

## UNIT 6

### EDWARD ALBEE & *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*

#### I. INTRODUCTION: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES (1928 - )

Emerged 1939 = theater in deep state of crisis

Financial vicissitudes & theatrical conservatism (Broadway) -->

emergence of new experimental theater

Adopted child (multi-millionaire, Red Albee & domineering wife, Frances)

Dislike his parents (material good & no love) --> educational rebel

Grandmother = source of love (America unspoiled by wealth & liberal values

<-- American myth of frontier individualism and liberal commitment)

Right of artist to project personal despair onto a metaphysical plane

1946, left Choate for Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut

Early works (*Schism*, 1946) = need for compassion

'The City of People' (1949), 'Ye watchers and Ye Lonely Ones' (1951), 'An End to Summer' (n.d.), 'The Ice Age' (n.d.)

Main concern = reconstruct moral existence (recuperate Am. liberal virtues)

#### II. EDWARD ALBEE'S LITERARY DEVELOPMENT

*The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960), *The American Dream* (1961)

Social critic & satirist --> change is possible (not absurdist)

Absurd in conventions and devaluation of language

Dialogue composed of clichés & dominated by mundane bourgeois attitudes

Opposes real values/artificial & idealized American past/vacuity of present

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) --> transition Off-Broadway -->

Broadway (no concessions except apparent naturalism)

Three acts: 'Fun and Games', 'Walpurgisnacht' & 'The Exorcism'

*Tiny Alice* (1964), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1963), *Malcolm* (1966),

*A Delicate Balance* (1966), *The Man with Three Arms* (1983)

Miller & Albee = Jeffersonianism not inspected for historic contradictions

Process of rediscovery historically regressive (turn to past).

Increasingly + question of the nature of theater (no Aristotelian position) *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (1968)

Plays as series of allegories (didactic writer through theater)

Questions with answers outside work of art itself

Realism charged with metaphysics constrained by his liberal humanism

*All Over* (1971), *Seascape* (1975) & *Happy Days* (1975), *Counting the Ways* (1976), *Listening* (radio script), *The Lady from Dubuque* (1980) Dominated

American theater of 1960s --> reinvigorated liberal humanism, dramatic

parables (restoration of human values on public/private level) Fascination with

fate of American revolutionary principles & metaphysical concern (people subordinated to social myths & committed other myths)

Witty & abrasive, control over language (brilliant rhythms and nuances) New ground with each play --> refusal to compromise ==> eroded support Off-

Broadway playwright (insist on Broadway productions) ==> gradual eclipse of powerful & original playwright

Controlled humour & musician's sense of rhythmic structure/tonal subtlety

Failure documented = imagination + will & moral being

People can change in theater

### **III. ALBEE'S *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?* (1962)**

Small New England college + single set (womb-like living room)

George + Martha (not children ⑦ fantasy) + Nick + Honey (own lies)

'Fun and Games'(humor) + 'Walpurgisnacht'(truth) + 'The Exorcism'(haunted)

Strindbergian drama of sexual tension + New Carthage (Spengler)

Stripping of illusion ⑦ myth collapses (articulateness = defence)

American revolution ⑦ progressively away from liberal

Honey (timid, afraid of consciousness as pain) -> childish dependence

Nick (totalitarian interested in power = Young Man in *The American Dream*)

George & Martha in recoil from reality ⑦ alternative world (child)

Speak = lie + collapse to silence (Pirandello's "naked figures")

Verbalization = defense against terror of silence (real questions)

Humor through humiliation = desperate humor

Slow retreat from language => truth = pre-linguistic <-> language deceives

Beneath humor = fear of fatal collapse of liberal individualism (<- Jung)

George's failure = surrender of moral conscience (denial of history)

Play presupposes a freedom perversely rejected ✕ re-engage (ambiguous)

☒ own nature & relationships with others (also desertion)

Denied vicarious survival (children) => reality = actions & relationships

Albee's early plays = stripping of illusion & language (accept mortality)

Euphemism = central strategy & alcohol = opiate (consciousness -> myth)

History (George) & science (Nick) -> evasion, rationalization = fictions

Play ends with simplified language = monosyllabic question & answer

Language/Illusion no longer between them -> fiction comes apart (relationship)

Question ⑦ reconciled to own weaknesses & unrealized dreams?

