

Personal Failure and the Emasculated Male in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Arafat Abdali Rakhees

Corresponding Author, Assist. Lecturer

Sultan Idris university, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Malaysia

E-mail: alabbad.arafat@gmail.com

Jinan Fedhil Breyo Al-Hajaj

Basra University, Faculty of Education for Human Sciences, Iraq.

E-mail: jinanbreyo@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the emasculation of the male character in Edward Albee's *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. It attempts to examine the male hero's troubled personality through Freudian lenses. George's character is explored to uncover his flaws as a human being, which lead to his failure to perform his gender roles whether as a son, husband or even imaginary father. It also discusses the psychological causes that push Martha into demeaning and emasculating him. The analysis reveals that George as a person has failed himself on various levels. He has settled into a state of lethargy and lassitude that makes him unwilling to restore his position as the patriarch of his family. He has lost his authority and his respect along with it due to his own personal imperfections. As a result, Martha assumes authority and maintains the upper hand; she has to make sure he would never be able to ride out of the storm.

Keywords: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory; George; emasculation; sexual impotence

1. Introduction

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is Edward Albee's three-act play that casts light on the disastrous consequences of the troubled relationship between Martha and George who play the roles of the emasculator and emasculated respectively. George represents the male character who is castrated, feminized and rendered powerless by Martha who is a dominating wife with masculine traits.

The play reflects the struggle for power, a marriage like George and Martha's exposes so vividly and the way relationships can be stunting and crippling to one or both partners. George, the leading man in the play, started as a young and promising academic, a matter that made him attractive in the eyes of the university president where he started working and his daughter leading to his union with the latter. However, time proved that George was not up to the task and when the play opens, George emerges as a failure on almost every level, physical, professional, psychological, and sexual. Of course, towards the end of the play, George burns all his bridges and makes a desperate attempt to rebel, seize power and restore his position, usurped from him by his wife. Though it looks like his effort paid off, there is no guarantee that he would not relapse into torpor again and let his wife lead in his stead.

Martha took advantage of his many weaknesses and personal failings and managed to clip and curb his patriarchal authority. In consequence, he was reduced to an effeminate and emasculated male who is no longer fit to act as the head of the household. Though *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is a very well-researched play, the emasculation of its main male character has not been investigated before. Therefore, this study explores the many facets of George's emasculation and investigates their reasons and corollaries. The starting point of the present research is that George's emasculation is a choice he opted for rather than a state he was simply bullied into it. It seems that his personal fallibility has contributed to his own failure.

2. George: The Emasculated Patriarch

George is the classical example of a man emasculated and dominated by his energetic wife. As a man, he does not fit into the American conventional ideal of masculinity. George's feeble character is sketched through Martha's permanent criticisms of his impotence, sterility and professional frustration. He appears docile and subservient to Martha who relentlessly ridicules and insults him. George puts up with what is "intolerable" and is too "kind" and too understanding "which is beyond [Martha's] comprehension" (p.102). George's inferiority and failure make him resign to his fate, accepting Martha's verbal abuse. She hits him where it hurts most. He does not measure up to her standards of perfection and she rubs his nose in it at every opportunity.

George wields any masculine traits he possesses inefficiently. In the past, Martha tried to mould his personality and regulate his life according to her golden rules of success, but she failed terribly. In the eyes of his wife and her bossy father, George is an underachiever, hen-pecked, 'cluck' (p.1), a 'bog', 'swampy' (p. 26), and a 'bastard' (p.31). He is a failure since he falls short of Martha's expectations and does not achieve any social success or live up to her ideal of male perfection. When an argument heats up between the couple, George warns Martha and threatens to 'rip' her 'to pieces'. In response, Martha blurts out: 'you aren't man enough . . . you haven't got the guts' (p. 84). In this encounter, George insinuates that he is up to the challenge and that he has more in store than meets the eye. Yet, the confidence his speech temporarily oozed turns to be only a bluff, hence, Martha has reasons to doubt his words.

