

Chapter Three

One's Responsibility to and for the Other

I'm numbed enough ... and I don't mean by liquor, though maybe that's been part of the process – a gradual, over-the-years going to sleep of the brain cells – I'm numbed enough, now, to be able to take you when we're alone. I don't listen to you ... or when I *do* listen to you, I sift everything, I bring everything down to reflex response, so I don't really *hear* you, which is the only way to manage it. But you've taken a new tack, Martha, over the past couple of centuries – or however long it's been I lived in this house with you – that makes it just too much ... too much. I don't mind your dirty underthings in public ... well, I *do* mind, but I've reconciled myself to that ... but you've moved bag and baggage into your own fantasy world now, and you've started playing variations on your distortions, and, as a result...

(Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* 155)

The epigraph describes the relationship between George and Martha. George's confession "I don't really *hear* you" indicates the dysfunctional communication between them. George and Martha conceal their true feeling and continue their verbal dueling in this twenty-three years of marriage. Language becomes the site, where the couple exercise what is left of their wits. With words, they together create a son-myth, which offers them comforts and at the same time brings them conflicts.

In Chapter Two, we see how the ontological self tries to control and manipulate the other—Martha's father reduces others, the subject Nick studies symbolically

assimilates others, and particularly, Martha negates George and Nick. Martha does not accept what George is and also breaks their agreement by telling Nick and Honey about their imagined son. Moreover, her totalizing indulgence goes into extremes when she uses the act of adultery to subsume both George and Nick. Apparently, crossing marriage boundaries by committing adultery, she has asserted her ontological power with the most extreme manner. George's reaction to Martha's ethical transgression is crucial. This chapter argues that George's decision of killing the imagined son elaborates Emmanuel Levinas's ethical concern for one's responsibility to and for the Other. It is out of love, not revenge, that George destroys the son-myth in order to take the responsibility to help Martha eliminate her totalizing inclination and reconstruct a more truthful marriage relationship.

Levinas's Ethical Relationship

Levinas's ethical relationship emphasizes one's responsibility to and for the Other, which is also the main concern in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. In this play, the playwright suggests that one should abandon illusion and enter reality. This positive way of facing life correlates with responsibility to and for the Other in Levinas's ethical relationship. Probably the most quoted section in Levinas' s *Totality and Infinity* is the passage, where the term "ethics" first appears.

A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other **ethics**. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and

my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as **ethics**. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the **ethics** that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge.

(emphasis added, *Totality* 43)

Levinas introduces the idea of ethics as a particular relationship, which occurs when the Other comes to the Same. The presence of the Other calls the Same into question and thus issues an ethical relationship.

Totality and Infinity is a book about “a defense of subjectivity” and it proceeds to “distinguish between the idea of totality and the idea of infinity” (*Totality* 26). The idea of totality or ontology has been investigated in the previous chapter. The idea of infinity brought by the Other will be the focus in this chapter. Levinas intends to discuss these two terms in a way neither term subordinates the other term into itself. In order not to fall into the ontological totalizing perspective that both terms share on the same ground, the relation between the Other and the Same is defined by Levinas as “a relation without relation” (*Totality* 80).¹⁰ “Levinas’s endeavour,” Colin Davis explains, “is to protect the Other from the aggressions of the Same” (3). The point of departure lies in a belief that “beings should be preserved in their specificity and isolation, and not subsumed under the general category of Being” (Davis 34). Defining the relation between the Other and the Same as “a relation without relation”

¹⁰ This special encounter between the Other and the Same is described by Levinas as “a relation without relation” (*Totality* 80) or “a reality without reality” (*Totality* 65, 212) or an “unrelating relation” (*Totality* 295).

indicates Levinas's hope to protect and preserve the alterity of each term.

