

THE FUNCTION OF RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*

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Pregledni članak

Abstract: The goal of this work was to elaborate the theme of religion in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The religious elements in the play were discussed with the intention of showing as to what purpose these elements were used. While analysing the theme of religion in the play, we first introduced the context in which the play was written. The play is classified as a piece of absurdist drama. Such drama aims towards proving the meaninglessness and pointlessness of human existence and it questions the beliefs and ideals of the past which had been taken for granted. Speaking of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the author, as has been elaborated in the analysis, wanted to show the uselessness of religion and its lack of capacity to help humans in any meaningful way. The use of various religious allegories and symbols simply point towards such a conclusion.

Introduction

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is a play written by Edward Albee in 1962. It was premiered at the Billy Rose Theatre on 13 October, 1962. The main characters of the play include Martha and George, a married middle-aged couple. The play centres around the couple and their turbulent relationship. Nick and Honey, a younger couple, also feature in the play.

The play abounds with a plethora of themes, and all of them are inextricably interwoven. Therefore, we have a very complex structure and it would be wrong to associate the play with only one theme. The theme of religion is actually a minor one and it does not dominate the play in thematic terms. Therefore, it would be wrong to label the play as a religious play. Nevertheless, the play contains various religious allusions and symbols whose function will be discussed in this work.

In order to familiarise ourselves with the context in which the play was written, Tomislav Sabljak's *Teatar XX stoljeća* will be used. This will be done as it helps us discuss the topic properly and guides us towards explaining as to why Albee used religious elements and to what purpose he used them. During the analysis of the religious elements of this play, David Krasner's *Twentieth Century American Drama* will be used along with the text of the play itself.

Context

In order to be able to discuss any of the topics related to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, we have to familiarize ourselves with the context the play in which it was written. The play had a plethora of elements which can be related to the Theatre of the Absurd (French: *théâtre de l'absurde*) which is a designation for a certain number of plays often characterised as absurdist fiction in the 1950s and 1960s.

Hungarian-born English dramatist Martin Esslin introduced the term in his essay *Theatre of the Absurd* in 1960. (Sabljak 1971, 341) In the essay, he explains why he introduced the term

and what he meant with it. The very term reminds us of something unreasonable, inappropriate or illogical, and most of works of absurdist fiction point out, among other things, the meaninglessness of human life by using bizarre or fantastic means. The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd questioned the very nature of human existence by presenting a world without logical sequences.

The Theatre of the Absurd – although it was never conceived to be a separate movement *per se*, nor the writers of absurdist plays considered themselves to be under a single umbrella of absurdist fiction dramatists – can today be seen as a reaction to the previous movement of modernism which dominated the first half of the 20th century. Being aware of this, Esslin explained the distinction between the conventional theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd. The first kind of theatre is based upon the already existing accepted set of values – including religious values – while presenting the audience with a fixed objective towards which the action of the play will direct itself. On the other hand, in the Theatre of the Absurd, there is no such logical syllogism. The spectators are not aware and do not know that the author has in mind when it comes to the action of the play. And upon the end of the play itself, the spectators are left in ambiguity as to what the meaning of the play is. This is exactly what happens in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which tackles many different issues, including the issue of religion and its role and function in human life.

The main goal of absurdist plays was to show the absurdity and illogicality of pre-existing values which had been taken for granted for a very long period of time. It aimed towards shattering the existing accepted frame of beliefs and values of previous decades. (Sabljak 1971, 346) This includes the issue of religion as well, and the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, though not explicitly, aims towards showing not only the absurdity of religion, but also, to be more specific, the uselessness of religion in our lives. This work will attempt to elaborate as to whether or not religion is shown in this way in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Another goal of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd is to engage the readers and spectators in intellectual analysis in deciphering the meaning hidden behind the plays. This is particularly true when it comes to the topic of religion, because the author does not explicitly state anything about it, but only stimulates us to think about it in deeper, more intellectual terms.

Having said this, we have to be aware of the fact that the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd are aimed towards a very specific audience which is, in intellectual terms, capable of grasping the hidden meaning – or meanings – behind the play. Traditional plays are easy to understand for most of spectators and they offer them a chance to identify with the characters. But the absurdist ones are completely different and the spectators are faced with an irrational side of their existence presented in the play. Only a very specific audience can understand the majority of possible meanings behind *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The characters themselves are educated people (or are at least in some way closely related to them), except the character of Honey which seems to be unwitting and which represents the character unable to grasp everything that other characters – George, Martha, and Nick – talk about in the play. She is not able to follow their arguments at all, and, at least in this aspect, she might be the symbol of audience's inability to understand the hidden meanings behind the play.