*Zoo Story* & *Who's Afraid?* = protest against conformity -> responsibility

George & Martha's battles = model for social & political battles

Human relations derive from human vulnerability & imperfection

Free society needs bond of affective nature (Christian love of neighbor)

Critics ⑦ ending = callous & sentimental & Diana Trilling ⑦ weakness =  
spiritually vacuous existence (no historical explanation/personal psychology)

Harold Clurman = morbid-mindedness

University = particular freedom + liberal humanist values (<-> betrayal)

Early plays alienation (☐ Buber + Fromm) (☐ capitalism + human condition)

Lack of commitment = collapse of will, esp. intellectuals

*Zoo Story* = love (Fromm) to escape from anomie & *Who's Afraid of Virginia*

*Woolf?* + *A Delicate Balance* = threat to sanity if fail responsibility

*Man in the Modern Age* (1930) ⑦ Karl Jaspers = "The individual is merged in the function. Being is objectified, for positivism would be violated if individuality remained conspicuous"

Utopianism (Miller & Williams) = critique of modernity

Miller & Albee = liberalism (no individual <-> society) -> Jeffersonianism

Process of rediscovery ⑦ Miller and Albee turn to the past (<- Jaspers)

Albee's plays = inventions (simple entertainment)

Naturalistic set = tactic for ambushing audience (expectations frustrated)

Albee's reputation = experimental work Off-Broadway/Europe -> Broadway

Style = highly ironic & uncompromising ⑦ reiterates themes (parody)

Broadway audience = middle ground of nothing ⑦ lazy

Metaphysical overtones = clear though muted + phenomenological model of reality = + difficulty of distinguishing truth from illusion ✕ Truth

#### IV. ALBEE'S CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Attacks false consolations generated by society/individual imagination (not in artistic form or character)

Weakness = characters develop to opacity (inexpressible experience)

Characters no generate action --> action contains play's prior metaphysics

Function = respond to events (freedom limited)

Constructing sets = image of determinism

Deceptions of language denounced in lucid & articulate way

No simply proposing acceptance of reality --> degree of transcendence Albee's metaphysics in relationships (being through inter-subjectivity) Failure of characters = + fantasy - imagination



## V. CRITIQUE TO ALBEE'S WORK: WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH EDWARD ALBEE?

Mediocre work --> *The Zoo Story* & *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*,  
(unbelievable situations) --> no psychological explanation or logical events

Allegorical elements in conflict with realistic conventions

Scenes no rhythm & nothing follows in terms initially proposed --> no  
obedience to reality outside playwright's head, nor consistency

Albee's roles have to be supported by actors (falseness of Albee's characters <-  
- surrogates for more authentic ones)

Albee's real talent = theatrical instinct (not grows)

Preferred to Beckett, Ionesco or Genét, because worse

Reckless inventiveness can pass for complexity with no complex

## VI. EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE ZOO STORY* (1959)

Schiller Theater Werkstatt in Berlin --> Provincetown Playhouse

Right to fail proscribed by Broadway

Alienating divisions within American society

Objective: make some statement about the condition of 'man', of the art form

Exploration of farce & agony of human isolation

Parable with two characters as model of American experience

Jerry = America flaccid and enervated, lost its clarity, energy & vision

Peter = defined by negatives (suppresses humanity) = cliché (weakness)

Process of play = revelation of Jerry's convictions & elaboration of myth Not

absurdist play --> break out of social isolation (not metaphysical) Language

drained of real meaning (clichés & conventionalized -> not truth)

Metaphoric approach: method oblique, but embrace real & true

Jerry & dog = parody of love-hate situation in romantic fiction --> pseudo-

crisis (nothing resolved) --> displaced account of encounter with Peter

End = Jerry back to naturalism ==> destroys dramatic effectiveness

Musical composition (crescendos & diminuendos) = tone of voice, pitch,

volume & rhythm carefully controlled as dialogue

Critique of American values & acknowledgment of fragility of language

Social alienation = product of system (individual no control over product of

labor & no vision of future)

Sentimental (romanticism of Beats, 1950s)

Love = no abstraction (momentary sexual union) => self depends on others

Not like European absurdist (aftermath of earthquake) --> - denying bleakness

of scene + identifying area of hope

## VII. ALBEE AND THE ABSURD: *THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE ZOO STORY*

*The Zoo Story, The Sandbox & The American Dream* = on the face absurd

Beckett, Ionesco or Pinter <--> Albee believes in validity of reason & scarcely sense of absurd universe --> concession towards cruelty & self-pity

*The American Dream & The Zoo Story* = attacks on American Way of Life

Deception practice more complex than simple lie --> involves denial of normal assumptions about evidence --> techniques of theatre of absurd (devaluation of language & images) ideally suited to social criticism