It is not only Martha who has a low opinion of George's capabilities. George himself has a low self-esteem because he does not incarnate the ideal image of the muscular physique and sexual power of the traditional American male as he himself earlier admits: "I've always been lean ... I haven't put on five pounds" (p.17). He is the 'worm' that his wife calls him, the 'sour-puss' (p.9) and the 'muck-mouth' (p.10) who makes no attempt to shake off the derogatory image which his wife has drawn of him. As such, George is himself conscious of his limitations. He is aware of how he tends to "sort of fade into the backgrounds...get lost in the cigarette smoke" (p.17). George is passive and masochistic because he submits to his wife, playing the role of the victim perfectly well. Martha tends to think that he even finds pleasure in being ridiculed and humiliated by her all these years:

YOU CAN STAND IT!! YOU MARRIED ME FOR IT!! ... DON'T YOU KNOW IT, EVEN YET? ... My arm has gotten tired whipping you ... For twenty-three years (p.80).

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

George is a powerless cuckold. He is mentally dominated and emotionally castrated by his wife. He gives up the traditional authoritative status assigned to men by society and fails to perform his gender role of expectations. He does not react to Martha's recurring love affairs as normal men do. He plays deaf and dumb while Martha, for instance, makes a pass at Nick, their late night guest. George reacts passively, having been used to seeing her flirt with other men. He gives the cold shoulder and settles ostentatiously down with a book. Albeit Martha begs him to intervene, he puts on a convincing

show of complete indifference, unruffled by Martha's announcement of what she is going to do with Nick:

MARTHA; I'm going to entertain myself.

NICK[*takes MARTHA's hand, pulls her to him. They stop for a moment, then kiss, not briefly*]

MARTHA[*after*]: you know what I'm doing, George?

GEORGE: No, Martha ... what are you doing?

MARTHA: I'm entertaining one of the guests. I'm necking with one of the guests.

GEORGE [*seemingly relaxed and preoccupied, never looking*]: oh that's nice. Which one?(p.90).

Martha is obviously the one wearing 'pants' in the family and George has no saying whatsoever. He has to welcome and serve drinks to guests he has not invited after midnight and submit to his wife taking a like to the male guest under his own roof and before his very eyes.

George's marriage is a sadomasochistic whereby he and Martha taunt each other and act out their sexual fantasies and deviances. Their family life has transformed into the domestic battlefield of an increasingly bitter war of words, violence and sexual games. George's submission has a role in fostering Martha's authoritative and spoiled personality: "You've taken a new tack, Martha, over the past couple of centuries . . . that makes it just too much . . . too much. I don't mind your dirty under things in public...well I do mind, but I have reconciled myself to that" (p.81-82). Owing to his acquiescence and passivity, George sowed the seeds of Martha's rebellious personality until she has become: "spoiled, self-indulgent, willful, dirty-minded, liquor ridden" (p.83). George is sympathetic to Martha and tolerant of her egotism. Although he suffers greatly from his wife's excessive drinking, infidelities and aggressiveness, George tolerates her: "You can sit there in the chair of yours... with the gin running out of your mouth, and you can humiliate me, you can tear me apart... All NIGHT ... and that's perfectly alright . . . that's O.K...." (p.80).

George seems to have son-like love for Martha, who is six years his senior. Consequently, selecting a mother-like love-object and directing all libido towards her, his ego is devalued. Crockatt (2006) cites Freud's argument that "a man loves a woman as his infant self loved his mother. He is totally identified with himself as a baby, all his libido invested in an overvalued object with a consequent depletion of ego libido" (p.11). Having such inclinations, George is hardly qualified to act as the ideal patriarch. Additionally, given Martha's adoration of her father, she would not be satisfied with a husband who is unwilling to follow in her Daddy's steps.

2.1 George: A Filial Failure

If one takes George at his word, then George's problems have started long before he even met Martha, i.e., exactly when he was a teenager or probably even younger. And parallel to Martha, George is emotionally trapped in that troubled childhood. His personal history and family background are revealed in his first novel which he calls "my memory book" (p.74). The novel emerges as an unconscious means of wish-fulfillment for George, who unwittingly betrays some neuroses that date from the teenage years. George has fictionalized a sad novel about a high-school boy who gets his mother and father killed by mistake. Learning of the story, his father-in-law forbids him to publish it, retorting: "if you respect your position here, young man...You will just withdraw this manuscript" (p.71). George tells Martha's Daddy that the novel is based on a "truth" that has happened to him: "No, Sir, this isn't a novel at all ... this is the truth...this really happened ... To Me!" (p.72). In so doing, he aggravates the situation and loses face in front of Martha.

