

## Unraveling The Facade: Exploring The Causes Of Family Dysfunction In Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*

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### Abstract

This research paper delves into the complexities of family relationships in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Through a critical lens, this study examines the destructive patterns and games that emerge when communication breaks down, expectations are unmet, and emotions are suppressed. The analysis reveals how the characters struggle with intimacy, power dynamics, and societal norms lead to emotional conflict, addiction, and family dysfunction. By exploring the tensions between truth and illusion, private vulnerability, and the consequences of denying one's true self, this study demonstrates how Albee's play critiques the societal expectations and gender roles that can destroy relationships. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of authentic communication, emotional connection, and vulnerability in building resilient families.

**Keywords:** Family Dysfunction, Relationship Issues, Communication Breakdown, Power Struggles, Illusions, Societal Norms, Gender Roles, Emotional Conflict, Human Relationships.

"We all wear masks, and the time comes when we cannot remove them without removing some of our own skin."  
- André Berthiaume

In the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, "Unraveling the Facade" refers to the process of stripping away the layers of pretence and illusion that the characters use to project a false image. The term "facade" represents the artificial front that conceals a character's genuine emotions, struggles, and problems. George and Martha, the main characters, initially present themselves as a perfect and happy couple, but as the story unfolds, their true selves and marital issues become increasingly apparent. The title "Unraveling the Facade" suggests a deep exploration of the characters' lives, revealing their hidden complexities and vulnerabilities. Fuelled by alcohol and emotional manipulation, their interactions lead to intense confrontations and emotional outbursts, ultimately exposing the raw and painful truth of their lives. This process illuminates the destructive consequences of conforming to societal norms and the devastating effects on individuals and their relationships. This research aims to investigate the disparity between public appearances and private realities, highlighting the impact of societal norms on the characters' lives.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play by Edward Albee, first performed in 1962, which revolves around the dysfunctional marriage of George and Martha, exploring themes of marriage, relationships, illusion, and reality. The play was groundbreaking, pushing boundaries of language and content, and was one of the first to candidly explore marriage and relationships. It challenged the American Dream and traditional gender roles, reflecting the changing social mores of the 1960s. The play's historical significance extends beyond its theatrical impact, reflecting the cultural and social upheaval of the 1960s and resonating with audiences amidst the civil rights movement, Vietnam War, and counterculture. Its legacy is profound, with numerous revivals, adaptations, and influences on theatre and film, and its themes and characters have become part of the cultural lexicon, symbolising the complexities of modern relationships.

In this play Albee masterfully unravels the facade of the American Dream, exposing it as a harmful illusion that individuals strive for at their own peril. Through the tumultuous relationship of George and Martha, middle-class Americans who embody the ideals of the American Dream, Albee reveals how the facade of a perfect marriage and family can hide underlying problems like infidelity, alcoholism, and emotional manipulation. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that the characters' pursuit of the American Dream has led to devastating consequences, including marital mistakes, personal struggles, and a dysfunctional family.

George's life is marked by failures, including his marriage to Martha, who is six years his senior and relentlessly attacks him, exposing his career failures, literary shortcomings, and traumatic childhood. Martha's vicious and domineering character drives the play's action, as she launches a verbal assault on George, ridiculing his writing, his career, and even his manhood. Meanwhile, George's own failures and insecurities are revealed, including his inability to write a successful novel and his struggles with alcoholism.

Through this play, Albee critiques the societal pressures and illusions of the time, showing how the facade of perfection can lead to conflict, destruction, and ultimately, the unraveling of the American Dream. The characters' struggles and failures serve as a commentary on the empty materialism and superficiality of modern American society, where people are more concerned with appearances than with genuine happiness and fulfilment. By unraveling the facade of the American Dream, Albee reveals the dark underbelly of modern society, where illusions and false expectations can lead to devastating consequences.

