

Edward Albee:
"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf":

Author:

Edward Albee was born March 12, 1928, in Washington D.C., and he was adopted as an infant by Reid Albee, the son of Edward Franklin Albee of the powerful Keith-Albee vaudeville chain. He was brought up in great affluence and sent to select preparatory and military schools. Almost from the beginning he clashed with the strong-minded Mrs. Albee, rebelling against her attempts to make him a success as well as a sportsman and a member of the Larchmont, New York, social set. Instead, young Albee pursued his interest in the arts, writing macabre and bitter stories and poetry, while associating with artists and intellectuals considered objectionable by Mrs. Albee. He left home when he was 20 and moved to New York's Greenwich Village, where he took to the era's counterculture and avant-garde movements. After using up his paternal grandmother's modest legacy, he took a variety of menial jobs until 1959 when "The Zoo Story" made him a famous playwright, first in Europe, where it premiered in Berlin, and then in New York. This short work together with 1962's full-length "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf", a brutal portrait of a hard-drinking academic couple, and 1966's "A Delicate Balance", his first Pulitzer Prize-winner, created the mold for American drama for the rest of our century. In 1975, Albee won his second Pulitzer Prize with "Seascape".

Plot:

George, an unsuccessful professor of history, and Martha, his wife, the daughter of the president of a small New England college, return home early in the morning from a party for new faculty members. George and Martha are drunk when they enter and continue drinking throughout the rest of the play.

Under vicious remarks about him and his abilities she informs him that they now expect guests, a young and fresh lecturer and his wife. George gives way in a resigned realization of the inevitability and so he mixes the drinks. As the young people appear, Martha begins with the play of the emotional disassembly. With a slowly but constant increased intensity she discovers Nick and Honey, the weakness of her husband, his incompetence, his failed career, his ridiculous physical constitution – short, she degrades him until on skin and bones. George is not able to defend himself, he only says that she should stop with her taunts. The young married couple stand this hell-fuss helpless opposite, Honey must vomit because of the alcohol-consumption. In the drunken orgy that follows, Martha and George engage in a harrowing battle to destroy each other, taking deliberate delight in pain and venom as they feed on each other's weakness.

In the second act, George strikes back and he uses Martha's tactics on the guests, by expansions of intimate details, and so Honey collapses. After that Martha turns erotic toward Nick and they disappear in the back-rooms.

As George hears that Martha has spoken about their son, the resolution matures in him to make finally a clear table. In the third act George forces Martha in front of the guests to notice the truth. Martha so far was a really strong woman, but now she collapses, the guests go home and Martha and George stay back without hope, empty and exhausted.

Games:

The play is a series of games and rules. The games are seriously playful imitations of the social games we play in our everyday life. The beginning games are comparatively harmless, then they turn to open adultery and finally to killing George and Martha's imaginary son.

"Lebenslüge" :

Martha and George have been married for some years, but both are disappointed about that, what has become of their hopes and plans. In this situation they have created together a "Lebenslüge", and both recognize the lie as a lie, but they themselves knowingly don't admit it. The son as a concretization of the "Lebenslüge" is to be seen as an allegory of the fulfilling mutuality, that you cannot find, but that you can persuade yourself. Albee's conclusion at the end is that even the finding of the truth does not lead to cleaning and new beginning.

Interpretation:

The central point is the conflict between George and Martha. Nick and Honey are more or less spectators and extras. Albee does not put hope on Nick and Honey as the hopeful generation, that in future commence everything better and morally more credible, but also in them is already placed the concurrence, the innocence and the cowardice, before the truth.

George and Martha, trapped in their house and their lives together, attempt to find substitutes for the reality they have been trying to escape and deny, and at the end, after Nick and Honey have left, George and Martha are left with the reality they so feared, and that reality turns out to be marked by many affirmations (the many "yes's" in the dialogue) and the morning sun illuminating the real world they now must face together, alone.

I think that Albee's play is about truth and illusion fundamentally. The theme of truth and illusion from the last act is the strongest notion from the play that is presented. It is full of uncertainties, like life.

Characteristics:

Martha: She is nasty-vicious, merciless and hungry after a strong reaction of George. As the reaction comes it destroys Martha.

George: He swallows all the malices of Martha, hoping that he himself can procure a little silence in his life, and he makes this through ignorance and thick-skinness. As this seems no longer possible, he grabs for the last means. Because the father-in-law of George is president of the college, it puts him in an unusually ambiguous relation to both his employer and his wife Martha, and it puts Martha in a position emphasizing the matrilineal heritage of power.

Nick: He is a young lecturer and he wavers between adaptation, weak out-breaks of self-confidence and half-hearted tries, to protect his wife. His career stands in the centre of his life, and his wife is only a tiresome, even when she is a attractive addition regarding money. He seems to represent everything the American dream was about, he is good looking and ambitious.

Honey: She is a little rural-fairly stupid, she drinks too much, and she doesn't understand any irony. Even as George makes jokes about her, she doesn't recognize it for a long time. Her collapses stay temporary, because she doesn't think really about it. After ten minutes in the bath-room she comes again merrily-naive along.