Albee uses techniques <--> not accepting metaphysic of absurd

Not poetic quality/imaginative range of *Waiting for Godot* & *Rhinoceros*

Absurd has two levels: underlying vision of the universe & forms of writing & strategies of presentation (1st level --> Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*)

Absurdist mind = intellectualist, metaphysical

Characters with fixed identities; events which definite meaning; plots with cause/effect; dènouements with complete resolutions of questions raised by play; and language meaning what says = not absurd world

Theatre of absurd = systematic pursuit of irrelevant

In dènouements Albee diverges from the absurd (most harm)

Albee's finite world (brilliance, inventiveness, intelligence & moral courage)



## QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS (UNIT 6):

- 1.- Indicate the most relevant facts of Edward Albee's life.
- 2.- Name some of Albee's early plays and themes.
- 3.- How can you characterize Albee's literary development?
- 4.- Explain the plots, structures and themes of Albee's *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story*.
- 5.- Can you see anything in common in Albee's and Miller's work?
- 6.- Describe the plot and themes of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.
- 7.- How can you describe the treatment of relationships in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*
- 8.- Characterize Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in literary terms.
- 9.- Is Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* an absurdist or a realistic play?
- 10.- Which are the aims of Albee's work? Give your personal opinion about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

## ANSWER TO QUESTIONS (UNIT 6):

1.- Indicate the most relevant events of Edward Albee's life.

When he emerged in 1939 the theater was in its usual state of crisis, but it was a crisis which seemed deeper and more irremediable than usual. At the time of his *débüt*, the financial vicissitudes and theatrical conservatism of Broadway theater caused the emergence of a new experimental theater. Albee was an adopted child; he was taken to a house of a multi-millionaire, Red Albee and his domineering wife, Frances (mother for portrait of domineering and threatening women & father for the effete and cowed men). He grew to dislike his parents. Surrounded with material good but perhaps deprived of love he turned into an educational rebel as later he would become a social critic creating a series of dramatic parables about the loss of love and the ironic triumph of the pragmatics. (His grandmother was the source of love, but another time and another set of values from the rest of his family. He associated her with an America unspoiled by wealth and with liberal values derived from an authentic American myth of frontier individualism and liberal commitment (thread of sentimentality which runs through much of his work).

Albee's poor home situation was undoubtedly a factor in his disastrous educational record. He seems to have been concerned with challenging the right of the artist to project a personal despair onto a metaphysical plane.

In 1946, he left Choate for Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

2.- Name some of Albee's early plays and themes.

His play *Schism* (1946) concerns with the attempt of a young man, Michael Joyce, to persuade a girl, Alice Monahan, to leave her family and run away with him. The early works, including *Schism*, are concerned with identifying the need for compassion, the necessity of relinquishing a destructive egotism and corrosive materialism for a redemption which can only lie in human relationships. In 'The City of People' (1949) a domineering father deliberately crushes his son's spirit and inhibits his sexual maturity. 'Ye watchers and Ye Lonely Ones' (1951) is a brief play in three scenes which ostensibly addresses itself to the plight of the homosexual. A young boy induces his friend into the possibility of making money through selling one's services to homosexuals. Human relationships are reduced, as in many of Albee's subsequent plays, to the level of simple material gain. Also 'An End to Summer' (n.d.). 'The Ice Age' (n.d.) is an allegory which comments on totalitarianism and on America. The main concern in his early plays is the necessity to reconstruct a moral existence, to recuperate the liberal virtues of an America which has betrayed its values and lost its purpose.

### 3.- How can you characterize Albee's literary development? (Later plays)

LATER PLAYS: *All Over* (1971) presses even closer to the fact which is the root cause of the absurdity and fear that underlies his characters' actions -death. This time the group of characters is markedly older as they gather together in the familiar hermeticism of the closed room to witness the death, or perhaps the dying, of one of their number (though he remains securely behind a screen, as the fact of death and its implications for human life are similarly kept at arm's length). Their mutual surrender of complexity and individuality is expressed in their identification with role.

*Seascape* (1975) & *Happy Days* (1975?); *Counting the Ways* (1976)

Originally written as a radio play, *Listening* carries a very specific stage direction. The play takes place within the space created by a semi-circular wall which, tellingly, Albee describes as a kind of stone cyclorama. In other words the set has deliberately theatrical overtones. In the foreground is a large fountain and above it a monster head in half relief, the spigot of the fountain emerging from the mouth. This setting is an image of a world which has lost its ordered grace, a world in which the ordering principle has been lost, the mind which conceived that order being now dead or removed.