Though nothing in the text proves its validity, the murder tale whether fictional or real is highly significant. It seems that ever since the accident, he feels distressed and his unconsciousness inflicts misery on him, a matter that brings out his failure as a scholar and his sexual impotence as a husband. George's accidental matricide/patricide story varies every time he relates it though the basic details remain the same. George imputes the crime to a fifteen-year-old boy alleging that "this boy... had killed his mother with a shotgun completely accidentally, without even an unconscious motivation"

(p.50). Later, "the following summer, on a country road with his learner's permit in his pocket and his father on the front seat to his right, he swerved the car, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a large tree" (p.51). Accordingly, the boy or George was inflicted with guilt-induced psychosis and had to be "put in an asylum" (p.51). In consequence, he harbours sad emotions and is stuck in childhood traumas.

The sorrowful events of childhood affects George's entire life. He is beset by self-loathing and low self-regard. To avoid anxiety and suffering, George represses his sad memories in the unconscious and then releases them in a novel or as he names it the "memory book." By sublimation as a self-defense mechanism, he both vents his pain freely away from the censorship of the superego and channels his traumas into an artistic work. In writing such a novel, George fictionalizes reality where he revels in fantasy and elevates fiction to the status of reality. Writing, here, serves as a therapeutic means for his traumatic emotions. According to (Davis, 1994), stories are either fictional and they are written as a defense against "psychotic regression" (p.227), or real stories which remain stored in the unconscious because their revealing may cause severe mental illnesses. In both kinds of stories, the character lets slip the troubled unconsciousness, repressed by the conscious. Since George claims that his novel is autobiographical, it uncovers his guilt complex about his parents' death. As his father-in-law forbids its publication, George's release of pain and guilt is thwarted and his healing is impeded.

Apparently, George's childhood plays a critical role in shaping his later weak personality. From a psychoanalysis viewpoint, a human personality is the by-product of the past experiences and his/her role in the family. According to Freud, the unresolved pathological conflicts from early childhood are responsible for personality disorders during adulthood. A "traumatic experience" brings "men... to complete deadlock or impasse", shaking the very "foundation on which they have built their lives" (Freud, 2016, p. 171). In other words, the psychological history and past painful experiences influence the individual's future. The memories of the murder incidents and the events that took place right before and after are so deeply engraved in George's consciousness and he is haunted and tormented every time he recalls them.

By the same token, the unconscious is shaped during childhood when the person begins to repress disturbing memories and store them in the unconscious (Tyson,2006). In Freudian terms, repression is a defense mechanism whereby the person drives away all traumatic memories, unacceptable desires into the unconscious because of the demands of the superego (Thurschwell, 2000). Through repression, George keeps the painful memories of his parents' accidents in the unconscious to later disclose them in the form of fiction. He projects the tragic accidents onto the "Bergin boy" because of the requirements of the ego and the superego. Though he seems to be calm and well-balanced, the accidents were so painful to George that they made him emotionally crippled and locked him in an infantile stage:

GEORGE: Do you know what it is with insane people? Do you? . . . the quiet ones?

NICK: No.

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

NICK: They must.

GEORGE: Well, eventually, probably, yes. But they don't. . . in the usual sense. They maintain a . . . a firm-skinned serenity. . . the . . . the under-use of everything leaves them . . . quite whole (p.52).

The narrative of his parents' murder involves many symbols that reflect the internal world of George's troubled mind and his lonely childhood. As he narrates the events of that tragic evening (pp.50-51), George's speech is charged with symbolism. The evening itself is a symbol of the unconscious dark side of George's psyche which is triggered through "the liquor lobby". He makes a point of the darkness as "a fine time for the crooks and the cops", which sets loose the thwarted desires and primitive urges of the Id in spite of the "prohibition" of the superego. The gin mill, i.e., the ego, becomes controlled by the gangster father, i.e., the Id where the evil demons and psychic energies lie in the dark. In the story of the parents' killing, the young boy seeks asylum in a "closed world of illusion

and becomes frozen in permanent adolescence" (Bigsby, 1967, p.259). He prefers to escape the bitter reality rather than encounter it. In the narrative, George speaks his own mind though. To defend his ego against the psychological agony, he sublimates his past experience via writing.

