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REVELRY, ABSURDITY, AND THE GROTESQUE: STAGING THE CARNIVALESQUE IN *THE BALD SOPRANO* AND *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*

EĞLENTİ, ANLAMSIZLIK VE GROTESK: *THE BALD SOPRANO* VE *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF* OYUNLARINDA KARNAVALESK SAHNELEMESİ

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, with particular concentration on how absurdist dramaturgy is employed to destabilise established social norms. Ionesco deliberately disturbs the linguistic coherence of the narrative to parody bourgeois discourse; Albee, though, exposes the ideological and emotional ruptures that underlie domestic life through fashioning a more realistic structure. Despite their divergent aesthetic strategies, a party scene at the heart of both plays offers a carnivalesque space where a temporary subversion of hierarchical norms leads to the exposure of the inherent instability of language, identity, and authority. By amplifying the absurd through grotesque humour, performative excess, and fragmented discourse, both plays address the performative scripts of social life and challenge the illusion of stability in the fabric of everyday interactions. This study, therefore, highlights the orchestration of the temporary dissolution of hierarchical and discursive norms, an eruption of absurdity, in which the party space becomes a site of transgressive liberation. Yet, the ironic climax in both *The Bald Soprano* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* occurs once the characters inevitably return to their defined, familiar roles and once the collapsed truths succumb to restored facades. The audience here experiences the cyclical nature of their existential condition and faces the paradox that even within the liberating theatrics of the absurd, the grip of social convention remains unbroken. Each play presents a carnivalesque victim whose symbolic function reinforces this cyclicality, serving both as an agent of transgressive inversion and a vehicle for social critique. Mrs Smith, the wife in the domestically rigid Smith household, falls into the trap of verbal absurdity and performative incoherence, suggesting that the ritual of bourgeois order is being disassembled, aligned with Bakhtinian notions of subversion and renewal. Likewise, Martha, George's emotionally destructive wife, is presented as the focal carnivalesque victim, unmasked and emotionally exposed, to introduce the revolving cycle of humiliation. Taken together, this study argues that these victims collectively reveal the inescapable, ritualized cycles of humiliation governing social performance, exposing the fragile foundations of authority and the self-perpetuating mechanisms of power that sustain bourgeois ideology.

Keywords: *carnivalesque, theatre of the absurd, The Bald Soprano, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.*

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Eugène Ionesco'nun *The Bald Soprano* (1950) ve Edward Albee'nin *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) oyunlarını, Mihail Bahtin'in karnavalesk kuramı ışığında incelemektedir. Çalışma, özellikle absürt dramaturjinin yerleşik sosyal normları nasıl istikrarsızlaştırdığına odaklanmaktadır. Ionesco, burjuva söylemini parodileştirmek için anlatının dilsel tutarlılığını bilerek bozarken; Albee ise daha gerçekçi bir yapı kurarak aile yaşamının altında yatan ideolojik ve duygusal kırılmaları ifşa eder. Estetik stratejilerindeki bu farklılığa rağmen, her iki oyunun da merkezindeki bir parti sahnesi, hiyerarşik normların geçici olarak askıya alındığı, dilin, kimliğin ve otoritenin içsel istikrarsızlığının ortaya çıktığı bir karnavalesk alan sunar. Gülünç mizah, performatif aşırılık ve parçalanmış söylem yoluyla absürdü güçlendiren bu oyunlar, toplumsal yaşamın performatif senaryolarını ele almakta ve gündelik etkileşimlerin dokusundaki istikrar yanılsamasına meydan okumaktadır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma, hiyerarşik ve söylemsel normların geçici olarak çözülmesinin ve bir absürtlük patlamasının orkestrasyonunu vurgular; bu süreçte parti alanı, dönüştürücü bir özgürleşme mekânına dönüşür. Ancak, hem *Kel Şarkıcı* hem de *Kim Korkar Hain Kurttan?* eserlerindeki ironik doruk noktası, karakterlerin kaçınılmaz olarak tanımlanmış, tanıdık rollerine geri dönmeleriyle ve çöken hakikatlerin yeniden tesis edilen cephelere yenik düşmesiyle ortaya çıkar. Seyirci burada varoluşsal durumlarının döngüsel doğasını deneyimler ve absürdün özgürleştirici tiyatrosunda bile sosyal konvansiyonun hâkimiyetinin kırılmadığı paradoksuyla yüzleşir. Çalışma, her iki oyunda da bu döngüselliği pekiştiren, hem dönüştürücü bir tersine çevrilme aracı hem de toplumsal eleştiri vasıtası olarak işlev gören bir karnavalesk kurban figürünün sunulduğunu iddia eder. Titizlikle düzenlenmiş Smith hanesinin eşi Mrs. Smith, sözel saçmalık ve performatif tutarsızlık tuzağına düşerek burjuva düzeninin ritüelinin söküldüğünü ima eder ve Bahtinci altüst oluş ve yenilenme kavramlarıyla hizalanır. Benzer şekilde, George'un duygusal yıkımının kaynağı Martha, odak noktasındaki karnavalesk kurban olarak sunulur, maskesi düşürülür ve duygusal olarak ifşa edilerek aşağılanmanın döngüsel çarkını başlatır. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, bu kurban figürlerinin toplumsal performansı yöneten, kaçınılmaz, ritüelleşmiş aşağılanma döngülerini kolektif olarak açığa çıkardığını savunmaktadır. Bu, otoritenin kırılgan temellerini ve burjuva ideolojisini sürdüren, kendini daim ettiren iktidar mekanizmalarını ifşa eden bir analiz sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *karnavalesk, uyumsuz tiyatro, The Bald Soprano, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