*The Lady from Dubuque* (1980) reiterates the themes of his earlier plays almost at the level of parody. The hysterical tone is partly a consequence of characters pressed beyond a naturalistic poise and partly a result of a collapse of confidence on Albee's part. His own social analysis is now so bleak that it cannot conceive a model of character which can sustain his redemptive impulse. Its central character, Jo, described as a frail, lovely, dark-haired girl in her early thirties, is dying, apparently of cancer. But in a sense this is merely an extreme form of the slow death which is life, as it is of the disintegration of social form and the slow collapse of language which are equally in evidence. Once again he is concerned with the fate of American revolutionary principles -though not with the fate of liberal abstractions. Thus liberty, dignity and possession are dismissed as mere 'semantics'.

LITERARY DEVELOPMENT: Albee's plays offer a series of allegories. Despite his denials, he is a didactic writer and his theater a teaching mechanism. It poses questions whose answers may no lie within the work of art itself. Albee's realism is charged with metaphysics constrained by his liberal humanism. He began his career as a 'demonic social critic', recalling America to its liberal principles and he remains that, though America has changed and he himself has lost some confidence in the ability of art to oppose the move towards apocalypse.

Edward Albee dominated the American theater of the 1960s. His brilliantly articulate calls for a reinvigorated liberal humanism, his dramatic parables of the need for the restoration of human values on a public and private level, struck just the right note for the Kennedy years, as did his hints of a threatening apocalypse. But behind the fascination with

the fate of American revolutionary principles lies a metaphysical concern for if he was interested in the degree to which people willingly subordinated themselves to social myths he was also committed to exploring the nature of other myths.

By turns witty and abrasive, and with a control over language, its rhythms and nuances, unmatched in the American theater, he broke new ground with each play, refusing to repeat his early Broadway success. But that refusal to compromise (even, on occasion, to make those compromises necessary to public performance) slowly eroded his support. He was essentially an Off-Broadway playwright who (with a few exceptions) continued to insist on Broadway productions of his plays. The effect was the gradual eclipse of one of America's most powerful and original playwrights. He has tackled issues of genuine metaphysical seriousness in a way that few American dramatists before him have claimed to do, for the most part with a command of wit and a controlled humour. He has set himself the task of probing beneath the bland surface of contemporary reality and created a theater which at its best is luminous with intelligence and power. He has a musician's sense of rhythmic structure and tonal subtlety. The failure which he has documented has been one of imagination no less than of will and moral being.

Although he has acknowledged that film is the most popular contemporary form he is 'convinced that the public knows instinctively that film is a synthetic manufactured experience incapable of change, but people go to the theater thinking that it is a dangerous present tense experience. They can change'. (a basic assumption of Albee's theater)

#### 4.- Explain the plots, structures and themes of Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream*.

*The Zoo Story* (1959) is an exploration of the farce and the agony of human isolation. It is a parable and its two characters constitute a model of American experience. The description of Jerry could equally be applied to his sense of an America which has become flaccid and enervated, which has lost its clarity of outline, its energy and its vision. Peter, a man defined by negatives, 'neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely', survives by suppressing a troublesome humanity. He is a cliché and the one weakness of an otherwise brilliant play lies in Albee's failure to solve a basic problem -how to invest Peter with sufficient imaginative autonomy to make his eventual transformation a real possibility and a matter of concern. Peter is bland, the epitome of the successful businessman; Jerry has the wild-eyed intensity of a convert. The process of the play is the slow revelation of the nature of Jerry's convictions, the elaboration of a myth which he himself only seems to understand through the process of narration. He taunts Peter, assaults him and finally, in some kind of terrible blend of love and despair, forces him to take an irrevocable step, pulling him

suddenly and ineluctably into the world of causality in which actions have consequences and responsibility can no longer be denied:

in the course of the play [Jerry] tries to transfer a sense of all the anguish and joy of being alive to Peter. In order to accomplish this transference he must precipitate an act of extraordinary violence. (Albee, 20 years later)

*The Zoo Story* is not an absurdist play, but an articulate assertion of the need to break out of an isolation which is socially rather than metaphysically derived. Their privatism is not the result of the absurdity of their position; it is the essence of it. Language has been drained of its real meaning, infiltrated by clichés and conventionalized to the point where it loses its ability to express truth. It is a kind of metaphoric approach: 'sometimes a person has to go a long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly'. If theater is to be a mechanism for truth, its methods may be oblique, but its ultimately concerned with the need to identify and embrace the real and the true.

