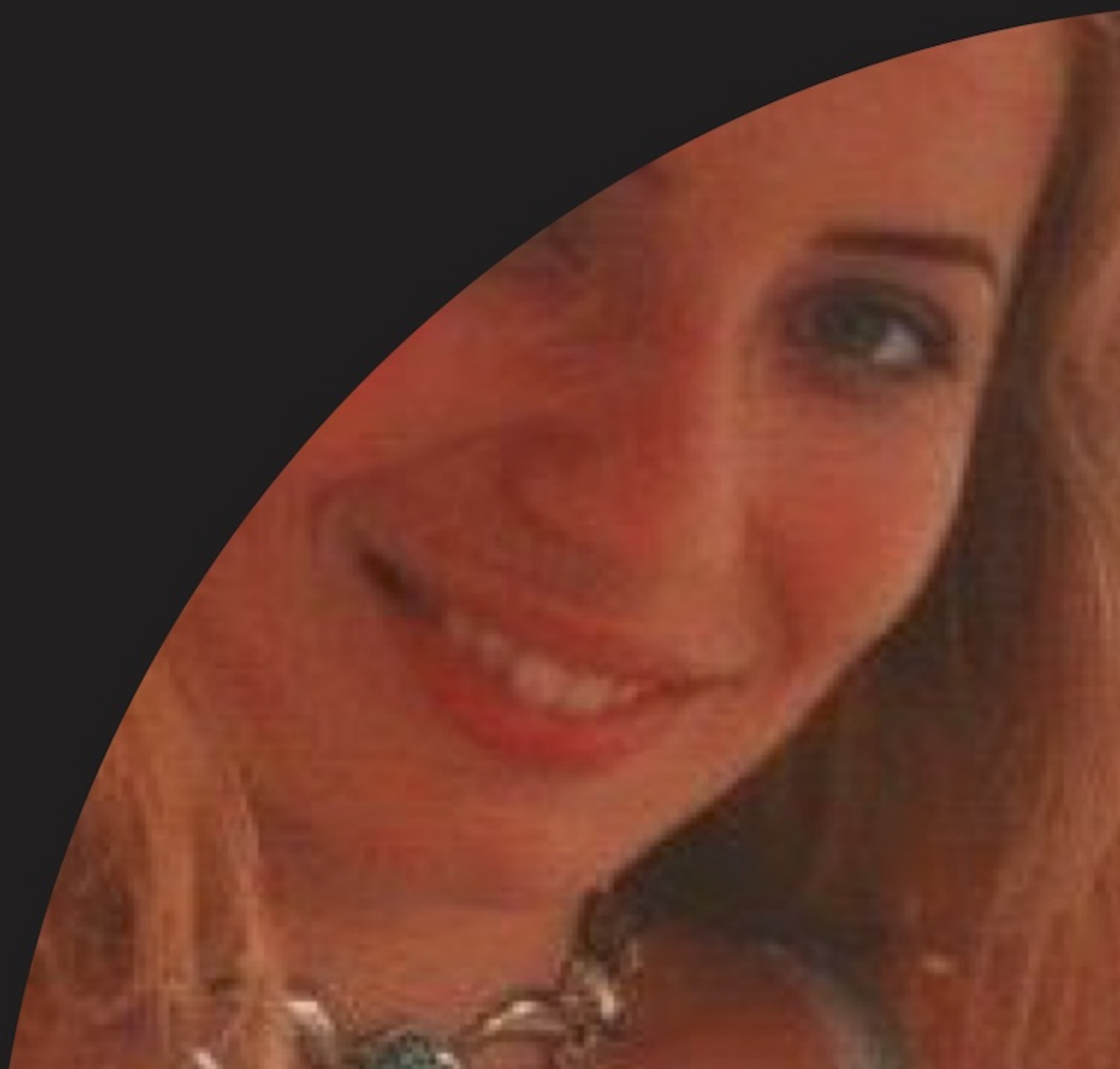


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**The Woman
Dancing Towards
Madness**



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A Comparative Analysis of Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf and Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire from the Perspectives of Woman's Identity

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1. Preface

When I first encountered with the dramas of Edward Albee I was deeply influenced by Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Consciously or rather semi-consciously I was looking for the assertions of the main characters regarding the notion of "time" and "being" in the midst of the omnipotence of the words related to ego and egotism. I was curious enough to endeavour to find the double-speak of the text with special appreciation towards the absurd utterances being pressed for time, comprising so much emotion.

