

# Public Discourse on Marriage & Privacy – Concealment or Revelation?

## The Reception of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

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Thirty-four-year-old Edward Albee's first Broadway play debuted at the Billy Rose Theatre on October 13, 1962, directed by Alan Schneider. "Whether such a dramatic ordeal will be successful may be questionable," *Variety* anticipated; "whether it would be suitable for the road or pictures may be dubious."<sup>1</sup> *Variety* raised the issue of suitability because of the play's dialogue, which included potentially obscene words and phrases, and its representation of sexual themes. In the play, a disjunction between truth and illusion that revolves around the public exposure of private behavior is central to the play's narrative, the story of a middle-aged college history professor, George, and his wife, Martha, who have a couple named Nick and Honey over for drinks on a Saturday night. The play represents private lives at variance with public impressions when the visit develops into a series of ugly confrontations between the four, particularly between George and Martha over his inadequacies and her infidelities. Albee's representation of a hidden private "hell" paralleled the

1. Quoted in Leonard J. Leff and Jerold Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990) 243.

confluence of three emerging notions: that familial privacy often concealed intrafamilial conflicts behind a public façade of marital satisfaction, that marital relationships need not be preserved at any cost to the individuals in them, and that the concealed negative aspects of marital life – particularly those related to sexuality – should be revealed in mainstream culture in representations in works of art.

These three emerging ideas contributed to a broader shift in the understanding of marital and familial privacy that was occurring in the United States in the early 1960s when Albee wrote the manuscript for his play. It is with the influence of the emerging understanding of familial privacy on what was represented in the play and how the play was interpreted that this essay is chiefly concerned. It is important to foreground these notions in order to emphasize that neither conceptions of marital or familial privacy nor an aesthetic of revelation (or revelatory aesthetic) are static. Revelation of behavior otherwise confined to the private sphere has a long history in the theater. For example, Henrik Ibsen, an influence on Albee, represented the private sphere of the family in realist works like *A Doll's House* (1879). Yet, neither the private sphere in Sophocles' or Euripides' Greece nor that in Ibsen's Norway during the second half of the nineteenth century was the private sphere of the early 1960s. As Lawrence Stone reminds us, intrafamilial behaviors such as delaying marriage, having a child out of wedlock, or ending a marriage have had "a different moral significance at different times and among different classes of people."<sup>2</sup> Variations in moral significance also mean that neither the manner nor the content of revelation in Ancient Greek or nineteenth-century realist drama was the same as those of the early 1960s. Neglecting shifts in the specific configurations of what constitutes the private sphere of marriage and what characterizes the boundaries of representation overlooks the importance of those very configurations that need to be explained. That neglect often results from an "ontological gerrymandering" that leads researchers to bracket crucial assumptions about society and culture.<sup>3</sup>

Cognizant of the temporality of representations and their reception,

2. Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 9.

3. Steve Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch, "Ontological Gerrymandering: The Anatomy of Social Problems Explanations," *Social Problems* 32.3 (1985): 214-27.

this paper will examine, first, how the theme of truth and illusion is related to the theme of revelation and concealment in the play; second, how a bifurcated understanding of privacy that was under development during the 1950s and 1960s can be seen in the two couples' revelations and, equally important for the play's status as high culture, how critics adopted the language of a bifurcated privacy and valorized revelation. These two aspects of the critical discourse in the play's reception contributed crucially to both the play's being perceived as being culturally verisimilitudinous and its being categorized as a work of art. The theme of revelation and concealment played a dual role, then, in influencing both how critics interpreted the play *and* how they positioned the play within the drama canon.

To see how the theme works on these two levels, this paper places the critical reception of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in the context of a larger privacy discourse. The play exemplifies the manner in which changing understandings of privacy influenced changing views toward concealment and revelation within interpersonal relationships and thereby *justified* the representation of behavior (in particular, the language) otherwise found objectionable. In sum, interconnecting these points shows how one particular element of social and cultural verisimilitude, which I will refer to much more narrowly as the *bifurcated understanding of privacy*, can inform critical reception as much as the themes of the play.<sup>4</sup>

In the play, the issue of concealing or revealing things about oneself (or someone else) is interwoven with the issue of telling the truth about oneself (or someone else). Thus, in the play, aspects of the characters' lives and personalities are at times concealed and at times revealed; and among the revelations, some are truthful, but some may not be. One element of Albee's overriding narrative strategy is to construct characters who initially maintain "superficial" fronts but who eventually reveal their "real" personalities in the course of the play. This narrative device allowed Albee to cross the public and private divide, since the specific elements of the narrative that underscored these dichotomies were intertwined with understandings of familial privacy. These include childless-