*The American Dream* (1961) is an account of the destructive power of Mommy and Daddy. The family, an icon of the American system, is exposed as the heart of its venality and inhumanity. Thus the parents in the play systematically destroy an adopted child, being particularly sure to annihilate any sign of vitality and potency. Eliminates natural feelings and warm human contact. All capabilities for connection have been broken -eyes to see, sexual organs with which to love, hands to touch, and tongue to speak- in the name of affection and care. So the new generation is destroyed in the bud, and in the person of a Young Man we are presented with a living embodiment of the American Dream, personally attractive, totally amoral and drained of all humanity. The only hope resides in the figure of Grandma, an old woman representative of older values and immune to the destructive power of Mommy and Daddy. Mommy and Daddy enact the fictions offered to them by society. Language is conventionalized to the point where it is emptied of all meaning. Action and language contradict each other. Death is denied. Euphemism becomes the principal linguistic tactic. And lacking a language which relates them to their own experience, they are equally unable to make contact with one another. In the American Way of Life, normal human feelings and relationships have been deprived of meaning. Isolation of characters because of selfishness, impotence or lovelessness. Sterility of society and individuals. *The American Dream* is just that, a dream. Sometimes, as in other absurd drama, there are moments of lucid illumination where a character, for a moment, sees the entire hopelessness and confusion of his existence before lapsing once more into the meaningless 'syntax around' him. The natural order of life has been reversed and now the younger one is the less chance one has of being alive.

Dialogue composed of clichés and dominated by mundane bourgeois attitudes. Albee opposes real values to artificial ones, and the idealized American past to the vacuity of the American present (no Beckettian). For Beckett, the illusion of freedom is a central element of the absurd, an ironic birthright; for Albee, the principal moral failure of his characters lies in their inability to acknowledge a freedom which is the only basis for personal identity and national purpose. The problem with *The American Dream* is that he is more successful in dramatizing Mommy and Daddy and their vapid lives than he is in identifying any alternative.

##### 5.- Can you see anything in common in Albee's and Miller's work?

What Miller and Albee seem to employ in order to deplore what they see as the collapse of community, the decay of individualism and the demise of social responsibility is a kind of Jeffersonianism, though this Jeffersonianism is not inspected for its historic contradictions, for its presumptions about the privileges no less than the responsibilities of individualism, and for its reliance on the primacy of values which now we would be inclined to identify as conservative and capitalist. And since the process seems to be one of rediscovery, whereby the individual 'grows aware of his own being' which has been obscured by his willingness to be 'nothing but a means', the process seems necessarily historically regressive. (they turn to past).

Conversely there is an element of utopianism in Albee's work, as there is in that of Miller and Williams. All three offer a critique of modernity in the name of a system which is not so much dramatised as defined by its absence. In the case of Miller and Albee it would seem to be a form of liberalism in which Freudian notions of an opposition between the interests of the individual and those of society are denied. What they seem to be employing in order to deplore what they see as the collapse of community, the decay of individualism and the demise of social responsibility is a kind of Jeffersonianism. But that Jeffersonianism is not inspected for its historic contradictions, for its presumptions about the privileges no less than the responsibilities of individualism, and for its reliance on the primacy of values which now we would be inclined to identify as conservative and capitalist. On the surface there is a clear distinction between the model of Williams's utopianism and that deployed by Albee and Miller, for whom a certain rationality is essential and for whom the distinction between reality and illusion is basic to both a sense of identity and a system of morality.

He who wishes to find his way to the origin of the crisis must pass through the lost domain of truth, in order to revise it possessively; must traverse the domain of perplexity to reach decision concerning himself; must strip off the trappings of the masquerade, in order to disclose the genuine that lies beneath. (Jaspers)

Since the process seems to be one of rediscovery, whereby the individual “grows aware of his own being”, which has been obscured by his willingness to be “nothing but a means”, the process seems necessarily historically regressive. This, of course, is why Miller and Albee seem to turn to the past. Jaspers insisted that,

Experience of the harshness of the real is the only way by which a man can come to his own self. To play an active part in the world, even though one aims at an impossible, an unattainable goal, is the necessary precondition of one's own being...Man wins destiny only through ties: not through coercive ties imposed on him as an impotent creature by great forces which lie without; but by ties freely comprehended which he makes his own... The remembrance discloses to him its indelible foundations; and the future reveals to him the region wherein he will be held accountable for what he does today... For the individual, thrust back into his own nudity, the only option today is to make a fresh start in conjunction with the other individuals with whom he can enter into a loyal alliance.

