

1. Introduction

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf is one of the most popular and, at the same time, most controversial of Edward Albee's plays. A major bulk of Albee scholarship is devoted to this 1962 play which has continued to draw uneasy responses from many critics. The play undermines and nullifies many of the American ideals of the time and presents characters which are unusually disrespectful of traditional values. Naturally, when the play was first staged, the audience and critics were bound to take sides, either with the ideals that glorified their country or with the disrespectful mockery of these ideals in Albee's play.

In the early 1960s, one of the most important of these ideals was that of the American family. The postwar years of the 1950s were characterized by heavy pro-family propaganda, the baby boom and an obsession with the picture of the happy, domestic woman. "The American way of life" which was "characterized by affluence, located in suburbia, and epitomized by white middle-class nuclear families" (May 2008: 8) became the "cultural ideal" of the time (2008: 11). Its propagation over-emphasized "distinct gender roles for family members" (2008: 19). After the widespread participation of women in paid labor during the war years, the ideal femininity of the 50s required that women return to their homes and joyously take on the role of the housewife and the mother of several children. Under the apparent conformity of the fifties, there was a tension, a 'delicate balance' which was broken by Betty Friedan's momentous work, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which the author objects to "the limits of the family-centered role for women" (Ryan 1992: 42).

Written and staged only one year before the publication of Friedan's book, *Virginia Woolf* shows an obvious engagement with the question of women and their role in the family. The picture presented in the play, however, is nowhere near the ideal picture of the so-called *American way of life*. Its portrayal of marriage and motherhood was so devastating to some of its contemporary critics that they went so far as to label the play as perverse and morbid, its characters as decadent and its author as immoral (for an example, see Schechner 1975). Though most of the attacks on the morality of the play were challenged, clarified and rejected almost simultaneously, the tradition of reading Martha—the controversial female character of this play—remains heavily influenced by those early reactions. This ambivalent, at times cautious attitude results from the critics' bewilderment when confronted with such an unusual female character that has been repeatedly, albeit unsatisfactorily, regarded as either a shrew and a maniac, or a broken, victimized woman; a tradition that has kept its ambivalence even on to the twenty-first century.

The intention of the authors in the present study is to disavow these charges and suggest that the play shows Albee's sympathy with the situation of women. Drawing on the theories of Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray, we hope to demonstrate that through Martha, Albee criticizes the patriarchal society and its celebration of phallic values. But interestingly, in doing so, he is also careful to avoid showing the woman as a pathetic victim of her time. Contrary to the claim of most of Albee scholarship, Martha is neither a monster nor a ruin, but rather a clever, vivacious woman who, in collaboration with her husband, George, challenges the widely accepted patriarchal values by theatricalizing them. Rather than *embodying* the socially approved feminine and masculine gender roles that they seem to be performing, Martha and George mimic those roles to render them as questionable in the eyes of their audience. This aspect of Martha's character and this bond between her and George has not previously received much critical attention.

2. Monstrous Martha/ marginal Martha: the critical tradition

In 1962, the same year as the premier of *Virginia Woolf*, Brustein describes Martha as “bitterly shrewish” (1999: 7) and claims that the connection between her and George is based on “deadly hatred” (1999: 8). In the following year, Gassner regards her as a compulsive tormentor and expresses sympathy for “the driven woman and her long-suffering husband” (1975: 6). Hirsch refers to Albee’s characters in general as “domineering women and impotent men” (1978: 8), as “devouring mothers, castrating wives, remote husbands, dead sons” (1978: 18). Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Paolucci returns to “the domineering figure of woman” and “the submissive male” (2000: 46). Martha is again the destructive woman looking for “victims” everywhere (2000: 52), and “George’s worldly failure takes on a heroic color” (2000: 50).

Even critics who have approached the play with feminist concerns have rarely managed to gain a more substantial ‘victory’ than labeling Albee as a misogynist. For instance, Duplessis accuses the playwright of aiming at “the re-establishment of those [patriarchal] norms” (1980: 6) by eventually transforming Martha into a “subordinate, dependent woman”, as “George is returned to his position of mastery and dominance” (1980: 6).

In later articles on *Virginia Woolf*, which are much more balanced, Martha’s role still remains marginal to the critics. In one of the rare psychoanalytical studies of this play, relying heavily on Freud’s ideas, Davis emphasizes “male bonding” (1994: 221), giving the foreground to George, Nick, and inevitably, Martha’s Daddy. This line is later taken up by Eby (2007), who regards the play as an example of competitive masculinity, with Martha acting a marginal, catalytic role. Furthermore, Davis assigns to George the role of the “analyst” (1994: 214). This attitude can be found in the works of other critics as well. Roudané, for example, calls George (and not Martha) “the anger artist” (2005: 47) and Winkel regards him as the savior (2008: 150), “the mastermind of the action” (2008: 147), the social critic and “Albee’s mouthpiece” (2008: 142). Winkel is one of the few critics who regard Albee as critical of patriarchy and sympathetic with the situation of women. But in her study, too, Martha is depicted as a victim of the social pressures of her time, forced to cling desperately to the son-illusion and pushed toward losing her balance (2008: 244).