4. See Stephen Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000) for an extended application of Tzvetan Todorov's conception of *verisimilitude* to the film.



ness, developed in the representation of George and Martha's imaginary child and Nick's story of Honey's hysterical pregnancy; the relationship of parents with their children, developed in George's tale to Nick, which may or may not be about George and his parents as well as George and Martha's fictive accounts of their own parenting styles; and illusions represented by the toy shotgun that George aims at Martha, the chimes that ring accidentally, and the telegram announcing the death of George and Martha's son. Sexual behavior appears explicitly in arguments about "truth and illusion" as well. Whether Martha and Nick are successful in their effort to have a sexual liaison never becomes entirely clear, and some critics have interpreted the implications to mean that they *did* have sex while others have interpreted Martha's charge to Nick that he is a "flop" to mean that Nick's inebriation prevented him from being able to have sex because of alcohol-induced premature ejaculation or impotence. The ambiguities in Martha and Nick's liaison – and its indirect (off-stage) representation in the narrative – conceal the true nature of their encounter.

The play's exposure of Martha's incongruous behavior – her possible adultery – fits the period's aesthetic impulse to "[air] dirty laundry," as George remarks to Martha at one point in the play, understood by advocates of the revelatory sensibility as part of the "transposition from 'sincerity' to 'authenticity' ... [that] characterize[d] the intellectual politics of the sixties and carrie[d] over into the popular arts as well," as Jerome Klinkowitz has encapsulated the shift.<sup>5</sup> Yet, to many Americans revelation signaled not authenticity but a lack of self-control. Honey expresses the mainstream middle-class aversion to pricking at façades; she does not want to know the truth and says so. Nick also seems to echo this sentiment when he asks George, in response to one of George's revelations, "if it's so embarrassing, why do you talk about it?" Counterposed to a sense of embarrassment was a belief that within the blushing could be found truths significant to personal identity.

A component of the narrative that shapes George and Martha's identi-

5. Klinkowitz borrowed the idea of these two concepts as synecdochically representing concerns of the period from Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). Dickstein, in turn, was developing – and in part inverting – a view of American society and culture that Lionel Trilling had captured in his work; see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1972).

ties is their use of vulgar language. The revelatory aesthetic underlay acceptance of the profanities in the play. Originally, Richard Barr, one of the play's two producers, seriously questioned the vulgarity of the language, especially the words "fuck" and "motherfucker." Barr recalled that

such words had been heard Off-Broadway but not yet on Broadway. "I was nervous," [he said], because I felt the sensationalism of breaking the "word-barrier" would "prejudice" some people and "revolt" others. "It didn't seem worth the risk. I told Edward: 'I'll take one fuck uptown!'" Albee decided, however, to take them all out. "Shit" became "hell" and "crap," "bullshit" became "nuts," and "fucked" became "screwed."<sup>6</sup>

According to Andrew B. Harris, after prompting from Barr, "Albee decided to remove all of the four-letter words so as not to have critics and audiences dismiss it as a play that only dealt with sensationalistic issues of language."<sup>7</sup> Barr and Albee were hesitant to include vulgar language even though by the time the play was preparing production theater critic Allan Lewis' had already noted significant changes taking place in the late 1950s and early 1960s on the American stage. In his view, "language taboos are gone and four-letter words freely used," a development that he did not feel was only positive: "Richness of imagery and subtle suggestions have given way to abusiveness and vulgarity."<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Martha's profanity in particular was shocking. Stephen J. Bottoms argues that "coming from a male character, such behavior would have been far less remarkable" and "this depiction broke all precedent in terms of what was deemed 'normal' or acceptable for female characters in Broadway plays."<sup>9</sup>

Correspondingly, some Americans believed such transgressive representations threatened the social order. Insofar as behavior within the private sphere was concealed from the public sphere, behavior and attitudes concealed beneath a social veneer through privacy and secrecy "are not only in opposition to the public realm," Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett

6. Mel Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999) 165.

7. Andrew B. Harris, *Broadway Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1994) 88.

8. Allan Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* (New York: Crown, 1965) 256.

9. Stephen J. Bottoms, *Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 100.



remind us, "they are also in potential opposition to the public order."<sup>10</sup> Bringing private or secret behavior into the public sphere, many believed, coarsened the texture of the public sphere, an argument voiced repeatedly, for example, by those opposed to pornography's presence in the public sphere or, in the case of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* to the presence of vulgar language. When the play left New York and arrived in Boston, Richard J. Sinnott, the chief of the Licensing Division for the city of Boston, characterized Albee's play as a "cesspool" and demanded the producers change nine "irreverent references to the Deity," which they did.<sup>11</sup> In exposing the murkier aspects of the lives of its protagonists, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* positioned itself within an ongoing debate in mainstream public discourse over the boundaries of the private sphere as these were determined by conflicts pitting individual autonomy against public decorum.