While Albee's plays not merely urge the acknowledgement of reality but also see human relationships as an essential means of distilling and defining that reality, they are themselves factitious. They are inventions that can easily be accommodated by audiences seeking simple entertainment. The apparently reassuring nature of the naturalistic set for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is indeed, itself a tactic for ambushing an audience whose expectations are thereafter systematically frustrated. And despite what is, perhaps, rather too pat a conclusion to *The Zoo Story*, in which myth seals up some of the spaces left by the action, the sheer power of the play resists easy accommodation.

#### 6.- Describe the plot and themes of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

(Plot) It is set in a small New England college. Its single set, a womb-like living room, stands as an image of a refusal of life by those who enact their fears and illusions within it. George is a professor of history married to the daughter of the college president. Unable to have children, they have conspired to create a fantasy child, designed to cement their relationship, to compensate for a delinquent reality. But in fact the child becomes a divisive principle, claimed as an accomplice by both George and Martha. When his twenty-first birthday arrives, they are confronted with a dilemma. If they sustain the myth they must let the boy go, if they refuse to allow him to reach his majority, they will undermine a myth whose utility and whose conviction rests on the acceptance to a coincidence between real and fictional time. And witnessing the crisis is another couple, newly arrived at the university and already beginning the construction of their own illusions.

Like *The Zoo Story*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a protest against what Albee saw as a growing conformity, a retreat from individuality and moral responsibility. It stands as an assertion of the absolute need to accept the responsibility for one's actions and to close

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the gap between individuals, to end private and public alienation. In this sense, George and Martha's battles become a model for social and political battles, which derive from a desire to externalise and defeat qualities and tendencies inherent in the body politic.

In both *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Zoo Story*, there is a slow retreat from language –a suggestion that truth is pre-linguistic, that speech is designed less to communicate than to give access to power or to articulate the need to deceive (the self and others)- then his own splendid articulateness as playwright is also suspect and profoundly ambiguous. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* however, there is nevertheless a kind of truth in language, a Freudian upsurge of the subconscious perception breaking through into the conscious world. And though the humor in which George and Martha excel is certainly a protective device it is also evidence of a perception of dissidence or disproportion, of that sense of the ridiculous, of which Nick and Honey are unaware. Beneath the humor is a serious fear of a fatal collapse of liberal individualism. As Jung had suggested in *The Plight of the Individual in Modern Society*,

Under the influence of scientific assumptions, not only the psyche but the individual man and, indeed, all individual events whatsoever suffer a levelling down and a process of blurring that distorts the picture of reality... The goal and meaning of individual life (which is the only real life) no longer lies in individual development but in the policy of the state, which is thrust upon the individual from outside and consists in the execution of an abstract idea which ultimately tends to attract all life to itself. The individual is increasingly deprived of the moral decision as to how he should live his own life.

7.- How can you describe the treatment of characters and relationships in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Honey is hopelessly timid, afraid to have children, terrified of the real. Unwilling to confront the fact that in many ways “consciousness is pain”, she retreats into a childish dependence and, indeed, at one stage assumes the foetal position. Her husband, named, apparently after Nikita Khrushchev, lacks George's moral sensitivity. He is a totalitarian interested in power, and conventionalized. In many ways he is close kin to the Young Man in *The American Dream*. And together they have also begun to elaborate their lives. But for Albee these cannot be accurately described by Ibsen's term, “life-lies”. They are, finally, destructive of life: “The only optimistic act in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is to say, admit that they are false illusions and then live with them if you want and know that they are false”.

George and Martha inhabit a city of words. In recoil from reality, they laboriously construct an alternative world, lovingly elaborating their illusions in an apparently concrete language. But while in one sense, to speak is to lie, in another, there is a real risk that the



lexical superstructure, the crust of language, will eventually collapse of its own weight and leave them with the silence which they both fear but which may reduce them to what Pirandello once called “naked figures”. Their verbalisation is indeed a response to their terror of a silence in which the real questions will assert themselves. The play humor functions intimidating through humiliation; it is a desperate humor. Terrified of being, they play like children (there are many references to their childishness) or like actors, and “play” becomes a central metaphor.

