Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDWARD ALBEE

Edward Albee was raised by wealthy adoptive parents; his adoptive father was the son of a vaudeville magnate and owned several theaters. Edward was expelled from high school, and then dismissed from a military academy in Pennsylvania. He completed his secondary education at the Choate School and then was expelled from Trinity College in Connecticut for skipping classes and refusing to attend chapel. He moved to Greenwich Village and began writing plays. Albee currently teaches playwriting at the University of Houston and has received three Pulitzer Prizes for Drama.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

During the sixties, an image of the happy American family was reinforced by the conservative president, Dwight Eisenhower, as well as popular sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. These social images, of the happy housewife and the perfect marriage, were unrealistic and masked the harsher reality that lay beneath the social exterior. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* resists the narrative pressure to present reality in a digestible form and instead exposes family life in a harsher light. At the same time, the Cold War was an important feature of American political life in the 1960's, and the non-violent tensions that arise in Martha and George's living room might be understood as a small-scale representation of the international conflict.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Buried Child, written by Sam Shepard in 1978, like *Who's Afraid*, depicts the breakdown of an American family, and expresses disillusionment with the fiction of the American dream. Both George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's *You Can't Take it With You* (1936) and Harold Pinter's *Birthday Party* (1957) also resemble Albee's play in that they feature party games that get out of hand and result in the playing out and revelation of private marital tensions.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*
- **When Written:** 1962 (first performed)
- **Where Written:** New York
- **Literary Period:** Theater of the Absurd
- **Genre:** Dramatic stage play
- **Setting:** A house on a New England college campus
- **Climax:** George informs Martha that he has received news, via telegram, that their son has died.

EXTRA CREDIT

Nikita and George. Albee has admitted that the resemblance of Nick's name to Nikita Kruschev—the Soviet premier—and of George's name to George Washington—first president and the icon of the American dream—were intentional.

Close, but no cigar. Though the play won all of the votes necessary to award it the Pulitzer Prize in 1962, it did not receive the prize because of its controversial themes and language. No prize was awarded in drama that year.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play takes place on a New England college campus, in the home of a professor, George, and his wife, Martha, the daughter of the college president. The play begins with Martha and George returning from a party at Martha's father's house. They bicker drunkenly with one another, and Martha informs George that they have guests coming over, even though, as George reminds her, it is two o'clock in the morning. Martha sings, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," to the tune of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf," which she seems to have invented at the party, and laughs hysterically at it.

The doorbell rings and George opens the door right as Martha is yelling to him "Fuck you!" Nick and Honey, their guests, look as though they regret having come. They begin to discuss the party—Nick, a new professor, expresses his gratitude for the president's parties in helping him grow acquainted to the college. Martha and Honey excuse themselves to go to the restroom. George provokes Nick, and then tells him about the campus practice of "musical beds"—of sleeping with other professor's wives. Nick snaps, irritated with George's crassness.

George believes that Nick is in the Math department, but Nick explains that he teaches Biology, with a particular research focus on genetics. George accuses Nick of rearranging chromosomes in order to make everyone identical. Honey returns and tells George that she's heard about his son—George is distressed by this news. Honey is followed into the room by Martha.

When George leaves to get more alcohol, Martha begins telling Honey and Nick about the circumstances of their marriage. She explains that she married George in part because her father had his eyes on him as a potential future president, but later lost confidence in him. George re-enters the room in the middle

of her narrative. He breaks a bottle against the bar and then begins loudly singing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." Honey announces that she's going to be sick.

While Martha tends to Honey, George and Nick converse: Nick tells George that Honey often gets sick, and that he married her because of a "hysterical" pregnancy. George tells Nick about a boy that he knew in high school who accidentally killed both of his parents.

Martha and Honey return and George puts on music. Martha and Nick dance close together. George introduces the next game they are going to play—entitled "Get the Guests"—and then begins to describe the plot of his second novel. The plot he describes is the story of Nick and Honey's marriage—the false pregnancy, the wife's mousiness. Honey runs out of the room to vomit again. When George exits to get ice, Martha seduces Nick into kissing her. When George returns, he begins to read a book and appears unfazed when Martha informs him that she is necking with one of the guests. Martha and Nick leave George, and when George hears dishes clattering in the kitchen, he throws a book at the sound, then leaves.

Martha enters the empty living room and babbles crazily to herself. Nick enters. They chat a little, and then the door chimes ring and Nick opens the door to find George. George announces that the next game they are going to play is "bringing up baby." He begins to talk about their son, despite Martha's pleading, and then prompts Martha to take over. She and George play off of each other, each adding details about the son's childhood. Then George reports that while Martha was out of the room, a man from Western Union came and delivered a telegram informing them that their son had died.

When Martha asks what George did with the telegram, he says he ate it, and then laughs explosively. Nick guesses correctly that Martha and George are in fact incapable of having children. The guests say their goodbyes and leave. George puts his hand on Martha's shoulder and begins singing, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." Martha answers that she is.

CHARACTERS

Martha – Martha is the daughter of the president of the college where George and Nick are professors. She is middle-aged, large and boisterous, and is married to George in an intense and acrimonious relationship. She admits to a history of infidelity and flirts with Nick throughout the play, ultimately seducing him into kissing her, and perhaps more. Her constant nagging of George about his lack of ambition suggests that she may be insecure about her own professional situation.

George – George is an associate professor in the History Department at the college. He is forty-six years old. Martha describes George's career as a failure, and purports to have married him because her father had once seen George as a protégé and potential future president of the college. According to Martha, her father changed his mind about George's future after witnessing his weakness and impotence. At times throughout the play, George exhibits his professor-like erudition, as when he speaks in Latin and elegantly defends the study of History, but each time, Martha dismisses him as pretentious. His character, as is apparent in this description, is largely defined by Martha's descriptions of him, which further supports the passivity that Martha accuses him of, until the end of the play when he cruelly retaliates with the false news of their son's death.

Nick – Nick is a new professor at the college, in the biology department. Only twenty-eight years old, he is already highly accomplished—he earned his Master's degree at the age of nineteen, and was a boxing champion in college. Young and ambitious, he provides a contrast to George, who is old and apparently unambitious. After a couple of drinks, however, Nick reveals that his life isn't all it seems, when he admits that he didn't marry Honey out of love.

Honey – Honey is Nick's wife, a couple of years his junior, and is described as petite and plain. She is clearly not very intelligent, and becomes drunk very quickly, retiring to lie on the bathroom floor and peel labels off alcohol bottles. It is evident that Nick, handsome and intelligent, feels he deserves better, and he ultimately confesses to George that he only married Honey because of a hysterical pregnancy and his parents' expectations. Honey, like Martha, it turns out, cannot have children and is distraught by her infertility. She is clearly the weakest character in the play and spends much of the play offstage.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

IMPERFECT MARRIAGE

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf paints a harsh portrait of marriage as a vehicle for conflict, arguments, and disappointment. George and Martha, though named after the first presidential couple of the United States, are a model of dysfunction, an undermining of the idea of the happy couple. They invite Nick and Honey to their house to serve as an audience for their mutual disdain and bickering. Though Nick and Honey are initially presented as sane and functional, particularly in contrast to their counterparts, their marriage is quickly revealed to be similarly dysfunctional

The play depicts the unraveling of the two marriages as the

appearances that the characters assume in public are sullied with the drunken revelations of their private thoughts and histories. At the end of the night of debauchery, however, Honey and Nick go home together and George and Martha remain, each to resume their married lives. The suggestion is that all marriages are marked with some conflict and turmoil, but that, when all is said and done, they continue on. Given that the play premiered in the early sixties, it can be read as a reaction to the fifties, when unrealistic images and advertisements of the 'perfect American family' and home life abounded.

