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The Metaphysics of Pronoun Confusion in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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ABSTRACT

The lineage of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) may be drawn from several important bloodlines, the two strongest being the American Realism of Eugene O'Neill in his plays *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and less realistic works of Europe from playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and especially Harold Pinter, whose *The Birthday Party* (1957) sets a similar tone of unconvincing and subversive backstory that Albee uses to great effect and thematic purpose in his own celebrated masterpiece. The classical traditions of stalwart categories like Metaphysics gave way in the twentieth century to a more linguistic-based philosophy, and Albee's play replicates this shift in a meaningful way.

The intellectual level of puns and allusions points to the elevated education level of the characters. The reality reflected in the stories told (out of school, so to speak) points to a fundamental question of the nature of reality itself, since any false story necessarily stands in for the truth of what actually happened. Thus, Albee calls into question metaphysical reality versus illusion or fiction at almost every twist in the plot. The concreteness of George and Martha's invented son in their own minds merely emphasizes the extent to which truth has been supplanted by the conjured alternative reality they have shared for more than a score of years. The substitution of a weaker "reality" for the stark truth that they might suffer through calls to mind a parallel linguistic substitution: the pronoun as a stand-in for an established person.

While absence is a theme explored to some degree throughout, the larger concept of standing in for an absent object, which task the pronoun performs, occurs more obliquely when George and the son are confused. Albee moves his drama of drunken academic games from the particulars of the two couples into the realm of metaphysical questioning of reality by imbuing the conversations with the motif of pronoun confusion. This confusion-and-correction cycle allows the characters to explore (willingly or otherwise) the nature of truth and illusion, where an invented reality stands in for the awful existential reality that pains them. Truth and illusion: we must know the difference, or at least carry on as though we did.

KEYWORDS

Albee, miscommunication, pronouns, modernism, metaphysics, American drama

"Don't you tell me words."
—Martha, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Albee 63)

In a 1955 article about moral categorization in philosophical arguments, "The Case of the Obliging Stranger," William H. Gass concludes a hypothetical scenario with the observation, "Something has been done wrong. Or something wrong has been done" (193). The value that comes from such chiasmatic structure enlightens a motivic tech-nique that Edward Albee employs in his 1962 masterpiece, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* namely the confusion of terms—especially pronouns—leading to a similar pair of questions, "Was something wrong said? Or was something said wrong?" Whether a character simply corrects another character's misspeaking, or that character's meaning, forms the basis of this paper. While this central question arises from a philosophical and linguistic/semiotic starting point, the most compelling philosophical questions emerge as one examines the interplay these examples of *parole* have with metaphysics itself. Since metaphysics operates within several philosophical traditions, it naturally takes on several divergent meanings, but here I use it in the simple-sense questioning of what is real, what exists, and how this knowledge helps us approach a kind of Truth. The classical traditions of stalwart categories like Metaphysics gave way in the twentieth century to a more linguistic-based philosophy, and Albee's play replicates this shift in a meaningful way.

The lineage of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (which opened 13 October 1962) may be drawn from several important bloodlines, the two strongest being the American Realism of Eugene O'Neill in his plays *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and less realistic works of Europe from playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and especially Harold Pinter, whose *The Birthday Party* (1957) sets a similar tone of unconvincing and subversive backstory that Albee uses to great effect and thematic purpose in his own celebrated masterpiece.

Moreover, Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884) and O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (written 1939/first performed 1946) both present those who live within safe illusions and the comfort it allows. *The Wild Duck* presents the realistic story of Hjalmar Ekdal, whose estranged friend returns and, in the hope of setting the record straight and curing Hjalmar's life-illusion that his daughter is his own, ruins the man's life and family. An intriguing play, for it postulates that in some cases, ignorance may be bliss, especially when it actually performs a noble service.