Yet vulgar language or profanity was not unknown in the public sphere of the United States at the time of the play's debut. Already in 1948, Burgess Johnson could write "swearing is all about us. We hear it in camps and clubrooms and cafés; in the drawing room, the attic, and the cellar. It echoes from street corners and passing taxis." Furthermore, Johnson observed:

But present-day frankness of speech, and a new freedom granted advertising in newspapers and magazines, on car-cards and wayside billboards, on the stage and over the air have taken all the shock out of Victorian shockers. The kick is gone from whole vocabularies, since men may discuss in prose and poetry, on the stage and in radio commercials, all the old privacies relating to sex and digestion.<sup>12</sup>

Johnson's description of the state of freedom of expression and the socio-cultural acceptance of profanity and private topics in the theater is typical in its overreach and offers a pertinent example of the claim being argued

10. Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett, "Privacy and Secrecy: A Conceptual Comparison," *Journal of Social Issues* 33.3 (1977): 46. Although privacy and secrecy can be potentially destabilizing, they can nonetheless, Barry Schwartz has argued, stabilize sociocultural order by keeping transgressions invisible and thereby reducing public disobedience.

11. Quoted in Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* 190. For a history of censorship of the stage in the United States during the twentieth century, see John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003). Although Houchin does not discuss Albee's play, he does examine Off-Off-Broadway theater, including Jack Gelber's *The Connection* (1959); see especially 179-84.

12. Johnson, *The Lost Art of Profanity* 177.

here: that commentators frequently exaggerate the degree to which some sociocultural change has taken place (or, just as frequently, has failed to occur). Throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s, commentators in mainstream public discourse lamented either the "anything goes" sensibility that dominated American society and culture or the widespread suppression of expression.

As the dispute over the language in the play indicates, there was a growing tension between the desire for individual autonomy and decorum; the two had come to be at odds, if not incompatible with, one another. Some Americans had come to believe that individual autonomy not only gave individuals a right to engage in non-normative behavior, it also allowed them to let it be known publicly that they engaged in such behavior. This expansion of individual autonomy had two dimensions. On the one hand, it involved a redefinition of deviance, with heretofore non-normative behavior moving from the periphery to the center. On the other hand, some behavior that remained deviant began to be more tolerated. The expansive understanding of individual autonomy was in part justified by reference to a right of privacy. In the post-industrial sociocultural matrix taking shape in the early 1960s, sociologists Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner and countless others argued, the private sphere provided individuals with a lived space in which they could make choices and decisions that shaped their lives and identities, in contrast to the public sphere, where their lives were constructed by institutional forces over which they had no or little control. Many of those choices and decisions were considered to be beyond both the purview of the state and the view of others in the community.

Indeed, the "visibility" criteria had become a common element of mainstream public discourse on privacy by the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> By the early 1970s, sociologist Barbara Laslett could define familial privacy as "the structural mechanisms which prohibit or permit observability in the enactment of family roles."<sup>14</sup> Distinctions based on visibility and accessibility were also crucial for Hannah Arendt: the "distinction between the

13. Jeff Weintraub, "The Theory and Politics of the Public/Private Distinction," *Public and Private in Thought and Practice: Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*, ed. Weintraub and Kumar (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 1-42.

14. Barbara Laslett, "The Family as a Public and Private Institution: An Historical Perspective," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 35.3 (1973): 480-92, 481.



private and public spheres, seen from the viewpoint of privacy rather than of the body politic," Arendt wrote, "equals the distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden."<sup>15</sup> Arendt's view associated privacy with bodily functions, including sexual behavior, which mainstream public discourse still only officially sanctioned within the marital relationship.

Much of what was deemed to be rightfully withheld from public scrutiny was confined to marriage. Indeed, in their discussion of privacy Berger and Kellner focused on the intimate relationship that constituted marriage.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the centrality of the marital relationship to the right to privacy was reflected in the legal framework of the right: a marital couple's decision regarding the use of contraceptives was at issue in the legal case that culminated in the Supreme Court's recognition of a constitutional right to privacy, *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965).<sup>17</sup> Reproductive rights are, appropriately, an underlying theme in the play, with its extended representation of childlessness. Albee wrote the manuscript for his play at a time when the baby boom and the pronatalism that underlay or accompanied it were waning, although Albee could not have possibly known this; in many ways, the play offers a critique of pronatalism. Although the right of privacy protected familial privacy in the United

15. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958) 72.