ACADEMIA

The play takes place "on the campus of a small New England college," George and Nick are both professors, and Martha's father is the president of the college. This academic setting influences and taints the narrative in various ways at various points throughout the play. It results in specific power dynamics, tensions, and jealousies among the characters—Martha is attracted to Nick, and George is threatened by him, because of his academic accomplishments; Martha's father bears the key to George's future success or failure, and thus defines the terms of their marriage; George and Nick's academic disciplines inform their modes of conversation and their argument about genetic biology.

The academic setting also contributes particular significance to the genders of the characters—the characters who are employed by the college and whose successes are examined, George, Nick, and Martha's father, are all men. The women in the play, Martha and Honey, are only affiliated with the college through their familial relations. Honey plays an exaggerated version of the university wife, in her timidity and deference to her husband. The play examines the tricky intersection and separation in the academy, between professional and personal life, and public and private life. It also explores the limitations of academic intelligence and professional ambition in creating a happy life.

APPEARANCE, SECRECY, AND TRUTH-TELLING

George and Martha use Nick and Honey as an audience to whom they reveal dark secrets about their marriage, and thereby to betray one another's honor and secrecy. Alcohol loosens everyone's lips, and encourages even Nick and Honey to say things they otherwise wouldn't. Nick discloses to George the story of his own marriage and Honey's false pregnancy; Martha tells Nick and Honey about the book that George wrote but failed to publish on account of her father.

At the end of the play, as though revealing some truth, George and Martha begin to tell conflicting stories of their son's birth and **childhood**. When George speaks, Martha accuses him of lying; when Martha speaks, he accuses her of lying. Then George dramatically reports that their son has recently died in a car crash. Martha yells at her husband, accusing him of having killed their son, and he responds, "You broke our rule, baby. You mentioned him . . . you mentioned him to someone else." While the scene is confounding and difficult, it becomes clear that they never had a child after all, and yet placed great importance on maintaining, privately, the belief that they did. The fact that they have been lying all along about the existence of their son throws doubt on the truth of other stories they have told throughout the play, as of George's story about the boy who accidentally kills both his parents. In fact, there is a suggestion that it is George's parents who have died, though perhaps not that he actually caused their deaths.

The play puts pressure on the contrast between stable appearances and chaotic hidden realities, and on the thin line between secret-revealing and story-telling. The final line of the play—Martha's admitting that she is afraid of **Virginia Woolf**—lends further significance to this theme. Virginia Woolf was a social realist, who often depicted darkly realistic family lives. In admitting that she's afraid of Woolf, Martha identifies the scariness of unmasking the truth, of facing reality, and in doing so, for the first time, admits a deep and honest truth about herself.

AMBITION, SUCCESS, AND FAILURE

George's lack of success is a great point of conflict in his marriage to Martha, who, with her father, had expected him to accomplish more than he has. George was expected to take over the college's presidency after the retirement of Martha's father, but Martha suggests that her father no longer thinks George fit for the position. She mocks his scholarly work, the novel he wrote, and his general weakness. George is put into relief by the young Nick, who is praised as ambitious, successful, and bound to achieve great things. Martha seems more upset with George's lack of success than even he is, which might be read as a projection of her own frustration with her own inability to have an accomplished professional life —a consequence of the sexism of the time, and perhaps an indication of her own shortcomings as well.

That all of the characters' focus on ambition and relative success has only led them to the seemingly unhappy situations on display in the play suggests that success as they understand it may not be a good value or barometer to dictate one's life around.

CHILDREN AND CHILDISHNESS

Throughout the play, Martha and George act childishly in provoking one another and teasing

their guests. They perform common romantically infantile gestures, like calling each other "**baby**," and talking to each other in childish voices. When she drinks too much, Honey sucks her thumb on the bathroom floor. At some moments, too, George and Martha treat Nick and Honey as though they were children. All of this behavior might be understood in the context of both of the couple's experiences with infertility and "imaginary children": George and Martha invent a son that doesn't really exist; and Honey had "a hysterical pregnancy." In the end of the play, Honey yells that she wants a child. Children, and the necessary absence of them, is a subject of distress for the two married couples.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BABIES

Images of babies and child-like behavior appear throughout the text. Martha and George call each other baby; Martha sometimes speaks in a childish voice; and when Honey drinks too much, she curls up like a "fetus" on the bathroom floor and sucks her thumb. The abundance of baby symbolism is explained later on in the play, when it is revealed that both Honey and Martha have failed to have children and so both couples are fixated on the possibility and absence of babies.

ALCOHOL

Alcohol is consumed throughout the play, and the narrative is often punctuated by character's glasses being refilled. The characters' lips are loosened as they drink more and more, until Honey is on the bathroom floor and George and Martha grow increasingly harsh towards one another and say ever crueler and more revealing things. Alcohol serves to strip away the false fronts that the characters might otherwise use to mask their dysfunctions.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf was an acclaimed modernist novelist of the 20th century. Her novels—*Mrs. Dalloway* in particular—depict family society life in all of its banality and darkness. When the characters of Albee's play sing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," they appear to be expressing a fear of confronting their realities. The song additionally suggests that even respected professors like George and Nick might secretly be afraid of the difficulty of some of their academic subjects—such as the notoriously difficult work of Virginia Woolf—but are too ashamed to admit their fear except in a **childish** song.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* published in 1983.

Act 1 Quotes

Ha, ha, ha, HA! Make the kids a drink, George. What do you want, kids? What do you want to drink, hunh?

Related Characters: Martha (speaker), George, Nick, Honey

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Nick and Honey have arrived at George and Martha's home and Martha––notably drunk herself––instructs her husband to make their guests a drink. Her overfamiliar tone and use of the word "kids" makes her sound like a mother offering her children a drink; the fact that the drinks in question are alcoholic, and that Martha herself is already very drunk, adds a disturbing twist to her question. Throughout the play, the characters reference children and recreate family dynamics, highlighting the conspicuous absence of children in the lives of both couples.

This passage also reveals Martha's forceful personality and manipulation of those around her, and particularly of George. Rather than politely asking or suggesting that George make the drinks, Martha aggressively demands that he does so. This in turn highlights the more passive, weaker role George takes in their marriage. The hysterical laughter that precedes this demand further emphasizes Martha's volatile and intimidating character. The characters in the play frequently laugh, though this laughter almost always contains distinct undertones of hostility, fear, or hysteria; this illustrates the theme that beneath social pleasantries lie far more menacing dynamics.

Musical beds is the faculty sport around here.

Related Characters: George (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

George has confided to Nick that it is not easy being married to the president's daughter; Martha, overhearing this, has snapped back at him, before exiting the room with Honey. With the women gone, George teases Nick, who grows exasperated and tells George he doesn't like being involved in other people's business; George replies that this will soon change, as "musical beds is the faculty sport" at the university. Once again, George takes on a kind of mentoring, parental role with his guest, though again, this is given a disturbing twist by the fact that George seems to be encouraging Nick to engage in adultery.

The framing of extramarital affairs as being akin to the children's game "musical chairs" further blurs the distinction between childhood innocence and the sinister reality of adult life. Like a child, George treats the matter at hand playfully; however, given that he is discussing marital infidelity, this suggests a kind of moral irresponsibility and carelessness. Throughout the play, Nick and Honey's earnestness is contrasted with George and Martha's unwillingness to take anything seriously, a disposition that seems to have resulted from years spent in a bitter and tumultuous marriage.

> Do you believe that people learn nothing from history? Not that there is nothing to learn, mind you, but that people learn nothing? I am in the History Department.

Related Characters: George (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

George has been asking Nick about his work, falsely assuming Nick was in the Math department when he is in fact in Biology. Nick appears frustrated with the riddle-like way in which George is speaking with him; in this passage, George adopts the same style of speech in reference to his own work in the History department. George's question seems to imply that he does not take his academic work particularly seriously, a fact that perhaps reflects his lack of success in his field. Nick, in contrast, is a very promising scholar who takes his work very seriously, and reacts badly to George's jesting.