Since the attempt to publish his first novel is aborted by Martha's father, George channels his energies into a tragic story about the death of his imaginary son. The story of the child's death replicates the plot of his first novel about the accident of his parents' death. By this means, George converts his subconscious feelings of guilt into another form of story to discharge his psychic energy. Freud as cited in (Taylor, 2009) refers to "the transformation of psychic energy into a variety of forms." He holds the view that "a traumatic experience or extended intrapsychic conflict can be transformed from one form into another" (p.10-11). By repeating the same details of his parents' killing in the accident of his imaginary son's death, George projects his tragic story onto his imaginary child. He is finally able to handle his emotions that date from his troubled childhood (Machalická, 2002). However, this maneuver to beat Martha makes no amends to George's failure as a son; rather it documents his failure as a father.

2.2. George: A Professional Failure

A man's basic role is traditionally linked to his position as a breadwinner. A profitable job is essential for the maintenance of manhood. However, in modern times, a man's career is much more than the total sum of putting decent food on the table. The social ranking which relied on lineage and wealth in the old times is reshuffled in favour of prestigious careers in modern times. A career that fails to create a halo of importance and deference would send its doer down the social ranking ladder. Academia is one of the fields where careers shine. Being a staff member in a college is one's ticket to recognition and respect. Nonetheless, there are individuals who land on an academic career, but fail to make the best of it, which is exactly what George, the leading man of the play, did.

George is a forty six years old history professor in a New England college. He married Martha, the daughter of the university president, early in his career. Though money and position may seem to be the driving forces behind George's marriage, affection was the main motive for his marriage (Magill, 1977). Therefore, when the couple recall their courtship days, George professed love to Martha. George is a professional failure because he seems to lack ambition, self-confidence and talent. He got stuck in a groove and could not break free from it. He is lacking in both aptitude and ardour, a matter that impedes further his career advancement. Married to a woman like Martha who possesses a domineering personality and who is bold and unscrupulous, he was gradually reduced to a nobody. Martha looks down on George and she is outspoken in her condemnation of his faults. In Martha's words, George is "sort of . . . a FLOP! A great... big... fat ...FLOP" (p.45), a statement that does not only pronounce George as a lost cause, but is also final and decisive, combining his professional and personal failure. Diving deeper into his miasma of failure, Martha is fully aware of why her husband fails to answer her requirements. He does not have what it takes to become her father's heir, succeeding him to the university presidency, something Martha hoped her husband would do. George "didn't have much . . . push . . . he wasn't particularly . . . aggressive." His being unaggressive or not macho enough goes against Martha's definition of true manhood. He seems untalented in the *manly* art of leadership and is incapable of enlisting admiration or inspiring awe as Martha clearly and simply delineates his flaws: "You didn't do anything; you never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk" (p.3). In simple terms, George does not have the mannish qualities that qualify him to lead and control.

George acts as the playwright-agent whereby Albee criticizes the American academic circles. Albee paints the realities of life inside academia in a nightmarish scenario. As an associate professor of history, George does not score any success in his career because he is dissatisfied with the role he performs in Carthage College. He says: "professor of Latin and Elocution . . . was buried... as many more of us will be under the shrubbery around the chapel" (p.21). However, if George has really wanted to become something, he would have first to leave his present position and explore other

alternatives so that he would not end up being buried down under the chapel shrubbery. Being aware that he would not make it to the presidency chair, he should have to unearth his career and save himself along with it. The hint to the 'Latin and Elocution' professor is by no means casually dropped. George probably insinuates that a professorship in humanities would get him nowhere other than the college graveyard. Meeting the other male character in the play who happens to be a biologist, George recognizes the limits of his career. While George is a man of the past by the virtue of his job, the other guy, Nick is a man of the future. It is more like Darwinism pitted against stories and anecdotes of the past.

George insists to remain himself and does not make any effort to come closer to Martha's father in order to go up the ladder of success. Instead, he is exasperating his father-in-law who "expects his... staff ... to cling to the walls of this place like the ivy... to come here and grow old... to fall in line of service" (p.21). As such, he neither meets his father-in-law's terms, nor fulfills his personal goals. George seems to be canny, contemplative though not very scholarly. He seems to be "more interested in the subject of History than in the business of administration" as Selerie (1992, p.37) states, yet he has contributed very little if nothing to the history scholarship of the university. Later on, we discover that he has been occupied in fictional writing instead of historical research. He claims that his main concern is to preserve cultural treasures and keep his status quo and honesty intact. He refuses to sacrifice his ethical values to achieve social success. Thus, George is completely absorbed by and listening only to his superego.