16. They were not, of course, alone at the time. Reviewing postwar research in 1958, family and marriage scholar Reuben Hill had documented "striking shifts" in the focus of marriage and family research away from "large-scale comparative analyses of great sweep" toward studies concerned with "the internal workings of marriages and families in their home neighborhoods and on the impact of family life on personality development" (Reuben Hill, "Sociology of Marriage and Family Behavior, 1945-56: A Trend Report and Bibliography," *Current Sociology/Sociologie contemporaine* 7.1 [1958]: 6). For a more recent overview of marriage and family research, see David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies* (New York: A. de Gruyter, 1988). This shift in focus can be read as one reaction of family sociologists to the shift from traditional to companionate marriage during the twentieth century in the United States. For a discussion of the relationship of the marital relationship to privacy, see Laslett, "The Family as a Public and Private Institution: An Historical Perspective." For recent studies on family life and the private sphere see Felix M Berardo, "Family Privacy: Issues and Concepts," *Journal of Family Issues* 19.1 (Jan. 1998): 4-19; Naima Brown-Smith, "Family Secrets," *Journal of Family Issues* 19.1 (Jan. 1998): 20-42; and Tony Fahey, "Privacy and the Family: Conceptual and Empirical Reflections," *Sociology - The Journal of the British Sociological Association* 29.4 (Nov. 1995): 687-702.

17. 381 U.S. 479 (1965). Privacy was subject to much debate during the early to mid-1960s. For example, in its Spring 1966 issue, *Law and Contemporary Problems* examined privacy from legal, sociological, psychological, and philosophical perspectives. "Privacy," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 31.2 (1966): 251-435.



States in the early 1960s, the status of the family at the time of its representation in Albee's play was at a contradiction-filled juncture in American social and cultural history. As Barbara Laslett argues, social factors such as industrialization and, first, urbanization, then later suburbanization, made possible the changes that allowed the family to become the center of private life for most Americans.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the family being privileged as the most important social unit, the view of the relationship at the core of the family – the marital relationship – was changing. Marriage shifted from being understood as being a permanent relationship to one that lasted as long as both partners to the relationship believed it should last. As William L. O'Neill's work shows, divorce had already become more accepted during the Progressive Era, an acceptance reflected by steady increase in the divorce rate during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> By the time *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opened on Broadway, the divorce rate per 1,000 married couples had roughly tripled since 1890.<sup>20</sup> Despite the increase in divorce, marriage remained strong, if often bemoaned, as an institution. The number of marriages had increased immediately following World War II (peaking in 1946 at 2.3 million) but the marriage rate declined throughout the 1950s.<sup>21</sup>

Just as the right of privacy was gelling constitutionally, cracks in the postwar mainstream consensus on which forms of behavior ought to remain hidden from public scrutiny were becoming apparent. Among Americans in general, the development of privacy rights moved in contradictory directions: privacy became bifurcated. On the one hand, the right of privacy was advanced to *conceal* aspects of one's life from public scrutiny in order to protect individuals' autonomy in their private lives. On the other hand, that same right was eventually trumpeted to justify public displays of non-normative behavior originating in private choices. Thus, the former understanding of the right of privacy would *conceal* behavior in order to underwrite individual autonomy while the latter

18. Laslett, "The Family as a Public and Private Institution: An Historical Perspective" 481.

19. William L. O'Neill, *Divorce in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967).

20. Alexander A. Plateris, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics, United States, 1867-1967* (Rockville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 1973).

21. Sally C. Clarke, "Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics, 1989 and 1990," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 43 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 1995): 2.

would *reveal* or *expose* behavior to achieve the very same end. Conversely, Americans were divided over whether the public should be exposed to private or secret behavior in high or popular culture, a long-standing divisive issue as Rochelle Gurstein's *The Repeal of Reticence* makes clear.<sup>22</sup>

The emergent understanding of privacy that both enlarged the sphere of permissible behavior in private but at the same time – and in tension – made revelation and exposure of the private more acceptable within many areas of life in the United States during the 1960s. Important in the context of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was an increasing acceptance among drama critics (and theater audiences) of representations of the private sphere, not least its darker and controversial aspects. At the time Albee wrote his play, American theater, including the Broadway mainstream, had an established, if minor, tradition for representing darker familial secrets normally confined to the private sphere in American society. While this tradition was not a dominant strand of American theater, a number of significant playwrights such as Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill work with the Provincetown Players in the 1910s and 1920s, and William Inge, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller in the 1950s pushed the sociocultural envelope in representing private behavior. For example, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947-49) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955-56), both of which were adapted for the big screen, as would be *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Tennessee Williams explored marital and familial themes similar to those Albee pursued. A component of the play's high culture status can be traced to Albee's influences.