George's question about people learning nothing from history may also allude to the wider political context of the play. In the first half of the 20th century, it was widely assumed that the devastating effects of the two World Wars would deter nations from engaging in international conflict; yet in 1962 the Cold War had escalated to a climax, leading many to fear that the world was facing imminent destruction by nuclear conflict. This anxiety created a nihilistic atmosphere in which it could be difficult to believe that ordinary actions mattered or that people had learned their lesson from the first two World Wars.

> He was going to be groomed. He'd take over someday...until [Daddy] watched for a couple of years and started thinking maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all...that maybe Georgie boy didn't have the *stuff*...that he didn't have it in him!

Related Characters: Martha (speaker), George

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

With George out of the room, Martha has been telling Nick and Honey her life story, including the fact that her father had wanted her future husband to be someone who would one day take over the university presidency. Martha explains that at first her father approved of George and planned to "groom" him for the role of president; however, he then changed his mind, coming to believe that George "didn't have it in him." This story is of course highly embarrassing for George, a fact made worse by his reentrance into the room halfway through. Martha exhibits a total disregard for her husband's feelings and for ordinary codes of social conduct; indeed, it seems her motivation for telling her guests this story is simply to hurt George by making him look bad.

Martha's use of childish language ("Daddy"; "Georgie boy") infantilizes both her and George, and trivializes the story she is telling. The term "Daddy" also suggests she has a childishly close relationship to her father, exhibiting loyalty to him over her husband. Once again, Martha and George's childlessness could be interpreted as creating an imbalance in the conventional family dynamic. Perhaps because she

was not able to become a parent herself, Martha remains stuck in the position of a child, thereby alienating her from her husband.

Act 2 Quotes

It was a hysterical pregnancy. She blew up, and then she went down.

Related Characters: Nick (speaker), Honey

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Honey has left the room to be sick and Martha is tending to her; alone with George, Nick has admitted that Honey is sick often, and confessed that he married her because they thought she was pregnant. As it turns out, it was a "hysterical pregnancy," meaning Honey believed she was pregnant and even had symptoms of pregnancy, yet was never actually pregnant at all. This fact about Honey conveys the intensity of her desire for children. Indeed, the unfulfilled wish to be parents causes both couples to act in strange and delusional ways. While "hysterical pregnancy" is a recognized clinical condition, the word "hysterical" is particularly fitting in a play populated by characters who frequently behave in a crazed, delirious manner.

In the hospital, when he was conscious and out of danger, and when they told him that his father was dead, he began to laugh, I have been told, and his laughter grew and he would not stop, and it was not until after they jammed a needle in his arm, not until after that, until his consciousness slipped away from him, that his laughter subsided.

Related Characters: George (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

George has been telling Nick a story from his teenage years, when a boy he knew confessed that he accidentally killed both his parents, first by shooting his mother and then running over his father while learning to drive. George describes the moment when the boy woke up in the hospital following the car accident to be told that his father was dead. According to George, the boy laughed hysterically for such a prolonged period that he had to be sedated. Like many other moments in the novel, this story depicts the disturbing realities that lie beneath ordinary social dynamics. The boy's laughter is a bizarre and highly inappropriate reaction to the news that he has murdered his father; at the same time, this is consistent with many other moments in the play when dark and cruel behavior is accompanied by laughter.

The fact that this story involves a parent-child relationship is also significant. The desire to have children is an overwhelming force in the novel, yet this passage depicts an inverse to this theme: the Oedipal narrative of a boy murdering his father. The story is also connected to George's later symbolic "murder" of his and Martha's imaginary son, when he tells the other characters that they have received a telegram with the news that their son is dead. The playfulness with which George presents these matters of familial life and death implies that he does not take them seriously, emphasizing the sense of nihilism that runs throughout the play.

Just before we got married, I developed…appendicitis…or everybody *thought* it was appendicitis…

Related Characters: Honey (speaker), Nick

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Martha and Honey have returned, and Martha has demanded that George apologize for making Honey sick; Honey interjects that she gets sick often, and that before she was married she developed a condition that "everybody thought... was appendicitis." Because Nick has already told the real version of this story to George, the audience is aware that what actually happened to Honey was a hysterical pregnancy. This passage thus involves multiple layers of false appearances––Honey's false pregnancy, her lie that it was appendicitis, and even to some extent her marriage to Nick, which Nick has admitted took place to

avoid scandal when they thought Honey was pregnant out of wedlock. Nick and Honey, whose marriage seemed respectable and harmonious at the play's outset, are revealed to lead lives consumed by secrecy and deceit in much the same way as George and Martha.

> Our son ran away from home all the time because Martha here used to corner him.

Related Characters: George (speaker), Martha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

Martha has told Nick and Honey that her son used to be sick whenever George was in the room; George responds that their son would frequently run away because Martha "used to corner him." Once again, George and Martha attack one another in a strangely open, almost performative way. They seem fixated with one-upping each other, competing over who can leverage the crueller insult. George's words here evoke disdain for Martha's feelings about their imaginary child, perhaps suggesting he is resentful of the intensity of her desire to have children. Meanwhile, the fact that George and Martha use their imaginary son as a way of insulting each other conveys the extent of their marital misery; even engaged in a fantasy game, they cannot imagine a happy home life, but only different manifestations of their current unhappiness.

> You told them! OOOOHHHH! OH, no, no, no, no! You couldn't have told them...

Related Characters: Honey (speaker), George, Nick, Martha

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

George has played a game he calls "Get the Guests," in which he has told the other characters a thinly-veiled version of the story Nick confessed of Honey's hysterical pregnancy. Having realized that Nick must have told George her secret, Honey cries out in horror, exclaiming "you couldn't have told them." Honey's non-verbal cries of "OOOOHHHH!" in this passage convey her drunken and emotional state and make her seem childish. (This impression is emphasized by the fact that George has told the story like a children's tale, with Honey shown as a mouse who "puffs up.") Unlike the three other characters, who are all accustomed to taking part in intellectual rapport, Honey is characterized as earnest and unintelligent; she is not able to understand the ironic and absurdist ways in which George and Martha speak and interprets their words literally.

This sense of earnestness translates to her relationship with Nick, whom she can't believe has betrayed her by telling George about her false pregnancy. Nick has repeatedly told George that he finds George and Martha's fighting and open discussion of their marital problems uncomfortable and inappropriate; however, at this moment it is revealed that Nick has done the same thing to Honey. This suggests that George and Martha are having a corrupting influence on the younger couple. At the same time, the fact that Nick and Honey's marriage seems to unravel so easily implies that the issues of dishonesty, secrecy, and betrayal plague all marriages, rather than being unique to George and Martha's exceptionally tumultuous relationship.

> I'm loud, and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in this house because somebody's got to, but I am *not* a monster. I am *not*.

Related Characters: Martha (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

Honey has left the room to be sick again after the game of "Get the Guests," and Nick has followed her. Martha at first seemed somewhat impressed by her husband's bold behavior, but quickly begins insulting him, and the two have once again descended into cruel bickering. George calls Martha a monster, and she responds by insisting that although she's "vulgar" and domineering, she is not a monster. This exchange highlights the complexities in

Martha and George's dynamic. At the beginning of the play, Martha appears to be the more harsh and impolite of the pair; she incessantly pressures the other characters to drink and disparages and humiliates George. In this passage, she claims to "wear the pants in this house because somebody's got to," a statement that suggests her behavior is a direct result of George's failure to live up to the masculine ideal of a confident, assertive husband.

However, over the course of the play it begins to seem like George is far more cold-hearted than his wife. While he and Martha both berate each other, it is George who then chooses to torment their guests. The climax of the play comes in the form of George telling Martha their imaginary son is dead, an act that clearly has a devastating effect on her. At this point, Martha's vulnerability is exposed, and it becomes difficult for the audience to see her as a "monster." George, on the other hand, appears to have abandoned all sense of social decency and morality, suggesting that he may be the true "monster" of the pair.

