

MA ENGLISH  
SEMESTER IV  
PAPER III  
AMERICAN LITERATURE  
WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF BY EDWARD ALBEE

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Date – 12/08/2023

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Edward Albee was born on 12th March 1928. Edward Albee is a veritable phenomenon among the American playwrights of the sixties. He is one of the very few American dramatists to have etched a developing stature during the second World war. The internationally best known American play ride of the sixties , Edward Albee came to the fore in the mid century and reached a widespread audience even more quickly than did Eugene O'Neill. Edward Albee first one recognition with his one act play *The Zoo Story*(1958). He developed a following on the continent and identified himself with the avant garde movement. With the substantial theatre force Albee has been remarkable in bringing into force although in the American context, the pointlessness and absurdity of the human situation. He is one of the major exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd. Although none of Albee's more recent works succeeded as fully as did the zoo story and who is afraid of Virginia woolf he remains one of the most important playwrights in contemporary America.

The major works of Edward Albee.

1. *The Zoo Story* (1958)
2. *The Sandbox*(1959)
3. *The American Dream*(1959)
4. *The death of Bessie Smith* (1960)
5. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*(1962)
6. *Tiny Alice* (1965)
7. *A Delicate Balance* (1966)

## MCQs

1. Which institution serves as a setting for the play?

Ans- A University Campus

2. What time do George and Martha arrive home from the party at her father's house?

Ans- 2 am, midnight

3. What department does Nick work in?

Ans- Biology

4. During which act do George and Martha force Nick and Honey to reveal their own secrets and problems?

Ans- The second

5. What does Albee title the final act?

Ans- The Exorcism

6. Which department does Martha think Nick works in?

Ans- Maths

7. After rejecting his kiss , what does Martha ask George for?

Ans- A drink

8. What does George urge Martha not to bring up in front of Honey?

Ans- Their child

9. What does Martha tell George as Nick and Honey enter?

Ans- "Screw You"

10. What department does George work in?

Ans- History

11. What does George fake gun shoot instead of bullet?

Ans- A Parasol

12. Which of their sons' features does George and Martha argue about?

Ans-. His eye colour

13. Who was Martha?

Ans- George's wife

14. What does George break against the wall?

Ans- A Bottle

15. At the beginning of the scene, what is Martha making off stage?

Ans- Coffee

16. According to Nick, why did he marry Honey?

Ans- she was pregnant

17. In George's story about preschool what kind of alcohol is pronounced?

Ans- Bourbon

18. When talking privately with Nick, what does George call his son?

Ans- A bean bag

19. How does Nick make George feel?

Ans- Threatened

20. When the group reunites , what does Honey want to do?

Ans- Dance

22. According to Marta, who kept George from publishing his novel?

Ans- Her father

23. In the final act, who enters the room first?

Ans- Martha

24. After Martha tells Nick that she loved George, what rings?

Ans- The doorbell

25. In the end , who says they are afraid of Virginia Woolf?

Ans- Martha

Q1. Explain the significance of the title *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee.

Ans . Considered with deep insight, *Who's afraid of Virginia woolf* is in many important respects the first. In addition to being the first of Albee's full length plays , it is also the first juxtaposition and integration of realism and abstract symbolism. There seems to be an experiment in allegory and metaphorical cliches. Grotesque parody, hysterical humour, brilliant wit, literary allusion, religious undercurrents, Freudian reversals, irony on irony appear for the first time in an organic whole.

Q2. Discuss the importance of the games in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

Ans. Edward Albee attacks several American attitudes, cultures, morals, and values in the Play. One of these is the importance attached to games. By and large, American public takes games very seriously. Keen interest in bridge, golf, football and baseball is a part of the American cultural heritage. Being a good sportsman is looked upon as a social worker. This attitude is all the more significant because in a fragmented culture which has no agreed upon values, the game creates a severely limited world, tightly organised with absolute rules and values.