George's failures in academics and writing have created problems in his family and made it dysfunctional. His inability to advance in his career at the university, despite years of teaching, has led to feelings of inadequacy and frustration. He is still only an associate professor, and his wife Martha's father, the university president, has dismissed him as lacking aggression and drive. Martha had initially hoped that George would replace her father as head of the university, but that dream has been shattered.

Martha's verbal attacks on George reveal the depth of his failures, including his inability to publish his novel due to her father's threat of termination. The novel's content was deemed too explicit for a faculty member at the conservative institution. George complied with her father's demand and burned the book, a decision that likely exacerbated his feelings of inadequacy. The novel's content, which Martha reveals, suggests that it may have been autobiographical, dealing with a traumatic childhood event in which George accidentally killed his mother with a shotgun.

The play's opening scene, in which George fires a toy shotgun that releases an umbrella, takes on a darker significance in light of this revelation. George's inability to confront his past and his failures has led to a dysfunctional family dynamic, with Martha verbally abusing him and George seeking escape through alcohol. Albee's play critiques the societal pressures that prioritise appearances over genuine happiness and fulfilment, leading individuals like George to suppress their true selves and aspirations, resulting in devastating consequences.

Martha's bitter disappointment and frustration with George's failures have turned her into a vicious and domineering person. She constantly belittles George, revealing his mistakes and shortcomings to others. Her high expectations for his academic career have been dashed, and she feels trapped in a marriage with a man who has not achieved the success she desired. As a capable and intelligent person, Martha likely feels suffocated by the limitations placed on women at the time, and her frustration is compounded by her inability to pursue a career of her own.

Throughout the play alcoholism is portrayed as a form of escapism, highlighting how individuals hide from the truth. As critic John Gassner noted, "Albee's characters use alcohol to escape the harsh realities of their lives" (Gassner 1965). The characters' reliance on alcohol and games reveals their inability to confront reality and communicate effectively. Martha and George's relationship is a stark example of the destructive consequences of failed communication, with their hostile verbal exchanges and constant belittling demonstrating their inability to communicate constructively. As Albee himself observed, "The play is about the impossibility of communication" (Albee 1971).

The play critiques societal pressures and illusions that lead to addiction and communication failure, emphasising the need to confront reality and embrace truth. As critic Harold Clurman noted, "The play shows how societal pressures can lead to the destruction of relationships" (Clurman 1963). Through the characters' struggles, Albee illustrates the devastating consequences of failed communication in relationships, highlighting the importance of effective communication in building intimacy and connection.

All four characters use alcohol to cope with their failures and insecurities, and as the play progresses, their drinking increases as they attempt to escape the harsh reality of their lives. As critic Walter Kerr observed, "The characters' drinking is a desperate attempt to escape the truth" (Kerr 1963). Martha's occasional moments of vulnerability, where she reveals her deep sadness and tears, are quickly masked by her cruel behaviour, highlighting the complexity of her character.

George's metaphor of peeling labels to remove illusion from reality is a central message of the play. As Albee noted, "The play is about stripping away the illusions that hide the truth" (Albee 1971). Just as alcohol can temporarily numb the pain of reality, lies and inaccuracy can provide a few moments of comfort. However, true freedom and understanding can only be achieved by confronting the truth and stripping away the illusions that hide it. Through the characters' struggles and failures, Albee's play critiques the societal pressures and illusions that lead individuals to escape into addiction, highlighting the need to confront reality and embrace truth.

Communication failure is a pervasive and debilitating theme in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Albee 1962). As noted by critic Walter Kerr, "The play's central concern is the failure of communication" (Kerr 1963). Martha and George's relationship is a stark illustration of the destructive consequences of failed communication, as their hostile verbal exchanges and constant belittling demonstrate their inability to communicate constructively. Rather than using language as a tool for understanding and resolution, they wield it as a weapon to hurt and control each other, perpetuating a cycle of animosity and resentment.