Levinas believes that the Other and the Same are separate and thus each of them preserve their own alterity. Levinas identifies this isolation as a “radical separation between the same and the other” (*Totality* 36). This “radical separation between the same and the other” makes possible “the alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other” (*Totality* 36). In his book *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, Adriaan Peperzak suggests that the I exists in a self-centered way “which is at the same time independent as well as separated *and* capable of entering (of having-always-already-entered) into the relation with the Other” (147). Although the isolated Same lives in its separation, the Same is always capable of sensing the appearance of the Other.

The condition of separation is described as “economy” by Levinas (*Totality* 110). In his discussion of separation, Levinas writes:

The analysis of the relations that are produced within the same [...] will recognize separation as **inner life**, or as **psychism**. But in turn this **interiority** will appear as a presence at home with oneself, which means inhabitation and **economy**. [...] We live from ‘good soup,’ air, light, spectacles, works, ideas, sleep, etc.... These are not objects of representations. We live from them. (emphasis added, *Totality* 110)

Separation is like the inner life or psychism or interiority of the Same. Within the condition of separation, the Same feels at-home and lives from its surroundings, which is called economy by Levinas. In the self-identification, the Same constructs its identity through the world and establishes its identity as a possessor of the world.

Before the Other comes to the Same, the Same “is ignorant of the Other” and “exists as separated in its enjoyment” (*Totality* 62-63). In the isolated separation, the Same nourishes itself by its environment and gains enjoyment from transmuting the otherness of the world into itself. Levinas illuminates how nourishment becomes enjoyment:

Nourishment, as a means of invigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is in the essence of enjoyment: an energy that is other, recognized as other, recognized, we will see, as sustaining the very act that is directed upon it, becomes, in enjoyment, my own energy, my strength, me.

All enjoyment is in this sense alimentation. (*Totality* 111)

The Same finds enjoyment through “the transmutation of the other into the same” (*Totality* 111). The process of integrating the other is a means of refreshment as well as the source of enjoyment. So this otherness is discovered by the Same in the world it occupies and then is transformed by the Same as “a source of jouissance” (Davis 43). Through the transmutation of the other into the Same, the Same regains a sense of whole in its self-identification. This otherness is integrated into the Same and this process of assimilation helps the Same achieve a sense of self-unification and self-identity.

However, the otherness the Same perceives in its outside world is different from the alterity of the Other. The Same may find otherness in the outside world but “the absolute other is the Other” (*Totality* 39). Levinas specifically distinguishes this otherness from the alterity of the Other:

The I is, to be sure, happiness, presence at home with itself. But, as

sufficiency in its non-sufficiency, it remains in the non-I; it is enjoyment of “something else,” never of itself. [...] The relationship of the I with the non-I produced as happiness which promotes the I consists neither in assuming nor in refusing the non-I. Between the I and *what it lives from* there does not extend the absolute distance that separates the same from the other. (*Totality* 143)

“The relationship of the I with the non-I [produces] as happiness” means that the Same (I) finds the otherness (non-I) in its surroundings and absorbs this otherness (non-I) as a means of enjoyment (happiness). Nonetheless, the otherness (non-I) discovered by the Same is never Other. The otherness (non-I) which the Same finds comes from its outside world, not from itself (I). Since this otherness (non-I) can be integrated into the self (I), it is assimilated into the totalization of the Same (I). The otherness (non-I) does not challenge the Same (I). Therefore, this otherness is never Other.

After exploring the interiority of the isolated Same, Levinas pursues his inquiry into the exteriority of the Other, the face of another human. “The way in which the other presents himself” is defined by Levinas as “face (le visage)” (*Totality* 50). The notion of face in Levinas’s thought is not necessarily the human face. The face of the Other is more like a trace of the Other. The encounter between the Other and the Same is “an irreducible relation—the face to face (le face à face)” (*Totality* 79). Davis has analyzed and described this unique “face to face”: “It is a relation because an encounter does take place; but it is ‘without relation’ because that encounter does not establish parity or understanding, the Other remains resolutely Other” (45). The “face

to face” which occurs when the Other approaches the Same does not designate that these two share a common ground because “the alterity of the Other is in him and is not relative to me; [the Other] *reveals* itself” (*Totality* 121).