INTRODUCTION

The absurdist drama has traditionally been associated with existentialist studies, as seen in the foundational works of Martin Esslin (1961), to highlight the metaphysical disorientation and postwar alienation. Letitia S. Dace (1967) argues that absurdist drama presents life as "hopeless, meaningless, and purposeless" (p. 4), reinforcing the existential instability and the collapse of coherent meaning central to both plays. Bakhtin, though, enlivens texts by shifting attention toward the "performative," "communal," and "ideological inversions." His concept of carnivalesque highlights how humour, chaos, the grotesque body, and reversal of social norms contribute to subvert and liberate the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere. Originating from the medieval folk laughter and grotesque realism, Renfrew (2015) argues that:

> "carnival was 'nonofficial,' a licensed time out of life, a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order'. […] During carnival, 'all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' were suspended; life was lived 'inside out,' a fact symbolized by the prominent role of comic crownings and uncrownings (the carnival king/fool)." (p.135)

Carnival, according to him, was to sustain "conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (2015, p. 135). Likewise, in his book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin (1984) notes that "in carnival ... the new mode of man's relation to man is elaborated" (p. x). One of the essential aspects of this relation is the "unmasking" and disclosure of the unvarnished truth under the veil of false claims and arbitrary ranks. Bakhtin's model finds a deeper meaning in the linguistic absurdity and formal disruption of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), where language dissects into tautologies and cliches, distorting bourgeois norms and shedding light on the hollowness of social communication. The play's repetitive circular structure portrays the "anti-Aristotelian dramaturgy" of the absurd in which coherence is forfeited to stress the artificiality of meaning itself (Fuchs, 1996, p. 33). The artificiality of meaning expressed through the stated dramaturgical strategy of the playwright also goes hand in hand with his criticism of patently absurd life. In other words, akin to the lack of coherence in his plotting and structuring the plays, the quality of life in the 1950s is deprived of its meaning in the clutches of a war-stricken and poverty-stricken society.

Likewise, often aligned with American realism, Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) depicts a similarly carnivalesque environment within the domestic setting. Many scholars have underlined the intentional blurring of reality and illusion, where alcohol-consumed enactments and linguistic games throughout the play pull the apparent stability of matrimonial roles and middle-class respectability into pieces. The living room, as the domestic sphere, turns into a grotesque stage of emotional deterioration, disclosing the theatricality of social identity. Hence, in both plays, the party setting becomes a spatiotemporal framework defined by certain core dimensions: a carnivalesque heterotopia (a liminal temporal zone) where suppressed truths come to light, social decorum collapses, and power dynamics are subverted. The body of this structure is "the [grotesque] body [that] cannot be conceived outside a web of interrelations of which it is a living part" (Holquist, 2002, p. 100).

The party held during the early hours of the morning is a feast for both actors and spectators to practice their existential being. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984) notes that:

> "In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators… Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom." (p. 7)

Martha, the university president's daughter, and George, the associate history professor, serve as the central couple whose destructive verbal and psychological games define the limits of domesticity and intellectual freedom in Albee's work. According to Stephen Bottoms, George's physical aggression toward Martha and his verbal attacks on the guests are driven by the humiliation produced through his sense of helpless exposure. The participation of both Nick and Honey in Martha's mockery of George

further shows that the "audience is far from being merely passively manipulated by the performers" (Bottoms, 2000, p. 168), as laughter, cruelty, and spectacle bind them to the performance. As Dentith (2005) also explains, carnival operates as a space of social disruption, marked by "its capacity to invert hierarchies and undermine boundaries" (p. 72), thereby unsettling established norms and roles. In this context, Nick and Honey's involvement signals a breakdown of hierarchical distinctions, as they cease to function as detached observers and instead become participants in a temporary, chaotic social order. Albee's play thus becomes a carnivalesque theatre-within-the-theatre, in which characters are both actors and audience, mocked and mocking, and where no one remains immune from exposure.

