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Edward Albee's Martha and George: A psychoanalytic interpretation of a dysfunctional couple

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Abstract

This paper ponders and reflects upon the troubled personalities and traits of the dysfunctional couple (Martha and George) portrayed in Edward Albee's 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' through a Freudian lens. There is a separate analysis of both the characters individually followed by a comprehensive evaluation of the subsequent effect that the characters have on each other as a couple.

George's character is explored and his flaws as a human being are uncovered in order to understand his failure to perform the roles expected out of him conventionally of a son, husband or even as an imaginary father to an unconceived child.

Whereas Martha, who suffered from traumatic emotional experiences during childhood is reflected upon to understand her phallic fixation, unbalanced personality and unresolved sexual conflicts all of which has negativity affected her personality.

As a couple they make sure unconsciously that none of them is ever able to ride out of the storm that their union is.

Keywords: Edward Albee's Martha, George, psychoanalytic interpretation, dysfunctional couple

Introduction

Synopsis of the play

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1962) ^[1], is Edward Albee's widely appreciated and critiqued post war play that is cited as a 'powerful contemporary dramaturgical art of the twentieth century' (Rakhees, 2019) ^[2]. He paints a gloomy and bleak picture of the shambling and trodden institute of marriage in contemporary American society, where a negative entanglement of roles and personalities seeps through the happy facade of 'The American Dream' (Blum, 1969) ^[4]. The play dramatically exposes the troubled marriages and unhappy lives of the two representative couples: George, 'the flop', 'emasculated' husband and Martha, the 'dominant', 'wanton wife' as well as Nick, the 'narcissistic', 'dispassionate' husband and Honey, the 'mousy', 'oversensitive' wife.

George, the professor of History and Martha, the daughter of the college president. are the culmination of modern despair and of the scaring absent love and passion in relationships. The couple is childless and 'suffers from many psychological problems that are detrimental to their marriage' (Blum, 1969) ^[4]. Their hellish marital relationship is a manifestation of their individual pasts and a collective present together where their aspirations, beliefs and ghoulish twists of personalities are tested and brought forward.

The play opens up with an odd hour cocktail party, to which Nick and Honey are over zealously invited by Martha, the hour hand turns and after a few swings of the drink the couples engage in a funny and cruel series of fun and games, George and Martha wage a cold war of manners and intentions which exposes the illusive life they live and their 'emotional and biological sterility'. Their conflict uncovers the failing marriage of Nick and Honey who hide beneath a façade of an intimate relationship.

Martha - The lost girl in the cover of an old woman (Reversed Oedipus Complex)

Albee depicts Martha as a middle-aged woman in her fifties. She is 'a large, boisterous woman, looking somewhat younger, ample, but not fleshy.' She is 'coarse, obscene depraved, and voluptuous'. And 'a spoiled and self-indulgent, wilful, dirty-minded and liquor-ridden' lady who also happens to be 'a devil with language' (p.11).

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Yet she is 'intelligent', 'educated and keen', but 'her intellectual gifts are roofed with a brassy, aggressive, and vulgar facade'.

This is the 'repugnant feminine' (Rakhees, 2019) [2] description of a woman who suffers from phallic-fixation, disruption of psychosexual development and Electra Complex. She is the subverted feminine personality who is the 'destructive', 'Voluptuous', 'wicked', 'monster', 'sub-human monster', 'Monstre!' female (Albee, 1962) [1].

The daddy's girl, who is emotionally trapped in the history of her lonely childhood.

Had always tried with futility during her entire childhood for the love attention of her father. She is fearful and wary of loneliness and abandonment: "I am afraid George" (p.129). The Origin of this sympathy invoking fear has its roots in her troublesome childhood. She lost her mother quite early in childhood and grew up with her father.

"Mommy died early, see, and I sort of grew up with Daddy... I went away to school, and stuff, but I more or less grew up with him" (p.43).