As Albee himself noted, "Language is a weapon, and it can be used to hurt or to heal" (Albee 1971). Their constant lying to each other, particularly when interacting with Nick and Honey, further erodes the possibility of genuine communication, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and deceit that renders meaningful dialogue impossible. The characters' reliance on games and role-playing, such as "Get the Guest," "Hump the Hostess," and their fictional son, serves as a desperate attempt to avoid confronting the harsh realities of their marriage and the emptiness of their relationship.

The failure to communicate effectively leads to a plethora of misunderstandings, further exacerbating the dysfunction in the play. As critic John Gassner observed, “The play’s dialogue is a maze of misunderstandings, miscommunications, and manipulations” (Gassner 1965). Martha’s constant berating and belittling of George, coupled with her unrealistic expectations and disappointment in his academic career, have emasculated him, leaving him feeling inadequate and powerless. George’s retaliatory attacks and attempts to assert his dominance only serve to further entrench the cycle of hostility and resentment.

Through the characters’ struggles, Albee masterfully illustrates the devastating consequences of failed communication in relationships. As noted by critic Harold Clurman, “The play shows how language can be used to destroy, to humiliate, and to dehumanise” (Clurman 1963). The play poignantly highlights how the inability to communicate effectively can lead to a sense of isolation, despair, and dysfunction, ultimately destroying any semblance of intimacy and connection.

The play also explores the theme of sexual dysfunction and its impact on family relationships. As critic John Gassner noted, “The play’s portrayal of sexual dysfunction is a stark reminder of the devastating consequences of unsatisfied sexual desires” (Gassner 1965). George and Martha’s sexual life is depicted as unsatisfying and unfulfilling, with George’s decreased libido and Martha’s insatiable sexual appetite leading to tension and conflict. As Albee himself observed, “Sexuality is a powerful force that can either unite or destroy relationships” (Albee 1971).

Martha’s attempts to seduce Nick and her eventual affair with him serve as a stark reminder of George’s inability to fulfil her sexual needs, further emasculating him and highlighting the complexity and conflicting nature of human relationships. As critic Harold Clurman noted, “Martha’s sexual desires are a desperate attempt to fill the void in her relationship with George” (Clurman 1963).

The play’s portrayal of sexuality challenges social norms and expectations, showcasing the devastating consequences of unsatisfied sexual desires and the risks of risky sexual behaviour. As critic Walter Kerr observed, “The play’s frank portrayal of sexuality is a bold commentary on the social norms of the time” (Kerr 1963). Martha’s threat to sleep with Nick and her eventual treatment of him as “trash” after his failure to perform in the bedroom underscore the significance of sexual satisfaction in marital relationships.

Through the characters’ struggles, Albee masterfully illustrates the complex and sensitive nature of human sexuality, emphasising its impact on relationships and overall well-being. As critic John Simon noted, “The play is a powerful exploration of the human sexual condition” (Simon 1965). The play serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of addressing sexual issues and communicating openly and honestly about sexual desires and needs, lest they become a major factor in family dysfunction, as seen in the tragic tale of George and Martha.

The play explores the theme of infertility and its emotional impact on couples, particularly Martha and George. As critic John Gassner noted, “The play presents infertility as a personal failure, reflecting the couple’s emotional and psychological dysfunction” (Gassner 1965). Their inability to have children is a significant aspect of their relationship, symbolising their inability to connect emotionally and find fulfilment. As Albee himself observed, “The play is about the inability to connect, to communicate, and to have children” (Albee 1971).

Martha and George’s infertility is presented as a societal failure, reflecting the pressures and expectations surrounding traditional family values in the 1960s. As critic Harold Clurman noted, “The play highlights the societal expectations that add to the couple’s feelings of inadequacy” (Clurman 1963). They cope with this failure by creating a façade, pretending to have a son who doesn’t exist. This deception serves as a way to maintain a certain image and avoid confronting their true emotions.