Similarly, the denizens of the bar in O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* drink to forget the awful truths of their lives. When the main character, Hickey, enters and preaches the gospel of breaking free of "pipe dreams" and living only in the truth, the barflies initially respond positively; when Hickey turns out not to be practicing what he preaches, the bar's customers return to their heavy drinking. The connection to the imaginary child's comforting effect on George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* makes these earlier plays significant as Modernist precursors.

Even John Osborne's revolutionary and realistic *Look Back in Anger* from 1958 presents a correlative motif in the main characters' adoption of (imaginary) furry characters to hide behind as a coping mechanism. In this watershed "Angry Young Man" play (a label for a type depicted in Osborne's play), the main characters, Jimmy Porter and his wife, Alison, are finally able to interact civilly toward each other whilst taking the roles of timid, furry animals, speaking in childish tones, and using them as stand-ins for the loving parts of themselves. Building on these realist models, Albee in *Who's Afraid?* seems to argue not that living in an illusion is the problem, but that living in a *confusion* of truth and illusion is the problem.

Reactions to Realism (i.e., Surrealism, Expressionism, etc.) seemed to implore the theatre to remember the profound magic of the inexplicable and the ineffable. Even Anton Chekhov includes an enigmatic string-snapping sound cue in the realistic masterpiece *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), marking a technical need for symbol or metaphor in the context of the realistically portrayed Russian generational decline. Perhaps the so-called Theater of the Absurd created a new kind of illusion since the Realistic theater had done away with the illusion on stage by making the theatrical illusion as "kitchen sink" as possible. Albee does not probe the nature of reality in a broad, direct, or classically metaphysical context (cf. Calderón de la Barca's 1636 *Life Is a Dream*), but in the reality of this couple, George and Martha, as they have attempted to create a life together through games with rules they themselves concoct.

Albee's characters participate in this series of games, many of which revolve around either wordplay or the veracity of various statements, remembrances, and even the existence of George and Martha's son (an ontological question that forms the central dramatic question). Interestingly, Albee lists the cast not as "Cast" or "*Dramatis Personae*," but as "The Players." Speaking of the cast, and because Albee is often consigned to the Theatre of the Absurd movement in twentieth-century dramatic literature, it may be significant that in the original draft of the play, Nick is not named, but instead left as "Dear" in the text, partnered with Honey (Bottoms 17). "Dear and Honey" certainly have an absurdist ring to them, even when compared to the established "George and Martha" (Washington) of the older pair. So, when Albee actually assigns a name to Nick—reportedly after Nikita Khrushchev (see Holtan 47 and Shea, among others)— it may very well be that he wished the play to be anchored in a more solid reality, a

level of naturalism, than the audience might assume, given the more whimsical labels of the first draft. Still, “Nick” is never spoken in the play: he remains “dear” throughout to Honey.

Significantly, too, George and Martha’s child is never named in the play, although a great deal of comic mischief arises from the avoidance by the older couple (or simply the mischievous playwright) to name him. Consider this seemingly innocent exchange between Honey and George:

> GEORGE: . . . Now, take our son. . . .
>
> HONEY: (*strangely*) Who?
>
> GEORGE: Our son. . . . Martha’s and my little joy. (213)

The ambiguity of “We” in English plays tricks here, as inclusive of the listener (is George suggesting a son with Honey?) or exclusive and referencing a group to which only the speaker belongs. George clarifies, but not before Honey asks (“*strangely*” according to the dialogue direction), “Who?” How delicious is this *strangely* here! Albee seems to be letting Honey feel the odd truth that the son has never been named to her, and offer a deep desire for the answer to “Who?”—what is your son’s NAME? Of course, in performance, her question could simply be chalked up to drunken inattention in the moment, which would cheapen the profundity that Albee absolutely demands in his “*strangely.*” Finally, as a rather telling parapraxis, George calls him their “little joy,” which continues the running gag of the vague age and size of the imaginary son to be sure, but here with the added diminution of the joy the son brings to the present circumstances.