Two of the most recent critiques of *Virginia Woolf* have focused on aspects of the play that pave the way for the present argument. Rakesh Solomon, in his account of Albee’s direction of his own plays, states that during the rehearsals the playwright tried to emphasize those details of Martha’s character which were less highlighted in previous productions of the play, demanding that she “should simultaneously also appear genuinely funny, intellectually agile, passionate, and most importantly, capable of both compassion and love” (2010: 125). In another 2010 study, Falvey focuses on the black humor of the play as a point of strength, both of the play and of its humorist husband and wife. She views the jokes and the pranks as a bond between George and Martha, a source of connection and mutual engagement (2010: 244).

Expanding these views, this article proposes that it is not Martha that Albee criticizes in *Virginia Woolf*, but rather it is the roles that she and George represent in their games that is being ridiculed and attacked. The main conflict of the play is neither George versus Martha nor George versus Nick, as some have suggested, but actually George *plus* Martha, in a shared attempt to demonstrate the inadequacy of the gender roles they are supposed to embody. This idea can be vividly explained using the concepts of masquerade, mimesis, and theatricality. Before that, however, it is necessary to specify in what ways their socially approved gender roles are problematic.

3. “She is discontent”: Awareness of the phallic lack

As critics have pointed out, Martha and George’s relationship appears to be suffering from “overwhelming defeat and frustration” (Trilling 1975: 80). Martha never hesitates to express her profound dissatisfaction with her situation. She senses that something is lacking, not merely in *her* marriage or *her* life, but also in the lives of everyone else. George seems to be equally aware of this sense of lack and emptiness. The couple’s powerful expression of their discontent can be explained and justified with what Lacan refers to as “phallic lack” (Lacan 2006: 56).

To understand this concept of lack we have to pay attention to the subject’s psychological development, especially the phase Lacan refers to as the mirror stage, when the child begins to distinguish the image reflected in the mirror as its own. The infant’s “identification” (Lacan 2001a: 1) with this image enables it to replace its previous notion of a “fragmented body-image” (2001a: 3) with the “illusion of autonomy” and wholeness which is derived from the apparently whole body-image reflected in the mirror (2001a: 5). This notion of identity “structures the subject’s entire mental development” (2001a: 3). The subject goes on to seek autonomy from what Lacan calls the “specular image” (2001a: 2), which is not necessarily a mirror-reflection, but any reflected or projected image that helps the creation of the subject’s ego and builds up the illusion of autonomy. The subject often uses the other to receive a reassuring reflection of itself-- a process that begins with the infant’s seeking its reflection in the mother’s face-- and for the male subject this other is commonly woman. Regarded as a mirror, woman is reduced to a thing, an object, whose function is to help maintain the male subject’s sense of completeness and wholeness. This attitude, which is a dominant attitude in a patriarchal society, denies woman her identity and, consequently, her desire.

Lacan associates the mirror stage with the Imaginary order, which can be regarded as “a realm of image and imagination, deception and lure” with its “illusions . . . of wholeness, synthesis, autonomy, duality and . . . similarity” (Evans 1996: 84). Before discovering the image, the infant enjoys a sense of complete unity with the mother, believing itself to be the answer to all her desires and needs. The discovery of the self-image as a separate identity is both exciting and shocking. Yet it is the child’s discovery of its not being the sole object of the mother’s desire that ends the peaceful Imaginary stage and starts its initiation into the Symbolic—the stage of language with its phallogocentric values. This marks the child’s introduction to the Name of The Father and the authority of the phallus (Lacan 2006: 230)—which, to the child, is the imaginary object of the mother’s desire that the child believes the father possesses.

The phallus is simultaneously the recognition of desire and its un-attainability, since the child does not possess the phallus. It is therefore “a signifier of lack” (Homer 2005: 95). To regain the sense of autonomy after entering the Symbolic order and accepting the law of the father, which forbids the former imaginary oneness with the mother, the subject has two options, which “turn around a ‘to be’ and a ‘to have’ . . . the phallus” and in turn decide its sexuality (Lacan 2001b: 221). The masculine subject pretends that he possesses the phallus, while the feminine subject presents “the *masquerade* of being the phallus” (Homer 2005: 95). Femininity and masculinity are actually made-up roles, “subject positions”, rather than biological facts (2005: 98). They are only made possible by the pretension regarding the phallus, by “a ‘to seem’ . . . to mask its lack” (Lacan 2001b: 221).

This sense of loss and lack that is central to our grasp of the phallus, also inevitably affects our *jouissance*, a not-so-satisfactory translation of which can be joy or pleasure.