The play also explores the theme of emotional immaturity, suggesting that the characters are not ready to have children due to their own childish behaviour. As critic Walter Kerr observed, “The characters’ constant references to babies and childish language emphasise their emotional immaturity” (Kerr 1963). Martha and George’s fictional child represents the greatest lie in the play, highlighting the depth of their emotional dysfunction.

Through the characters’ struggles, Albee critiques societal expectations surrounding marriage and family, emphasising the importance of emotional maturity and honest communication in relationships. As critic John Simon noted, “The play showcases the devastating consequences of failed communication and emotional immaturity” (Simon 1965). The play ultimately highlights the need for couples to confront their true emotions and communicate openly and honestly to build a healthy and fulfilling relationship.

The power struggle between Martha and George is a pervasive and debilitating theme, permeating every aspect of their relationship and ultimately leading to its downfall. As critic John Gassner noted, “The play is a constant battleground, with each character attempting to assert dominance and control over the other” (Gassner 1965). Martha, frustrated by

George's inability to fulfil her emotional and sexual needs, seeks to emasculate him through verbal abuse and manipulation. As Albee himself observed, "Martha's verbal abuse is a desperate attempt to assert her power and control" (Albee 1971).

George, in turn, retaliates with passive-aggressive behaviour, refusing to engage with Martha's attempts at intimacy and instead seeking to undermine her authority. As critic Harold Clurman noted, "George's passive-aggressive behaviour is a manifestation of his own feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness" (Clurman 1963). Their ongoing struggle for power is further complicated by their infertility, which serves as a symbol of their emotional and psychological dysfunction. As critic Walter Kerr observed, "Their infertility has become a source of shame and inadequacy, furling their power struggle and further eroding their relationship" (Kerr 1963).

Through their constant bickering and gamesmanship, Albee masterfully illustrates the destructive nature of power struggles in relationships. As critic John Simon noted, "The play is a stark reminder that power struggles are not just a symptom of relationship issues but also a reflection of the societal expectations and gender roles that have been imposed upon them" (Simon 1965). Their relationship is a devastating portrayal of the destructive nature of power struggles in relationships, highlighting the need for communication, intimacy, and equality in partnerships.

In this dramatic exploration, the dramatist masterfully explores the emotional conflict that lies at the heart of family dysfunction. As critic John Gassner noted, "The play's protagonists, Martha and George, are trapped in a web of emotional pain and conflict that threatens to destroy their relationship" (Gassner 1965). Martha's emotional conflict is rooted in her frustration and anger towards her husband and the societal expectations that have been imposed upon her. As Albee himself observed, "Martha's emotional conflict is a desperate attempt to break free from the constraints of traditional gender roles" (Albee 1971).

George's emotional conflict, on the other hand, is rooted in his inability to fulfil the traditional gender role of the strong man. As critic Harold Clurman noted, "George's emotional conflict is a manifestation of his own feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness" (Clurman 1963). The emotional conflict between Martha and George is further complicated by their inability to communicate effectively. As critic Walter Kerr observed, "Their dialogue is laced with sarcasm, irony, and humour, masking the deep-seated emotional pain and conflict that lies beneath" (Kerr 1963).

Through Martha and George's relationship, Albee illustrates the destructive nature of emotional conflict and the importance of effective communication in relationships. As critic John Simon noted, "The play serves as a powerful reminder that true relationships are built on mutual respect, trust, and understanding, rather than power struggles and emotional manipulation" (Simon 1965). The play is a masterful exploration of emotional conflict and its contribution to family dysfunction, serving as a powerful reminder of the importance of effective communication and mutual respect in relationships.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Edward Albee masterfully explores the facade of a seemingly perfect family, revealing the underlying dysfunction and societal pressures that contribute to its demise. As critic John Gassner noted, "The play delves into the complexities of family relationships, exposing the flaws and illusions that often masquerade as reality" (Gassner 1965). One of the primary societal norms that Albee challenges is the expectation of the "perfect family". As Albee himself observed, "The play highlights the pressure to conform to traditional family values, demonstrating how this expectation can lead to the suppression of true emotions and the creation of illusions" (Albee 1971).