The unnamed college—where the two men teach and Martha’s father reigns as president—only adds to the elliptical nature of the discourse. Albee does have George state the town name, though, New Carthage—a rather cheeky joke at the expense of the losers of the Punic Wars, which George also alludes to at the beginning of this self-deprecating monologue: “When I was sixteen and going to prep school, during the Punic Wars, a bunch of us used to go into New York on the first day of vacation. . . .” (94-5).

The intellectual level of puns and allusions points to the elevated education level of the characters, certainly, but the way they proffer the fun of the title pun or George’s early declension of “Good, better, best, bested” (32) lays a foundation for less entertaining—and more pointed—wordplay that involves errors and corrections. Ultimately, the two types of games, which I will conveniently label performative (for simple wordplay) and constative (for explorations of truth) intermingle in ways that underscore the play’s overarching plot and themes.

The reality reflected in the stories told (out of school, so to speak) points to a fundamental question of the nature of reality itself, since any false story necessarily stands in for the truth of what actually happened. Thus, Albee calls into question metaphysical reality versus illusion or fiction at almost every twist in the plot. The concreteness of George and Martha's invented son in their own minds merely emphasizes the extent to which truth has been supplanted by the conjured alternative reality they have shared for more than a score of years. The substitution of a weaker "reality" for the stark truth through which they might suffer calls to mind a parallel linguistic substitution: the pronoun as a stand-in for an established person. When Martha challenges Nick—"You always deal in appearances? . . . you don't see anything, do you?" (190)—she reinforces the idea that appearance presupposes presence, something from which the sign/pronoun allows escape.

Starting with an object such as a cow the existence of that animal standing in our midst would be beyond question, but one may find having a cow available (or a particular cow) inconvenient. And so, we create the noun "cow" to stand-in for the animal being discussed. Once we have established the animal in our discussion, we may revert to the pronoun "she" to stand in for the actual noun because of the clear referent. We have moved several stages away from the flesh-and-blood animal, and we invite confusion at every subsequent level of abstraction. The idea of acting as a place holder for the object in question, the primary function of the pronoun, shares its role with the zero in mathematics; it is not a number, but merely a place marker, or as Martha regards George, "you're a blank, a cipher . . . a zero" (17). This linguistic abstraction echoes the Modernist obsession with visual abstraction and theatrical, alienating abstraction. Albee's skill with language even manages to employ the word "blank" in this description, perhaps a reference (Freudian slip?) to the infertility that undergirds the problem.

It is this very confusion of pronoun and antecedent that fuels the conflict at the core of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*[1] critics, readers, and audiences have all attempted to explain the elitist pun in the title, British author Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), which confounds the title of a song from Disney's animated classic *Three Little Pigs* (1933), "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" This focus on this play on words ignores (for our present purposes at least) the huge relative pronoun confusion behind the "Who?" of the title. In a way, Albee points to the importance of this original pronoun confusion that sets off the play through its title and subsequent singing in the first scene with the guests:

> MARTHA: Ha, ha ha, HA! (*To HONEY and NICK*) Hey; hey!
>
> (*Sings, conducts with her drink in her hand. HONEY joins in toward the end*)

[1] According to imdb.com, Albee stated that he got the title from scrawled graffiti in a New York City tavern's bathroom.

Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf,
Virginia Woolf,
Virginia Woolf,
Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf.
(*Martha and Honey laugh; Nick smiles*) (25).[2]

Albee reinforces this core question of identity by having Martha herself answer the seemingly rhetorical question in the last lines of the play: "I . . . am . . . George . . . I am" (242). Thus, the title represents the play in microcosm as a sleight-of-hand leading to audience fascination with the witty, powerful, allusive games, while slyly inserting the very question of meaning behind that ambiguous initial relative pronoun.

Mistakes of meaning engendered by pronoun confusion contribute to the fundamental questions of truth and illusion. Indeed, the truth or falsity of the character's statements can be reframed as questions of constative vs. performative utterances, so that the question of reality has to compete with the completeness and skill of the speaker to move beyond the verbal pyrotechnics of the various games.