It is through the face that brings the infinite meaning to the Same. When the Other enters into the world of the Same, the presence of the Other “[exceeds] *the idea of the other in [the Same]*” (*Totality* 50). Before the Other reveals its existence, the Same feels at home with itself. Assimilating the otherness found in the outside world, the Same forms a false concept of sameness. With the appearance of the Other, the Same eventually recognizes its fake imagination of wholeness. The face of the Other makes the Same realize that the otherness it perceives is never Other. From Levinas’s perspective, the presence of the Other challenges the supremacy of the Same.

“Exceeding *the idea of the other in [the Same]*,” the Other manifests the idea of infinity. Therefore, Levinas claims that “the relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an **ethical** relation” (emphasis added, *Totality* 51).

Disrupting the isolated separation of the Same, the face of the Other makes the Same feel shame ethically (Peperzak 164).

The imbalance between the infinity of the Other and the limited powers of the Same might lead to the total negation of the Same. Levinas illuminates the Same’s possible wish to kill.

To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. [...] The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique “matter” possible for total negation. I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent,

which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill. (*Totality* 198)

The infinite power of the Other might make the Same feel threatened and result in the total negation of the Same. The intention of the Same to negate and annihilate living beings might seem to be destructive. However, the Same cannot hurt the face of the Other in that the face of the Other “is not of the world” (*Totality* 198). As Davis puts it: “The Other remains inviolate and inviolable. The face appears in my world but does not belong to it; I can do it no harm” (51). The alterity of the Other is not deduced by comparison; or rather, the absolute otherness lies in itself. Thus this alterity cannot be touched or exterminated by the self’s totalizing power.

When the Other shows up in front of the Same, the first expression of the face is “an ethical resistance”—“you shall not commit murder” (*Totality* 199). This commandment reveals “both the strength and weakness of the Other” (Davis 50). On the one hand, the face resists the possession and powers of the Same (*Totality* 197). But on the other hand, the face is naked and vulnerable in front of the Same (Peperzak 164). If the Same decides to take extreme measures to suppress the face of the Other, one way to achieve this goal is through “killing the other, or even innumerable others, but the Other survives” (Davis 51). The Same may try to kill the other or others, yet the absolute Other cannot be killed. The presence of the Other might threaten the role of the Same as a sovereign possessor in the world in that the Other reveals its infinity, which is over and beyond the limited powers of the Same. Nonetheless, the relationship between the Other and the Same is not necessarily hostile. Rather,

Levinas sketches the face's peaceful approach.

The face in which the other—the absolutely other—presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace. (*Totality* 203)

As the Other presents itself, the Same realizes that it is not the sole owner of the world. According to Levinas, this approach of the Other is not aggressive but peaceful. The face of the Other does not do harm to the Same. Instead, it simply demands the Same to respond.

The nonviolent commandment “you shall not commit murder” addressed by the face of the Other issues an ethical calling into question of the Same. It is through gazing and speaking, the face of the Other obliges the Same to make response.

This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one “puts the things in question in giving”)—this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. (*Totality* 75)

The gaze and expression of the face is the epiphany or revelation that is heard by the Same and urges the Same to confront it as well as many related others. The

commandment of no killing spoken by the face is not compelling: whether the Same obeys or not is decided by itself. Therefore, the Same is “confronted with real choices between responsibility and obligation towards the Other, or hatred and violent repudiation” (Davis 49). The face of the Other also encompasses the concept of the third party. “The third party,” Levinas suggests, “looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice” (*Totality* 213). The face of the Other signifies not only this unique other but a third and a fourth and an nth other (Peperzak 168). The idea of the third party leads to social justice. The face of the Other cries for justice and “summons me to my obligations and judges me” (*Totality* 215).

In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas mentions his intention: “My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning” (90). Rather than establishing a moral code, Levinas stresses that the necessity for morality is absolute. The meaning conveyed in *Totality and Infinity* is the absoluteness of one’s obligation to and responsibility for the Other. During the encounter with many others, one makes choices between to take or to give. Levinas would definitely choose the latter.