In *The Bald Soprano*, the absurdist theatre prospers the tension between the breakdown of language and the failure of ritual, achieved through parody and the mechanical, almost vaudevillian repetition of banal dialogue. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, though, frames the grotesque as a productive tension between performativity and political critique through intensified role-play and emotional striptease. The key point, as Bakhtin asserts, is that the carnival is never permanent; it is perpetually followed by a re-imposition of order. The endings of both plays fortify such a paradox as the moment of transgression resumes its conventional rhythm, albeit leaving behind a distressing awareness of its fragility.

This rereading of the absurdist drama through a Bakhtinian perspective asserts that grotesque imagery, festive chaos, and absurdity converge in the parlor, a domestic site of performative respectability, to momentarily dismantle the illusion of order, reaffirm its ideological necessity, and expose its inherent deceptiveness, revealing how the carnivalesque operates as both a destabilizing and regenerative force within the modern absurdist stage.

1. The Banality of the Grotesque: Carnivalesque Devices in *The Bald Soprano*

Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994) was a French-Romanian playwright and a central figure in the Theatre of the Absurd, whose career gained prominence in the 1950s by pioneering a dramatic style that rejected realism and conventional plot. Ionesco's approach was to expose the absurdity and meaninglessness of modern life through the destruction of language and the parody of bourgeois society. Plays like *The Bald Soprano* (1950) utilize cyclical, nonsensical dialogue and mechanical characters to critique conformity and the emptiness of communication, setting the stage for the theatrical exploration of the grotesque and the breakdown of social scripts. Certain features of the notion of carnivalesque, which are accompanied by those of the Theatre of the Absurd, can be said to be very conspicuous in *The Bald Soprano* from the outset. The play begins with a domestic scene in which the married bourgeois couple, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, have some rest after dinner at home and talk to one another about petty issues. For instance, Mrs. Smith spends a lot of time articulating the need to pay attention to what the family should eat for dinner or where to do shopping, which gives the impression that the family is ostensibly concerned about matters of less significance in daily life. Likewise, when Mr. Smith speaks for the very first time, he emphasises that he is confused by the unknown reason why the press announces the age of the dead people, but not that of the newly-born ones and converses with his wife as follows:

> "Mr. Smith: Here's a thing I don't understand. In the newspaper they always give the age of deceased persons but never the age of the newly born. That doesn't make sense.
> Mrs. Smith: I never thought of that!
> Mr. Smith: It says here that Bobby Watson died.
> Mrs. Smith: My God, the poor man! When did he die?
> Mr. Smith: You know very well that he's been dead these past two years. I remembered it through an association of ideas." (Ionesco, 1958, p. 11)

This dialogue sounds quite meaningless to audiences/readers in the sense that he not only complains about the above-mentioned press announcements, but also he associates what he reads in the newspaper with the death of one of his acquaintances, questions his wife about the veracity of his ideas and mocks her. However, at this point in *The Bald Soprano*, the idea that elements of Absurd Theatre converge with Bakhtinian carnivalesque springs to mind mainly because the illogical plot of the play

merges with a sense of ambiguity and duality. In contradistinction to the familiar opening situation, the articulations of the couple render what happens in the scene unfamiliar, and the absence of a plot structure which can be tracked down easily comes to the fore as a kind of impediment to audiences/readers. Dukore (1961) notes that

> "*The Bald Soprano* seems to be formless because it does not use the plot structure of the realistic play. But is not this lack of plot- is it not exactly the right form for a play that reveals lives which are formless and which lack meaningful forward motion?" (p.176).

The answer to the critic's question is certainly affirmative since the play functions as a harsh critique of the inanity of the bourgeoisie to a serious extent. Besides, Mr. Smith's allusion to Bobby Watson as "the handsomest corpse in Great Britain" (Ionesco, 1950, p. 12) is followed by the fact that he has a wife called Bobby Watson, which creates an overwhelming sense of ambivalence when the couple talks about the physical appearance of Bobby Watson as follows:

> "Mrs. Smith: I've never seen her. Is she pretty?
> Mr. Smith: She has regular features and yet one cannot say that she is pretty. She is too big and stout. Her features are not regular but still one can say that she is very pretty. She is a little too small and too thin. She's a voice teacher." (Ionesco, 1958, p. 12)

The dualistic nature of the description of the physical appearance of Bobby Watson by Mr. Smith, along with the idea that husband and wife bear the same name, Bobby, corroborates the assumption that Ionesco conveys fundamental messages about the lives of the members of the bourgeoisie. It is understood that these people are entrenched in a world which is characterised by lifelessness, absurdity and dullness irrespective of their gender. Gray (1963) in *The Uses of Incongruity* similarly states that "the world of these characters, though apparently calm and logical on the surface, is actually deeply erratic within; though they think themselves sane, they are actually insane" (p. 345). Furthermore, their physical appearances do not matter a lot as they are all dragged into passivity and victimised by a lack of adequate motivation to keep their lives going more fruitfully.