However, George's professional incompetence makes him feel inferior in front of Martha "who's expected [him] to be somebody, not just some nobody, some bookworm" (p.46). He cuts a poor figure in the eyes of his wife for he lacks the tenacity crucial to a career success. Martha looks upon him as a useless person and treats him as if he was non-existent: "I cannot even see you...I haven't been able to see you for years" (p.8). George is humiliated as well by his coworkers who treat him as a standby used only in an emergency. For example, during the wartime he has "run the History Department, for four years . . . because everybody was away" (p.20), but not because he is competent.

George is interested in history as far as it gives him access to the past and accommodates his escape from the immediate reality into a world of unconsciousness. Being an escapist, the past offers him a safe harbour as he himself declares:

When people can't abide things as they are when they can't abide by the present they do one of the two things-either they turn to contemplation of the past as I have done or they set about to alter their future(p.95).

Bigsby (1967) reports that although George and Nick seem to be different, they are alike at heart and each one of them represents a different facet of escapism. While Nick finds his consolation in science, George is lost in the contemplation of the past. He "looks to the past both as a protection from present reality and as a welcome relief from an enervating conformism" (p. 262). Supporting this idea, Correa (1995) says that George finds his matching part in Nick into whom he projects his flawed ego. And, in many dialogues of the play he, in fact, disparages himself rather than Nick. George unconsciously projects his unsound thoughts and motives onto Nick who unconsciously enacts the corresponding experience.

George belongs to the old generation which has conservative ideals, is "preoccupied with history" (p.26) and unwilling to accept the new ideas of "the wave of the future." He lambastes Nick for the scientific experiments that will "assure the sterility of the imperfect...the ugly, the stupid...the...unfit" and renders history worthless so as to "lose its glorious variety and unpredictability" (p.36). George thinks that these scientific experiments will lead to the loss of individuality and uniqueness.

Expressing most of his ideas through George, Albee presides over the play as a "passive observer of the social scene" (Kelly,1990, p.372). He condemns the unpleasant consequences that follow from the experiments of scientists and mathematicians and result in "a civilization of men,

smooth, blond, and right at the middle weight limit"(p.35), which conform to the modern standards of good looks. He fears that scientists are rearranging genes to generate "a race of men test tube bred... incubator born... superb and sublime" (p.35), a matter that results in a class of inexpressive, programmed and autonomous individuals who possess no clear identity. Furthermore, the institution of marriage will be threatened because such experiments will facilitate the production of parentless children that are born out of wedlock. George views scientific researches as a shame and a threat to his masculinity because they aim at creating a race of men with identical qualities which a traditional American man is expected to have like virility, strength and sexual prowess:

NICK: you . . . you don't know much about science. do you?

GEORGE: I know something about history. I know when I'm being threatened.

MARTHA [salaciously to NICK]: So, everyone's going to look like you, eh?

NICK: Oh, sure. I'm going to be a personal screwing machine! (p.36-37)

George fears that if those scientists succeed in their attempts, then "the surprise, the multiplicity, the sea-changing rhythm of ... history, will be eliminated" (p.36). Above all, there will not be "much music, much painting" (p.35). In other words, liberty will be lost; cultures and races will die out and literary or artistic creativity is no longer valued. Further, diversity will be erased where "everyone. . . will tend to be rather the same" (p.35) because it is man-made, and not the product of natural processes. George views that the threat of Nick's experiments to civilization and history is looming ahead (Adler,1973). Despite the good intentions behind, George's extreme views are myopic and insular. With such orthodox mentality, George could not have made any professional breakthrough even if he wanted to. In sum, his academic progress is deterred and career imploded.

2.3. George's Sexual Impotence

Though George is not biologically asexual, he looks like a man with a libido loss. He often avoids sexual interaction and does not satisfy his wife's sexual appetite that probably grew insatiable out of his neglect. He does not compensate for the phallus Martha longs for and which triggers her strong desires. In Hauge's view (2009), "a man who cannot fulfill his wife's needs is . . . incompatible with the hetero-normative male role" (p.24). George goes so far as to reject Martha's intimacy over and over again:

MARTHA: Hello. C'mon over here and give your mommy a large sloppy kiss.