Edward Albee, in his *Which Theater is Absurd?* essay, points out that most of absurdist drama concerns human attempts to find meaningful escape from his meaningless position in the world. (Sabljak, 405) The world is meaningless to humans because the religious, political and social values of the past had been shattered. However, his attempts to escape from the sordidness of life by finding solace in religion are fruitless.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is abundant with religious allegories and symbols which the author uses in order to show us – or stimulate us to think – as to whether or not religion can offer true escape from everyday life and offer solutions to our everyday problems. The Theatre of the Absurd heavily draws on the tradition of allegories and symbols, and this play brims with them as well.

Examples from the Play

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is not Albee's only play that, at least to a certain extent and in a certain way, tackles religious issues. *Tiny Alice*, published in 1964, is a play which is

centred around the corruption of church officials who are involved in fraudulent financial affairs. In this play, Brother Julian, a lay secretary of the Cardinal, abjures his faith and marries Miss Alice who makes a huge, two-billion donation to the Church. (Krasner 2005, 250) This implicit criticism of church officials continues in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as well. Honey, one of the characters in the play, is a daughter of a preacher and proves to be mentally and emotionally unstable. She is, in intellectual terms, far behind the other three characters and she often fails to even understand what the other characters are talking about. By presenting us with such a character in the play, it is possible that Albee wanted to show the failure of religion as an institution in bringing up sensible human beings.

On the other hand, George and Martha do not appear to be religious in a traditional sense. George at one point says that Martha is a pagan and that she does not believe in the existence of God. By saying this, George probably had in mind that her behaviour is primitive, but it can also be understood as a hint that Martha represents the primordial life force. However, even if we understand the character of Martha in this way, she is still way more prudent, intelligent and sensible than Honey is. We can clearly realise what the author alludes: even a pagan understanding of life is more consistent and more sensible than that of a church official's daughter.

Act II of the play is called *Walpurgisnacht* (or Walpurgis Night in English). The name was taken from a German legend about witches who meet every year from the 30th of April until 1st of May, about six months after Halloween. Walpurgis Night is a ritual observed by witches, pagans, satanists and other occult followers. The ritual consists of wild sexual orgies and Albee probably names Act II as *Walpurgisnacht* due to the fact that Martha and Nick either have or appear to have a sexual intercourse. Albee maybe named Nick in reference to "Old Nick", which is an old term for the devil. Such an interpretation would bring us to the conclusion that Nick brings chaos and turmoil into the relationship between George and Martha. However, the play must not be considered in these simplistic terms as to represent a confrontation between good and evil, as the official religious systems understand the world. It was with the help of Nick – and, to a lesser extent, Honey – that George and Martha brought down their illusions they had fostered for a long time. Therefore, the simplistic perspective of seeing the play as a confrontation of good against

evil is wrong. Albee most probably wanted to indicate that the days of seeing the world in terms of good and evil are gone, thus shattering one of the main principles of institutional religion.

Act III is called *The Exorcism*, which is a term denoting a process during which someone makes an evil spirit leave a certain place. This is done by saying or reciting special words, and George does exactly that in the last act. He decided to tell Martha that their imaginary son is dead and brings "flores para los muertos" (flowers for the dead), which is an indication of their so-called son's death. (Albee 2005, 206) Martha tries to persuade George not to talk about their son, but she does not succeed.

Martha realized that there is no going back and that she must face reality – namely, that there is no possibility of the two of them conceiving a child. She then describes their imaginary child choosing a vocabulary which clearly indicates how she idealised that child. As she is talking about him, George moves on to recited parts from the Catholic requiem mass, which is a Mass for the repose of the souls of the dead. Martha calls the child "poor lamb", which is an often used term for an unhappy child. However, the meaning behind the "poor lamb" is more complex, and Martha might have used the phrase to suggest "the Lamb of God". It is a term that Catholics often use to refer to Jesus Christ.

Having this in mind, we come to the question as to why and to what purpose George and Martha are performing the exorcism. Is it only their imaginary child that they are trying to expel from their lives? If we accept the explanation that the "poor lamb" refers to Jesus as well, the author's intention might have been to show us implicitly that George is trying to cast out religion from their lives as it had not answered any of their questions. It had only served as a consolation, but ultimately did not bear any result.

George and Martha needed their imaginary child as a consolation or hope that one day they would conceive a real one. However, this does not happen and George tells her that there is no hope they would ever have a child of their own. He thus brought down their illusion, and the author of this play probably wanted to bring down our reliance on religion and show its pointlessness and uselessness in the lives of humans.

Conclusion

The goal of this work was to elaborate the theme of religion in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The religious elements in the play – mainly allusions and symbols – were discussed with the intention of showing as to what purpose these elements were used in the play.

In analysing the theme of religion in the play, the first thing to be done was to introduce the context in which the play was written. The play is often considered as a piece of absurdist drama. Such drama aims towards proving the meaninglessness and pointlessness of human existence and it questions the beliefs and ideals of the past which had been taken for granted for centuries. Speaking of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the topic of this work, the author, as has been elaborated in the analysis, wanted to show the uselessness of religion and its inability to help humans in any meaningful way. The use of various religious allegories and symbols simply point towards such a conclusion.

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