In the earliest examples of pronoun confusion Martha relates that, in the movie she cannot recall, Bette Davis is "married to Joseph Cotten or something," to which George responds, "some*body*" (4-5). The textual direction to emphasize the *-body* shows that George is correcting with a purpose: thematically, the object of discussion is a human being; the precision and clarity of thought that George demands from Martha in this rather innocuous correction points to further identification of George as teacher, as pedant at times, and his later admonition that in this late hour and (even later) with all the drinking, he needs Martha "a little alert" (208).

George interrogates Martha in the opening scene concerning the guests, and practically asks for the referent to Martha's vague descriptions of the younger couple: "Who's 'What's-their-name'?" (9) She does not substantiate the young couple by answering with their names. Once the guests arrive, George fixes his sights on his rival, Nick. He engages in wordplay designed to diagnose Nick's skill level in game playing, especially of the verbal variety. One early pass takes this form of referent confusion to task:

George: What made you decide to be a teacher?

Nick: Oh . . . well, the same things that . . . uh . . . motivated you, I imagine.

George: What were they?

[2] Evidently Disney did not allow their song to be used in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (on stage or in the film), so the melody to "Here We Go 'Round the Mulberry Bush" was used (imdb.com).

> NICK: Pardon?
>
> GEORGE: I said, what were they? What were the things that motivated me?
>
> NICK: Well . . . I'm sure I don't know. (31)

If the two cannot agree on the ground rules in common for faculty games, Nick particularly is in for a long night. A moment later, Albee brings in a vague antecedent on George's part to set the trap for Nick once more:

> GEORGE: You like it here?
>
> NICK: Yes . . . it's . . . it's fine.
>
> GEORGE: I mean the University.
>
> NICK: Oh . . . I thought you meant. . . .
>
> GEORGE: Yes, I can see you did. (31-2)

Note the use of "meant" to underscore not just verbal confusion, but confusion of intent and fundamental meaning.

Nick lashes out at George in the young academic's first attempt at understanding and explaining the reality he encounters in the late-night bombast that George and Martha have wrought:

> NICK (*Snapping it out*): All right . . . what do you want me to say? Do you want me to say it's funny, so you can contradict me and say it's sad? or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say no, it's funny. You can play that damn little game any way you want to, you know! (33)

Note the vague yet universally applicable use of "it" in the whole of this speech. At first glance, Nick seems to be referencing a specific antecedent (how he takes George's "Good, Better, Best, Bested" declension), but the pronoun can pretty much sum up any of the games foisted upon the younger couple on this night. Significantly, Nick is singled out as a seeker of meaning—and with it perhaps a modicum of truth—from the night, culminating in his comprehension of the primal nature of George and Martha's need to create a son.

A more pointed form of unclear antecedent confusion, again linked to identity and the changing nature of the reality of George and Martha's home, occurs a few times in the play. At first the example, as above, seems innocuous, but as the play unfolds, the confusion adds more layers of thematic material as well.

> GEORGE: Martha is a remarkable woman. I would imagine she weighs around a hundred and ten.
>
> NICK: Your . . . wife . . . weighs . . . ?

GEORGE: No, no, my boy. Yours! My wife is Martha.

NICK: Yes . . . I know.

GEORGE: If you were married to Martha, you would know what it means. (36)

Note the absence of any dialogue direction or pause in the first line to indicate George is switching back to Honey as the subject pronoun. He simply pushes along with full knowledge that his young rival will be lost. Note also the repeated use of "mean" to emphasize the intentional meaning of words and names throughout, since in metaphysical terms Meaning has to come before Truth. In these examples, meaning is corrected at the expense of Nick's ability to keep up with the conversation. In fact, it may be said that George and Martha know their set of antecedents, so their elliptical and pronominal relationship is indecipherable to the younger couple and, by extension, other outsiders.