Phallic jouissance, which Lacan associates with the masculine structure, is the kind of “jouissance that fails us, that disappoints us”, the kind which is “susceptible to failure and . . . fundamentally misses our partner” (Fink 2002: 37). Since the Symbolic denies women any access to their own definition of desire, they constantly experience the masculine structure of the phallic jouissance, covering up the lack by trying to be better mirrors, to present better specular images to men.

Albee’s *Virginia Woolf* is the product of a time when strictly defined gender roles were emphasized. In such a social environment, subjects are under more pressure to fit the subject positions prescribed to them by the Symbolic order of the world of the father/fathers. At the same time the dominant discourse of the time disclaims the inherent and unassailable sense of dissatisfaction that follows the acceptance of these roles. Such discourse naturally does not dissipate the lack, but makes it more complex, causing the subject to experience greater anxiety about it. Commonly, the subject tries to suppress the feelings of dissatisfaction for the fear of appearing abnormal and becoming marginalized by society, unaware that this is a feeling shared by all subjects.

It is no wonder, then, that Martha and George’s expression of their strong feelings of lack and loss seems shocking to the public and the critics alike. They lay bare what is inside us all but most people try to deny or push far back out of sight. They seem to have no reserve in giving voice to their deeply rooted sense of dissatisfaction, for they actually *intend* to shock the audience.

As the play begins, Martha refers to a Bette Davis movie which is distinguishable as *Beyond the Forest* (Albee 2007: 155). The movie, as well as Martha’s retelling of it, reeks of dissatisfaction. The emphasis with which Martha declares *She is discontent* shows that she sees much affinity between her own role as a domesticated housewife and that of Rosa Moline, the character played by Bette Davis. In the movie, Rosa is in love with a man other than her husband, a fact that White refers to as proof of Martha’s adulterous intentions (White 1985: 52). But this man can be the symbol of a more complicated idea than adultery; he may be regarded as Lacan’s *objet petit a*. With (*petit*) *a* standing for the French word *autre* (meaning ‘other’ with small o), *objet petit a*, which Lacan relates to the Imaginary (Lacan 1998: 83), is the “object-cause” of desire, “any object which sets desire in motion” and like “a precious object hidden inside a relatively worthless box” refers to what “we seek in the other” that in reality can never be gained (Evans 1996: 128). As the presumed object of her desire, Rosa’s lover in Chicago is an imaginary source of satisfaction. Even the physical circumstances of this relationship prevent its fulfillment. He is far from Rosa; she is sick—a fact emphasized by Martha three times in her short narrative—and what is more, Martha does not even remember his name. He is not only inaccessible, but also nameless and ambiguous. Martha’s narrative is concerned only with the impossibility of perfect jouissance. For her, this is the significance of the movie, and she refers only to details of the plot that help establish this theme. In fact, her allusion to this insignificant movie early in the play is not merely to show that she is discontent, but rather to prove that everybody is. Everyone is dissatisfied because an incomplete experience of jouissance is all the satisfaction the subject can get once it enters the Symbolic. In other parts of the play, too, Martha and George’s dialogues are full of clear references to this sense of emptiness. For instance, Martha’s calling George “a blank, a cipher” (Albee 2007: 164), her exclamation, “IT’S NOT WHAT I WANTED!” (2007: 258) and both George and Martha’s “SNAP” (2007: 261, 286; capitals in original) spell out their awareness of lack.

Nevertheless, this knowledge of the phallic lack does not help Martha to easily accept her feminine subject position, a subject position that demands her turning into a mirror to

reflect the images of the men around her as large as possible. Her consciousness of lack prevents her from turning into a satisfactory mirror. She looks at men and sees “flops” (Albee 2007: 276). Even with all her exaggerated praise of her daddy, Martha does not fail to ridicule him as well as the others. She refers to her daddy’s decisions twice in the play, first when she recalls the boxing match (2007: 190-91) and then when she talks about her first marriage (2007: 206). In both cases, her tone is evidently humorous. In the boxing match scene, she clearly makes fun of the irrationality of her daddy’s decision. This attitude would have been a very surprising inconsistency if we were to take her high praises of her daddy seriously. But these praises are interpretable in a much more satisfactory manner if we regard them as part of the show that Martha and George are trying to set forth to entertain and enlighten their guests and their audience. In this view, Martha and George can be regarded as actors, playing an exaggerated and distorted version of their respective gender roles with the intention of highlighting the sense of lack that runs through them.

4. Mocking the masquerade: Martha’s mission

As explained above, gender roles, or the masculine and feminine subject positions, are both based on a mutual pretense, that is, of having or being the phallus. The term Lacan uses for the feminine pretense, however, is *masquerade*, which is loaded with much stronger theatrical connotations (Lacan 2006: 616).