She continually expresses her fondness for her father to Nick and Honey saying, "I admired that guy! I worshipped him... I absolutely worshipped him. I still do." (p.43). She obeys her father's commands in hope to attain his love. For example, she invites Nick and Honey to a cocktail party because it was father who asked her to be kind to them:

George:... But why in God's name are they coming over here now?

Martha [in a so-there voice]: Because Daddy said we should be nice to them, that's why. GEORGE [defeated]: Oh, Lord. Martha:...Daddy said we should be nice to them.

GEORGE: But why now? It's after two o'clock in the morning, and...

Martha: Because Daddy said we should be nice to them! (p.5).

Martha's source of power and her reins around George's neck are because of her relationship to the President of the college (her father). She considers her father as the Supreme figurehead of achievements whom no one can surpass or even come close to. A Closer look at Martha's dialogues point out the admiration she has for him in a way that highlights her feminine Oedipus attitudes:

Martha: Daddy knows how to run things (p.14).

Martha: Daddy was on this physical fitness kick... Daddy's always admired physical fitness... says a man is only part brain... he has a body, too' and it's his ability to keep both of them up... Daddy got the idea all the men should learn how to box... self-defense... Daddy's a strong man... And he asked George to box with him. Aaaaaaand... George didn't want to... probably something about not wanting to bloody-up his meal ticket... Anyway, George said he didn't want to, and

Daddy was saying, 'Come on, young man... What sort of son-in-law are you?'...and stuff like that (p.30).

However, Martha hardly ever gets her father's affection and love. She projects her need for love and a role model in another man and failed relationships, Martha first marries a lowly gardener, but when her father, the president of the college, found out that she married beneath her class, he annulled that marriage. She remarks: "Daddy and Miss Muff got together... put an end to that... real

quick...annulled" (p.42). So, Martha returns to her Daddy's home as a hostess and a caregiver:

"I came back here and sort of sat around for a while. I was hostess for Daddy and I took care of him" (p.43).

Martha is devoid of love and affection that every person seeks in order to obtain her father's affection and respect, she marries George who works in academia 'and is also preoccupied with History like her father', nursing hopes that he could fill the void and her father's place as the president of university. She directs her entire attention and devotion to George and exerts negative and undue efforts to make him 'a replica of her father's character'. Martha explains her reasons for marrying George in her conversation with Nick:

Martha: I was sort of on the lookout, for... prospects with the new men. An heir-apparent.

And I got the idea, about then, that I'd marry into college... Daddy had a sense of history... or... continuation. history... and he'd always had it in the back of his mind to... groom someone to take over... some time, when he quit. George "came into... the History Department" (p. 43-44).

However she ends up as a 'castrated object' (Blum, 1969) [4]. As, George does not nurture her ambitions for he is not the high-flyer that Martha hopes he would be. In fact, Martha's marriage to George is obviously driven by a hidden unconscious desire to fulfill her emotional and sexual needs. This portrays her unconscious sexual motives and traumatic child self. Martha lacks a strong sense of self worth and a positive self-image, she wants George as a harbinger of hope and love to her.

In her Unconscious she believes that George will someday propel her to a position higher in her father's eyes. 'Her main agenda is to marry a man who could make her look remarkable and vital in her father's eyes' (Rakhees, 2019) [2]. But, Martha's dream is more significant and substantial to her than a real person, George, who seems to have a different plan for the future.

He misunderstands the little scared girl hiding behind the old viciously for cover: George:... we get misunderstood Martha, the good-hearted girl underneath the barnacles, the little Miss that the touch of kindness 'd bring to bloom again (p.84).

'One of the psychosexual stages that plays a vital role in forming an individual's personality is the phallic stage which paves the way for the individual's sexual maturity and his/her normal heterosexual life. Throughout this stage, boys are unconsciously attracted to their mothers and experience Oedipus Complex while girls have sexual desires for their fathers.' (Rakhees, 2019) [2] They feel penis envy and see their mothers as rivals, due to the Electra Complex. In order to resolve this complex, the girl is taught about socially acceptable and unacceptable relationships.