George says: "You...you've been here quite a long time, haven't you?"
What? Oh...yes. Ever since I married What's-her-name. Uh, Martha. Even before that. Forever. Dashed hopes, and good intentions. Good, better, best, bested. How do you like that for a declension, young man?"

Time is in tight correlation with fear: George fears of loosing love, or the shadows of a marriage based upon a once true love, Martha fears of aging rapidly without proving herself or anyone that her existence is meaningful. Her "being" is out of her, does not belong to her character, plays a different part in the drama according to the heideggerian explanation.



(Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, p.4)

Martha's being is non-existent in philosophical way, she is never questioning it, nor anything else. Her being is twisted, is bare without questions, without hopes. The ruins of her being is radiant in her illusions, her illusionary existence, her nothingness, absurd dreams, confined love, and finally as truth unfolds, her illusionary son, which is the peak of the bare twentieth's century's hopeless nihilism symbolized in this female character.

We are to question her existence, her experience of time, experience of human emotions besides vulgar love, alcoholic passion and bare words we are to face the questions she is too weak to face in the given drama.

Does she have any real aim? Does she fulfil her husband's dreams? Can she become a woman by the end of the play, or is she totally deprived of all feminine features in the interludes she plays again and again?

These were my preliminary questions, the reason for choosing this play to analyze. I wanted to know the answers, wanted to peep behind the curtain Albee is moving up and down between the scenes and in the emotional holocaust of his characters. I wanted to be the first one who can precisely explain what happens with Martha in this play. Therefore, I chose her counterpart in an absolutely different play and investigated two female characters in the world struck by absurd forces and male dominance.

The main assertion of this work is the following: Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee though being different representatives of the twentieth century's American drama, still share some similarities concerning their presentation of human relationship, their characters, as well as some dramatic devices, for instance, the stylistic allusions to the tragic, which is considered the confinement of their female characters.

As for a closer understanding, my attempt is to shed light upon the psychological faces of the characters of two well-known dramas, Albee's *'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'* and Williams's *'A Streetcar Named Desire'*, with special respect to women characters, who can be interpreted as the most genuine synthesis of psychoanalysis and that of the theatre of the Absurd.

The basic hypothesis I prove is a symbolic annotation of women being tools in their own world driven by two major forces: absurdity and consequently a tendency to survive this absurd existence with illusions. However, they are in an even more complex situation, since the frustrating opposition between the outside world and their own private world. Hence, absurdity arises as a consequence of the discrepancy between the two. Women are obviously tragic characters, but their tragedies appear more subtly, than what we would expect after being familiar with Shakespearean and ancient Greek tragedies. The tragic root in Williams's dramas emanates from the incapability of women to reach happiness since they are confined with their surroundings or their past, and due to their sex they are offered no real chance to penetrate their walls.

In Albee this confinement is more violent. At first glance, Martha does not seem to be a victim, rather a vivid, active, sometimes even aggressive life force, which avails her of the opportunity to live as condensed as possible. However, she is also a tool in her own game. She is afraid of her destiny and she seems strongly ironic when she creates her imaginative child—an act which reveals her real tragedy: she uses the illusionary son as a substitute for her existential deficiencies. She cannot reach fulfilment either, being trapped in marriage without the hope of childbirth. Nevertheless, at the end of the drama she is offered the possibility to reorder her life according to truth. Hence, she might reach some kind of fulfilment if she wants to, whereas Blanche is deprived of a similar possibility.

Correspondingly, women psyche seems to be dancing 'on the edge of madness' by both Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee, due to the characters' emotional demise between the extremes of a genuine quest for happiness, the different ways and choices to find their existential answers, and at the same time the impossibility of finding it.

Accordingly, I endeavour to create a thorough analysis of the major female characters of these dramas, with an amplification referring to some other works by the same authors. As it is suggested already by the titles of the chapters and sub-chapters, the starting point of my work is a general approach to two different characters, yet I try to investigate their roles in the plays in correlation with their relationship with the others, along with an examination of their possible motives, fears, hopes, psychological needs and paradoxes. This way we are led to the conclusion of a highly symbolic interpretation of the two. Thus, the picture of women, their presumable role given by the authors, as well as the similarities and differences among them are illustrated in a highly subjective interpretation based mostly on the character Blanche Dubois and Martha. All the other characters

are presented as some interludes which may lead us to a more thorough comprehension of the previously mentioned ones. The amplitude of criticism used to establish this chain of thoughts served me as an objective basis which creates the balance between the subjective ideas and reality.