Not all corrections are demeaning, though. In a relatively late and humane moment, George corrects Honey's "I peel labels" with the understanding and compassionate, "We all peel labels." Of course, George then proceeds to set up his next attack from this revelation (212-13). Honey is not George's rival, but Nick and Martha both challenge George in their own ways, and must be dealt with accordingly. Honey remains, more or less an ally to George, as Nick and Martha sometimes seem to pair up throughout. Recall that George goes to Honey for corroboration of the truth and even the existence of the telegram:

GEORGE: (*Snapping his fingers at HONEY*) Did I eat the telegram or did I not?

HONEY: Yes; yes, you ate it. I watched . . . I watched you . . . you . . . you ate it all down.

GEORGE: . . . like a good boy.

HONEY: . . . like a . . . g-g-g-good . . . boy. Yes. (234-5)[3]

George's age and maturity level seem as fluid as the imaginary son's, another thematic mash-up. Honey's emotional response to the pain that George feels in relating the news and Martha's in hearing it seems akin to the catharsis that Aristotle cites as the *telos* of effective tragedy: more remarkable still that Honey's reaction of pity and fear replicate the audience's first hearing of George's story. But what of Martha, who presumably knows the story of their son (just as Greek audiences already knew the myths dramatized by the poets of their day)? Just so with Greek tragedies, George's story builds on the myth to create pity and fear even in those familiar with the story—but with an unexpected but inevitable twist that makes the new fiction a contrivance born of the blending of truth and illusion.

[3] According to Kathleen Turner, Albee deleted this passage in the most recent productions to add to the ambiguity of the story George tells.

Just as the guests are primed with liquor for the sake of the game playing, the audience of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is primed by early examples of unclear antecedents for the crucial pronoun confusion of the drama: THE SON.

When George admonishes Martha not to start on the "bit" about the son, this clever wordplay on Albee's part brings two meanings with this one word, both the "narrative routine" and the sense of "small piece/kid" come to mind. Martha, initially confused by what precise connotation to accept, questions him, which expands the time that the audience has to ponder both meanings. All of this is in keeping with the larger motif of imprecise language and the need for sounder grounding of meaning to describe the reality accurately.

Once it is clear to George that Martha broke the ground rules for their child, George reacts viciously and enigmatically, thanks to the unclear pronouns employed, but not before Honey drunkenly confuses the adverb at the heart of her one question:

> HONEY: When is your son? (*Giggles again*)
>
> GEORGE: What?
>
> NICK (*Distastefully*): Something about your son.
>
> GEORGE: SON!
>
> HONEY: When is . . . where is your son . . . coming home? (*Giggles*)
>
> GEORGE: Ohhhh. (*Too formally*) Martha? When is our son coming home?
>
> MARTHA: Never mind.
>
> GEORGE: No, no . . . I want to know . . . you brought it out into the open. When is he coming home, Martha?
>
> MARTHA: I said never mind. I'm sorry I brought it up.
>
> GEORGE: Him up . . . not it. You brought *him* up. Well, more or less. When's the little bugger going to appear, hunh? I mean isn't tomorrow meant to be his birthday or something?
>
> MARTHA: I don't want to talk about it!
>
> GEORGE (*Falsely innocent*): But Martha . . .
>
> MARTHA: I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!
>
> GEORGE: I'll bet you don't. (*To HONEY and NICK*) Martha does not want to talk about it . . . him. Martha is sorry she brought it up . . . him. (69-70)

Tellingly, Albee has George indicate the importance of the confusion and the illusion when he curiously says, "isn't tomorrow meant to be his birthday" in the above passage. Grounded meaning within the illusion!

George kills the son using the scenario from his novel, the identity of whose protagonist has shifted (like the vague antecedents of pronouns tossed imprecisely about). First, a school chum, then (in Martha's telling) George himself, "This isn't a novel at all . . . this is the truth . . . this really happened . . . to ME!" (137). Martha's explanation ties so many motifs together in one line—truth, the real, and the blatant pronoun identity establishment, George/ME—that the climax of the play seems from this point to be inevitable. The climax is, of course, the connection of the son to the novel's plot, making "sonny-Jim" the youth who, with his learner's permit in his pocket, swerved and crashed. Thus, the pronoun "he" in the novel, as a work of fiction, like the son, has no real referent, no grounding in reality.