The established technique of incorporating non-conventional characters into an absurd play seems to be fully employed in *The Bald Soprano* by Ionesco, with the introduction of Mr. and Mrs. Martin, who are guests of the Smiths. It must be noted that the referred technique merges with the subversion and liberation technique of Bakhtinian carnivalesque in foregrounding deficiencies of the bourgeois system as well. When Mr. and Mrs. Martin enter, akin to the Smiths, their conversation is marked by utter ambiguity and absurdity, and a grotesque inversion of the familiar can be said to be primarily taking place on the stage. Despite the fact that they are married, they act and speak as if they are strangers, and they see each other for the very first time at Smiths' place. This defamiliarization of the familiar through Martins' mutual attitude serves to underline that matrimonial relationships among the members of the bourgeoisie are superficial, are not based upon reciprocal passion and respect, thereby concomitantly making readers/audiences realise that these people are imprisoned in nonsensical routines. That is to say, unlike characters encountered in conventional plays, the characters here impel us to reoccupy well-seated assumptions about morality, materiality, spirituality of the bourgeois class, with their inconsistent personalities and randomness of existence. More importantly, when the Smiths come back to the stage and interact with the Martins, the domestic setting turns into a party setting, as evocative of a space represented by the carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian framework. The topsy-turvy world of these people manifests itself, and things are toppled down. To illustrate, the Smiths and Martins begin to discuss whether there is always someone at the door when the doorbell rings, and Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Martin persist in invalidating the belief about the expected presence of someone waiting at the door upon hearing the doorbell as follows:

> "Mr. Smith: Goodness, someone is ringing. There must be someone there.
>
> Mrs. Smith: Don't send me to open the door again. You've seen that it was useless. Experience teaches us that when one hears the doorbell ring it is because there is never anyone there.

Mrs. Martin: Never.
Mr. Martin: That's not entirely accurate." (Ionesco, 1958, p. 23)

The disagreement between men and women about this issue at stake compels us to reconsider the validity of established norms in society. The playwright can be said to be implicitly stressing that things in life may turn out to be the reverse of how we expect them to be, and in the patriarchal environment of the Smiths and Martins, it is not always men, but also women, who can be guides in finding the right way of doing an action. In this regard, breaking the boundaries of hierarchy between men and women can be said to be deeply embedded in the simple conversation about the doorbell ring. There is a temporary liberation from the compulsion to act and think in line with a phallogocentric worldview on the side of women. As Storm (2011) in *Irony and the Modern Theatre* notes that:

> "Here, a more commonplace assumption of "reason", in this case an expectation that when a doorbell announces an arrival a person must be "there," is turned inside out, first by the absence of a bell ringer, then by the equally paradoxical arrival of the Fire Chief, and finally by the fact that there is no tangible correlation between the ringing of the bell and whether or not a person is doing the ringing." (p. 133)

Considering the domineering attitude of men while advocating their righteousness, it can be said that reason symbolises men in line with an androcentric worldview; however, the technique of carnivalesque subversion provides a fertile ground for women to reassert their identities and experience a kind of emancipation in the theatrical realm. As for the entrance of another male character, the Fire Chief, what initially strikes audiences/readers is that he adds a different dimension to the discussion about the doorbell ring by confirming that it was him who rang the doorbell for the third time, whereas he did not ring it at all for the first and second times. His confirmation of having done so enables Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Martin to raise their voices against the suppression of their husbands and to allege that they were right in deconstructing the notion of the presence of someone at the door because of the doorbell ring. Yet, his acceptance of ringing the doorbell for the third and even the fourth time renders male characters partially right, and this means that both sides have their own rights and freedom of speech, thereby eliminating inequality between men and women. The Fire Chief, with his name, reminisces about the paradoxical nature of fire in a carnival, and it is as though he annihilates and reconstructs a certain thing, as Bakhtin (1984) highlights,

> "Deeply ambivalent also is the image of fire in carnival. It is a fire that simultaneously destroys and renews the world. In European carnivals, there was almost always a special structure called hell, and at the close of carnival, this hell was triumphantly set on fire." (p. 254)

In other words, it would be fitting to contend that the Fire Chief plays an active role in subverting the usual order and giving it a renewed shape with his commentaries.