GEORGE: well, dear, if I kissed you I'd get all excited . . . I'd get beside myself, and I'd take you, by force, right here on the living-room rug, and then our little guests would walk in, and . . . well, just think what your father would say about that. (p.7).

To overcome the pangs of sterility in his life, he recurses to denial as a self-defence mechanism. Together with Martha, they deny their infertility and invent a fantasy child. George struggles for twenty one years to preserve a mythical baby as an unconscious attempt to avoid a deep sense of pain and shame for being barren. Hurt by Martha's flirtation with Nick, especially after she has brought their secret to light, George turns the tables on his opponent and decides to kill off the fictional son. He fabricates a story of an automobile accident, telling Martha that their illusory child has died.

On account of his impotence, George functions as the symbolic woman and plays a female role. He does not live up to the stereotype of the traditional heterosexual man. Compared with Martha who is strong, loud-mouthed, cruel, 'large' and 'ample', George is "thin" (Albee, 1962), sensitive, calm and soft. These traits include him within the circle of femininity and renders him effeminate. Sometimes, George even assumes a female identity as in his exchange with Martha where he asks her to make him a drink: "Make your little mommy a gweat big dwink" (p.25). Martha also labels him as: "You old floozie!" (p. 39) and "you Mother!" (p.92), referring to his object loss while Nick ridicules him: "You just tend to your knitting grandma" (p.61).

George is often humiliated by Martha who spares no chance to bruise his ego. He is physically lacking and in his relation with Martha, George is by no means the strong side. Martha revels in her muscular superiority and recklessly tells their guests about her beating him in a boxing game, commenting "it's what he uses for being bogged down... why he hasn't *gone* anywhere" (p30). In

response to Martha's insult, George creeps up on her with a shotgun, and "calmly aims it at the back of Martha's head. Pulling the trigger; yelling "POW!!! You're dead!", George fires the fake gun and instead of a bullet, "a large red and-yellow Chinese parasol" pops from it (p.30). The gun carries a sexual meaning and implies George's phallus. Since it is fake, the gun proves George's impotent masculinity (Eby, 2007). The powerless gun is a symbolic image of George's emasculation and the lack of bullets is a representation of his sterility. The umbrella typifies the defensive mechanism which George employs to protect his ego (Falsafi, Khorashadb and Abedin, 2011). The gun is also an attempt made by George to parade his sexual virility, to reinstate his lost masculine control and simultaneously to kindle Martha's sexuality. Besides, playing with the fake gun satisfies the Id impulses of George who derives sexual pleasure from the praises lavished on him by Martha and their guests:

NICK [Laughing]: Good Lord.

HONEY: Oh! My goodness!

MARTHA: . . . that was pretty good (p.30-31).

Apparently, all characters use sexuality to achieve power. So, by a toy weapon George performs the masculine role he has lost since Martha wears pants in the house and knocks him down with boxing gloves to play this role herself. It frightens Honey, Nick's wife, who says "I've never been so frightened in my life!", and ignites Martha's unbridled passion who asks George to give her a kiss. Being akin to the male genitals, the gun, fake as it is, achieves George's subjective identity and masculine sexuality. Through this performance, George gets the desired response as it seems to re-masculinize him. He temporarily fuels Martha's sexual drives and redeems his masculinity. The effect is however short-lived and it soon expires. Denying Martha intimacy paves the way for Nick's virility to take over and Martha is bent on finding solace in Nick. She openly admires his male prowess and phallic masculinity:

MARTHA: You don't need any props, do you baby?

NICK: Unh-unh.

MARTHA [*suggestive*]: I'll bet not. No fake Jap gun for you, eh? (p.32).