Before Lacan, Joan Riviere had used the term to describe ‘womanliness’ in her study of the “intellectual woman” (Riviere 1929: 303). Riviere indicates that women who aspire to professional and intellectual positions traditionally regarded as masculine are (unconsciously) concerned that they may have to face their male colleagues’ anxious and defensive reactions. “To avert anxiety and retribution feared by men”, the woman indulges in a masquerade, wearing womanliness “as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisal expected if she was found to possess it” (Riviere 1929: 306).

To Lacan, it is not only the intellectual woman who wears the mask. To be able to pose as the phallus, which is “the signifier of the desire of the Other”, woman has to “reject an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade” (Lacan 2001b: 221). What remains of femininity is the pretension of being what she believes the Other desires. To be the phallus, woman turns into “that which she is not” (2001b: 221). The core of femininity, whatever it may be, is rejected and lost; the woman is forever behind the mask.

An examination of *Virginia Woolf* reveals that Martha, who claims she is the one with the pants and the whip in their house, is also involved in the masquerade of femininity, in both senses as used by Lacan and Riviere. The very song, ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?’ is an obvious signal of the situation Riviere describes. Davis explains that at certain moments in the play when tension accumulates, the characters suddenly start singing ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?’ because the use of “intellectualized wit banishes anxiety” (1994: 213). But the song itself *symptomizes* a kind of anxiety, the anxiety about intellectual women. It is a college joke, replacing the words *big bad wolf* in the original version with the name of a threatening intellectual woman, Virginia Woolf, a writer, a critic, and above all a feminist. Martha’s exaggerated enjoyment of this song is part of *her* masquerade, joining in with the college men’s ridicule of Virginia Woolf, laughing at the woman who *is* a threat, to give them the reassurance that *she* is not like that, that she is not a threat.

The song is only part of Martha's Masquerade. In Act I, by slipping into a more voluptuous dress, Martha starts the parade of her femininity before Nick's eyes, and George quickly recognizes the move (Albee 2007: 184). Later, when she recounts the story of their courtship, Martha emphasizes the fact that she had planned to marry an "heir apparent", that she had willingly decided that she wanted to be the exchange value between her father and her future husband (2007: 207). Paradoxical as the claim is—since objects do not decide and plan their own role—it does suggest that she wishes to demonstrate an internalization of the phallic value system and her place in that system as mere commodity. Complementary to this line of argument is the fact that she seems rather too eager to celebrate the socially defined gender roles of her time. She asserts that she expected to marry a man who would be professionally successful. In ridiculing George's salary, she gives voice to the materialistic values of her time which recognizes the place of the man in the family as that of the provider and the bread-winner. As Winkel (2008) explains, a more obvious example of her attempts to embody the feminine ideals of the 1950s is in her pretence of motherhood. Unable to have an actual child, Martha seems so determined to become a mother—as she is expected to—that she manages to persuade George to play along in the imaginary game of the fantasy child.

These facts, however, are in contrast with the above-mentioned knowledge of the phallic lack she so clearly demonstrates. It is also in opposition with what critics call her emasculating and unfeminine quality. These seemingly contradictory aspects of her character have led some readers, spectators and critics to regard Martha as unnatural, imbalanced or downright crazy. As long as these contradictions remain unexplained, the charges stand. However, the play implicitly offers a simple and exciting explanation for Martha's behavior, an explanation that has been lightly touched upon by several critics, but has never been used to clarify these problematic aspects of the play. Several critics have referred to George and Martha's fun and games as theatrical play acting (see examples in Falvey 2010: 243; Winkel 2008: 132; Davis 1994: 220; Hirsch 1978: 6; Brustein 1999: 7). George and Martha's playfulness and showmanship have not escaped them, yet those same critics have never regarded these characteristics as the couple's intentional theatricalization of their marriage to problematize feminine and masculine gender roles, which is the key to the analysis of Martha's character.

Since, in the phallic economy of the Symbolic, woman is reduced to the *masquerade* of femininity, she becomes the show itself and not the actor who performs the show; not the subject who masquerades but the mere noun: *masquerade*. This, obviously, keeps reinforcing that economy which continues to marginalize women. Irigaray proposes that to challenge this situation women have "only one path, . . . that of *mimicry*" (1985b: 76; italics in the original).

As Diamond explains, it is the "Platonic mimesis" to which Irigaray refers (1997: iv). For Plato, as demonstrated most clearly in his cave allegory, mimesis is the work of shadows, reflections and mirror plays. It is deceitful and illusive. Froma Zeitlin asserts that in Plato's views "woman is the mimetic creature par excellence" since she, too, works with illusion and deceit (qtd in Diamond 1997: vi). Plato tries to move away from the mimetic shadows to the origin—the idea—and regards the *mimos*—meaning both the one who mimics and the mime itself—as potentially subversive. The *mimos*, be it the poet or the woman, is "a panderer of reflections, a destroyer of forms" and a threat to the established values s/he mimics (Diamond 1997: v).