Following the end of the discussion about the doorbell ring, there is one other important scene in the play where the characters decide to tell each other interesting stories in order to both educate and enjoy themselves. This section of the play also pertains to the argument that the Bakhtinian technique of carnivalesque subversion can be found in the utterances of the non-conventional characters, especially in those of the Fire Chief, in that the stories that he tells in the form of fables make us reconsider the reliability of some ancient stories or philosophies. The extract from the referred section is as follows:

> "Fire Chief: Well, then! 'The Dog and the Cow,' an experimental fable. Once upon a time another cow asked another dog: 'Why have you not swallowed your trunk?' 'Pardon me,' replied the dog, 'it is because I thought that I was an elephant.'
> Mrs. Martin: What is the moral?
> Fire Chief: That's for you to find out.
> Mr. Smith: He's right.
> Mrs. Smith: Tell us another." (Ionesco, 1958, p. 30)

It is self-evident that the content of the story told by the Fire Chief is unfathomable and absurd even though it takes the form of a fable, and this implies that people may no longer foster a strong faith in ancient doctrines or teachings whose veracity was unquestionable in the past. This can also relate to the attempt of the members of the bourgeoisie in rationalising what is actually irrational in their lives, and Fire Chief, here, shoulders the responsibility of awakening them by drawing attention to their preoccupation with vacuous matters.

After the Fire Chief leaves, the vacuity in the characters' lives is accentuated by how they converse with one another. Meaningless dialogues overlap, and the idea that language is the most effective means of communication is deconstructed. Language turns into a barrier, and the characters fail to interact with each other effectively. This can be exemplified through a dialogue towards the end of the play, which is as follows:

> "Mrs. Smith: Mice have lice, lice haven't mice.
> Mrs. Martin: Don't ruche my brooch.
> Mr. Martin: Don't smooch the brooch.
> Mr. Smith: Groom the goose, don't goose the groom." (Ionesco, 1958, p. 40)

Here, by disrupting the sense of logic behind communication, their articulations point to an inevitable lack or a shortcoming. In other words, the employed verbal language symbolises a certain sense of inadequacy, as Storm (2011) remarks that

> "[b]y the later movements of the play, and especially the end sequence, words are divested of all meaning. Brooch means nothing; it only rhymes with smooch which is also meaningless. This fallibility is what The Bald Soprano employs to such theatrical effect." (p. 147)

Akin to the assumed deficiencies in language, there are deficiencies in their lives, in the social system according to which they regulate their preferences. When this is analysed in line with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque notion, it corresponds to the inversion of hierarchy in some ways. Irrespective of their gender, all the characters speak alike, and patriarchal discourse is subordinated by the meaningless discourse, which removes barriers between men and women in terms of social superiority.

Despite the final scene of the play, which suggests a fleeting sense of equality between women and men through its linguistic absurdity, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Martin ultimately emerge and come to the fore as carnivalesque victims. Their husbands' condescending attitude and habitual interruption of their speech trivialised the wives' voices within domestic and conversational spaces, even in the carnivalesque setting of the play. In other words, their agency remains limited to repetitive, meaningless exchanges that parody genuine communication. Hence, the women are victimised not through overt violence but through linguistic and psychological mechanisms that keep them silenced, mocked, and reduced to mechanical, submissive roles without letting them experience subversive patriarchal norms. In this way, Ionesco's satire reveals that the supposed freedom of the carnivalesque merely reconfigures, rather than dismantles, the structures of female oppression.

2. From Parlor to Carnival: The Grotesque Theatre of Albee

Born in 1928 in Washington, D.C., and later adopted by a wealthy family, Edward Albee was raised in affluence but often felt alienated. This turned into a frequent theme that infused much of his work. His immediate recognition, followed by his early plays characterised by their sharp dialogue, exploration of existential themes, and critique of the American dream, made him a pivotal figure in American drama, particularly recognised for his contribution to the Theatre of the Absurd. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, he employs the structure of a somewhat ordinary evening to examine the chaotic, surreal, and grotesque nature of human relationships through four characters. The narrative is mainly set in George and Martha's house, a middle-aged couple: George is a history professor and Martha, the daughter of the university president. Despite George's objection, Martha decides to invite over a younger couple, Nick and Honey, after already coming back from a faculty party. This normal gathering soon descends into a nightmarish carnival of psychological manipulation, verbal sparring, and emotional devastation. George and Martha engage in a series of games designed to humiliate and

torment each other, and Nick and Honey are presented as pawns in their power struggle. This dynamic aligns with Bakhtin's view that language is inherently active and dialogic, where "meaning is not some abstract content but a putting forward of a point of view which asks for a response" (McCaw, 2016, p. 57), revealing how George and Martha weaponize speech as psychological performance. Through this escalating verbal conflict, the play exposes the deep-seated frustrations, regrets, and fantasies that underpin George and Martha's relationship.