Most important among these was Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), the main dramatic predecessor of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee compared his play to O'Neill's; O'Neill, Albee argued, "says you have to have false illusions. *Virginia Woolf* says get rid of them."<sup>23</sup> O'Neill's influence on Albee in general and *Who's Afraid of*

22. Rochelle Gurstein, *The Repeal of Reticence: A History of America's Cultural and Legal Struggles over Free Speech, Obscenity, Sexual Liberation, and Modern Art* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996). Indeed, the origins of the right of privacy in American law is often traced to Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis's seminal treatment of the tort of the violation of privacy that was in part inspired by the scandal sheets of the late nineteenth century; see Warren, Samuel D. and Louis D. Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," *Harvard Law Review* 4.5 (1890): 193-220.

23. Quoted in Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* 153.



*Virginia Woolf*? did not escape critical notice. O'Neill represented specific themes relevant to an analysis of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? For example, O'Neill represented "child murder" as does Albee, in that George "murders" the fictive son.<sup>24</sup> Another aspect of note was O'Neill's critique of reproductive technology, which paralleled George's attacks on Nick's genetics research.<sup>25</sup> Other dramatic influences on Albee included August Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* (1901) and *The Bond* (1893). Allan Lewis read Albee's play as being directly inspired by the Swedish playwright's one-act drama based on his divorce from Siri von Essen.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, Lewis saw the title character of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1891) as a model for Martha – a housewife "caught in middle-class dullness."<sup>27</sup> Albee himself contributed his creation of female characters that are "strong and vital and vocal people" to Ibsen.<sup>28</sup>

A final influence on Albee was James Thurber, who, while a dramatist, was also well-known for his short stories in *The New Yorker*. Gordon and Marcia Winship from James Thurber's short story, "The Breaking up of the Winships" (1937), possibly inspired George and Martha. Thurber as antecedent challenges the play's high culture status just as did its association with the commercial interests of Broadway. In his famous essay on the high and low culture divide, Clement Greenberg ridiculed *The New Yorker* as "fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade."<sup>29</sup> Just as views were divided over the cultural status of a writer like James Thurber, mainstream drama critics often wrote of the changes in content ushered in by the plays of Tennessee Williams, William Inge, and others as constituting nothing less than a sea-change, while advocates of Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway saw Broadway as hopelessly conformist and conservative.

In being contrasted with Off-Broadway, Broadway was often criticized

24. See P. L. Hays, "Child Murder and Incest in American Drama," *Twentieth Century Literature* 36.4 (1990): 434-48, which provides a run-through of the similar themes that underlie the analysis given here.

25. O'Neill's *Abortion* (1914) represents the dilemma brought on by an unplanned pregnancy that leads to an illegal abortion, the death of the main female character, and the suicide of the male lead.

26. Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* 91.

27. Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* 91.

28. Quoted in Jeanne Wolf, "Jeanne Wolf in Conversation with Edward Albee, WPBT TV (Miami, FL)," *Conversations with Edward Albee* (1988) 119-120.

29. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) 11.



for being a strictly commercial venue rather than a forum for exploring risky themes in a high culture fashion. Numerous drama critics condemned the conventions and clichés that characterized many Broadway plays. One standard charge was that Broadway's commitment to commercial success limited the freedom of expression of playwrights.<sup>30</sup> Eric Bentley wrote in 1954 that an unspoken maxim of Broadway financing was that "no play shall be performed unless a small group of wealthy men will bet on its having a long run."<sup>31</sup> Because of financial concerns, representations of the darker side of the private sphere were often avoided. Albee himself berated Broadway for being driven by commercial concerns and for being anything but innovative or artistic.<sup>32</sup> As a result of the structural demands for success on Broadway, Bentley argued, highbrow plays were viewed unfavorably by financiers even if lowbrow plays were not believed necessarily to be a more reliable investment.<sup>33</sup> These comments indicate that the acceptance of revelation was somewhat less enthusiastic on the production side of the theater equation than on the (critical) reception side. These contradictions were clear in the production and exhibition of Albee's play. While Barr and Clinton Wilder were initially hesitant to produce *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Billy Rose, who Albee biographer Mel Gussow characterized as "an emblem of Broadway commercialism," saw the exploitation potential of the play.<sup>34</sup> Albee claimed that Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder "didn't like the compromise and corruption of Broadway" and preferred working Off-Broadway "where plays are allowed to exist on their own terms."<sup>35</sup> Barr and Wilder wanted, though, "to bring the Off-Broadway standards to Broadway" and for reasons unknown to Albee they chose *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as their first attempt.<sup>36</sup> With *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee emerged from Off-Broadway into the Broadway limelight.