This notion is adopted and expanded by Irigaray, who likens Plato's cave to a womb-theatre. In her 'Plato's Hystera' she examines the cave allegory and proposes that the hystera, the womb-like cave, is actually a stage, "a speculum", already theatrical (1985a: 255). The reflections and shadows to which the prisoners in the cave are subjected are already devised by the "magician-imagemakers" who are all men: the father, the philosopher or God (1985a: 264). It is the passivity, "the silence of the other"—the hystera, the mother—that allows the words of men to be heard (1985a: 235, 257). Plato's mimesis is based on phallic values, and positions the woman as a reflective, concave surface, which is "pure mimicry, with no definition" of her own (1985a: 307), reflecting sameness, the same exact image that the magician requires. The continuity of phallogocentrism is dependent on "its power to *reduce all others to the economy of the same*" (Irigaray 1985:74; italics in the original).

But if woman chooses to emphasize difference, if she begins to reflect images that are "*exaggerated or blurred*" (Irigaray 1985a: 345; italics in the original), she can shake the phallic power that is based on, and is the base of, the reflection of sameness. If she decides to theatricalize her own masquerade, she may be able to turn the phallic stratagem of transforming the woman into a mirror against itself. She would be able to turn "mimesis imposed" into "mimicry unleashed" (Diamond 1997: xi). That is why, Irigaray asserts, "One must assume the feminine role deliberately" (1985b: 76).

Toril Moi, in her study of *A Doll's House*, suggests that by exposing the theatrical nature of Helmer and Nora's marriage, Ibsen "wishes to make us think about the way we theatricalize ourselves and others in everyday life" (2006: 234). The same can be said about *Virginia Woolf*, where Martha and George's marriage is obviously and overtly theatrical. But, unlike Helmer and Nora, Martha and George are aware of the role-playing which is at the heart of their marriage. In fact, they are consciously and actively involved in their own theatricalization through their fun and games, their word plays, their unrestrained humor and even their battles. Their troubled marriage is in fact the mimicry of a troubled marriage with the aim of snapping their audience—primarily Nick and Honey (since they are the chosen audience, the ones to whom the older couple's play-acting is addressed), but also the actual spectators of the play—out of their complacency. Their aim, Albee's aim manifested through them, is similar to the aim of Brecht's alienation effect.

Brecht insists that theater should seek "to expose illusions" (Diamond 1997: viii), to shock the audience and motivate them to reassess their lives and their society. This is achieved in part by distancing the actor from the role, by making it obvious that this is not reality, but a constructed theater which has to be analyzed and examined. In Elin Diamond's words, alienation effect is achieved when you manage "to pry actor/signifier from character/signified, to defuse realism's narrativity" (1997: viii). This is precisely what George and Martha aim at, to attract the attention of their audience to their gender roles, the subject positions forced on them, and thus to expose the phallic lack and challenge the Symbolic.

Though Nick and Honey, as well as spectators and critics, have difficulty separating George and Martha from the roles they play, the couple begin hinting at their theatrical mission early on in the play. When George and Nick are left alone for the first time in Act I, Nick suggests that the older couple "seem to be having some sort of" a marital problem. George's answer is a clarification of the nature of their relationship: "Martha and I are having . . . nothing. . . . Martha and I are . . . exercising. . . . That's all. . . . We're merely walking what's left of our wits" (2007: 175). The implications of this statement are vivid, that he and Martha are intentionally indulging in the war of the sexes that they forced upon their guests.

As Anne Paolucci has suggested, it is perhaps true to say that Martha has chosen Nick as her, their, victim (2000: 52), but he is not to be a sexual victim. The sexual game, 'Hump the Hostess', is merely a part of the entire show. The victim is actually chosen in a manner more akin to the way in which Jerry chooses his victim in Albee's earlier play, *The Zoo Story* (2007). Peter is at once Jerry's victim, his audience, and his unwitting co-actor in a show planned by Jerry. Peter barely knows what it is all about until almost near the end of the play, and it is only then that he finds out that it has all been done to wake him up. Nick and Honey seem to play the same role in George and Martha's theater.

Davis correctly calls "Get the Guests . . . the game of games" (1994: 212). The more detached Nick and Honey pretend to be, the harder George and Martha try to get them involved. Get the Guests begins the moment Nick admits that, in spite of his previous statements, he finds himself amused by the older couple's "flagellation" of each other (Albee 2007: 215). Act II, tellingly named 'Walpurgisnacht', is more about Nick and Honey than about George and Martha. It begins when George tricks Nick into revealing the deepest secrets of his marriage. George orchestrates their dialogue so skillfully that we may suspect it is not his first time. He could have started his game from the beginning of the play, had he wanted to. But it is only after Nick momentarily lets down his mask of detachment that George begins the real game, as if the newcomer's consent is a necessary part of the ritual. Nick's confession of his interest in the events of the evening allows George to take him to the next level. Nick and Honey, who have previously been merely the audience, are now players in the game.