Act 3 Quotes

❝ I cry all the time too, Daddy. I cry allllll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And George cries all the time, too.

Related Characters: Martha (speaker), George

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning Act 3, Martha is alone onstage, drunkenly talking to herself and conducting imaginary conversations with George and her father. She confesses to her father that she and George both "cry all the time," but says that she cries "deep inside, so no one can see me." This passage furthers the revelation of a more vulnerable side of Martha. Her confession "I cry all the time too, Daddy" makes her sound like a young child. This emphasizes the notion that Martha has not been able to move beyond the position of a child, partly because she has not had any children herself. The affectionate term "Daddy," meanwhile, highlights her closeness and loyalty to her father, an attachment that seems to come at the expensive of her relationship with George.

This passage also evokes the themes of appearances and secrecy. Although Martha is brash on the surface, here we realize that internally she feels weak and sad. Her statement that she cries "deep inside" shows that Martha represses her feelings beneath a confident, careless exterior. Although George and Martha exhibit disdain for the social codes that require people to mask their true feelings beneath civility, this scene reveals that they are equally guilty of suppressing their emotions—they just do so under a cloak of flamboyant vulgarity rather than restrained politeness.

❝ George who is out somewhere there in the dark...George who is good to me, and whom I revile; who understands me, and whom I push off.

Related Characters: Martha (speaker), George

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Nick has entered the room; it seems that he and Martha have had a sexual encounter of some kind, but it is unclear exactly what happened. Martha has confessed that her extramarital affairs feel pointless and that George is the only man who has ever made her happy. She says George "is good to me" and understands her, but admits that she responds by pushing him away. Having been exposed to Martha's personal vulnerability, the audience now gains insight into a different side of her relationship with George. Perhaps it is not the case that they simply hate each other, but that their feelings are complicated by mutual insecurity, resentment, and self-sabotage.

Martha's words here seem to suggest that something about George's love for her *causes* her to rebuff him. Note that she does not say "who understands me, *but* whom I push off" but rather "*and* whom I push off." The use of the word "and" indicates that perhaps because George understands her so well, Martha cannot stand to be around him. This is emphasized by the fact that their relationship seems to be built on trading insults; indeed, George and Martha are able to insult each other so effectively precisely because they know one another so well.

> I'M RUNNING THE SHOW! (To MARTHA) Sweetheart, I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you...for us, of course. Some rather sad news.

Related Characters: George (speaker), Martha

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

George and Martha have been telling Nick and Honey about their son, taking turns to share facts about his life. Martha has explained that the boy is now off at college, and she seems to want to drop the topic, but despite his wife's protests, George insists they continue. In this passage, he announces that he's "running the show," before turning to Martha to tell her that he has bad news.George's declaration that he is "running the show" implies that he has decided to disprove Martha's claims that he is not assertive or domineering enough. It is also a meta-dramatic reference to the fact that this is a play filled with moments when the characters engage in theatrical behavior, performing in an exaggerated, flamboyant manner and reciting stories as if the other characters are an audience.

The "bad news"George references is his invented story that he has received a telegram telling him that their son is dead. George's decision to include this twist in his and Martha's "game" of telling stories about their imaginary son is the play's climactic act of cruelty. The fact that he first says "bad news for you" before correcting himself to "for us, of course" shows that he is deliberately aiming to hurt Martha; it also suggests that she is more emotionally invested in their game of speaking about their imaginary son than George is.

> I FORGET! Sometimes...sometimes when it's night, when it's late, and...and everybody else is...talking...I forget and I...want to mention him...but I...HOLD ON...I hold on...but I've wanted to...so often...oh, George, you've *pushed* it...there was no need....there was not need for *this*. I *men*tioned him...all right...but you didn't have to push it over the EDGE. You didn't have to...kill him.

Related Characters: Martha (speaker), George

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

George has finished telling the story of receiving the news that his and Martha's imaginary son is dead. Honey, still not aware that the son in question is not real, has exclaimed in horror, and despite the fact that she knows the story is all an elaborate game, Martha also becomes hysterically upset. She says that sometimes she "forgets" and almost mentions their son in front of other people, and admits that she mentioned him in front of Nick and Honey earlier (thereby breaking the rules of the game), but insists that George took it too far. This is the climax of Martha's vulnerability, a moment when––in contrast to her usual behavior––she becomes openly upset in front of the others, breaking "character" from the tough, flamboyant persona who mercilessly hurls insults at her husband.

On one level, it seems clear that George's actions were deliberate, and that he leveraged Martha's emotional investment in their imaginary son against her. At this point in the play, George certainly appears to be the crueler of the two. On the other hand, it is perhaps rather arbitrary for Martha to decide that this act has "push[ed] it over the edge," given that she and George spend the entire play taunting and tormenting each other. Either way, it is clear that both feel betrayed and perhaps on some level even frightened of one another, a fact that foreshadows the play's ending, when Martha admits she is afraid of Virginia Woolf.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The play opens in the dark, and a crash is heard at the front door, followed by Martha's laughter. Martha enters through the front door, George following behind her. Martha begins to curse, and George tries to silence her, reminding her that it's two o'clock in the morning. She continues to provoke him, reciting a Bette Davis line—"What a dump"—and asking him what movie it's from. He doesn't remember but she persists on asking him the name of the Bette Davis movie. George suggests that the movie is *Chicago*, which Martha sharply rejects.

This opening exchange establishes the antagonistic character of Martha and George's marriage. Note also that George and Martha share the names of the first "first couple" of the United States—George and Martha Washington—both highlighting how non-perfect their marriage is compared to the Washington's and implying a connection between the state of George and Martha's marriage and the state of the United States at the time in which the play is set.

Martha goes on to describe the movie, but George pleads that he's tired from her father's "Saturday night orgy." Martha nags him for doing nothing but sitting around and talking; George accuses her of going around and "braying" at everybody.

Their bickering evolves, becoming more directly critical, and from George's not-so-nice reference to Martha's father it seems that her father plays a role in their bickering.

Martha orders George to make her a **drink** and informs him that they have guests coming over, but can't remember their guests' names. She describes that the male guest is from the math department, and that his wife is mousey. She explains that she's invited them over because her father wants George and Martha to be nice to them.

Martha appears to be an obedient daughter and a demanding wife. The couple's social lives are intertwined with their professional lives; they must have certain guests over because of Martha's father's preferences.

George and Martha continue to bicker—George accuses her of springing things on him like this, and Martha accuses George of sulking. She begins to sing, "Who's afraid of **Virginia Woolf**? Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf…," and asks George if he didn't think that was funny. He responds that he thought it was alright, and Martha tells him that he makes her puke.

Martha acts immaturely and clearly drunkenly, singing a children's tune with changed lyrics. George does not indulge Martha's childish antics.

They continue on in this vein, Martha calling George a "simp" and "phrasemaker", and George comparing Martha to a cocker spaniel when she chews her ice cubes. George reminds Martha that he's six years younger than her; she retorts that he's balding. She asks him to kiss her but he denies her request out of fear of growing too sexually excited before their guests come over. Martha asks, in a **childish voice**, for another drink.

The couple's arguing takes on a somewhat lighter tone, and it's clear that this mode of dispute is commonplace and, to a degree, comfortable between them. But that comfort seems one of long exposure; there is still deep bitterness that the bickering is expressing. There is also a degree of sexual excitement in the "battle" for them.

The front doorbell interrupts their antagonistic banter, George very reluctantly goes to answer it as he provokes Martha. At the very moment that he opens up the door, she yells at him, "Fuck you!," such that their guests, Nick and Honey, hear it. Nick appears uncomfortable and proposes that he and his wife shouldn't have come. George and Martha brush off their concern and invite them to come in and throw their stuff down anywhere. Honey giggles a little, and George mocks her.

