnerability. For instance, her statements such as "*What a cluck, what a cluck you are!*" (p.3) and "*You make me puke*" (p.13) convey a deep sense of despair and meaninglessness, shedding light on her complex emotions towards George and the impasse in their relationship. These linguistic subtleties not only enrich the psychological portrayal of the characters but also deepen the exploration of existential themes throughout the play. Martha's words reflect the complexity of her character's inner world and existential dilemmas. Through her language, Albee intricately weaves existential themes into the narrative, using them as tools to deepen the portrayal of characters' inner worlds and enrich the overall narrative of the play.

Nick: Honey...

Honey: Well, you were.

Martha: You look like you still got a pretty good body now, too... is that right? Have you?

George: Martha... decency forbids...

Martha: SHUT UP! Well, have you? Have you kept your body?

Nick: It's still pretty good. I work out.

Martha: Do you!

Nick: Yeah.

Honey: Oh, yes... he has a very... firm body.

Martha: Have you! Oh, I think that's very nice.

Nick: Well, you never know...

Martha: ...you never know when it's going to come in handy (p.52-53)."

In this instance, Martha's utilization of the phrase "*I think*" demonstrates its dual capacity, as noted by Holmes (1990), serving both as a marker of uncertainty in an epistemic modal sense and as a linguistic tool for tempering emotions. This phrase can thus operate as a mechanism for expressing ambiguity, either to convey uncertainty or to inflect statements with emotional nuances. Martha's employment of this phrase likely aims to underscore uncertainty or establish an emotional tenor before opining on Nick's circumstances. For instance, in her response to Nick's self-praise about his physique, Martha's rejoinder, "*Have you! Oh, I think that's very nice,*" possibly serves as a sarcastic emphasis on Nick's self-admiration. In this context, the function of the expression "*I think*" appears to serve as a vehicle for ambiguity, reflecting Martha's emotional state or conveying a sarcastic tone. This syntactic element is frequently deployed to introduce personal opinions or thoughts, allowing the speaker to articulate their perspectives. The phrase "*I think*" thus functions as a rhetorical device for emphasizing ambiguity, with Martha using it to sarcastically underscore Nick's self-adulation. Consequently, Martha's use of the phrase "*I think*" can be construed as an expression of existential anxiety, indicative of her feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. The manner in which Martha employs this phrase suggests a sense of doubt and insecurity regarding her own thoughts.

A thorough examination of Martha and George's pathological interactions, as well as their collaborative games with guests Nick and Honey, unveils a complex intertwining with existential



themes of absurdity and meaninglessness (Sasani, 2014, p.1484). Sasani's analysis effectively captures the entrapment within George and Martha's relationship, resonating with the sense of captivity and meaninglessness often associated with existential philosophy. The characters' endeavors to unravel their identities and scrutinize their marital histories align with existential themes of self-awareness and the quest for reality. Moreover, Leonard's (1970) exploration of Martha's dissatisfaction with George and her inclination to project him into a childlike role can be construed as an expression of an Oedipal conflict, coinciding with existential philosophy's inclination to delve into the subconscious and unravel the intricacies of human relationships. Additionally, Adhikary's recent work (2023) accentuates the play's endeavor to comprehend the characters' identities by emphasizing the absurdity of human existence, echoing existential philosophy's contention that human existence is fundamentally absurd (p.45). The act of Martha and George assuming each other's roles and engaging in games with their guests, Nick and Honey, serves as a poignant reflection of existential themes, as these characters grapple with the quest for their own identities and the creation of meaning. Their games, like "Get the Guests" or "Hump the Hostess," act as diversions from their personal discontent and the void they sense in their lives. This reflects the existential philosophical idea that people frequently resort to distractions to evade facing life's inherent absurdity and lack of meaning.