Albee believes that "it's nice to keep people off balance" to create "dramatic intensity" (qtd in Solomon 2010: 134). Martha and George seem to believe in the same principle. They achieve the desired effect by a sudden reversal of their statements and, indeed, of their roles. Without much logical preparation, Martha shifts in her narratives from the wild young woman who has married the gardener at her college to the obedient daughter whose sole job is to take care of her father, from the dispassionate princess of romance who is to be married to her father's heir to the flauntingly vulgar and loud humorist, from the weak, dependent and psychologically shattered woman to the master of the house with a whip in her hand, from the drunken adulteress who uses her body to help men sleep their way up the academic ladder to a mock version of the virginal woman who has never been pleased by any man other than her husband, from the spiteful humiliating daughter of the president of the college to the passionately loving wife who finds her husband cleverer than other men. This is not to say that Martha has a split personality. If her personality were split into so many fragments, it would have been impossible to find any coherence in her actions. But in all these roles, Martha is clearly Martha, with that playful twinkle one can always imagine in her eyes. By mimicking the various extremes of the possibilities offered by the phallogocentric society to the feminine subject position, Martha violates those gender roles, thus endangering the restricting framework which reduces women to one of these predefined roles. By turning her expected masquerade of femininity into a shape-shifting carnival of masks and games, by turning the night into the witches' Walpurgisnacht, she bewilders her audience and forces them to reconsider the roles she so noncommittally embodies.

The same statement can be made about George, whose narratives range from a modernized version of *Oedipus Rex* to futuristic science fiction. He plays the humiliated husband and the cruel host, the wounded animal and the healing hand, the violent man and the loving husband, the swamp and the god of the evening. He is the bartender and at Martha's command provides the poison to drug their audience into joining their

masquerade of the masquerade, their exaggeratedly theatrical parody of the ideal white middle-class American marriage, to push them to doubt and question their own marriages.

George and Martha never lose sight of their important mission. Even their private conversations are part of the play they are performing, or perhaps rehearsing. While for Nick and Honey “privacy . . . is the acting out of the social roles assigned by the Big Other . . . to prove to the *socius* that they have the kind of normal, healthy relationship it holds up as the ‘ideal’ all must mirror” (Davis 1994: 216), for George and Martha the private and the public are one. In the presence of their guests, Martha tells George, “We’re alone!” (Albee 2007: 235), and even when they actually seem to be alone, they are somehow aware of the fact that they are not. They are never alone and Albee appears to have allowed his characters a relative awareness of this fact: As characters of a play, they are always onstage, before an audience. Therefore, even in parts of the play where the two of them are alone on stage, George and Martha seem to carry on a theatrical version of their life.

Only on rare occasions do they put aside their shape-shifting masks and talk to each other as actors do at a pause in the rehearsal when they are suddenly not the roles they play. An example can be found in Act II. As George pleads with Martha not to say anything about the book he has supposedly written, she asks disappointedly, “What’s the matter with you George? You given up?” (Albee 2007: 238). There is a sudden change in George’s tone when he replies; it is suddenly no longer “*pleading*” but “*calm . . . [and] serious*” (2007: 238, *stage direction*), saying, “No . . . no. It’s just I’ve got to figure out some new way to fight you, Martha. Guerrilla tactics, maybe . . . internal subversion . . . I don’t know. Something” (2007: 238). The tone of this question and answer clearly separates it from the general atmosphere of the rest of its surrounding conversation. It shows an inside knowledge, something Nick and Honey are not aware of and the audience at the theater vaguely suspect. The speakers of these lines are not the alcohol-soaked tormented couple who will tear at each other only a few pages later. They are rather actors in the middle of the play, pausing to evaluate each other’s position to decide their next move, since they do not have a fixed script and need to improvise. Their mimetic mission is obviously pre-planned; they both know what they are involved in. But the details of their show are decided on the spot for maximum effectiveness. George has to stop and think what moves to make next, just as Martha repeatedly changes her plans in response to George’s reactions.

There is no guarantee that any of the stories told by George and Martha are real, or that any of their dialogues express their actual heartfelt sentiments. From the beginning of Act III, Nick and the audience begin to find out that what is going on between George and Martha is deeply and consciously theatricalized. This knowledge casts a shadow of doubt over the validity of their former claims and comments as well. In the third Act, ‘The Exorcism’, George and Martha throw away the seemingly realistic façade of their show, and indulge in confusion with all their might. Early in that Act, Martha reduces the ambitious Nick to a houseboy. Though she expresses disappointment, her tone is more triumphant, since she has been able to prove to Nick that he, too, is a “flop” (Albee 2007: 275), like everybody else. Nick has received an education about the emptiness of the phallic jouissance. But the lesson does not end here. Nick is forced to witness another aspect of George and Martha’s relationship, a mock romantic encounter, so out of place after Martha’s presumed infidelity. At this point, the older couple does not bother to justify their words and actions to Nick, who is already initiated in the game and will be able to find out the meaning of the show on his own if he is attentive enough.