1. The play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is an attack on marriage as an institution. Discuss.

Ans. Albee was aware of the social malaise and the ills of the affluent American society of the 1960s. Racial strife , brush war abroad , the rise of the Cosmopolis and the breaking of family life were the facts too well known to the social critics of the time. "I'll highlight the breakdown of real communion between individuals". Like the playwright's of the theatre of the absurd, he is also a satirist. Attacks the

manners and attitudes of society that keep man from communication. Once the artificial barriers are brought down, then we can see whether or not there is a hope of community. Albee uses the satirist's axe to demolish these barriers. At first glance it would seem that Albee has no "moral norm" against which to measure American society. Attacks its most cherished assumptions that the marriage bond is a source of communion. The satirical thrust of the play is indicated by the ironic way in which Albee constructs his facade, setting dialogue character types to represent a recognisable segment of the American scene. The situation of the play where in a married couple entertaining another couple resembles that of Noel Coward drawing room comedy *House party* in miniature. The cultural attitudes that come under fire in *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf* cut across the spectrum of American culture to stop. The marital relationship of George and Martha becomes ruptured in the first instance by George's failure to advance in his profession. Even marrying the president's daughter is no help to him. He is bogged down and he has no hope of achievement. Failing at his job George cannot come up to standard as a husband. The conventional image demands that the husband be the breadwinner, the dominant figure in the household, a practical man of affairs. He is a flop and Martha cannot respect him. Controls the activities of the household. George does not know that she has invited guests, it is not a search for his right when she sets out to produce Nick. The character of Martha, as counterpart to George, is an unpleasant parity of the independent and aggressive American female. Milk and honey serve as contrasts to George and Martha. Milk is a dominant male headed for success, bright, young and aggressive. He has a consuming self-interest and a driving ambition which he makes by a cool defence. Though the traditional Western view of the institution of marriage is not universally accepted in practice, Americans still pay lip-service to an ideal of married stability and communion. Though George and Martha do find a new basis for union, the union is isolationist,

sterile, dependent on mutual need. They are left facing the void. When all the props of manners and mores have been kicked away there is only the waste land into which no life giving streams flow. The note of hope that brings in their mutual concern seems like whistling in the graveyard. In the last analysis, being afraid of Virginia Woolf in the world of New Carthage is not much different from simply being afraid.

Q2. Bring out the comic elements in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf"?

Ans- Edward Albee's masterpiece "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf" is a comedy with a difference. This is because the play certainly has its serious side. There are a number of touching situations in it and the play ends on an almost tragic note. In spite of that, the play can best be described as comedy. The play is loaded with wit and humour. The very common concept of a married couple having an imaginary child, and continuing to sustain themselves with that imaginary child for as long as 23 years is absurd and ridiculous and no doubt suitable for comic treatment.

In this play, we have a number of comic elements, besides the notion of a fantasy child. For instance, there are a couple of practical jokes played by George. During the course of the first act, at one point he aims a shotgun at Martha's head to the horror of Honey and Nick but when he pulls the trigger, Chinese purple parasol blossoms from the barrel of the gun instead of a bullet or pellet coming out of it. Later in the Play, in the third act George brings large bunch of Snapdragon which he has stolen from the green house of Martha's father, and he begins to fling the flowers one by one at Martha and Nick as if the the flowers



were Spears, uttering the word "snap" every time he throws a flower. Both of these are amazing situations.

George himself provides certain other comic elements to the play. For instance, the names he gives to the various games are amusing. The first game is called "Humiliate the Host". George's narration of an episode of school life to Nick also constitutes a comic element in the Play. George has a treasure trove of ready wit and biting sarcasm. His verbal fireworks on the other characters are very amusing indeed. In addition to his mocking darts on Martha, George also provides plenty of humour by his remarks about Martyr's father, Nick and Honey. Jokingly remarks that Martha's father is a God. George does not spare either Nick or Honey even though they are guests in the house and should be treated with some courtesy. Epochs fun at Nick by saying to him ironically.. "your sympathy disarms me you your compassion makes me weep". Martha also equally contributes to the comedy of the play but in that she is next only to George. mother reveals her capacity for wit in the manner in which she makes amorous advances to Nick too serves as a source of comedy in the Play. His account of his wife's hony's hysterical pregnancy is very amusing. Honey provides amusement to us by her absurdities. No doubt she is truly a comic character. She has a great weakness for brandy. She keeps asking for more branding while at the same time declaring that she does not drink much. She giggles most of the time in an idiotic manner.