Not for revenge but for love—Responsibility to kill in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

In Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Martha has crossed the marriage borders. Martha’s ethical transgression, her adultery with Nick, is examined in the previous chapter. Another wrong doing of Martha is breaking the rules by telling others about their imagined son. Compared to the adultery, breaking a game rule might not seem that important. However, the role of the invented son is extremely

significant in George and Martha's marriage. The playwright insinuates that if one's totalizing inclination is not checked, one might lead himself/herself into destruction. At the end of the play, George kills their imagined son. This chapter argues that George's decision to demythologize the illusion in his and Martha's marriage—killing the imagined son—is not an act of revenge but an expression of love for Martha. George's determination to change shows his willingness to take responsibility for Martha and this resolution of George embodies Levinas's notion of ethics.

Before probing into how George reaches the conclusion to kill the invented son, it is necessary to examine the origin of this son myth in George and Martha's marriage life. George and Martha are intellectuals, husband teaching at college and wife a college graduate. They want something more than a life of material satisfaction. Martha keeps on complaining about George's failure but George seems indifferent to it. Most of all, they cannot have children. Martha has revealed her desperate desire to have a child: "And I had wanted a child... oh, I had wanted a child" (218). Unfortunately, Martha's wish never comes true. Martha does not have any pregnancies at all (97). Their barrenness, together with other disappointments in life, makes them miserable. In Martha's soliloquy, she shows the bitterness in life:

MARTHA. [...] I cry all the time, Daddy. I cry allllll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And George cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put 'em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays (*Begins to laugh*) until they're all frozen (*Laughs even more*) and then... we put them... in our... drinks. (185-86)

In this monologue, Albee demonstrates his beautiful poetic talent. The tears in the eyes freeze like ice and then are placed in the drinks. Martha's invisible sorrow in hearts is transformed into the solid form of ice metaphorically and she puts this ice in her drinks. Crying all the time, Martha confesses her depression.

Not only Martha but also George undergoes this pain. George admits his withdrawal:

GEORGE. (*A hideous elation*) It's very simple.... When people can't abide things as they are, when they can't abide the present, they do one of two things... either they... either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they set about to alter the future. And when you want to change something ... YOU BANG! BANG! BANG! (178)

This passage displays that George tends to use sarcastic humor to face his dissatisfaction in life. George confesses his indulgence in the past and his interests in the past and history. Since George and Martha cannot change their dissatisfied present, they find other ways to compensate for it. Together they create an invented son as a consolation for their barrenness.

This invented child serves as a refuge from reality and the source of joy in George and Martha's marriage. In Martha's own words: "[It] is the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weights too heavy on our tiny heads" (187-88). Probably Martha is the one who starts this what-if-we-had-a-son game. George seems to enjoy in this fantasy too. It appears that they talk about this created child in their private conversation:

GEORGE: I never want to talk about it.

MARTHA: Yes you do.

GEORGE: When we're alone, maybe. (121)

This dialogue shows that George is willing to participate in Martha's imagination game but only in their private time. When George decides to put an end to "their oh-so-sad games" (197), he tells Martha: "All right, Martha; your recitation, please" (217). "Recitation" here may indicate that Martha contributes a lot to their collaborative creation of the invented son. The imagined son turns out to be more than a role playing game to Martha. She describes in detail her labor process (217), the boy's broken-arm accident (221) and many other stories. She portrays her son as if he really exists:

MARTHA. I have tried, oh God I have tried; the one thing ... the one thing
 I've tried to carry pure and unscathed through the sewer of this marriage;
 [...] the one thing, the one *person* I have tried to protect, to raise above
 the mire of this vile, crushing marriage; the one light in all this
 hopeless ... *darkness*... our Son. (227)

The existence of the son figure is tremendously important in this play. To Martha, the invented son saves her from the misery she suffers. It is the light, the joy, and the courage in Martha's discontent marriage life. The fantasy child brings happiness to both George and Martha and becomes especially a myth to live by in Martha's case.