Albee's Off-Broadway phase contributed to critics interpreting Albee's

30. See, for example, Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* 191.

31. Eric Bentley, "The American Drama, 1944-1954," *American Drama and Its Critics* (1965) 188.

32. Albee, Edward, "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?" *New York Times Magazine* (25 February 1962) 66.

33. Bentley, "The American Drama, 1944-1954" 189.

34. Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* 163.

35. Digby Diehl, "Edward Albee Interviewed," *Conversations with Edward Albee* 13 (1988) 28.

36. Diehl, "Edward Albee Interviewed" 29.

drama as high culture even if Broadway theater as such was not *necessarily* thought to be high culture. Albee had begun his career as a dramatist Off-Broadway when his first play to open in New York, *The Zoo Story*, ran on a double bill with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Provincetown Theater on MacDougal Street in 1960. Albee's off-Broadway period lasted for fifteen months in 1960-61 and consisted of four one-act plays whose audiences were largely those for alternative theater. Significantly, critics associated Albee with the Theatre of the Absurd (initially to his own surprise) during this period. This put Albee in company with playwrights such as Beckett, Harold Pinter, Jean Genet, and Eugene Ionesco, all of whom investigated themes of humanity's absurd condition in the decades following World War II. In doing so, these playwrights distanced themselves from Broadway in a number of ways, not least in their non-commercial aspirations. Being free from the taint of commerce placed their plays within the discourse of high culture at the time. Equally important, truth and illusion – revelation and concealment – were common themes within the Theatre of the Absurd. According to Martin Esslin, who labeled the Theater of the Absurd, such drama “attempts to make [the individual] face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment.”<sup>37</sup> In Esslin's view, “the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness,” to accept it without fear or illusion, and even try to laugh at it.<sup>38</sup> The pain often came from the sense of having revealed something the mainstream preferred remained hidden. Critics applied the same rhetoric to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* “On the level of sordid revelation of lives on stage,” Alan Lewis wrote, “the play is an absorbing drama of sex and violence. Audiences are repelled or shocked or full of admiration as they see themselves, or those they know, uncompromisingly portrayed.”<sup>39</sup>

Drama critic George Oppenheimer, writing in *Newsday*, described the effect of viewing the Theatre of the Absurd; most of the Theater of the Absurd playwrights, he wrote, “have specialized in displaying the wounds of our world and then, having painfully, and I suspect, gaily

37. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd ed. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964) 313-14.

38. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 314.

39. Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre* 90.



ripped off the bandages, they have walked away without a thought of administering a poultice or a stitch."<sup>40</sup> In an interview in *Encore* magazine given in 1963, Kenneth Tynan said, "it seems to me [Albee] simply tears the scabs off middle-class guilt and unease."<sup>41</sup> The dermatological metaphor for the revelation motif, a commonplace in critical reviews of the play, also appeared in the play. At one point, George says

and when you get through the skin, all three layers and through the muscle, and slosh aside the organs ... and get down to the bone, you know what you do then? ... You haven't got all the way yet. There's something inside the bone, the marrow, and that's what you gotta get at.

Although Albee's association with the Theater of the Absurd leant *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* intellectual capital, when Digby Diehl suggested to Albee in an interview in 1963 that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* had been written "in a fashion different from the Theater of the Absurd," Albee implicitly agreed.<sup>42</sup> The vagueness of the applicability of that theatrical soubriquet suggests that even contested generic labels retain enough of their value to frame interpretations of a work. Absurd or not, Albee "opened up off-Broadway to new writers" and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "made a very wide public aware of the seminal importance of off-Broadway."<sup>43</sup> In a manner similar to that of the generic corpus suggested by Steve Neale in his analysis of *genre*, it seems that particular ways of speaking about particular works accrue – certain themes become shorthand for critics and others, both on the production and consumption side of the equation. This was a commonplace of the revelatory aesthetic, which often drew on the Freudian notion of a talking cure that has as its goal the revelation of deeply buried truths that can only be revealed if the protective cover of the socialized and acculturated self is removed – peeled away – and the real self is made visible. Indeed, in his representation of George and Martha's relationship, Albee seemed

40. Quoted in John Mason Brown, *Dramatis Personae: A Retrospective Show* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963) 538.