This three-act play demonstrates the intensifying emotional and psychological conflict and the deep-seated frustrations, regrets, and fantasies that underpin George and Martha's relationship. The evening closes with a shocking revelation about the couple's non-existent "son," a fabrication that epitomises the couple's shattered dreams and the illusions they have constructed to cope with reality and rebuild their relationship on a more honest foundation.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? retools a children's rhyme to merge the trivial with the canonical. Albee casts modernist introspection against domestic farce through the immediate incitation of Virginia Woolf, which initiates a carnivalesque logic, Bakhtinian in form. The play is the embodiment of Bakhtin's markers of the carnivalesque as characters experience ritual humiliation as part of a performative unmasking, while the grotesque laughter peaks at the moments of cruelty and absurdity, and established hierarchies of academic, gender, and generational are subverted. As the evening unfolds, the orderly tempos of bourgeois civility turn into an unruly pattern of role reversals, ritual humiliation, and psychological disrobing in a carnivalesque arena where Martha and George, the central combatants, sport power shifts unpredictably, alternating between roles of fool and executioner, jester and priest. They target one another and the illusions sustaining their marriage, which leads to an ultimate performance of a shared sacrifice filtered through a fantastical lens. George's hypnotic, intonated line, "now listen, 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?" (Albee, 1962, p. 233) functions as an immediate cursed liturgy of destruction, but this theatrical cruelty between the couple aiming to destroy their marriage, in fact reaffirms it through the exorcism of fantasy. Being the target of Martha's constant verbal attacks and humiliation, George, of all the play's characters, is the most shrewdly aware of "how to do things with words" (Bottoms, 2000, p. 7). Throughout the evening, he contravenes the usually unquestioned conventions of linguistic intercourse for the sake of both comedy and control. Such frequent usage of hyperbole, parody, and the grotesque results in a psychic manifestation in which satire becomes sacrament, and pain becomes the language of truth.

Martha scoffs at George publicly, mocking his academic dignity, masculinity, and sexual potency:

> "I swear … if you existed I'd divorce you. … That's right, baby … keep it clean. (To the others) George is bogged down in the History Department. He's an old bog in the History Department, that's what George is. A bog … A fen. … A G.D. swamp. Ha, ha, ha ha! A swamp! Hey, swamp! Hey, swampy!" (Albee, 1962, pp. 16, 50)

Martha employs her body and sexuality as not only a weapon but also an exaggerated performance to dominate and unmask George, and expose the fractures in their marriage and identities through ritualistic, carnivalesque cruelty.

Throughout the play, Martha assumes dominance, not as a professor's wife, but by invoking her father, the college president, a figure who represents the ultimate, foundational male authority of the university, to reverse the conventional gender and social roles. Seeing herself enthroned in authority, Martha ensures George that "It should be an extraordinary opportunity ... for some men it would be the chance of a lifetime!*"* and that "Some men would give their right arm for the chance!" (pp. 27-28), asserting dominance, placing George in a subservient, feminized role, turning domestic life into parody. As the grotesque jester-queen, she is not just cruel; she knowingly sings and laughs:

> "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf,
> Virginia Woolf,

Virginian Woolf. . . .

*"*Ha, ha, ha, ha! Make me another drink … lover …" (Albee, 1962, pp. 12, 16)

By doing so, she presents a self-aware role play, turning the home into a grotesque stage of inversion. As Albee himself observes, "Martha's always intuitive and instinctual," and George's "more controlled, intellectual approach" (Bottoms, 2000, p. 143) makes unpredictability her most dangerous weapon. She turns private conflict into public performance, using laughter as both a disarming and humiliating tool. As Bigsby (2004) observes, "they play their characters because performance has replaced being," revealing how identity itself is constituted through theatrical enactment rather than authentic subjectivity (p. 132). Martha is not an antagonist; she is both a victim and a central agent of carnival disorder, embodying both grotesque excess and ritual power reversal.

This emotional excess is linked to Bakhtin's grotesque realism, offering the body as exaggerated, earthy, and violating social boundaries. Hence, the grotesque, in Albee's work, is not inscribed merely in language or conflict, but also in the "body," through its presence, failure, and irreducible corporeality. Bakhtin's concept of the "grotesque body," defined by its "unfinished" nature, permeable boundaries, and exaggerated appetites, "is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 317). Martha, through her uncontainable emotion, unregulated desire, and theatrical vulgarity, depicts a grotesque rupture of socially authorized feminine decorum. She deploys her body not as passive or ornamental but provocative, unruly, and pointedly excessive to destabilize norms and uses her erratic language to assert her physical gestures. She tells George that "[he] makes [her] puke" (Albee, 1962, p. 13) and before pivoting into flirtation and then confession, she reflects in her soliloquy: "I cry all the time too, Daddy. I cry alllll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time" (Albee, 1962, p. 185), suggesting the grotesque as the collapse between performance and pain. She often masks her interior suffering by aggressive theatricality, which ultimately leaks through, laying bare the grotesque body as both shield and wound. She cries but articulates that:

> "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." (Albee, 1962, pp. 185-186)

George also contributes to the composition of this grotesque symphony. He fires imaginary guns, vomits words, and hurls insults with a performative knack that mocks traditional masculinity. These, coupled with intoxication, intensify ritual degradation and facilitate truth-telling, where hierarchy and logic falter. George and Martha employ language and emotion to swallow the world and be swallowed, tumbling into mutual cannibalism. Therefore, the grotesque in Albee's play is not regenerative to help its characters acclaim the grotesque as liberating and rebirth in the Rabelaisian sense; rather, it ruins and leads them to become trapped in its cycles, where cruelty and truth-telling are indistinguishable. As a result, bodies turn into battlegrounds for unresolvable emotional incongruities, and the bloated, bitter, broken language becomes as corporeal as their gestures. As they swallow silence, spit words, and unveil their inner selves, not as an act of liberation, but as ritualized pain, to ultimately face the absurd and bitter truth and carry on, relieved of the pre-carnival tensions.