In some sense, the secret fantasy world of George and Martha in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is similar to Levinas's notion of separation. The concept of separation is related to the self-identification or intersubjectivity. Levinas argues that the Same lives in its separation and gains enjoyment by transmuting the otherness into

itself. When the Other shows up to the world where the Same lives, the Same recognizes it is not the sole possessor in the world, and the otherness it finds is never Other. In Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Nick and Honey's visit is like the appearance of the Other that disturbs George and Martha's separation.¹¹ The presence of the Other represented by Nick and Honey makes George and Martha realize their son-myth enjoyment is only otherness not Other. Strictly speaking, George preserves his own separation and so does Martha. All of the four characters in this play are independent individuals. Each of them possesses his/her alterity, and they share neither a common ground nor the state of separation.

According to the concept of Levinas's separation in a broader sense, similar to the Same that gains enjoyment in the world it occupies, George and Martha find happiness in the son myth they create. As Levinas suggests, the Same sustains itself with the environment in its isolated separation. The Same lives from the outside world: "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, works, ideas, sleep, etc.... These are not objects of representations. We live from them" (*Totality* 110). Through transmuting the other into the same, the Same gains energy, strength, and enjoyment (*Totality* 111). Before the Other comes to the Same and challenges its supremacy, the Same indulges in its imagination of wholeness. "To live is a specific mode of commerce with things of the outside world," writes Peperzak about the mode of being (150). The self finds enjoyment in its environment. George and Martha too find

¹¹ Through the perspective of Levinas's ethical relationship, Nick's role in this play is in fact complicated and consists of multiple meanings. In Chapter Two, the interpretation of the characterization of Nick reveals two sides of Nick's role: Nick may represent the Same that intends to assimilate other people, and at the same time another Same (Martha) might try to incorporate Nick's otherness into its totality. However, the alterity of Nick makes him remain as the absolute Other. His significance of representation of the face of the Other plays an important role in the discussion in Chapter Three.

pleasure in their son myth, as George explains, “Our son [is] Martha’s and my little joy!” (213). Manifesting Levinas’s “living from,” Davis notes:

Living from ... offers a mode of encounter with the world which confirms the identity and sovereignty of the self; the world is fully available to me, ready to meet my needs and to fulfil my desires. (43)

George and Martha invent a son as compensation for their sterility. The imagined son “provides them an illusory identity as parents” (Paul 51). They “live from” this created son, which satisfies their desire to produce offspring. This imagined son has become a myth that sustains their life and gives them enjoyment.

However, Nick and Honey’s visit, like the presence of the Other, disturbs the private fantasy world of George and Martha. When George and Martha welcome their guests Nick and Honey at the front gate, the spheres between private and public collide. “Just don’t start on the bit, that’s all,” George warns Martha not to mention their son at the very beginning of this play (18). Later, George is surprised at Honey’s exclamation:

HONEY. (*To GEORGE, brightly*) I didn’t know until just a minute ago that you had a son.

GEORGE. (*Wheeling, as if struck from behind*) WHAT? (44)

Martha has told Honey about the son she and George create. “The intensity of George’s question to Honey,” Roudané notes, “suggests the seriousness of Martha’s slip, a violation of their lifelong agreement” (68). Martha’s slip signals that “their private life has disintegrated into an unreal, terrifying make-believe world” (Roudané 69). The supposed private imagination game suddenly becomes a subject in daily

conversation. The line between public and private sphere begins to blur.

The presence of the Other represented by Nick and Honey leads George and Martha to the realization of their son-myth enjoyment as only otherness not Other. Like the otherness the Same finds as enjoyment is not the same as the alterity of the Other, the imagined son is only an imagination not a real human being. With the appearance of Nick and Honey, the fictive son, which supposes to be the enjoyment George and Martha find in their private fantasy world of separation, turns to be the subject of conflict.