Moreover, the examination of heterosexual masculinity and power dynamics among characters in the play can be scrutinized within the framework of existential philosophy, shedding light on the essence of human connections and the pursuit of individuality. As it is seen in George's words: *Alas, Martha, in reality, it works out that the sacrifice is usually of a somewhat more private portion of the anatomy* (p.28). The phrase under consideration may pertain to masculinity and power dynamics, suggesting a notion of sacrifice often linked with sexuality. Within the framework of existential philosophy, emphasis is placed on the individual's imperative to construct their own existence and imbue it with meaning. In this regard, masculinity is frequently construed as embodying traits of strength, control, and sexual prowess. Hence, the term "sacrifice" in the quotation could allude to the sacrifices or challenges men encounter in fulfilling these societal expectations. Simultaneously, the expression "more private portion of the anatomy" in the quote denotes a deeply personal and intimate aspect associated with male sexuality and sexual identity. This underscores the pressures and complexities men face in upholding their sexual identity and performance. Within existential philosophy, such pressures and complexities are viewed as hurdles that individuals confront in forging their sense of self and identity. In essence, this perspective allows for an examination of heterosexual masculinity and power dynamics through the lens of existential philosophy. The quote elucidates the roles and expectations imposed on men, the dynamics of power and control in relation to sexuality, and demonstrates how existential philosophy can elucidate the fundamental nature of human connection and the quest for individuality. Existentialism posits that individuals are fundamentally responsible for crafting their own identities through the exercise of their agency and choices. Within this philosophical framework, sexuality emerges as a significant avenue for self-expression and self-representation, playing a pivotal role in how individuals construct and signify their existence. In many societies, men are often expected to embody qualities such as power, dominance, and sexual prowess as integral components of their masculine identity. Within the realm of existential philosophy, individuals are encouraged to actively shape their own lives and imbue them with personal meaning. Consequently, some men may feel compelled to emphasize their sexual prowess as a means of validating their existence or asserting their sense of self within societal norms. It is crucial to note, however, that existentialism allows for a broad

spectrum of expressions and identities, accommodating diverse forms of self-realization. This quotation is significant as it underscores the challenges and pressures that men encounter while negotiating societal norms concerning masculinity and sexuality. It underscores the intricate nature of male identity and the potential sacrifices or obstacles individuals may encounter in their pursuit of self-fulfillment and authenticity. Furthermore, the quotation illustrates how existential philosophy offers a theoretical framework for comprehending these complexities, facilitating an exploration of human connections and the essence of individuality. The quotation does not inherently imply that the character is physically or sexually feeble. Instead, it suggests that the character is willing to confront the sacrifices or challenges associated with meeting societal expectations regarding masculinity and sexual performance. The term “anatomical more private part” may allude to a deeply personal and private facet of male sexuality, but it does not necessarily connote weakness. Rather, it reflects the character’s acknowledgment of the pressures and intricacies involved in conforming to these societal expectations.

An analysis of the play reveals that, alongside the conflict between men and women, there exists a significant theme of intra-masculine competition. The verbal sparring between George and Nick underscores Albee’s conception that gender is constructed through dialogue, highlighting the play’s structural and psychological foundation rooted in the rivalry between these two characters:

“George: You take the trouble to construct a civilization... to... to build a society, based on the principles of... of principle... You make government and art and realize that they are, must be, both the same... You bring things to the saddest of all points, to the point where there is something to lose... Then, all at once, through all the music, through all the sensible sounds of men building, attempting, comes the Dies Irae. And what is it? What does the trumpet sound? Up yours (p.117).”

Here, the author invites readers to engage in a profound reflection on the intricate dynamics of gender roles and social structures. Through George’s portrayal, the text articulates feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, while simultaneously offering a critical commentary on how societal norms and regulations influence communication patterns and interpersonal relationships. George’s dialogues poignantly underscore the notion that societal constructs often act as barriers to authentic self-expression and individual autonomy. Within this framework, gender roles emerge as integral components of these constructs, as they are frequently shaped and upheld by prevailing social norms and expectations. This interpretation underscores that gender constitutes not merely a biological attribute but also a deeply entrenched social and cultural construct.