Equally important, the grotesque body in Albee's work does not serve as a carnival mask to mock authority; instead functions as a harrowing emblem of fragility. Martha's worldly rebellion is punished, and her exposure leaves her emptied, not empowered. The stage becomes a site of emotional leakage, where laughter, once playful, decays into cruelty, and bodies, laden with defeat, collapse under the weight of grotesque marvels.

Much like in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, where dialogue liquifies into rhythmic nonsense and contradiction, Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* offers conversations that initially mimic a duel of words steeped in academic sophistication, only to reveal grotesque rituals of miscommunication and psychic violence vividly staged through ritualized speech-acts and parodic games. Roudané (1987) refers

to the significance of the games and "the final expiation of the illusion is made possible by externalizing the lies governing their, and Nick and Honey's, relationship through such games [...] Conflict precedes resolution" (p. 70). In Act Two, George loudly offers:

> "I've got it! I'll tell you what game we'll play. We're done with Humiliate the Host . . . this round, anyway . . . we're done with that . . . and we don't want to play Hump the Hostess, yet . . . not yet ... so I know what we'll play.
> . . . We'll play a round of Get the Guests. How about that?" (Albee, 1962, p. 140)

The Infamous is not apparently a casual party game. George, in the role of the orchestrator of collapse, manipulates social conventions and misuses conversational decorum to trap Nick and Honey in a grotesque psychodrama. Under the illusion of the play, Nick and Honey are forced to reveal their stories and are humiliated.

George then suggests: "We got one more game to play. And it's called bringing up baby" (Albee, 1962, p. 205), using their shared fantasy of an imaginary child, introducing an affectionate collusion but turning it into a public crucifixion. George appeals to this routine and announces the child's death as the final incantation, making Martha shrink in response. As fantasy collapses, language fails, signifying that words have the ability to create fictions, but they do annihilate them as well.

According to Bakhtin, carnival is created by a suspension of rules and hierarchies, so it is not meant to mirror reality; language is never discarded, even when the meaning slips within the confines of George and Martha's psychological carnival. In Albee's work, characters hold to their verbal duels with vehement desperation. His linguistic world staggers between satire and tragedy, carnival and cataclysm as language becomes a defense mechanism, performative, ceremonial, and grotesquely baroque. Far from offering redemption, language becomes the medium of descent.

The ritual sacrifice at the heart of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* displayed through masquerades and a series of caustic games mirrors a carnivalesque rite of emotional dismemberment. Throughout the night, although Martha attempts to command the stage, it remains far from liberating and is systematically undone. Her performative audacity fails, and her body, once exercised as a site of defiance, appears to be the sacrificial ground of truth. She ultimately admits that "I … am … George … I … am … [Afraid of Virginia Woolf]" (Albee, 1962, p. 242), signaling her fear of domestic failure, but more importantly, a deeper existential terror; the loss of illusion, identity, and emotional protection, while she is positioned as its primary victim.

At the climax of the play, where George proclaims, with a funereal solemnity, that "our son is … dead" *(*Albee, 1962, p. 231), the symbolic "killing" of the imaginary son becomes the grotesque apex of an unmasking. By destroying a shared delusion, George depicts a dark priestly function not as a murder in the literal sense, but a sort of sacramental gesture of annihilation, dispelling illusions. In other words, through the inversion of ideals and sacred norms, and by the symbolic sacrifice of the "imaginary child," sacrament emerges as a vehicle for annihilation rather than celebration, enabling a desired confrontation with truth and transformation of the self, leaving the carnivalesque figure unmasked, emotionally dismantled, and left exposed in silence- bare, bitter, and real.

Nevertheless, Martha is not the only victim. In the course of the play, a fluidity of roles between the victim and perpetrator shifts continually. Martha and George humiliate each other; Martha mocks and seduces Nick; he is then drawn into psychological exposure, and Honey is infantilized; all are experiencing moments of ritual degradation in the domestic interior where ritual and traditional hierarchies are inverted, and likewise academic prestige, marital harmony, and masculine control are windswept by escalating absurdity. When the fantasy dies, nothing replaces it; the laughter of the earlier acts gives way to silence, a silence that is not catharsis, but the aftermath. Deprived of her grotesque persona, she is left *alone*, not in space, but in self.