Albeit the fake gun is aimed at fueling Martha's appetite, George cannot gratify Martha's heterosexual desires. Rather, he indirectly encourages Nick to have sex with Martha by playing the "Hump the Hostess" game. His aim is to compete with Nick and reassert his masculinity through proving Nick's impotency. Rubin as cited in Eby (2007) opines that George and Martha's marriage rests psychologically on the masculine rivalry between George and Nick regarding the ideal partner for Martha who is treated as a conduit that links between the two men. Martha is considered as a means to an end, a fact implied by George who urges Nick to have an affair with his wife and other "pertinent wives" (p.60) in order to make his way to the top of the college. He tells Nick that "musical beds" are common enjoyment among the members of the faculty at New Carthage. "Musical beds" (p.17) suggest the sexual affairs and promiscuity of the college community and refer to the absence of the ethical values within the Carthage academic world. Eby (2007) thinks that the display of macho competition between men affects marital relationship positively and contributes to its stability:

GEORGE: The way to a man's heart is through his wife's belly, and don't you forget it. [...] That's the way to power—plow them all!

NICK: And I'll bet your wife's the biggest goose in the gangle, isn't she...? Her father president, and all.

GEORGE: You bet your historical inevitability she is!

NICK: Yessirree. (*rubs his hands together*) Well now, I'd just better get her off in a corner and mount her like a goddamn dog, eh?

GEORGE: Why, you'd certainly better.

NICK: (*Looks at George a minute, his expression a little sick*) You know, I almost think you're serious (p.60-61).

George had wasted many chances to establish his masculine role in the heterosexual relationship with Martha. Martha is fully aware of that, therefore, she chides him for not using their marriage to his own advantage, commenting: "It should be an extraordinary opportunity . . . for some men it would be the chance of a lifetime!" (p.13). On his part, George views his marriage to Martha as a "sacrifice . . . of a somewhat more private portion of the anatomy" (p.14) because she has spiritually gelded his maleness though his biological virility is still sound and functional. To defend himself against a humiliating comparison with Nick and affirm his heterosexual masculinity, George resorts to vulgarity, making lewd references to his privates: "What I've got...I've got this little distension just below the belt...but it's hard...It's not soft flesh" (p.18). In another instance, when Martha emasculates him, telling Nick indirectly that George is not the father of their son, George asserts his masculinity, insisting on his being the father of the imaginary child: "The one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of . . . is my chromosomological partnership . . . in the . . . creation of our . . . son" (p.38). These examples show that George's main concern is to prove his masculinity which is challenged by Nick and Martha. In order to overcome his emasculation, earn Martha's respect and materialize her ego ideal, George suggests fighting with Nick for Martha's love: "I will fight you, young . . . one hand on my scrotum, to be sure . . . but with my free hand I will battle you to the death" (p.36).

George vengefully fancies Martha as an incestuous mother who would try to sleep with her imaginary son. Assuming that the imaginary son is real, George sees the imaginary child as the Oedipal son who fights him to win his mother's affection. Because Martha is attracted to the son and sexualizes him to castrate George, the child is turned into a rival of the father who decides, in his turn, to destroy him. Before the spectators/readers realize that this son is a figment of the imagination, George accusing Martha of the sexual molestation of the illusory child looks appalling and genuine:

Our son . . . couldn't stand you fiddling at him all the time, breaking into his bedroom with your kimono flying, fiddling at him all the time, with your liquor breath on him, and your hands all over his" (p.64).

GEORGE: He's a nice kid, really, in spite of his home life; I mean, most kids'd grow up neurotic, what with Martha here carrying on the way she does: sleeping till four in the P.M., climbing all over the poor bastard, trying to break the bathroom door down to wash him in the tub when he's sixteen (p.114-15).

Given that the made-up son competes with his father for Martha's affection, he may murder his father in order to become the sole love-object of the mother's desire. Contrary to the myth of Oedipus, George reverses the roles, killing the fantasy child before the latter murders him. George's action stems from his fear of castration by the physically virile son and the masculine adversary who possesses the phallus. In killing the unreal child, George performs the task of the superego by averting incest as well as parricide. In addition, he imposes the moral and ethical values demanding submission to and identification with the Oedipal rival. Hence, George prevents the Oedipus conflict from materializing so that it would not become a reality. The incest reported by George is likely to be an expression of an unconscious fantasy, which has to do with an infantile sexuality.

Freud illustrates that the superego originates from the identification with the Oedipal parent of the same sex and the internalization of the prenatal morality and prohibition against any unconscious incestuous infantile desire, which demands submission to and identification with the Oedipal rival. Thus, the task of the superego is to prevent the incest and parricide. It functions as the patron saint of the moral and ethical values in general. The son, then, relinquishes his mother out of fear of castration and sympathy with his father. Though George knows perfectly well that the son thing is only a game he plays with Martha, he feels that this son has challenged his authority, manhood and sexuality. Hence he has to disappear if George wants his authority back and virility restored and acknowledged.