Nick and Honey serve, initially, as external observers and a point of contrast for the marriage between Martha and George. Note also that Nick is named after the Soviet Premier of the time—Nikita Khruschev—and so the play, with its swings in power, its combination of destructive antagonism and seduction between the couples, comes to serve as a metaphor for the Cold War betwee the US and the USSR.

Nick notices an abstract painting and inquires about the artist. George begins to explain that it was made by a Greek man that Martha attacked one night, when Honey interrupts him, uncomfortable with the story. Nick starts off saying, "It's got a…" and George pre-emptively mocks the pretentious language that people use to talk about art, and offers that Nick was going to say something about the painting's "quiet intensity."

The academic setting of the play and the intellectual careers of George and Nick set the stage for a high likelihood of pretentious conversation. George displays his familiarity with this pretentious milieu in pre-empting Nick's potentially pompous contributions. Honey is established as somewhat nicer and less quick than the other characters.

George prepares **drinks** for the crew—brandy for Honey, bourbon for Nick, and (jokingly) rubbing alcohol for Martha. George recounts that when he was first dating Martha, she would order the "damnedest" things, like brandy Alexanders and flaming punch bowls. Martha facetiously praises George for his "Dylan Thomas-y quality," and George accuses her of being vulgar.

This is the first round of many rounds of drinks that will be consumed throughout the night. As more alcohol is consumed, more secrets will be told. Martha is always mocking George for not being successful, here comparing him to the famous poet Dylan Thomas based on his drinking rather than his work.

Martha again begins singing "Who's Afraid of **Virginia Woolf**," and this time Honey joins in. They begin to discuss the night's party, and Honey praises Martha's father as marvelous. George tries to condition Honey's compliment, but Nick insists that he has found the parties very helpful in getting introduced to the college. George confides to Nick that there are easier things in the world than being married to the daughter of your university's president. Martha retorts that it should rather be an extraordinary opportunity. Martha and Honey excuse themselves to go to the restroom. George tells Nick that he's heard he's in the math department, but Nick corrects him that he's not, and then George continues to interrogate him about what motivated him to become a teacher.

Again professional and personal lives merge: George dislikes Martha's father for certain personal and professional reasons that will be explained later. Nick finds her father helpful for professional reasons. Martha, meanwhile, is loyal to him because he is her father, but also because her position at the university (and therefore in the world) depends on her father's role and power.

Nick finally snaps back at George, tired of his antics. Nick explains that he doesn't like to become involved in other people's affairs, and is uncomfortable around George and Martha's marital disputes. George comforts him by saying he'll get over that squeamishness, because the college is so small and the "faculty sport" is "musical beds."

Nick expresses discomfort at the level of openness and lack of privacy that has already begun to characterize the evening. George follows up Nick's avowal of discomfort with a comment that is sure to make Nick even more uncomfortable, and which also suggests that the issues so evident in George and Martha's marriage are at play in most of the marriages at the college.

When George asks, Nick informs him that he is twenty-seven years old, and George responds that he himself is forty-something, and then expresses his pride in not having a paunch. He asks Nick how much he weighs, and then how much is wife weighs. Nick does not respond.

In asking after private details of Nick's life, including his weight, George acts crudely and impolitely, not abiding by the common decorum and conventions of civil society. Nick's refusal to respond deepens the contrast between him and George.

After the second time that George insists that Nick is in Math, Nick corrects him that he is in the Biology department. It suddenly occurs to George that Nick is the professor who is working, in genetic biology, to make "everyone the same, rearranging the chromozones." Nick tries to correct George's mistaken notions about his work in genetics, but George continues to express his misgivings. George tells Nick that he used to run the History Department during the war, and then remarks to Nick that his wife doesn't really have any hips. George asks Nick if he has any kids. Nick says no, then asks George the same question, to which George responds, "that's for me to know and you to find out."

George's anxiety about Nick's research in genetic biology might be seen as a reflection of other anxieties of the period in which the play was written, related to the Cold War and space travel, about the expansion of human control and the growing power of technology over nature. Again George speaks crudely to Nick about his wife and is suspiciously vague about his children or lack thereof.

George asks if Nick is going to be happy in New Carthage, given that the college isn't MIT or Oxford. He tells Nick that Martha's father expects his staff to grow old at the college. George calls to his wife. Honey tells the men that Martha is changing her dress, and then tells George that she's just heard about his son who is turning twenty-one the next day. George seems surprised and upset by the news that Martha has told Honey about him.

George continues to provoke Nick and paint the college in an unflattering light. George's surprise at the news that Honey has been told about their child is, as yet, unexplained but will become important later in the play.

George lets Honey and Nick know that Martha is according them an honor by changing her dress, and characterizes her as the "right ball" of her father. Nick requests that George not use such language around his wife. Martha enters looking more comfortable and more voluptuous. Martha praises Nick for his remarkable accomplishment, which she has just learned about, of having completed his Master's degree at the age of nineteen. George is impressed, and expresses some jealousy.

Martha appears to be putting on a show for the guests—and presumably for Nick in particular—by changing into a more revealing dress. Nick is introduced as inordinately ambitious and accomplished, thus providing a point of contrast for George, who is comparatively unambitious.

Martha insults George, calling him an "old bog" in the History Department, but George coolly ignores her comments. Martha inquires if Nick used to play football, and he answers that he did but that he was more skilled at boxing, and was intercollegiate state light heavyweight champion. Martha congratulates him on his still "pretty good body." George chastises Martha for being obscene.

Martha continues to appear, and increasingly so, to be flirting with Nick.

Martha encourages George to tell their guests about a boxing match they once had together, but he insists that she tell it instead. Martha explains that her father had become enthusiastic about the idea of exercise during the war and had invited George over to box with him, and Martha joined and put on some gloves herself and snuck up behind George and round housed him right in the jaw.

The story of George and Martha's boxing match makes sense given the contention we have witnessed in their relationship to this point, but is more literal than the verbal sparring they have been engaged in since the play's beginning. That Martha is the more aggressive and the victor also fits with their general dynamic.

George comes from behind Martha and aims a short-barreled shotgun at her head. Honey screams when George pulls the trigger, to the blossoming of a Chinese parasol from the gun's barrel. They all laugh out of great relief.

George's false shooting of Martha provides a great sense of relief from all of the tension that has so far built up. It also presses our expectations of what kind of action and surprise seems plausible in the context of this play.

Martha asks her husband for a kiss and he dismisses her but she insists and then places his hand on her breast. Nick retreats to the bathroom. Martha and George argue about whether Nick is in the biology or math department, and Honey shyly tells them it's the former. Martha reasons that Biology is better for Nick, because it's less "abstruse"; George corrects her, "abstract," but she insists that she meant what she said. When Nick returns, Martha recommences a conversation about Nick's experimentation in genetic biology. George explains that Nick is working on a system that could alter chromosomes, so as to make a race of men "superb and sublime." Martha and Honey are impressed and excited, but George tries to get them to understand that everyone will be the same, and that millions of sperm tubes will have to be cut.

Martha, like her husband, insists on behaving inappropriately in front of their guests. The scene is characterized by only slightly muted conflict and competitiveness, stemming it seems from both men's desire to be more attractive to Martha. There is also at play a conflict between the humanities and science: both in George's contention that Nick's work will result in both sameness and death, and in Martha's contention that Nick needs a field that is less "abstruse" (i.e. hard to understand). When Nick tries to correct her, insisting that she means "abstract", he is arguing that his field is more practical than others. But Martha refuses his correction, which is both a refusal of his male authority and a seeming agreement with George that the humanities are more messy and complicated.

Nick tries to cut George off, displeased with his lecture, but George continues his harangue about the consequences of the chromosomal adjustments—loss of liberty, loss of music and painting, et cetera. Nick proudly asserts that he is going to be the wave of the future.

Nick and George divide along the lines of their academic disciplines: Nick cares solely about the importance of progress and invention, as informed by his work in biology, while George cares more about the cultural vigor of a society, as informed by his work in history.