Bakhtin's concept of "unfinalizability" emphasizes that meaning, identity, and social structures remain perpetually open and unresolved, reinforcing the cyclical instability and lack of closure that

define both absurdist dramaturgy and the carnivalesque space (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. 36). Therefore, in the final tableau of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, no redemption, moral closure, or reconciliatory truth is offered. Rather, the final act ends with a muted limbo and a moment of suspended consequence as it resists either the classical arc of tragedy or the comedic renewal of carnival. The resolution then turns into a ritual exhaustion, presenting not a return to order, but to its illusion. Carnival's cyclicality, hence, in the Bakhtinian sense, leads to repetition instead of revolution.

The narrative opens with polite posturing, slopes into grotesque exposé, and culminates in a hollow stillness without signaling peace. This return is also echoed dramaturgically; the sun rises, a new day dawns, but the psychic weather is not shifted. This ending implies recurrence as the characters sit in silence temporarily, but the cycle is not broken; it has merely paused, aligned with the dark face of carnival: a grotesque festival without culmination, an unending loop of parody and pain. The absurd structure of the play rebuffs catharsis as it would imply closure. Albee's carnival ends not with rebirth but with exhaustion—a dull sunrise in a homely parlor tormented with broken illusions.

To distill the argument, Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stages a grotesque spectacle which ends, as all carnivals do, with the collapse of illusion. Characters are left stripped of their theatrical protections; Martha and George, in particular, are not celebrators in a masquerade any more. Martha, once mistress of revels, is emotionally scourged, and George, the high priest of deceit, kills their "imaginary child" with ceremonial precision. They are not healed but emptied, released into the clarity of what remains once fantasy dies. Likewise, the seemingly initial outsiders, Nick and Honey, are quickly drawn into the middle-aged couple's psychological games. They are not transformed but unsettled as they are forced to meet their buried truths. Nick faces the vanity of his ambition and marriage, and Honey faces up to her fear of and the phantom of motherhood and intimacy, showcasing confessions and regression while being drunk. The carnivalesque breach unsettles their façade of control and temporarily unmasks them to confront their absurd realities. Their exit marks a return to surface order, but they leave disturbed, their illusions quietly fractured.

CONCLUSION

Influenced by the surrealism and illogicality of the time, the Theater of the Absurd emerged as a reaction to the immense violence and absurdity of the twentieth century, particularly in the aftermath of the two World Wars. While reflecting the alienation and isolation of the individual, the futility of ambition, and the cruelty of life, the two plays examined here resonate with the dominant spirit of existentialist thought. Bakhtin argues that carnival was designed "to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions" (Renfrew, 2015, p. 135) while managing this liberation by justifying the fact that nothing is "stable, unchanging, perennial […] eternal and undisputable" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 166).

The ending of *The Bald Soprano* entails adopting a retrospective approach in that the play ends with a return to the initial event where the Smiths have been substituted by the Martins. After the experiences of the characters in the festive environment of the household, such an ending indicates that the playwright is indignant at the cyclical nature of the bourgeois lifestyle. They are destined to live in a vicious circle, and the play restarts with the Martins saying and doing exactly what the Smiths had done before. Like in a carnival setting, the things which seem to have undergone drastic changes revert to their prior status after some time, and this demonstrates Ionesco's disdain towards the impermanence of things and the futility of attempts to anticipate a human existence with equality and justice holding sway.

Likewise, Albee's play evolves into a chaotic interplay of meaningless conversations led by alcohol-induced absurdism that underscores the ineffectiveness of language. The female characters hesitate between covert manipulation and overt dominance, aspiring to an ascendance in gaining female supremacy, an illusion which collapses after the carnival is over, the game is played, and the secrets are revealed. The inevitable weight of societal expectations surrounding motherhood adds to the ambiguity of societal norms, reflecting the dissonance between personal desires and societal roles, emphasising the absurdity of the human condition, and the need to face and accept the bitter reality in contrast to the

illusions symbolising the zeitgeist of the 1950s and the struggles with the potential for annihilation and the haunting question of nothingness.

Hence, by analyzing Ionesco's linguistic breakdown and Albee's psychological excess through the lens of the Carnivalesque, this study has demonstrated that the staged revelry in both plays is ultimately a constrained, cyclical, and self-defeating act. The significance of this finding lies in challenging traditional interpretations of the Carnivalesque as purely liberating. Instead, this study reveals that for Mrs. Smith and Martha, the temporary subversion only serves to violently reinforce the stability of the very norms they attempt to dismantle. This analysis provides a new framework for understanding how Absurdist theatre, even in its most grotesque and chaotic moments, paradoxically confirms the enduring power of social constraint in the modern domestic setting.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL / PARTICIPANT CONSENT

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study. There are no participants in this study

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