2.1 An Approach to an Absurd Marriage

Richard E. Amacher quotes Albee's views on the theatre of the Absurd in the following:

The Theatre of the Absurd is an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and Post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempt to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world, which makes no sense, which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political and social structures man has erected to 'illusion' himself have collapsed (Albee qtd. in Amacher, *Edward Albee* 20).

As for a penetrative comprehension of Albee's claim, I will examine one of his most well-known plays: *'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'* with a special respect to women, mainly Martha's character. We may start such an analysis from various points; however, my aim is to start with the woman, who is presented within marriage, whose image may be highly distorted from the real one. First, I try to disentangle her character of the façade, analyzing her in relationship with her husband and the events, offering certain possibilities as alternative images of her to the reader digging under the surface. However, we are not offered a thorough analysis of her character by the end of the chapter, as this chapter serves mainly as a sort of introduction, a sudden downfall of certain extreme attitudes, paradoxical emotions, which seem to melt into an excruciation of the self within a highly genuine marriage. An 'absorption in art' (Amacher, *ibid* 20) may be the right term applicable to the process of excavation of the ruins of the woman Martha used to be, along with her hopes, fears and desires. Martha's enigmatic self-portrait is coloured in the course of the following chapters, like an expressionist painting, with vivid colours, unbalanced, aggressive, it will have been given lights and shadows by the end of this paper only.

Investigating the drama, we are exposed to the process how an old married couple tries to find the purpose of their existence within marriage in a highly specific way on both emotional and

intellectual levels. Throughout the play, we are given further details of this process including self-identification as a woman and as a man, self-realization as an individual, and a genuine opportunity of reincarnation of the self, the hope of reincarnation, which is only possible by confessing the truth and stepping out of the carefully built world of illusions.

Edward Albee has said that the song, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" means "Who is afraid to live without illusion?" At the end of the play, Martha says that she is. Indeed, the illusion of their son sustains George and Martha's tempestuous marriage. Ultimately, George takes it upon himself to "kill" that illusion when Martha brings it too far into reality. Throughout the play, illusion seems indistinguishable from reality. It is difficult to tell which of George and Martha's stories about their son, about George's past are true or fictional. Similarly, Nick

and Honey's lives are based on illusion. Nick married for money, not love. Though he looks strong and forceful, he is impotent. Honey has been deceiving him by using birth control to prevent pregnancy. As an Absurdist, Albee believed that a life of illusion was wrong because

it created a false content for life, just as George and Martha's empty marriage revolves around an imaginary son. In Albee's view, reality lacks any deeper meaning, and George and Martha must come to face that by abandoning their illusions.

Martha, the middle-aged wife of George could be a representative for a modern woman isolated in her world, which seems to be isolated from her husband's world as well. The very first scene of the drama already suggests a sort of discrepancy between the spouses. If we try to understand the quarrel between the two we may consider it quite a ridiculous one. However, if we neglect the topic and focus merely on the tension evolved between the two characters may open a new perspective: Are these characters as ludicrous as their quarrel? Is it a possible interpretation if we consider this play a symbolic degeneration of a couple? The answer to these questions may be found only if we are familiar with the whole drama. Nevertheless, some suggestions about their marriage are already present in the following lines:

GEORGE: She works in a grocery store

*MARTHA: She is a housewife, she buys things . . . and she comes home with
The groceries and she walks into the modest living-room of the modest cottage
Modest Joseph Cotton has set her up in...*

GEORGE: Are they married?

MARTHA [impatiently]: Yes. They're married . . . and she says, 'What a dump!'

GEORGE [pause]: Oh.

MARTHA [pause]: She is discontent.

GEORGE [pause]: Oh.

MARTHA [pause]: Well, what's the name of the picture?

GEORGE: I really don't know, Martha...

...

MARTHA: You didn't do anything, you never do anything, you never mix.

You just sit around and talk.