With the blurring line between private and public, the private son-myth enjoyment of Martha and George becomes the source of conflict in the presence of Nick and Honey. Initially, Martha is sorry to publicize their son's existence: "I'm sorry I brought it up" (70). With George's pressing in, Martha gets testy and she tries to question George's paternity:

MARTHA. George's biggest problem about the little ... ha, ha, ha, HA! ...

about our son, about our great big son, is that deep down in the

private-most pit of his gut, he's not completely sure it's his own kid. (71)

Martha begins to use their invented son as a strong weapon to fight with George. The supposed son-myth enjoyment in Martha and George's private fantasy world becomes focus of debate in the presence of their guests. For instance, they disagree on the color of their son's eyes.

MARTHA. (*To GEORGE*) Our son does not have blue hair ... or blue eyes,

for that matter. He has green eyes ... like me.

GEORGE. He has blue eyes, Martha.

MARTHA. (*Determined*) Green.

GEORGE. (*Patronizing*) Blue, Martha.

MARTHA. (*Ugly*) GREEN! (*To HONEY and NICK*) He has the loveliest
green eyes [...] like mime. (74-75)

George and Martha have a quarrel about the color of their son's eyes. Martha claims that the color is green like hers, while George insists that it is blue. The battle between George and Martha gets more ferocious when they all blame one another for making their son throw up all the time and run away from home (120-21). Their argument is pointless for their son is only a collaborative fiction. "Martha and I are having ... nothing," George explains to Nick when Nick refuses to get involved in their quarrel, "Martha and I are merely exercising ... that's all ... we're merely walking what's left of our wits" (33-34).

When Nick and Honey arrive, an interrelation between illusion and truth, private and public interferes with all characters. Not only is Martha addicted to the son myth but also George indulges in his own myth. George's "bergin story" serves as an example of his personal myth. At the beginning of Act Two George shares with Nick his own story. George was sixteen at that time. He went to a gin mill with his school friends on the first day of vacations. One of his friends, who accidentally killed his parents, ordered "bergin and water" (94-96). Later Martha purposely inquires whether George tells them his sad story:

MARTHA. (*Consciously making rhymed speech*) Well, Georgie-boy had lots
of big ambitions. In spite of something funny about his past....

GEORGE. (*Quietly warning*) Martha....

MARTHA. Which Georgie-boy here turned into a novel.... His first attempt and also his last.... [...] But Daddy took a look at Georgie's novel.... [...] and he was very shocked by what he read. [...] A novel all about a naughty boy-child.... [...] who killed his mother and his father dead.

GEORGE. STOP IT, MARTHA!

MARTHA. And Daddy said ... Look here, I will not let you publish such a thing.... (133-34)

Martha describes how George transforms his sad story into his novel, which Martha's father prevents from publication. Martha's intention is cruel; she deliberately mentions this to make fun of George, which truly hurts George's dignity. He yells: "I will not tolerate this!" (134); "I will not be made mock of!" (135). George explodes in anger when Martha, Nick, and Honey are all laughing at him. Shouting "THE GAME IS OVER!", George burns with rage (136). But Martha keeps pushing on:

MARTHA. You want to know what big brave Georgie said to Daddy? [...]

(Mimicking GEORGE'S voice) No, sir ... it isn't a novel at all ... [...]

this it the truth ... this really happened.... TO ME!

GEORGE. *(On her)* "I'LL KILL YOU! *(Grabs her by the throat. They struggle)*" (136-37)

A vicious joke makes verbal dueling transform into physical violence. Thrown on the floor by Nick in that struggle, George is deeply hurt "*but it is more a profound humiliation than a physical injury*" (138). Throughout the night George has undergone one humiliation after another from Martha in the presence of their guests.