Honey changes the subject by asking when George and Martha's son is coming home. Martha says never mind, and George makes Martha answer for both of them, given that she was the one to "bring *him* up." She yells that she doesn't want to talk about it. George and Martha continue to bicker and become antagonistic with one another. Martha claims that George's problem about their son is that he's not sure it's his own kid, and George becomes very serious and then insists that Martha is lying and that he is absolutely sure of his "chromosomological partnership" in the creation of their son.

Martha and George clearly have some secret conflict regarding their son—which will become clear over the course of the play—and they use their son to express their mutual antagonism.

Martha and George dispute the color of their son's eyes. George adds that Martha's father has tiny red eyes and is, in other ways as well, like a white mouse. He leaves to get some more **alcohol**. Martha begins to explain to Honey and Nick why her husband so hates her father, and details her adolescent life: she had gotten married at her academy to the man who mowed the lawn, but soon after left school and retired to the college with her father. Her father, she says, had anticipated grooming someone to take over after he retired from the presidency.

Again Martha and George use their son as a focus of disagreement. In her story, which may or may not be entirely true, Martha still reveals, though she does not focus on it, that she never really had a life of her own, and moved in with her father as soon as she left school. Further, it's clear that her father used her as a kind of "alliance building tool", offering her in marriage to the person he thought he could groom as his successor.

Martha is just beginning to describe George's entrance onto the college scene, when George returns to the parlor. Martha narrates that she fell for George when he came into the History department, and that their relationship was practical, too. George tries to stop her from talking about the business side of their courtship. Martha continues on in spite of his resistance: George was expected to take over the History Dept. and then the college, but then Martha's dad watched for a couple of years and began to doubt George's capacity for aggressiveness and power.

The reason for George and Martha's antagonistic relationship grows clearer as Martha details the practical circumstances for their marriage. At this point, the bickering that has been developed as customary for the couple throughout develops into a more serious marital conflict. George's lack of ambition is also revealed as a product of being discarded and stifled by Martha's father.

George breaks a bottle against the portable bar and nearly cries, but Martha does not relent, and tells George she hopes the bottle was empty because he wouldn't want to waste good liquor on an Associate Professor's salary. She criticizes him as "somebody without the *guts* to make anybody proud of him." George loudly sings "Who's Afraid of **Virginia Woolf**," and then Honey joins in before announcing that she's going to be sick and running offstage. Nick and Martha run after Honey, leaving George alone on the stage.

Martha is unrelentingly harsh with George, but her story of her and George's past reveals the source of her anger: her own power and position is dependent on George's success, and he's stopped having success. She was dependent on her father and now is dependent on George. His failure is her failure. George retreats into the nonsense children's song Martha made up.

ACT 2

Nick rejoins George, and Nick explains that his wife is frail and shouldn't drink, and then tells George that Martha is in the kitchen making coffee. He reiterates that he doesn't like to get involved in other people's affairs. George mimics him, and then asks if Nick thinks *he* enjoys Martha's ridiculing. Nick remarks that he doesn't see why George has to subject other people to it as well.

It's unclear who is responsible for creating the tension and discomfort of the evening. Nick tries to blame George, but George reasons that he is being particularly targeted by his ridiculing wife. Note also how Nick and Honey have a "standard" (at the time) husband and wife relationship—he's strong; she's frail—that stands in contrast to George and Martha's.

George asks Nick about his wife's sickness, which Nick describes as occurring fairly frequently. This leads Nick to reveal that he married Honey because of a **hysterical pregnancy**: he thought she was pregnant, but she turned out not to be. The two husbands laugh together.

The tables turn as Nick now reveals a secret about his and his wife's life together, after Martha and George have revealed so much about their own: there was no love in Nick or Honey's marriage either. It's funny, by the way, that a biologist like Nick was fooled by a hysterical pregnancy, and suggests that biology may not have all the answers about humans and their interactions.

George tells a story from his adolescence: when he was in prep school, during Prohibition, he and his friends would go into New York to listen to jazz and drink booze. One night, he says, one of the boys in the group who had accidentally killed his mother with a shotgun some years before, ordered "bergin and water." After some time, everyone in the gin mill had heard of the boy's mistaken order and began ordering "bergin" for themselves. At Nick's prying, George tells what happened to the boy: the next summer, while driving with his learner's permit and his father next to him, he swerved to avoid a porcupine and hit a tree, and ended up killing his father. He was put into an asylum.

George's story begins in an amusing and light tone, and quickly becomes sinister and tragic. This progress, from innocuously amusing to dark and difficult, mirrors the development of the play. The story of the son who accidentally kills both of his parents—who orphans himself—seems connected to the subject of George and Martha's own son, somehow, though how is not clear at this point.

George and Nick continue to chat—Nick asks if George has any daughters, and George responds that he only has the one son, whom he calls a "beanbag." He tells Nick that he would like to set him straight about something his wife said. Martha interrupts and announces that she and Honey are drinking coffee. George and Martha go back and forth, calling each other by different French insults.

Note how Martha interrupts and demands they switch from alcohol to coffee—from drunk to sobering up—just as George seems about to reveal something about his son. Martha doesn't want that subject discussed. George and Martha's French insults exemplify the sophistication of their relationship, even in their petty bickering.

George begins in again on Nick's marriage, and guesses that, in addition to the **hysterical pregnancy**, Honey has money. Nick lets on that George's guess is correct, but adds that he and Honey grew up together. He admits that there was never any particular passion between them. The men refill their glasses, and George asks again about Honey's money, explaining that he is interested "by the pragmatic accommodation by which you wave-of-the-future boys are going to take over." George reciprocates by telling Nick that Martha's money comes from Martha's father's very rich second wife.

Nick and Honey at first stood as ideal contrasts to George and Martha. But now they are revealed as just more repressed, hiding their secrets behind a façade of propriety. Nick married to avoid scandal and for money. And though Nick sees himself as someone who will usher in a new future, The revelation about Martha's father's money suggests Nick is no different from those careerists of the past.

George explains his interest in Nick by identifying him as a threat. Nick plays along and jokingly describes his sneaky plans for taking over the college. George informs Nick that the best way to gain power is through the faculty wives. Nick infers that he better mount Martha, then, and he and George exchange surprise at the apparent seriousness of the suggestion.

Nick and George now make explicit both their rivalry—that both seek power at the college—and the implicit attraction that has been developing between Nick and Martha throughout the evening. Nick in particular seems taken aback by this—mostly by the realization that he might actually be attracted to Martha, and that the attraction might be because she could help his career.

Martha returns, with a very drunken Honey in tow. Martha tells George to apologize to Honey for making her throw up, but Honey interjects that she often gets sick, though the doctors say there's nothing wrong with her. Martha begins to tell Nick and Honey that their son also used to throw up all the time, whenever he saw George. George retorts that the real reason their son got sick was because Martha would drunkenly "fiddle at him." They continue, increasingly aggressively, to dispute the causes of their son's sickness.

This kind of dynamic has become very common between Martha and George—their arguing about something regarding their son, and each accusing the other for their son's problems.

Martha mentions another embarrassing disappointment of George's—that he tried to publish a book, but was prevented by Martha's father. Honey requests some music for dancing, and George puts on Beethoven's seventh symphony. Honey gets up and dances by herself, and Martha criticizes the choice of music. George calls Honey "angel tits" and ask if she'll dance with him. Nick takes offense at this epithet. When a jazzy slow tune begins to play, Martha grabs Nick and begins dancing with him. They dance closely, and then further apart, but still undulating as though they were pressed together.

Martha's continued attack of George's failures (and the humbling of George by her father) is here directly connected to her more aggressive flirtation with Nick. That Nick takes offense at George's sexual comment to Honey further reveals Nick's hypocrisy—he cares about surface propriety, but at the same time is dancing in a sexual way with George's wife.