2.4 George: A Man of Words not Action

In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud (1905) sees joking as an embodiment and release of thoughts. He claims that "the thought seeks to wrap itself in a joke" (p. 74). If thoughts are unable to surface as they are, they take on the disguise of jokes. In his war with Martha, George seems to be always the defeated side. Because he lacks the power, his only effective weapon is witticism. He has a sarcastic, sophisticated and rhetorical language. George is a glib and calculating "PHRASE MAKER" (p. 6). His sharp tongue, verbal brilliance, acerbic wit and repartee are only a veneer to cloak his battered masculinity and a way to restore his dignity. Feeling threatened by Nick, the newly coming, talented young man, George exhibits a spectacular intellectual superiority to compensate for his imperfections and physical weaknesses. Davis (1994) states that "intellectualized wit" is one way to drive anxiety out (p. 212). Thus, George plays with words and takes flight in intellectual bantering to guard his ego against anxiety. He also uses intellectuality and sarcasm to act out his injured feelings.

George is a shrewd man with a perverted sense of humour. His verbal humour is a playful blend of witticism, puns and irony. He uses humour to release his suppressed thoughts, pent-up tensions and hostile feelings. His humour shapes his political and ideological views. For example, he ironically remarks about the wartime when he ran the History Department: "Everybody came back ... because nobody got killed. That's New England for you. Isn't that amazing? Not one single man in this whole place got his head shot off. That's pretty irrational (p. 20). In so doing, he drops a hint about how sending these academics to war was a mere show on the part of the war department. As such, none of them was prone to any real danger, unlike other recruits.

George hates his father-in-law and sees him as one of the causes of his failure. The perfect father of Martha's has always been a fierce rival he was unable to beat, and a major hurdle he was unable to overcome. George has neither the capability nor the courage to denounce his father-in-law to his face; therefore, he enlists humour to aid the release of his frustration. By using caustic humour, George makes fun of Martha's Daddy and expresses his hatred of him, telling Martha point blank: "Your father has tiny red eyes . . . like a white mouse (p.40). Earlier, George taunted Martha about her father who does not seem to be dying any time soon though he was quite advanced in age: "Martha's father has the staying power of one of those Micronesian tortoises" (p.21). George probably has entertained hopes of taking over the university presidency after the death of his father-in-law. Martha's father, however, might outlive George.

George is unable to confront unpleasantness and he uses humour as an escape mechanism. While he is at heart serious and in deadly earnest, others think him joking and quipping. Later in the play, the argument between him and Martha heats up, George taunts everyone by his sham jocularity. Nick even mistakes George's seriousness for black humour when the latter announces the death of his illusory son to Martha:

GEORGE: There was a telegram, Martha.

MARTHA: Show it to me! Show me the telegram

GEORGE: I ate it.

NICK: Do you think that's the way to treat her at a time like this? Making an ugly goddamn joke like that? (p.123).

It is obvious that George is an expert in the verbal warfare with his wife. His earlier defeats might be pretentious and are more a choice than compulsion. When he makes up his mind to win, he emerges victorious as it happens with their last war of words.

3. Conclusion

In relationships, it is not far-fetched for couples to engage in a struggle for power, which occasionally turns to a bitter and nasty fight. But when one partner proves to be highly lacking and physically as well as spiritually incapable, the relationship becomes off balance. In the George-Martha household,

George plays the role of the incorrigible loser by virtue of his lacking character. George has reconciled himself to be the object of Martha's dissatisfaction whether his worthlessness is genuine or only an act. In all, his so many failings on various levels expose a man of almost no ambition or self-esteem.

George seems to be completely anaesthetized as he himself confesses: "I'm numbed enough and I don't mean by liquor, though maybe that's been part of the process to be able to take you when we are alone. I don't listen to you" (p.80). As a result, Martha found all reasons to clip his manhood and shake his authority. His emasculation is not all caused by his overpowering wife though. He himself contributes to his castration and accepts the role of cuckold and impotent partner, playing along with his wife her vile games. In so doing, he sacrifices what is left of his masculine power and embraces his emasculation.

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