41. Charles Marowitz, "Talk with Tynan – an Interview," *New Theatre Voices of the Fifties and Sixties: Selections from Encore Magazine 1956-1963*, ed. Milne Marowitz and Hale (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981) 291.

42. Diehl, "Edward Albee Interviewed" 30.

43. Stuart W. Little, *Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theater* (New York: Coward, 1972) 216-17.



to follow Freud's notion that "we are familiar with the notion that pathology, by making things larger and coarser, can draw our attention to normal conditions which would otherwise have escaped us."<sup>44</sup> Peter Michelson commented that Martha and George "expend their full energies to show their young guests the true, the blushful Hippocrene – their monumental ugliness. Our literature adopts an aesthetic that aims to reveal the ugly as true, and it often uses the sexual libido, which our culture has turned into a species of the ugly, as part of its rhetoric."<sup>45</sup>

Wayne Schuth also expressed the revelatory aesthetic conception of the private sphere: truth existed in the private sphere, and if it was to exist in the public sphere, it would have to emerge from the private sphere. This view developed alongside the democratization of intimate relationships, as "being honest" and "telling all" became popular slogans and methods for interpersonal communication. Therapeutic culture had penetrated the stage. In Richard Barr's view, Albee "was the first playwright to say that people invent their own illusion to give themselves a reality. And his characters are *aware* of it ... A Blanche Dubois doesn't know that she's living an illusion. But Edward's characters – certainly those in *Virginia Woolf* ... – are aware they're creating the illusion themselves. That's the giant step. The awareness was what was new."<sup>46</sup> Albee "opened a new vein of dramatic writing, skeptical, sardonic, quarrelsome, contemporary," wrote Stuart W. Little in his study of Off-Broadway.<sup>47</sup>

While Albee's Off-Broadway origins and his esteemed dramatic lineage informed critical responses to the play and made it a critical success, it was not universally perceived as such. Indeed, the positive and negative critiques of the play can often be partitioned along the single parameter of how the critic understood the bifurcated meaning of privacy, or rather, which understanding he or she preferred. Negative reviews –

44. Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974) 58. Freud's influence on American theatre in the twentieth century was immense. See David W. Sievers, *Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama* (New York: Hermitage House, 1955).

45. Peter Michelson, "Apology for Pornography," *The New Republic* (10 Dec. 1966) 21-24.

46. Quoted in Richards, David, "Albee after the Plunge," *Conversations with Edward Albee* Sec. K, 1 (1988) 178.

47. Little, *Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theater* 216.

including the first, which appeared in the *Daily Mirror* and was written by Robert Coleman – emphasized the impropriety of the darker revelations. Coleman called it “a sick play for sick people.” *New York Daily News* critic John Chapman described the play as “three and a half hours long, four characters wide and a cesspool deep,” then wrote an article headlined “For Dirty-Minded Females Only.” Albee mused that Chapman’s assessment “added six months to the run.”<sup>48</sup> Yet, the play won numerous critical awards: the New York Critics’ Circle Award for Best Play (1962); the Outer Critics’ Circle Award; Tony awards for best play, best director, best production, best male lead, and best female lead; *Variety*’s critics called it the year’s best play as well. Veteran drama critic John Mason Brown, columnist and editor for *Saturday Review*, who together with John Gassner, Sterling Professor of Playwriting and Dramatic Literature at Yale University, comprised the Pulitzer Prize Drama Jury, wrote to the Pulitzer Prize Board, “Although I can’t pretend that *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* makes for a pleasant evening in the theater, I do know it provides an unforgettable one.”<sup>49</sup> The divided advisory board of journalists rejected the jury’s counsel and declined to nominate *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or any other play for the drama prize. One of the board members who voted against the play, W. D. Maxwell, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, called it “a filthy play.”<sup>50</sup> This was not, obviously, the language used to describe a work of high culture. As a result, the trustees of Columbia University issued no award for drama that year. Brown and Gassner resigned in protest. As the reaction of the Pulitzer Prize Board suggests, such representations could still be contentious within the high culture world of New York theater.<sup>51</sup> In Mel Gussow’s view, “Albee’s play was a shocker, especially because it was on Broadway, an arena known more for its timidity than its temerity.”<sup>52</sup>

48. All quoted in Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* 179.

49. Quoted in Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* 188–89.

50. Quoted in Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* 189.

51. For a look at the New York theater world – Broadway and off – as well as the role that theater played in the early 1960s in the sociocultural shifts that would later capture so much attention in mainstream media discourse, see Harris, *Broadway Theatre*, and Little, *Off-Broadway: The Prophetic Theater*. For a discussion of the Greenwich Village milieu in which Off- and Off-Off-Broadway developed in the early 1960s, see Sally Baner, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993).