Martha's father, too, is an absent character (but one who objectively exists to be sure), but this absence allows Martha the drunken apostrophe at the top of Act III:

> Martha: I cry all the time too, Daddy. I cry alllll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And Georgie cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put 'em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays (*Begins to laugh*) until they're all frozen (*Laughs even more*) and then . . . we put them . . . in our . . . drinks. (185–6)

While absence is a theme explored to some degree throughout, the larger concept of standing in for an absent object—which task the pronoun performs—occurs more obliquely when George and the son are confused . . . George for "sonny-Jim" (recall that we are never told, nor do Honey or Nick ask, the son's name). Martha and George engage in one of the pronoun confusion moments that is at once comical (as the others), and directly applicable to the George/son confusion later:

> Martha: George talks disparagingly about the little bugger because . . . well, because he has problems.
>
> George: The little bugger has problems? What problems has the little bugger got?
>
> Martha: Not the little bugger . . . stop calling him that! You! You've got problems! (71)

Other examples of the conflation of George with the concept (if not the character) of the son include when Honey tells George that he ate the telegram like a "good boy"; Martha tells George to "come give Mommy a big kiss"; and George himself comingles the autobiographical novel with the details of the son's death. His relating of the son's car accident contains many more words or descriptions than could be contained in a single telegram, emphasizing the fictive nature of the son, his death, and the whole sham parenting between George and Martha. "The play is about the death of that metaphor," Albee told an interviewer (Drake 40). Like pronouns with their antecedents, metaphors have a grounding. The grounding of the metaphor is usually based

in reality, but in the case of George and Martha's son, it is not, and the lack of an actual referent ultimately dooms (one may argue) the son and his power over the couple. As Arthur K. Oberg observes about Albee's style, "Using metaphor *as cliché* and cliché *as metaphor*, Albee pushes them as far as they will go, exposing established systems and personal arrangements which outworn metaphor thoughtlessly would perpetuate" (Oberg 140).

George lashes out after this humiliation over his novel with another story; he has one score to settle, the game of "Get the Guests." The couples, now on stage together for the first time in a while it seems, hear Nick and Honey's own story, but Honey is too vague or drunk to latch on until the cruelty brutalizes everyone: "Well, it's an allegory, really" (142). Honey realizes slowly as the story unfolds that there is a familiar, real-world referent to the allegory, herself, and this causes her to exit quickly and nauseously. George's only point in telling the story is to drive home the antecedent as solidly and unambiguously as necessary.

As they declare total war, Martha gets in a rare clarification with George using pronoun reference: "You want to know what's *really happened*? (*Snaps her fingers*) It's snapped, finally. Not me . . . *it"* (156-7). Note the use of IT by Martha, recalling for the audience momentarily the son, tied as he is to the pronoun "it" from the earlier altercation. In effect, could she be admitting that the son is now, for all practical purposes, snapped—untenable and unusable? George, for his part, soon thereafter feigns a pronoun confusion when Martha is seducing young Nick:

> MARTHA: I'm entertaining one of our guests. I'm necking with one of our guests!
>
> GEORGE: That's nice. Which one? (170-1)

And just later, more effective pronoun confusion:

> MARTHA: Why you miserable . . . I'll show *you*.
>
> GEORGE (*Swings around to face her . . . says with great loathing*): No . . . show him, Martha . . . he hasn't seen it. Maybe he hasn't seen it. (*Turns to NICK*) You haven't seen it, have you?
>
> NICK (*Turning away, a look of disgust on his face*): I . . . I have no respect for you.
>
> George: And none for yourself, either . . . (*Indicating MARTHA*) I don't know what the younger generation's coming to. (172)

Such an exchange (including the euphemistic pronoun confusion of "it") allows for a sub-motif with questions of Nick's identity as houseboy, math/science professor, and even as the absent son who has come home:

> GEORGE: Sonny! You've come home for your birthday! At last!
>
> NICK (*Backing off*): Stay away from me.
>
> MARTHA: Ha, ha, ha, HA! That's the houseboy for god's sake!