Martha discloses more of George's embarrassing history: he wrote a novel, but when her father read the novel he was very shocked to find that it was all about a naughty boy child who killed his mother and father. Martha's father forbade him from publishing the book. George demands that Martha to stop. When she continues, he rips the record off of the phonograph. She still continues. She reveals that George, after Martha's father's threat, threw the book into the fireplace.

The book that George wrote but did not publish appears to have recounted the very story that he told to Nick earlier on in the night, which suggests that the story may have been closer to George's own life than he had suggested. Martha paints George as cowardly for having thrown the book into the fireplace after her father's disapproval, and there is a suggestion that she is as angry at George for failing to stand up to her father as she is at his failure to advance (and perhaps those things are connected).

George yells at Martha that he will kill her and grabs her by the throat. Nick intervenes, and throws George onto the floor. George asks what other games they cam play now that they've exhausted "Humiliate the Host," and proposes "Hump the Hostess." Nick appears frightened. Finally George decides they should play a round of "Get the Guests." George begins to describe what he claims is his second book. The narrative that he recounts is the very story that Nick told him about his marriage to Honey. He begins by describing Nick's present situation, and then leading into a flashback to "How They Got Married." When Nick recognizes the story, he tries to keep George from continuing.

The scene becomes more direct and violent when George threatens Martha, thus necessitating Nick's intervention (pushing Nick into the traditional role of the "chivalrous" man). Yet Nick is unable to deal with the way that George makes everything explicit: Nick seems like he would be fine with actually "Humping the Hostess," but he can't handle it being talked about openly. Notice also how George's dexterity with language allows him to turn the tables and reclaim power.

By the end of the story, when George is describing how "the Mouse" (his name for Honey) got all puffed up, Honey stands up and declares that she doesn't like what's going on. She becomes hysterical as George describes how the Mouse's "puff went away," and then turns to her husband and yells at him, "You told them!" Distraught, she grabs at her belly. George abruptly declares, "And that's how you play Get the Guests." Honey announces that she's going to be sick and runs out of the room. Nick promises that he'll make George regret what he's done as he leaves to care for his wife.

Honey, who has appeared easy-going throughout the evening abruptly becomes distraught when she hears George tell the story of her hysterical pregnancy. George has regained power, here. At the same time, in doing so he has become much a less sympathetic character. To regain power he had to become the one causing pain to someone even weaker than he was.

Martha congratulates George for his performance, judging it to be the most life he's shown in a while, but then calls him a bastard. George reminds Martha that she had behaved rather viciously herself. She retorts that *he* can stand it but their guests shouldn't have to. George warns Martha that she'll wish she had never mentioned their son. Martha criticizes George for talking as though he were writing one of his "stupid papers". George calls her "spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded."

Martha distinguishes between what George has just done and what she has been doing throughout the course of the evening: while she was merely provoking George in their customary marital bickering, George directly injured their guests, whom they invited over in order to be nice to them. George seems not to accept this line of reasoning.

Nick reenters, leaving his wife on the bathroom floor, and apologizes for Honey's behavior. George leaves with a bucket to get ice for Honey. When George has gone, Martha asks Nick for a cigarette, calls him lover, and slips her hand between his legs. She asks him for a kiss, and Nick reasons that his wife won't know the difference. In the middle of their kissing, George enters and watches for a moment before leaving, unnoticed. Nick puts his hand inside of Martha's dress, but Martha tells him to take it easy.

Nick and Martha's romantic tension is finally realized when they kiss at last. Though Martha initially encourages it, she has to stop Nick from taking it further. When George quietly observes what is happening but does not intervene is one of the most affecting moments of the play, communicating a deep sadness on his part.

George sings "Who's Afraid of **Virginia Woolf**," and then returns with the ice bucket and says some unintelligible remark to Nick, which Nick brushes off. George offers drinks to Nick and Martha and says that he saw Honey lying on the bathroom floor sucking her thumb, curled up "like a fetus."

This scene contains a fair degree of dramatic irony, insofar as the play's audience knows that George has witnessed Nick and Martha's kiss, but Nick and Martha do not. Honey, meanwhile, is described as being even younger than a child—she is compared to an unborn baby.

George says that he's going to go read a book, because he always reads around four o'clock. Martha corrects him that he always reads at four pm, not am, but he absorbs himself nonetheless in his book. She tells George that she and Nick will just amuse themselves. George distractedly endorses her plan. When she tells her husband that she is necking with one of the guests, George tells her "good" and encourages her to go right on. Martha looks upset; she tries to challenge George, but he remains unfazed. George encourages Nick to throw Martha over his shoulder.

George aggravates both Martha and Nick by pretending not to care that they are kissing. His tactic is sly and counterintuitive: he infuriates them more by appearing unfazed and thus undermining what they thought was a thrilling transgression or a taking of power. Martha's upset suggests that her actions are made to provoke George—are dependent on George—and that what she wants from him is a response.

Martha calls George a motherfucker, and after kissing Nick, instructs him to wait for her in the kitchen. When Nick has exited, Martha addresses George, threatening to take Nick upstairs. George, now upset, responds, "SO WHAT, MARTHA?" She tells her husband that she'll make him sorry he made her want to marry him, and then leaves to join Nick. George reads aloud a quote about the fall of the west, "burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events." From offstage, Martha's laughter and the crashing of dishes can be heard. George throws his book at the chimes and mutters aloud, "You're going to regret this, Martha."

After Martha and Nick leave, George drops his cover of not caring about their flirtation. He abandons his calm when he hears Martha and Nick in the kitchen and throws a book at the wind chimes. The quote in the book again connects the failures in George and Martha's marriage to fears of impending decline in the US democracy and Western civilization.

ACT 3

Martha enters the room and begins to ramble alone on the stage, echoing pieces of conversation from the previous scene, and searching for George. She makes herself a drink, whines about her abandonment, and then performs an imaginary exchange between herself and George, with George politely promising her that he would do anything for her. She yells "Hump the Hostess!," laughs, and then falls into a chair. She begins imaginarily addressing her father— "You cry all the time, don't you, Daddy?... I cry all the time too, Daddy"—and then yells that she'll give George and the guests five counts to come out from where they're hiding. She talks about freezing her tears and putting them into her drinks, and then jiggles the ice in her glass repeatedly, giggling all the while and screaming "CLINK!"

Martha is drunk, but appears moreover to be processing difficult aspects of her life—her relationship with her father and with George, her sadness and tears. Her soliloquy marks a point of supreme unraveling. At the same time, her soliloquy reveals that her father—who has been upheld as a kind of ideal powerful man throughout the play—cries all the time. The appearance of power always seems to be hollow in the play, a posturing meant to hide an inner emptiness or sadness.

Nick enters the room and comments that Martha, too, has gone crazy. He reports that when he came back downstairs, his wife went into the bathroom with a liquor bottle and winked at him, and is now lying on the bathroom floor and peeling the label off of the bottle.

Honey's behavior in the bathroom confirms that the night has reached a height of chaos and unraveling, and has left both of the women in childlike states.

Nick asks where George is and Martha responds that he's vanished. Martha, with great affection, and in a brogue enunciates, "'tis the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads," and then tells Nick he's no better than anyone else. She adds that he's certainly "a flop in some departments." Nick apologizes for disappointing her, but Martha corrects that she wasn't disappointed, and that his potential is fine but his performance was lacking.

Martha's affected speech echoes the lofty passage that George read aloud at the end of the last act; this mirroring reminds us of the intimacy of George and Martha, and the ways in which their proximity to the academy affects their processing of emotions and relationships. Nick and Martha appear to speak in a veiled fashion about their recent sexual encounter; Albee leaves it unclear exactly what happened.

Martha goes on a rant about all of her pointless infidelities, and concludes by asserting that there's only one man in her life that has ever made her happy—George. Nick is incredulous, but Martha gives an elegant, if contradictory, defense of her love: "George who is good to me, and whom I revile; who understands me, and whom I push off..."