52. Gussow, *Edward Albee: A Singular Journey: A Biography* 190.



Offended critics tended to view the play "less as a critique of the nation's decadence than as a symptom of it. Since the play, according to established critical standards, lacked either psychological or philosophical depth and was not therefore morally serious – since it was not actually 'a good play' – then its popularity with audiences had to be indicative of cultural decline."<sup>53</sup> Thus, it was not surprising that the play encountered some antagonism in the high culture context because of its profanity and its sexual themes.

In trying to make sense of the objects of their analysis, critics by necessity resort to (or perhaps begin) by classifying those objects into categories. Thus, Albee was (or was not) part of the Theatre of the Absurd; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was (or was not) an Absurd play; the play's representation of the private sphere was (or was not) novel; Broadway or Off-Broadway theater was (or was not) high culture; and so on. Indeed, critical interpretation consists of making such choices. At the same time, by eviscerating the continuities between each of the categories listed above, such choices make clear distinctions that should remain fuzzy. Categorizing Albee's membership among the playwrights loosely grouped as the practitioners of the Theatre of the Absurd or the genre of the play as Absurd is not choosing between polar opposites. In a similar fashion, foregrounding the novelty of the play's representations or the difference between Broadway and Off-Broadway is not choosing between polar opposites, except as a rhetorical, critical move. Rather, the distinctions comprise sets of qualities, some shared, some not. Discontinuity characterizes the objects of interpretation no less than continuity. In his description of natural continuities, Carl G. Hempel noted that the objects and events in the world we live in simply do not exhibit the rigid boundary lines called for by classificatory schemata, put present instead continuous transitions from one variety to another through a series of intermediate forms. Thus, e.g., the distinctions between long and short, hot and cold, liquid and solid, living and dead, male and female, etc., all appear, upon closer consideration, to be of a more-or-less character, and thus not to determine neat classifications.<sup>54</sup>

53. Bottoms, *Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 98.

54. Carl Gustav Hempel, *Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1952) 55-56.



This essay has explored why critiques of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the reception of Albee on Broadway focused on the revelation of private life. Various periods in the history of the theater and various genres within drama have revealed private life in ways that their contemporary audiences found new and shocking. The question then becomes why subsequent generations of theater-goers continue to find similar revelations novel or outrageous. The answer seems to involve at least two aspects of social and cultural change. First, it is important to note that cultural and social change – understood variously as “mere change,” “teleological or culminative progress,” or “improvement or ameliorative progress” – is never uniform or universal.<sup>55</sup> Ignoring this truism leads to characterizations of periods that ignore the plurality of attitudes, values, and beliefs in societies and cultures at any given point in time. Thus, what is new and shocking for some social and cultural groups is not for others. Second, specific societies and cultures have different configurations of dominant attitudes, values, and beliefs at different historical junctions. At any given point in any social or cultural object's history – a nation, a literary genre, a legal concept, a subculture, and so on – various themes, issues, perspectives, and attitudes, values, and beliefs will be more salient than others. These themes and issues can be understood from various – often competing – perspectives; concepts used to understand and discuss the themes and issues are often contested, as well. It is in the steady consistency of contestation that social and cultural change occurs.

Perceptions of Albee's position as a dramatist and different understandings of the theater as high culture shaped perceptions of the representation of what sociologists have called the “topography of marital conflict” in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*<sup>56</sup> While the two understandings – both of which follow logically, if contradictably, from the basic right to privacy – were – and remain – essentially contested concepts, within the world of dramatic criticism, the language of a bifurcated privacy often valorized *revelation*, and this valorization was an integral part of the generic regime that comprised *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

55. Stan Godlovitch, “Morally We Roll Along: (Optimistic Reflections) on Moral Progress,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15.3 (1 January 1998): 272.

56. Gottman, J., H. Markman, and C. Notarius, “Topography of Marital Conflict – Sequential-Analysis of Verbal and Nonverbal Behavior,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 39.3 (1977): 461-77.

status as high culture. In approaching how meaning is generated, I have sought to keep in mind Jason Kaufman's reminder that from the perspective of an endogenous explanation of culture, "the meaningfulness of culture is something to be explained, not something used to explain."<sup>57</sup> Hopefully, the present sketching of the parameters of the bifurcated understanding of privacy and its traces in the representations in and the reception of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* suggests how dominant readings in the critical reception of the play might be explained.

57. Kaufman, Jason, "Endogenous Explanation in the Sociology of Culture," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30.1 (2004): 335-57, 340.