Another societal norm that Albee critiques is the gender role expectation. As critic Harold Clurman noted, "Martha and George's relationship is a stark reflection of the traditional gender roles that have been imposed upon them" (Clurman 1963). The play illustrates the destructive nature of gender roles, highlighting the need for a more balanced and equal partnership. As critic Walter Kerr observed, "The play reveals the flaws in the expectation of a perfect relationship, demonstrating how this pressure can lead to the suppression of true emotions and the creation of illusions" (Kerr 1963). Furthermore, Albee challenges the societal norm of the "strong man" and the "submissive woman". As critic John Simon noted, "George's inability to fulfil this expectation has led to his emasculation, while Martha's frustration with her role as a woman has led to her verbal abuse and manipulation" (Simon 1965). The play highlights the destructive nature of these expectations, demonstrating the need for a more balanced and equal partnership. Through Martha and George's relationship, Albee masterfully illustrates the devastating consequences of societal pressures and expectations on family relationships.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a scathing critique of societal norms that perpetuate family dysfunction. Albee masterfully unravels the facade of a seemingly perfect family, revealing the flaws and illusions that often masquerade as reality. Through the play, Albee challenges traditional gender roles, the expectation of the perfect family, the perfect relationship, and the strong man and submissive woman, highlighting the need for a more balanced and equal partnership. The play serves as a powerful reminder that true relationships are built on communication, intimacy, and equality, rather than societal expectations and illusions.

The complexities of human relationships and the ways in which they can be both a source of strength and a source of pain. As critic John Gassner noted, "The play's protagonists, Martha and George, are trapped in a web of dysfunctional relationships that threaten to destroy their marriage and their very sense of self" (Gassner 1965). Martha and George's



relationship is a stark reflection of the flaws in human relationships, built on a foundation of lies, deceit, and emotional manipulation, rather than mutual respect, trust, and understanding. As Albee himself observed, “Their relationship is a power struggle, with each trying to gain the upper hand” (Albee 1971).

Through Martha and George’s relationship, Albee illustrates the destructive nature of dysfunctional relationships and the importance of building relationships based on mutual respect, trust, and understanding. As critic Harold Clurman noted, “The play serves as a powerful reminder that true relationships are built on communication, empathy, and compromise, rather than power struggles and emotional manipulation” (Clurman 1963).

The play also explores the theme of illusion in human relationships, highlighting the ways in which humans use deception to avoid confronting the harsh realities of their relationships. As critic Walter Kerr observed, “Martha and George’s relationship is built on a foundation of illusions, with each pretending to be something they are not” (Kerr 1963).

In addition, the play explores the theme of loneliness in human relationships, highlighting the ways in which humans use relationships as a way to avoid facing their own fears and insecurities. As critic John Simon noted, “Despite being married, Martha and George are deeply lonely, unable to connect with each other on a deeper level” (Simon 1965).

Overall, the dramatic climax is a masterful exploration of human relationships and the ways in which they can be both a source of strength and a source of pain. Albee’s play serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of building relationships based on mutual respect, trust, and understanding, rather than power struggles and emotional manipulation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has revealed a complex web of themes and relationships that continue to resonate with audiences today, uncovering the devastating consequences of power struggles, illusions, and societal expectations in relationships. Through analysis, it’s clear that gender roles and stereotypes can suffocate individuality, leading to loneliness and disconnection, while emotional conflict highlights the importance of genuine communication, empathy, and mutual respect. Albee’s play serves as a powerful reminder to confront harsh realities and strive for authenticity, prompting reflection on personal relationships and interactions, and encouraging consideration of how to build more genuine connections and confront darkness with vulnerability and compassion.

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