Martha insists that George is wrong in believing that the moon is up though there is actually no need for such an argument since they could easily settle the question by merely looking out. George speaks about the cruise in the Mediterranean with his parents (Albee 2007: 284), the same parents that, it was previously disclosed, he had killed while still a teenager. Nick is quick to point this out. George's reply is the key to the whole play: "Truth or illusion, who knows the difference" (2007: 284). The illusion belongs to the Imaginary. The truth is what the Symbolic claims to offer. But the symbolic as a phallogocentric structure is itself based on 'lack', which it constantly tries to cover up and deny. One is tempted to ask, how valid is the truth that is based on an unacknowledged emptiness? And how far away from truth is the illusion which, though imaginary, has no pretence of being *the* truth? George and Martha know that the truth is based on pretence, and have no fear of exposing this awareness. They take on the mission of "jamming the theatrical machinery [of discourse] itself, of suspending its pretensions to the production of a truth and a meaning that are excessively univocal" (Irigaray 1985b: 78). Once the emptiness of the truth is revealed, it is not easy to tell it from fantasy, and that would make the audience stop to think and reevaluate their own ideas of what is true, or real. That is the whole purpose of the show the older couple keeps performing.

In the final Act, Martha and George are bent on emphasizing the theatricality of their relationship, to make the audience think about their own inadvertently theatrical gender roles. When Nick expresses his belief that George is shattered by what he refers to as Martha's "aimless . . . butchery", Martha accuses him, "you think a man got his back broken 'cause he makes like a clown and walks bent, hunh? Is that *really* all you know?" (Albee 2007: 278). Her contemptuous question, "you always deal in appearances?" (2007: 277), makes it clear that she does not validate what she parades before Nick's eyes as all there is. She knows that this is the masquerade she is reinforcing, but this knowledge also makes her realize, or suspect, that this is not all, that there is something else, something beyond this theater of femininity, family and marriage that appears to be all the Symbolic has to offer.

What joins George and Martha is an enjoyment of confusion and fiction, an attempt to experience 'the beyond' of the phallic structure, the occasional moments of a different kind of jouissance. The kind that is probably similar to Lacan's ambiguous term *the Other jouissance*, the feminine jouissance (Fink 2002: 35). By feminine, Lacan does not mean necessarily pertaining to women. It is called feminine because it is outside the phallic order. Unlike the phallic jouissance, it is the jouissance that "never fails" (Lacan 2006: 59). Lacan does not explain clearly what he means by the feminine jouissance; he only gives the example of the ecstatic passion of the saints (Homer 2005: 104). He regards it as unexplainable because it is beyond the Symbolic. It cannot be captured by the phallogocentric language, and is therefore indefinable.

This is one of the most important differences between Lacan and Irigaray. While Lacan suggests that woman and the feminine are outside language and therefore unrepresentable, Irigaray asserts that the feminine "*has to be*" articulated if we are ever to change the marginality imposed on women by the Symbolic (Homer 2005: 117; emphasis added). She encourages the attempt to manifest the feminine experience, and the feminine jouissance, through language. If woman begins "to play with mimesis", she may be able to "recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (Irigaray 1985b: 76). She would get involved in the "unsettling" of the dominant order, to eventually "rediscover the place of her 'self-affection'" (1985b: 77).

Martha and George's enjoyment of their games is more akin to the feminine kind of jouissance. By assuming the role of the *mimos* and by sarcastic mimicry of the roles they are

actually demanded to play in everyday life, they set themselves apart from the rest of their society. They distinguish themselves as Others, different from the rest of the society which they hope to enlighten as well. Although their intentional otherness causes pain and pressure in their lives (since they have to fight against that which they embody), it is also a source of pleasure. In their private conversations, both George and Martha confess to having experienced moments of a different kind of *jouissance*, fleeting moments which are nevertheless strong enough to remind them of the existence of the beyond. For instance, near the end of Act II, in the middle of their outburst over the phallic lack that dominates their lives, both George and Martha refer to moments in their relationship “when maybe we could have cut through all this crap”, “when we could . . . come together” (Albee 2007: 261).