Human relations derive precisely from human vulnerability, from “imperfection... what is weak, helpless and in need of support”. The question of human relationship and of the inner cohesion of our society is an urgent one in view of the atomization of the pent-up mass man...the free society needs a bond of an affective nature, a principle of a kind like *caritas*, the Christian love of your neighbour”. The association of *caritas* with a sexually charged relationship certainly ruins the risk of sentimentality but here this is largely avoided. Albee’s objection to the film version, however, lay precisely in its capitulation to this cliché.

While Albee’s plays not merely urge the acknowledgement of reality but also see human relationships as an essential means of distilling and defining that reality, they are themselves factitious. They are inventions that can easily be accommodated by audiences seeking simple entertainment. The apparently reassuring nature of the naturalistic set for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is indeed, itself a tactic for ambushing an audience whose expectations are thereafter systematically frustrated. And despite what is, perhaps, rather too pat a conclusion to *The Zoo Story*, in which myth seals up some of the spaces left by the action, the sheer power of the play resists easy accommodation.

#### 8.- Characterize Albee's *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in literary terms.

The play has three acts: 'Fun and Games', 'Walpurgisnacht' and 'The Exorcism'. The humour of the early part of the play gives way to a witches' Sabbath in which dangerous truths are exposed while the final act drives out the deadly fantasies and lays the ghost which George and Martha have created but by which they have been haunted. Word gives place to act, illusion to reality. The play title could have been “Who’s afraid of life without false illusions?” from a sign which he had seen in a Greenwich Village bar.

Ostensibly a Strindbergian drama of sexual tension, in fact the play is an elaborate metaphor for what Albee sees as the willing substitution of fantasy for reality, the destructive and dangerous infantilising of the imagination and the moral being by fear. The action takes place in a township called New Carthage –a Spenglerian reference underlined by George’s casual reading *from The Decline of the West*, jokingly a “cowboy book”. For Spengler, there was a clear parallel to be drawn between Carthage and modern America. In

both, power and money provided the principal axes for behaviour. In his cyclical view of history, both marked the age of the Caesars, the victory of money over culture.

The process of the play is a slow and relentless stripping of illusion, a steady move towards the moment when their myth will collapse of its own weight. George and Martha will be left to confront reality without benefit of their fantasies or the protective articulateness, which has been their main defence. The play remembers the American revolution, in the fact that George and Martha are named after the first President and his wife, and embodies the fate of the American dream which has moved progressively further away from the supposed liberal idealism of those revolutionary principles.

The play does presuppose a freedom, which he has willingly and perversely rejected. Its process and its theme argue the necessity to re-engage that freedom which is and must be inherently ambiguous, a freedom which enables the individual to define his own nature and to establish relationships with others, but a freedom which can be seen as synonymous with abandonment and desertion. George's respect for the ageing god of the college (the president whose offer of an eventual reward has cowed him) must end.

Denied even the vicarious survival implied by children they have to settle for the irreducible reality of an existence whose meaning has to be generated by actions taken and relationships forged.

The process of Albee's early plays tends to be a progressive stripping not only of illusion but also of language. And the fundamental thing they have to accept is their own mortality. Afraid of time they have become vicious Peter Pans. Nick prides himself on his detachment. George has simply compromised: "Accommodation, malleability, adjustment...these do seem to be the order of things". Either way, moral instincts are suppressed. Euphemism becomes a central strategy and alcohol a convenient opiate. They have suffered a "gradual...going to sleep of the brain cells". Afraid of pain, they retreat from consciousness into oblivion or myth.

History and science, as represented by George and Nick, become forms of evasion, rationalisation. They are fictions, ways of structuring the world and experience in such a way as to deny its contingent power. So, too, is the role-playing, the theatricality in which they indulge.

9.- Is *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* an absurdist or a realistic play. What is Albee's treatment of 'alienation' in his work?

In a sense Albee's early plays read like a pastiche of Martin Buber and Erich Fromm, both popular figures in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They address the question of alienation, an alienation which is partly a product of capitalism and partly as aspect of what it was then popular to call the human condition: "Man is torn away from the primary union

with nature, which characterizes animal existence... There is only one passion which satisfies man's need to unite himself with the world, and to acquire at the same time a sense of integrity and individuality, and this is love". For Fromm, "The experience of love does away with the necessity of illusions", and illusion is the source of a failure of moral will and political commitment.

While Albee was not concerned to enrol anyone in the cause of national or international politics per se in both *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* he does see a lack of such commitment as evidence of a collapse of will, more especially among those intellectuals who have betrayed a central responsibility. In the early one-act plays he presents a series of alienated individuals and in *The Zoo Story* offers love, in the Fromm sense, as a means of escaping from a sense of anomie. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Delicate Balance* he spells out the apocalyptic alternative, the threat to the sanity of those who fail in this responsibility.