Albee’s work portrays postwar heterosexual masculinity as inherently competitive, portraying it as an identity that must be validated and publicly demonstrated. The play subtly suggests that the construct of competitive masculinity necessitates both a victor and a vanquished party. The narrative further highlights the necessity of a receptive, albeit ultimately defeated, male audience to fulfill this performative dynamic, wherein one man’s masculinity is authenticated by another man. Moreover, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* illustrates that heterosexual masculinity is forged through a specific form of triangulation, wherein George and Nick vie for supremacy to ascertain who embodies the superior masculine qualities and is thus deemed a more suitable partner for Martha. The characters of George and Nick exemplify this competitive nature, each vying for dominance in their own way. George, as an older academic, represents a more intellectual and perhaps subdued form of masculinity. He often undermines Nick, the younger and more physically imposing biology professor, through his wit and psychological games. Nick, on the other hand, embodies a more traditional, physically dominant form of masculinity, which is challenged by George’s intellectual prowess. The character of Martha serves as a catalyst for

this competition, as both men seek her approval and validation. Martha, in turn, manipulates and emasculates both George and Nick, highlighting the fragile nature of traditional masculinity.

One of the main elements in the play is the themes of reality and illusion. Edward Albee emphasizes the fine line between reality and illusion by addressing the conflicts and relationships between characters. For example, the sentence "*Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference.*" (p.202) reflects the existential theme of struggling with the nature of reality and self. It implies that the characters, especially George, have a hard time understanding what is real in their lives and what is merely an illusion, which can be seen as a reflection of the complexities of human connections and individuality. In Act III of the play, George and Martha underscore a pivotal moment where the boundaries between reality and fantasy become increasingly blurred, particularly for Martha. She seems to lose touch with reality as she indulges in her fantasies and manipulations. This is exemplified in the scene where she imagines a child that she and George could have had, creating a vivid illusion that momentarily blurs her perception of reality. They reveal that their marriage, and conceivably their entire existence, hinges upon the imaginary child they fabricated together, a construct they now feel compelled to "destroy" to confront actuality. This admission not only illuminates the extent of their shared delusion but also prompts a reevaluation of their earlier statements. For instance, George's purported role in his parents' demise, Honey's dreamlike pregnancy, or the significance of a toy rifle may all be construed as instances where their myths may have manifested into reality. The characters employ various mechanisms to evade the harshness of reality, such as indulging in alcohol, engaging in sexual escapades, and launching relentless verbal assaults on one another. Furthermore, their outward personas serve as a deceptive veil, masking their true selves; they are not as they initially appear. Martha, for instance, outwardly abrasive and confrontational, emerges as the most vulnerable, necessitating the greatest degree of protection in the real world. She often uses her confrontational attitude as a defense mechanism, as seen in her exchange with George:

"Martha: You make me puke, you are the bloody idol of this campus... You're all blown up with nonsense... 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 is 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. (Act 3, p.190)."

In contrast, George, initially portrayed as passive and ineffectual, gradually assumes control over both his and Martha's lives. Similarly, Nick, outwardly projecting an image of masculinity, is ultimately revealed to be impotent in his intimate relationship with Martha. Honey, beneath her seemingly simple and guileless exterior, covertly employs contraceptive measures to prevent pregnancy. These narrative elements deepen our comprehension of the intricate interplay between reality and fantasy within the play, illustrating the characters' concerted efforts to elude the constraints of reality. Martha and George, the central figures, meticulously craft an outward facade of marital perfection, diverging sharply from the underlying reality of their complex relationship. The dissonance between the portrayed ideal and the actual state of their marriage becomes increasingly apparent as the narrative unfolds, compelling the characters to grapple with the inevitability of confronting truth. As the storyline progresses, the illusions meticulously upheld by Martha and George gradually crumble in the presence of their guests, prompting a reevaluation of preconceived notions about their marital bliss. The revelation of the intricacies of their relationship and respective pasts unveils layers of their inner worlds, allowing the audience to delve into the profound complexities of the characters. Martha's statement "*I swear... if you*