Freud (1953) expounds that fixation at the phallic stage develops a phallic character.

Martha has developed unconscious sexual attraction to her father. She idolized her father as the object of her desires and reveres him as a figure of strength in her life. She keeps on hunting for a father figure in her future spouses who had to either look like her dad physically or match his stance professionally. Martha represses her affection towards her father and seeks a more socially acceptable sexual relationship by marrying George, an academic who resembles her father professionally. Indeed, Martha finds alternative sources of her phallic obsession and libidinal

drive not only in George, but also in other adulterous relationships.

By choosing George as an object of affection, Martha intends to reproduce the archetypal father-figure through him. However, George outright refuses to become a way of fulfillment of Martha's ambitions, and this affects her psyche, causes her a psychological disorder and renders their marriage dysfunctional.

George - The emasculated patriarch (Repressed traumas)

Placing it unfiltered, George is the classical example of a man subdued and dominated by his energetic wife. As a man, on a social gender spectrum, he hardly fits into the conventional box of masculinity. George's feeble character is marked by Martha's nagging criticism of his impotence, sterility and professional frustration.

'He appears docile and subservient to Martha who relentlessly ridicules and insults him'. (Rakhees, 2019) George puts up with what is "intolerable" and is too "kind" and too understanding "which is beyond [Martha's] comprehension" (p.103). 'George is an underachiever, hen-pecked, '(Rakhees, 2019) [2] 'cluck' (p.1), a 'bog', 'swampy' (p. 27), and a 'bastard' (p.32). He considers himself a failure since he is never able to fulfil Martha's high fetched expectations of him.

George harbors a low self-esteem because he isn't exactly the incarnation of the ideal muscular physique and Casanova of the traditional American male as he himself earlier admits: "I've always been lean ... I haven't put on five pounds" (p.18). He fades into the background...gets lost in the cigarette smoke" (p.17).' George is passive and masochistic '(Rakhees, 2019) [2] because he submits to his wife, playing the role of the victim perfectly well. Martha tends to think that he even finds pleasure in being ridiculed and humiliated by her all these years:

You can stand it!! you married me for it!!... don't you know it, even

Yet?... My arm has gotten tired whipping you... For twenty-three years (p.80).

MARTHA: You moving on the principle the worm turns? Well, the worm part's O.K'... 'cause that fits you fine' but the turning part.. unh-unh! You're in a straight line, buddy-boy, and it doesn't lead anywhere.... except maybe the grave (p.89).

George's problems like Martha's blossomed long before he had even met her. Parallel to Martha, George is emotionally frozen in a troubled childhood. His personal history and family are painted in his first novel which he calls "my memory book" (p.74). The novel emerges as a symbol of secondary means to release the trauma that he has been battling since teenage years. George has birthed a sad novel about a high-school boy who gets his mother and father killed by mistake. Upon reading the manuscript, his father-in-law forbids him to publish it, "if you respect your position here, young man... You will just withdraw this manuscript" (p.72). George tells Martha's Daddy that the novel is based on a "truth" that has happened to him: "No, Sir, this isn't a novel at all ... this is the truth...this really happened ... To Me!" (p.73). He feels like a failure as a scholar and his sexually impotent husband. George's accidental murder story varies every time he relates it though the basic details remain the same. George inscribed the crime to a fifteen-

year-old boy alleging that "this boy... had killed his mother with a shotgun completely accidentally, without even an unconscious motivation'

In Freudian terms, Repression is a defense mechanism whereby the person drives away all traumatic memories, unacceptable desires into the unconscious because of the demands of the superego (Thurschwell, 2000). George buries the scarring memories of his parents' accidents in the unconscious to later spurt them out in the form of fiction. The accidents were so traumatic to George that they made him emotionally crippled and locked him in an infant like stage:

GEORGE: Do you know what it is with insane people? Do you?... the quiet ones? NICK: No.

GEORGE: They don't change... they don't grow old.

NICK: They must.