In *Man in the Modern Age* (1930), Karl Jaspers was appalled by the rise of mass order and positivism, which seemed to subordinate continuity and individuality to an accommodated norm. "The individual", he observed, "is merged in the function. Being is objectified, for positivism would be violated if individuality remained conspicuous".

10.- Which are the aims of Albee's work? Give your personal opinion about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

OPINION: The play ends with a radically simplified language, with the simple cadence of monosyllabic question and answer. Language no longer comes between them. Neither does illusion. The fabric of their fiction has come apart. They are left only with one another, with relationship; they acknowledge the responsibility that they had previously evaded. The question remains, however, whether they have simply been reconciled to their own weaknesses and unrealised dreams. George and Martha, who once, like Eliot's character, had consoled themselves with the thought that "we can fight each other, / Instead of each taking his corner of the cage". (Julia in Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*)

Like *The Zoo Story*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a protest against what Albee saw as a growing conformity, a retreat from individuality and moral responsibility. It stands as an assertion of the absolute need to accept the responsibility for one's actions and to close the gap between individuals, to end private and public alienation. In this sense, George and Martha's battles become a model for social and political battles, which derive from a desire to externalise and defeat qualities and tendencies inherent in the body politic.

Albee's reputation had been founded on experimental work performed Off-Broadway or in a Europe whose drama had clearly been a major influence on his own work. With the aid of profits derived from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee established the Edward

Albee Foundation (largely, it must be said, for financial reasons). This sponsored the work of new young writers and artists. But he himself turned consistently to Broadway. Add to this a personal style which is highly ironic and uncompromising and you have a writer who has been alternately praised and peremptorily dismissed, a writer who, if he took care not to repeat his effects, has reiterated his thematic concerns to the point at which at times he comes close to offering parodic versions of his own early work.

Albee himself observed in regard to the Broadway audience and his own characters that, "Most people are unwilling to suffer the experience of great joy or great sadness. They prefer the barren middle ground of nothing... most of our audiences are lazy".

The metaphysical overtones of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* were clear, though muted. The model of reality was a simple phenomenological one. And although George comments on the difficulty of distinguishing truth from illusion there is, finally, a truth to be acknowledged, an emotional and a factual reality.

CRITIQUE: (Diana Trilling) weakness was that it posited a spiritually vacuous existence for which there was no historical explanation and no sanction in personal psychology. (Harold Clurman) its chief failing was that it seemed to confirm that disease -in the sense of morbid-mindedness- could be turned into a brilliant theatrical formula. The nation's publicity media have praised the mediocre work of Edward Albee as if it were excellence. They have made the author of six bad plays into a man of fame and fortune and a cultural hero, which is his good luck. Both *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, his most successful, are built upon an unbelievable situation -namely, that a sane, average-type person would be a passive spectator in the presence of behaviour obviously headed toward destructive violence. In *The Zoo Story*, why does Peter just sit there while Jerry works himself up to suicide? Why doesn't Nick, In *Who's Afraid?*, take his young wife and go home when he sees that George and Martha want only to fight the whole night through? In both cases, the answer is either that there is some psychological explanation that has not been written into the play, or that if Peter or Nick did the logical thing and went home the play would be over. Whatever allegorical element is present in the situation of *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid?* is in conflict with the realistic convention that both plays assume.

Patching and stitching is the mark of Albee's style; scarcely few lines go by without making one feel that something extraneous has been sewn in. The scenes have no rhythm. They give no impression of having developed organically from situations deeply felt or from ideas clearly perceived. Nothing is followed through in the terms initially proposed. No obedience to reality outside the playwright's head, nor much evidence of consistency.

Even though all acting involves pretense, there is such a thing as being supported by a role: Albee's roles have to be supported by the actors. The falseness of Albee's characters

is due to the fact that they are but surrogates for more authentic ones. The characters who could make psychological sense in *Who's Afraid?* are not the two couples on stage but the four homosexuals for whom they are standing in. *Who's Afraid?* is more of a group of homosexuals playing to be heterosexuals than the other way around, but Albee does not know what he is saying or else is afraid to say what he means.

Albee's real talent is his theatrical instinct, but his talent does not grow. He is preferred to Beckett, Ionesco or Genét, because he is worse. Since his themes are obvious, even hackneyed, they cannot be obscure. And his reckless inventiveness can pass for complexity without forcing anyone to entertain a complex thought.