*GEORGE: What do you want me to do? Do you want me to act like you? Do you want me to go
around all night braying at everybody, the way you do?*

MARTHA [braying]: I DON'T BRAY! (W.A. of V.W. Act I. 51-79).

The close reading of the text also evokes some hints to the process which Esslin calls 'the modern man's endeavour to come to terms with the world in which he lives.' (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 27). Trying to find some kind of word machinery, which would reveal the complete

senselessness of human life along with the prototypical man striving to achieve a meaningful existence, we face an interesting phenomenon in the speech of the characters: their style and their silences, half sentences are very meaningful. Their speech permits us to have a chain of guesses concerning the nature of their marriage as well as their feelings. Their vulnerability may be highlighted by the way the author gives them free associations from a certain topic to the other. For example, to Martha the movie is closely connected with George's attitude without providing us any clues for reason. Thus, a sort of doubtfulness is evoked by the text, which may be rooted in the vulnerability of the characters in a hostile world. For example, George's impatience towards his wife and Martha's arrogance and violence towards her husband expressed by braying may imply an uncertain psychological state. Uncertainty is merely one possible cause of their attitude towards each other.

Moreover, the roots of uncertainty are not clear at the beginning, thus we may fall into the trap of considering their quarrel as well as their attitude ridiculous or even meaningless. On the other hand, we may not interpret the drama only on the level of stylistic features. These are to be examined minutely in a separate chapter, whereas the author's suggestions could be considered an authentic characterization of the spouses. Their speech and attitude towards each other seem to express an intended fight with each other in a strong interrelationship with a fight with the outside factors: time, the change of mentality, the social and moral standards of their environment as well as the accomplishment-based mentality of their age. This statement I am going to prove by the end of this chapter.

According to Amacher, the quarrel between Martha and George about the identification of the Bette Davis movie prepares us for the revelation we receive at the end of the act, because the situation of Bette Davis in the movie bears some resemblance to that of Martha in real life. (Ibid: 68). Martha seems highly discontented with her life, though it is not clear, whether her husband is to be blamed for her discontent, yet we are given a suggestion to expect some kind of hidden secret in their marriage, which may be the root of frustration. Moreover, George's reluctance to concentrate on the subject she talks about makes her even more annoyed as much as she starts to quarrel angrily with him without any perspicuous reason. Martha's anger may come from a deeply hidden part of her unconscious: she acts as if she were not aware of the fact that she is just offending George, because he does not remember the movie. On the other hand, she may designedly use this situation for arguing with her husband, even despising him. Either interpretation is true; her anger seems to be separated from the situation, having been born sometimes earlier. Consequently, this behaviour can be easily interpreted as absurd, the topic of their quarrel is ridiculous, thus the reader or spectator cannot really decide whether he, she is not skilled enough to understand it, or the dialogue is utterly unintelligible.

Agnate to Richard Amacher's views, Martha emerges as a woman discontented in marriage, 'suffering from a long-standing psychological repression of an unsolved problem that the alcoholic intoxication and the consequent events of the play in the third act eventually flush out of the deep hiding in the labyrinth of her subconscious' (Amacher 69).

The strong violence of the woman unconcealed stands in front of us. Violence is born out of fear, the fear of being violated. Martha tends to behave absurdly. Why? As she feels violated by something, someone, by the outside world, by her future - who knows? The image of the absurd woman is highly thought-provoking. No fragility, no submissiveness appears in her. The quarrel ends in drinking. The image of the twentieth century woman, if we consider her so, may embody non-feminine characteristics. Is it merely a means to augment the tension between the spouses, or is it rather a façade Martha hides her fears behind? The woman presented in this drama seems to embody rather manlike features: heavy drinking, patronizing, violent. Foster Hirsch was led to a

similar conclusion. Moreover, he developed the idea of mixed or even reversed gender roles:

In a typical Albee ploy, George and Martha seem to have reversed sexual roles, George castigating Martha for her brash "masculine" qualities, Martha berating George for his quietly "womanly" ways. Loud Martha, dressed in toreador pants and tight sweater, is almost a misogynist's parody of emphatic, grasping female sexuality, a portrait of a voracious female that contains both fear of her power and a muted respect for her energy as well as compassion for her needs

(Hirsch, Who's Afraid of Edward Albee? 27).