Their games, their twice theatricalized masquerade, challenge the phallic standards of logic, coherence and closure, and replace it with what Irigaray regards as “the feminine imaginary”, which is characterized by “multiplicity, fluidity, and flux” (Homer 2005: 117). Indeed, poststructuralists such as Lacan and Irigaray associate the concept of play with the feminine (Hall 1993: 78). That is why Martha must be regarded as the main player in *Virginia Woolf*. She is the one who changes the rules, who keeps the game fluid. This can partly explain her long speech in Act III, when she tells Nick the ‘sad’ story of George and Martha (Albee 2007: 277). Apart from the play-acting which is an indispensable part of everything Martha says, this speech is significant in another way as well. Here Martha decidedly tells Nick that what he has seen and what he will see is a game. She also implicitly reveals the reason for part of the sadness that lies in her marriage. It is true that George “keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I [Martha] can change the rules” (2007: 277), that he keeps adjusting himself to the fluidity and multiplicity of their married life, but he is not as flexible and as capable of shape-shifting as she is. Martha laments that George has “come to rest” in his love for her (2007: 277). She finds it ‘hurting, and insulting’ that he has accepted her *as she is*, regarding it as some sort of giving up. To Martha, the feminine mission is one of becoming, not being. She cannot be loved as she is because she is not one thing. She is the woman Irigaray describes in her *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985b). She is the *mimos* whose job is to mix “order and . . . disorder, reason and madness” (Diamond 1997: v).

George’s decision at the end of the play to kill off their fictional son is not so much a new phase in the game as a signal to show that the game is over. His excuse is Martha’s having “mentioned him [the son] to someone else” (Albee 2007: 307). The child fantasy belongs to the realm of the feminine imaginary, where plurality and lack of closure are actually values. By *speaking* of the child, Martha has presented it to and through ‘language’, in the same manner as Irigaray demands. But George seems unable to tolerate the tension this creates. Although, from the beginning of the play, he participates actively and voluntarily in their games of phallic destruction and subversive mimicry, he seems unwilling to risk *everything*. He is the one who gives up first under the pressure that is about to break them both. He destroys their son, the most important feminine fiction their marriage has nurtured, to stop the game before *it* destroys them both. By killing the son, he reminds Martha that he is, or perhaps they are, still subjects of the Symbolic and cannot immediately reject *all* of its principles without destroying themselves. By destroying the fiction, George brings closure to the previously fluid narrative. He briefly assumes the role of the patriarch, the god with whom resides the power of life and death. As Winkel explains, George sacrifices the son as “a scapegoat” in a “ritualistic performance” that, in Julia Kristeva’s opinion, “allows for a return to . . . societal norms” (Winkel 2008: 148).

It is true that, in doing so, George facilitates the assimilation to the Symbolic, but the important question here seems to be the attitude in which this assimilation takes place. Though many critics read this destruction of the illusion-son as a kind of happy ending (see Hirsch 1978: 32; Roudané 2005: 40), such an attitude undermines the whole purpose of the play. It is not imaginable that Albee, who has been criticizing many of the values of his society the whole time, would end his play by a celebration of patriarchy. The ending of the play does not represent what is *desired*. It has the urgency of a warning and the touching dignity of a tragedy. It does not show what should be, but what is. It decidedly demonstrates the crushing effect of the phallogentric order on the feminine imaginary. Remembering what the Virginia Woolf song has signified throughout the play, we can say that the fear of Virginia Woolf is in a way the fear of the death of fantasy, the fear of the oppressive power of the Symbolic and of the limited gender roles it offers to feminine and masculine subjects. By admitting that she is afraid of Virginia Woolf, Martha implies that she is afraid of being reduced to the mask, that she is afraid of the masquerade if she is not to perform it with her own rules.

5. Conclusion

Albee's play, on the whole, is an examination of the capacity of the patriarchal social order to be played with. Martha and George are conscious of the fact that they are actors of the roles that are assigned to them, aware of the possibilities that their theatrical existence offers them. Martha, specifically, consciously theatricalizes her own body, her words, her role (or roles), and her relationship with the other (absent or present) characters. She indulges deeply in the deliberate mimicry of feminine roles which are, according to Irigaray, themselves nothing but mimicry, and by doing so she fights against being reduced to mere mimesis. Martha's life seems to be a political undertaking, with the self-assigned mission of fighting the phallic authority in the 'one path' proposed by Irigaray: theater.

This subversive mimicry becomes a way of uncovering the processes by which language and culture annihilate difference—and femininity with it—to reinforce sameness as the only possible mindset, to reduce the feminine to the Other of the masculine. By doing so, it manages to open a space—in and through the dramatic medium—in which difference can be imagined and experienced. Although *Virginia Woolf* is not concerned with giving a definition of the feminine difference (since any definition would be relatively reductive and static), it delineates possible potentials.

Though the play's ending relinquishes the possibility of immediate success in changing the Symbolic, it is not completely hopeless. All George's and Martha's efforts have not been for nothing. Their performance, their theatrical mimicry, fulfills its primary purpose of affecting their audience. George and Martha release forces that continue their mission independently, both inside and outside the play. Nick and Honey, as well as the spectators in the theater, have no choice but to go over their own lives, ideas and beliefs, a reassessment which would hopefully change a few basic assumptions about women, men and marriage, and result in their admitting the validity of women's struggle to carve within language a space of their own, a space for the representation of feminine desire.

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