*existed I'd divorce you" (p.16)* underscores a pursuit for authenticity and meaning, foundational concepts within existential philosophy. According to existential thought, individuals possess free will and bear the responsibility of constructing their own existence and significance. Martha's declaration suggests a desire to perceive George in a more genuine or authentic light, rather than the persona he presents. This reflects Martha's quest for sincerity and authenticity within her relationships and broader life context. Moreover, Martha's statement underscores the intricacy of human relationships and the challenge of confronting reality. In interpersonal dynamics, individuals often struggle to fully comprehend the other party, leading to a disjunction between relational reality and perceived reality. Martha's remark toward George thus illuminates the intricate nature of relationships and the complexities inherent in navigating reality within them. The younger couple in the narrative initially endeavors to maintain an illusion of marital perfection, yet their encounter with the intricate dynamics of Martha and George's relationship forces them to confront the realities of their own union. The consumption of alcohol serves as a poignant symbol, accentuating the characters' proclivity to seek refuge in temporary illusions. While alcohol momentarily distorts their inner realities, the transient nature of these illusions underscores the inexorable return to facing the starkness of truth. This is exemplified in the scene where Martha and George's guests, Nick and Honey, become increasingly intoxicated, leading to a breakdown of social niceties and a confrontation of uncomfortable truths. As the effects of alcohol wear off, the characters are forced to confront the reality of their lives and the illusions they have created. The dialogues and conflicts between Martha and George serve as a focal point, highlighting the tension inherent in the interplay between reality and illusion. Complex interpersonal relationships form the thematic foundation of the play, with dialogues serving as a conduit for the audience to intimately comprehend the inner realms of the characters, facilitating a confrontation with the complexities of reality.

The sense of stagnation and purposelessness within the relationship of George and Martha stands as the principal theme of Albee's play. This sentiment notably crescendos with George's choice to "kill" their fictitious son, potentially reflecting a desperate quest for an escape, evading the realities of their relationship. George's act of "killing" their imaginary son underscores the stark reality and emptiness within their relationship. Through this action, George dismantles Martha's illusory world, seeking a desperate exit from their reality. This occurrence intensifies the feelings of stagnation and purposelessness in their relationship. This is exemplified in pivotal quotes from the play, where George elucidates his decision to Martha: "*....He is dead..., and I have killed him.... That's all, I could kill him whenever I wanted to*" (p.233-235-236). These words reveal George's earnest pursuit of an escape from reality and the futility within their relationship, as directed towards Martha. The play delves into the conflicts of George and Martha, and the intricate emotions underpinning their discord. As George and Martha grapple with their mutual loathing and interdependence, they confront the void within their relationship. This prompts the characters to scrutinize their own identities and relationships. The characters' introspection of their identities and quest for significance forms a pivotal dynamic in George and Martha's relationship. While George probes the shortcomings of his life and career, Martha acknowledges the inadequacy of defining her identity through familial bonds and marital ties. These inquiries lead the characters to seek an understanding of their existential realities and the essence of their relationships.

## **Conclusion**

This article delves into an existentialist examination of Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* providing a comprehensive analysis of how existential themes shape the characters. The insightful analyses by Adhikary and Pinder offer valuable perspectives on the play's revelation of existential themes regarding the intricacies of human existence. Within the relationships of Martha and George, the prevailing topics of existential philosophy are identified as captivity, meaninglessness, and the quest for identity. The play depicts the impasses and struggles with meaninglessness in Martha and George's relationship, illustrating how their characters reflect existentialist ideas. This analysis offers a valuable perspective on understanding the fundamental theme of the play, which mirrors the complexity of human relationships and individuality. Furthermore, the influence of existentialist philosophers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre on existentialist theater is explored. The profound impact of Camus and Sartre's philosophical views is evident in the thematic, aesthetic, and narrative styles of existentialist theatre, illustrating how stage productions mirror existential thought. The play's exploration of reality and illusion underscores the complexity of the characters' marriages and their attempts to confront the truth. Over time, illusions dissipate, unveiling the depths of the characters' inner worlds to the audience. Consequently, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* emerges as a profound work shaped by existentialist thought. The existential problems of the characters, conflicts in relationships, and the tension between reality and illusion are skillfully addressed elements through which existentialist themes are effectively conveyed. This analysis demonstrates that the play provides audiences with an opportunity to contemplate the intricacies of human existence and contributes significantly to the tradition of existentialist theatre.

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