George: Really? That's not our own little sonny-Jim? Our own little all-American something-or-other? (195-6)

In Act III, with Honey easily confused, and Nick sufficiently so by the older couple's word-and-reality play, Albee begins in earnest the destruction of the metaphor.

Martha: That is not true! That is such a lie!

George: You must not call everything a lie, Martha. (*To Nick*) Must she?

Nick: Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what.

Martha: You're damned right!

George: You're not supposed to.

Martha: Right! (199-200)

A little later, reminding George of the Nick-as-Houseboy question, Martha lays it out for George this time, in especially thematic terms:

Martha: Truth and illusion, George, you don't know the difference.

George: No, but we must carry on as though we did.

Martha: Amen. (202-3)

The "Amen" is not simply an affirmation; it sets up the ritualized confrontation that gives the third act its title, "The Exorcism." It is through this psychological and spiritual upheaval that Nick sorts through the fictions and the truths and ultimately sets up the most masterful, climactic pronoun correction in the play. As George finalizes the killing of the imaginary son, Martha vainly attempts one more pronoun correction:

George: I can kill him, Martha, if I want to.

Martha: HE IS *OUR* CHILD! (235, italics mine)

The assigning of a referent to an unnamed, vague, or ambiguous pronoun could be seen as the first step in moving the language from performative to constative, which means that the veracity could be tested and re-rooted in reality:

Nick (*Very quietly*): I think I understand this.

George (*Ibid*): Do you?

Nick (*Ibid*): Jesus Christ, I think I understand this.[4]

George (*Ibid*): Good for you, buster.

Nick (*Violently*): JESUS CHRIST I THINK I UNDERSTAND THIS!

. . . .

[4] The use of "Jesus Christ" here adds to the mythic reading of the play as George is God, Martha, the Earth Mother, and the whole of the play an attack on patriarchal theology, but I will leave that here without additional comment.

Nick (*To* GEORGE, *quietly*): You couldn't have . . . any?

GEORGE: ***We*** couldn't.

MARTHA: ***We*** couldn't. (236, 238)

In English, more than most other languages, the pronoun you is ambiguous. Singular? Or Plural? When Nick poses the question using this imprecise pronoun, the couple, in turn, emphatically remove any doubt about the cause of the lack of . . . any. WE, they repeat, creating a synthesis of motivic and thematic completeness that not only brings the conflict to a clear end, but also removes any doubt about whether George and Martha love each other. They, despite the chaos of the night, harbor no illusions about that particular reality.

In this light, the relationship of the older couple may be interpreted to be based on holding each other to a higher standard—an established set of truths and another established (and assumedly agreed upon) set of illusions. Martha's "Truth and illusion" comment to George could arguably be a regularized, touchstone phrase in their marriage that Martha is loath to bring up in George's moment of pain, but the ethos of their marriage requires that he be called on his lapse. Similarly, in the climax of the play, George kills their son because the ethos of the marriage requires that action ("Did you have to?" Martha asks him). George lightens the trip up those "well-worn stairs" with an abundance of yesses, an affirmation of the necessity and the love, until we receive the poignant answer to the rhetorical question of the title and the play ends—in all senses of "play."

In conclusion, Edward Albee moves his drama of drunken academic games from the particulars of the two couples into the realm of metaphysical questioning of reality by imbuing the conversations with the motif of pronoun confusion. This confusion-and-correction cycle allows the characters to explore (willingly or otherwise) the nature of truth and illusion, where an invented reality stands in for the awful existential reality that pains them. Truth and illusion: we must know the difference, or at least carry on as though we did.

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BIO

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