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Who's afraid of virginia woolf play synopsis

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Study Guide-MonkeyNotes Book Summary Table of Contents | Message Board | Printable Version | Barron's Booknotes Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis) The play opens with George and Martha returning from a faculty party hosted by Martha's father - the President of New England College. The time is two in the morning and both of them are very drunk. Martha tries to recollect the name of a Bette Davis movie and pesters George to help her. He makes them a drink and finds out that Martha has invited people over. He expresses frustration at this arrangement but eventually reconciles himself. Meanwhile their guests, Nick and Honey arrive. As the play progresses the true identity of each character is revealed. George is a history professor working in New England College. He is married to Martha, who is six years his senior. They are the older couple in the play yet they are not very mature. Nick is a professor in biology from the same college. Honey, his wife, is plain looking and slim-hipped. They are younger and somewhat taken aback by their hosts' behavior yet eventually partake in the game playing and manipulation that goes on. The guests and the hosts after initial exchange of pleasantries begin to drink. Your browser does not support the IFRAME tag. Under the influence of alcohol and much baiting from Martha and George, they all divulge their personal secrets. George has his own difficulties in being married to the college president's loud- mouthed daughter. Martha is peeved to find her husband incompetent in comparison to her father and then later Nick. Her sharp tongue does not miss a single opportunity in revealing his inadequacies. Nick is troubled because he was tricked into marrying Honey, who had suffered a hysterical pregnancy. This has culminated in a passionless marriage. In between all this George narrates an incident about his friend who had killed his parents accidentally and how these incidents landed him in a mental asylum. Both couples shield themselves from reality. Martha and George have created an imaginary son that creates a bond between them. After excessive drinking, Martha is unable to guard this secret and discloses it to Honey. When George learns of this, he is shocked, as she has made a transgression that will inexorably affect the illusion they have created. The relationship between Honey and Nick is revealed as being shallow and empty. Nick had an ulterior motive in marrying Honey. He knew that her father was wealthy and his wife was sure to inherit the wealth. Honey does not want children and decides not to have a baby. She takes birth control pills. Therefore, she usually complains of sickness and retires for rest. Martha continues with her unprovoked outbursts and George becomes cold and indifferent to them. Disgusted with his behavior, she tries to provoke him by seducing Nick. By now George realizes the futility of their illusions and that his and Martha' life together will be changed after this night. He declares the death of his child and chants the burial service in Latin. A startled and disturbed Martha is forced to accept this fact. With this he also points out the deficiencies in Nick and Honey's relationship. For the first time in the play, Honey expresses her desire to have a baby. Towards the end of the play Martha and George are transformed and renounce the illusory world they have created and face life without deceptions. The play begins at two in the morning and stretches to dawn of the next day. George sings the title of the play softly as if it is a lullaby and Martha's answer that she is afraid of Virginia Woolf reveals how much reality frightens her. THEMES Major Theme The play attacks American optimism and the privileging of progress and scientific thinking over more humanistic ideas. It questions the American way of life where sentiments and relationships have lost meaning and where life has become one long game of competition where agonistic relationships are built on false accusations and spiteful indictments, but have no real weight to them. Relationships are lacking in respect and compassion because the world does not value these once-important qualities. The play attempts to draw attention to the modern way of life, which is full of tensions, incompatibilities and divided loyalties. Human emotions and interactions in the contemporary world are superficial. Humans have isolated themselves from each other by escaping into playing games and creating fantasies that only reinforce their loneliness and despair. Minor Theme The play brings to the forefront the futility of indulging in a make- believe world. It defines the "anxieties" and "fears" of two couples "who are born in conflict between private needs and public values." All the three acts of the play represent a society that prefers to pacify itself, and cling to fantasy, under the pretext that it is essential for survival. MOOD A sense of sardonic bitterness with a grotesque sense of humor pervades the play. It is what is called "black" humor. Dark and caustic, the play is funny and tragic. The dialogue is sharp and witty, often at the expense of someone else's feelings. It is a deeply cynical play about the lack of human communication in the most sacred of relationships: marriage. Disappointment and melancholy overpower the characters as they continue to place their faith in their imaginary worlds. Dissatisfaction and depression grips the minds them. Your browser does not support the IFRAME tag. Table of Contents | Message Board | Printable Version | Barron's Booknotes Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Plot Synopsis/Book Notes/Analysis/Chapter Notes Gain full access to show guides, character breakdowns, auditions, monologues and more! UPGRADE TO PRO SIGN UP or or log in to your account Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf is probably the most famous and widely studied American play associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, a movement prominent in the 1950s and 1960s. Edward Albee's play is about the dysfunctional and self-destructive marriage between a history professor and his wife, witnessed over the course of one night (or, technically, one very early morning) following a party. But how should we analyse Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Before we come to the question of analysis, here's a brief recap of the play's absurdist plot. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf: plot summary The setting for the play is a professor's house on the campus of a New England university. At two o'clock in the morning, George, a professor of history, and his wife Martha return home after a party. Martha is the daughter of the president of the university where her husband teaches. Their first names suggest George and Martha Washington, the first President and First Lady of the United States. George is in his late forties and his wife is six years older, in her early fifties. Where he is somewhat cynical and world-weary, she is fiery and vulgar. She has invited a young couple back with them: Nick, a twenty-something biology lecturer at the university, and his wife Honey, a plain-looking woman also in her twenties. The first act, 'Fun and Games', sees Martha trying to seduce Nick while humiliating both her husband and, to an extent, Honey. As she gets more drunk, Honey grows bolder and asks George and Martha when their son will be coming home. Doubts are raised over whether George is the biological father of the couple's son, and Martha reveals that her father had discounted George as a potential candidate to succeed him as president of the university because he isn't good enough. Honey rushes off to the toilet to be sick, as she has drunk too much. The second act of the play is titled 'Walpurgisnacht', after the witches' feast or sabbath. Nick confides to George that he only married Honey because she had a phantom pregnancy and he felt he had to do the honourable thing. The two men talk at length, before Nick makes a comment about getting Martha in a corner and 'mounting' her. Martha then seeks to provoke maximum embarrassment in her husband by dancing suggestively with Nick and telling Nick and Honey that her father stopped George from publishing a novel he'd written, about a boy who murders his parents – a book which George insists was autobiographical. George turns increasingly nasty, decreeing that they should play a party game he calls 'Get the Guests'. He mockingly re-enacts Honey's phantom pregnancy, using the information Nick confided in him to taunt them and sow conflict. In response, Martha tries to seduce Nick again, taking him off to the kitchen so they can 'hump' there. George confides that his and Martha's son is, in fact, dead. The third act, 'The Exorcism', begins with Martha alone; when Nick enters, she accuses him of being a 'flop' just like her husband. George tells them that there is one more game to play: 'bringing up baby'. He and Martha pay tribute to their son, on his twenty-first birthday, before George tells his wife that their son has died in a car crash. When she demands to see the telegram announcing this news, he claims he has eaten it. George sings a song, 'Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf', as the curtain falls. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf: analysis Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf is often analysed as a response to a specific moment in US history: in 1962, when the play premiered, John F. Kennedy was President, and the United States had a confidence in itself as the leading world superpower. At the same time, tensions with the USSR, particularly over Cuba, led to uncertainty over the future. American life and self-confidence, which had perhaps been at its peak in the 1960s, was beginning to look like a double-edged sword: cosy and comfortable on the outside, but playing host (as it were) to some darker and more worrying secrets and anxieties. Albee's play brilliantly dramatises these, reducing them to a domestic setting centred on middle-class America. The names of the two leads, George and Martha, take us back to the founding of the United States and its first President; this further supports the notion that the play should be read as being 'about' America, as well as the lives of individual middle-class Americans. Edward Albee wrote in the New York Times in 1962 that he was 'deeply offended' when he learned he was becoming associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. As he argued in an essay, 'Which Theatre is the Absurd One', one could argue that absurdist theatre is actually more realist, and closer to reality, than so-called 'naturalist' or traditional theatre, which was reliant on conventions which failed to reflect actual life. So whereas naturalist theatre offers itself as a 'slice of life', absurdist drama tends to use dream-like rituals and allegories; whereas naturalist drama follows the rational and logical chain of cause and effect (one character does something; another character reacts as one would expect), absurdist theatre does not have to subscribe to such a rational linearity of plot. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, with its strange party games and rituals and its refusal to develop in terms of plot and character, is therefore an emblematic example of absurdism. The ritualistic element is even apparent in the pagan and religious titles given to the different acts of the play, e.g., 'Exorcism'. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the question of whether George and Martha actually have a son at all. Like Honey's phantom pregnancy, the sense we're left with, by the end of the play, is that he never existed at all: he, too, was a phantom, conjured by George and Martha as a focal point for their dysfunctional marriage. And if we view Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf as an absurdist allegory for America at a particular point in its history, the early 1960s, the son that doesn't exist might be analysed as a symptom of the country's anxieties over its future. Just as the couple have no children yet their imaginary son is the heart and soul of their conflicted relationship, so America is looking to its future – the space race which Kennedy had begun the decade by championing – while ignoring the problems and challenges closer to home. Edward Albee's original title for Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf was 'Exorcism', which he ended up using as the title for the final act of the play. The eventual title came from a bar which Albee frequented, where patrons would leave graffiti, written in soap, on a large mirror. Albee saw someone had riffed on 'who's afraid of the big bad wolf' (from 'Little Red Riding Hood') and daubed 'who's afraid of Virginia Woolf', a reference to the modernist writer, and Albee made a mental note of the phrase, thinking it would make a good title for a play. Image: via Wikimedia Commons.

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