GEORGE: Well, eventually, probably, yes. But they don't... in the usual sense. They maintain a ... a firm-skinned serenity... the... the under-use of everything leaves them... quite whole (p.53).

The narration of his parents' murder that reflect the internal world of George's troubled mind and his lonely childhood is charged with symbols. The evening is a symbol of the suppressed dark side of George's psyche which is triggered through "the liquor lobby". He defines the darkness as "a fine time for the crooks and the cops", which sets loose the crooked desires and primitive urges of the Id in spite of the "prohibition" by the superego. 'The gin mill, i.e., the ego, becomes controlled by the gangster father'(Rakhees, 2019) [2], i.e., the Id where the evil demons and psychic energies lie in the dark. In the story of the parents' killing, the young boy seeks asylum in a "closed world of illusion'(Biggsby, 1967, p.259)

In Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud (1905) describes joking as an outlet for the release of piled up thoughts. He claims that "the thought seeks to wrap itself in a joke" (p. 74). George employs a sarcastic, sophisticated and rhetorical language, a sharp tongue and verbal brilliance. He plays with words and takes pleasure in intellectual bantering to guard his beaten down ego and ever present anxiety. He has a perverted sense of humour and his verbal humour is a playful blend of witticism, puns and irony.

George: There was a telegram, Martha. MARTHA: Show it to me! Show me the telegram GEORGE: I ate it.

NICK: Do you think that's the way to treat her at a time like this? Making an ugly goddamn a joke like that? (p.124).

George spitefully views Martha as an incestuous mother who would try to sleep with her imaginary son. Assuming that the imaginary son is real, George sees the imaginary child as a rival who would fight with him to win his mother's affection. George accuses Martha of the sexual molestation of the illusory child

" Our son... couldn't stand you fiddling at him all the time, breaking into his bedroom with your kimono flying, fiddling at him all the time, with your liquor breath on him, and your hands all over his" (p.65).

George: He's a nice kid, really, in spite of his home life; I mean, most kids grow up neurotic, what with Martha here carrying on the way she does: sleeping till four in the P.M., climbing all over the poor bastard, trying to break the

bathroom door down to wash him in the tub when he's sixteen (p.114-15).

George subverts the roles from the classical tale of Oedipus Rex and kills the fantasy child before the latter murders him. Freud illustrates that the Id originates from the incestuous infantile desire for the parent of opposite sex. The task of the superego is to prevent the incest and murder. 'It functions as the patron saint of moral and ethical values in general'. (Rakhees, 2019) [2]. 'George knows perfectly well that the son thing is only a game he plays with Martha' (Rakhees, 2019) [2], he feels that this son has challenged his authority, manhood and sexuality. The imaginary son has to disappear if George wants his authority restored and acknowledged therefore he mercilessly killed him by the end of the play.

Martha and George: the spiteful couple

In relationships, it's common to witness struggle for power and authority, which sometimes evolves in the form of an evil manifestation of childhood traumas and the play of Id, ego and superego. But spurning and projection of unresolved traumas of childhood and adulthood throws relations into the hellish fire of hatred. Both Martha and George truly bring out the worst in each other. George's actions are never sexualized which means he is the opposite what Martha is. She is under control of the id which she seeks pleasure by using her sexuality as a tool however George's id is oppressed by the superego. He is afraid of the outer society which also can be seen in his fear of mentioning 'the bid'. It is a typical Yin and Yang situation that is created around Martha and George.

At the end of the play, when George asks, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf..." Martha replies as a way of accepting the end 'I... am...George... I... am....' (Albee 242; Act 3) it shows a deep need that they have for each other after their illusions were shattered and traumas confronted.

Conclusion

Albee's excellent use of psychoanalysis on his characters renders them a remarkable constitution and its manifestation. But the characters also forces us to ponder on What makes our lives 'normal' and 'abnormal'? Why do we desire a typical happy family? The answers to these questions lie in the Freudian conception of human mind and instincts as seen in the characters of Martha and George. Albee weaves his theatre of Absurd with a deep sense of psychology of his characters.

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