Martha confirms that the bickering that she and George endlessly engage each other in is simply part of their relationship, and that she only loves him more because of it.

Nick announces that he doesn't think George has an intact vertebra. Martha challenges him, and criticizes his microscopic vision—claiming that he has the ability to see everything but the mind. They go back and forth antagonistically like this until the door chimes ring out and Martha demands that Nick open the door, accusing him of careerist ambitions in trying to seduce her.

While usually Martha is engaging George in an antagonistic dispute, here she engages Nick, standing up for her husband when Nick tries to criticize him. Martha's criticism that Nick can't "see the mind" is also a criticism of his scientific field in contrast to George's field of the humanities.

When Nick finally opens the door, he comes face to face with a bunch of snapdragons, hiding George behind them. George enters, naming the flowers as "flores para los muertos," and calling Nick "Sonny." George offers the flowers to Martha in a manic manner, who receives them as a wedding bouquet. Nick tries to excuse himself, but the couple will not let him go.

George's announcement that he has brought "flores para los muertos" echoes the same line in A Streetcar Named Desire, which is spoken by a Mexican vendor and which reawakens Blanche's memories of a significant death. The line thus draws a comparison with a similarly melodramatic play that focuses on themes of sex, reality, and power, and introduces the theme of death.

George hands Nick the snapdragons and instructs him to put them in gin, but Nick drops them at his feet. George describes that he picked them for their son's birthday the next day. He and Martha dispute whether or not there was a moon in the sky that could have provided enough light for him to pick snapdragons, and then George begins to tell a story about a time that the moon went down and then came up again, when he was sailing past Majorca with his parents. Nick prods if this was after George killed his parents, and George, defiantly, says "Maybe." George shakes the snapdragons in front of Nick's face and Martha continues to doubt that George was ever in the Mediterranean. She and George trade remarks on the nature of "truth and illusion." George refers to Nick as a houseboy and suspects him of having "made it in the sack" with Martha. George begins yelling "here we go round the mulberry bush" and then throws snapdragons at Martha, stem first. Nick tries to defend her but Martha tells him to leave George alone.

Nick dropping the flowers is a retaking of his initial aloof stance, a refusal to play whatever "game" George is now playing. Though by this point Nick has been revealed not as "good" in a way that George and Martha are not, but rather as hypocritical. Martha and George's seemingly senseless argument about whether there was enough light to pick the flowers is an argument over truth and illusion, and Martha's attempt to dictate the terms of the illusion to stop George from continuing on. When Nick accuses George of having been the protagonist of his own story about the boy who accidentally killed both of his parents, George is evasive—though looked at in a certain way, most kids "kill" their parents by outliving them. Now George is the aggressor, but Martha refuses Nick's "chivalrous" attempt to intervene.

George announces that they have one more game to play—"bringing up baby"—but insists that everyone be there for it. He makes hog calls toward the hallway to get Honey, but Nick goes and gets her himself. Martha tearfully begs George not to play any more games, but he assures her that she'll have a great time, and then pulls her hair and tells her that she can't just end the night whenever she's "got enough blood in [her] mouth."

George is completely in control now, both verbally and physically, and the physical violence he pretended earlier now is real. He has clearly plotted some kind of revenge. He continues to draw upon the thin line that separates a "game" from a more sinister form of interpersonal interaction.

Honey enters the room with Nick, hopping like a bunny. George begins to discuss their son, despite Martha's pleading. He prompts Martha to take over, and she reports that their son was born on a September night, twenty-one years ago. She and George play off of each other, each adding details about the birth and the son's **childhood**— the banana boat, school, summer camp, his breaking his arm. George begins to interject phrases in Latin.

In her drunkenness, Honey acts like a child, while George brings up his and Martha's own child again. What ensues is confusing and does not make immediate sense—it is unclear whether George and Martha are inventing details of their son's life, or are recounting facts.

Honey suddenly exclaims that she wants a **child**. Martha ignores her and continues, beginning in on the difficult parts of the marriage— how they fought each other—and the parenting. She concludes that their son is away at college and everything is fine, but George insists that she continue. Martha refuses. Martha accuses George of lying, but George continues. Martha says that their son was really ashamed of his father, and then George accuses her of lying. They go on like this, and then, together give simultaneous speeches—Martha in English, "the one person I have tried to protect, to raise above the mire of this vile, crushing marriage; the one light in all this hopeless…darkness…our SON"; and George in Latin, "Dum veneris judicare saeculum per ignem."

Even as Honey reveals the desire for a child, Martha and George fight over theirs. Again Martha tries to use the son to take swipes at George, but George now rejects her attempts, a new occurrence in the play. Martha's speech about trying to protect their child suggests a key idea of the play—that couple's perceive children as the innocence at the heart of a marriage, as the thing to protect. Yet even as Martha is saying this, George's Latin prayer refuses her the option: it is a prayer for the dead. George proves his erudition by delivering his speech in Latin.

Honey, hysterical, screams for them to stop it, telling them they "can't…do…this!" George tells Martha that he has some bad news about their son. He reports that while she was out of the room, a man from Western Union came and delivered a telegram informing them that their son had died, that he had been driving on a country road and swerved to avoid a porcupine and drove straight into a… Martha cuts him off before he can finish, furious. Nick mutters "Oh my God," and Martha continues yelling at George. George speaks coldly about the practical business of going to identify the body. Martha howls, and repeats to George that he cannot decide these things. When Martha asks what George did with the telegram, he claims that he ate it, and then explodes with laughter. Martha threatens George, but he responds that she knows the rules.

George begins to tell the story of their son's death as the story he had recounted earlier, of the boy who killed both of his parents. The similarity begins to suggest that he has made up the telegram about their son's death, and about the earlier incident about the boy killing his parents. Yet now the son, dead or nonexistent, and the orphaned boy are connected. George's practical language about identifying the body overcome Martha's efforts to continue the illusion of their child. The illegibility of this scene—the difficulty of understanding what's going on—attests to the strength of the private language that Martha and George share.

Martha and George go back and forth, her yelling "He is our **child**!" and him yelling "And I have killed him!" Nick quietly announces that he thinks he understands what's going on. George explains that Martha broke their rule by mentioning him to someone else—to Honey. Martha repeats that he didn't have to have him die, that that wasn't needed.

Nick realizes along with the reader that the son never existed, that the son was a fiction or illusion or game created by Martha and George to help them manage and hide from the disappointments of their life and marriage. Yet even as an illusion, the son held a kind of power. George killed only a illusion, but there is still a kind of real death that Martha must face.

George proposes that the party should come to an end. Nick asks George if he and Martha couldn't have any— and trails off. George and Martha admit that they couldn't. The guests say their goodbyes and leave. George sighs and cleans up a little. He asks politely after Martha—if she needs anything, if she's tired. She responds shortly, and then asks again if he had to do what he did. He affirms that he did. He promises it will be better, but Martha expresses her doubts. Then she begins, "I don't suppose, maybe, we could…" but George cuts her off.

Nick guesses correctly that George and Martha were incapable of having children, though Albee leaves even this not entirely explicit. Martha and George's invented child has thus taken the place of the real child they cannot have, similarly to the hysterical pregnancy that took the place of the pregnancy that Honey was incapable of having. And in the process the idea of love, of family, all become muddled and illusory, just as people's views of each other are illusory. George asserts that now that the illusion is gone, that the truth is out, things will get better.

George puts his hand on Martha's shoulder and begins singing, "Who's Afraid of **Virginia Woolf**." Martha answers that she is and George nods as the curtain falls.

George becomes tender with Martha, and Martha becomes more open with George, at the end of the night of debauchery and disclosure. The line, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," previously a childish lyric, is taken seriously for the first time as Martha applies it to herself and admits that she is afraid, afraid of what's hard, of herself and what's inside her mind (Virginia Woolf was a master of stream of consciousness writing, of the capturing of her character's thoughts and experiences on the page).

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