The bergin story demonstrates George's indulgence in fiction and illustrates the

blurring line between illusion and truth. Martha insinuates that George is the boy in the bergin story and accuses George of parentcide (138). The answer to the question whether George kills his parents and pretends it is an accident cannot be known. Both George and Martha are unreliable characters. In his book *Edward Albee*, Gerry McCarthy explains that “George and Martha’s games [...] are routines with which they fill a life which is intrinsically lacking in the completeness of social and family relationships” (77). Pointing out the importance of game in George and Martha’s marriage life, McCarthy further indicates:

They are sustained by games, not illusions. George is or may be an orphan; Martha is discarded by the father she claims to admire: they are in a line of Albee characters who are abandoned and who make something out of this loss. (77)

Living with great disappointments, George and Martha need these games to make life easier and bearable. The fantasy son brings consolation to Martha. Similarly, George’s novel is his shelter from anguish. The bergin story “complements the broader truth/illusion motif of the drama” (Roudané 74). George’s novel could be based on a personal tragedy or pure imagination. The fabrication of their son myth and George’s fiction reinforce the oscillation between illusion and reality and reveals how both George and Martha live in their private fantasy world of separation.

George endures this all-night-long torture by Martha until he realizes that Martha has completely lost her mind. The ontological monster inside Martha has taken control over her. In this long night, Martha tells numerous stories to embarrass and humiliate George. However, George is willing to play as long as he knows it is

just a game. The question is, does Martha know? George proposes to play “Get the Guests” in which he retells how Nick and Honey get married and Honey’s hysterical pregnancy (140-48). While Martha despises what George has done, George derisively replies: “Why baby, I did it all for you” (152). He almost loses his temper:

GEORGE. (*Barely contained anger now*) You can sit there in that chair of yours, [...] and you can humiliate me, you can tear me apart ... ALL RIGHT ... and that’s perfectly all right ... that’s O.K....

MARTHA. YOU CAN STAND IT!

GEORGE. I CANNOT STAND IT!

MARTHA. YOU CAN STAND IT!! YOU MARRIED ME FOR IT!!

(*A silence*)

GEORGE. (*Quietly*) That is a desperately sick lie.

MARTHA. DON’T YOU KNOW IT, EVEN YET?

GEORGE. (*Shaking his head*) Oh ... Martha.

MARTHA. My arm has gotten tired whipping you.

GEORGE. (*Stares at her in disbelief*) You’re mad.

MARTHA. For twenty-three years!

GEORGE. You’re deluded ... Martha, you’re deluded.

MARTHA. IT’S NOT WHAT I’VE WANTED!

GEORGE. I thought at least you were ... on to yourself. I didn’t know.

I ... didn’t know. (152-53)

Martha justifies her doing anything to George because she is “the daughter of our beloved boss”(47). Martha’s claim that “It’s not what I’ve wanted” is a self-deception.

She has been indulgent with her self-delusion. Martha's delirious statement certainly is a big shock to George. By uttering, "No ... no ... you're ... sick," George starts to notice that something goes wrong in their marriage (153). Martha's behavior now really worries George. He tries to calm Martha down:

GEORGE. All right, Martha ... you're going too far.

MARTHA. (*Screams again*) I'LL SHOW YOU WHO'S SICK. I'LL SHOW YOU.

GEORGE. (*He shakes her*) Stop it! (*Pushes her back in her chair*) Now, stop it! (154)

George warns Martha to behave. The ontological monster inside Martha finally takes control of her. She is like a runaway train, losing control. The sickness of Martha has brought them to the point, where there is no turning back.

Martha's exclamation that "It's not what I've wanted" awakens George and makes him recognize that he is the only one who can help Martha now. George realizes that Martha's sickness and self-delusion have gone into extremes. However, George has retreated to his world of indifference for quite a long time. George himself is fully aware of his detachment. He admits his withdrawal and he confesses to Martha:

GEORGE. I'm numbed enough... [...] I don't listen to you ... or when I do listen to you, I sift everything, I bring everything down to reflex response, so I don't really hear you, which is the only way to manage it. [...] I don't mind your dirty underthings in public... well, I *do* mind, but I've reconciled myself to that... but you've moved bag and baggage into

your own fantasy world now, and you've started playing variations on your distortions, and, as a result.... (155)

George turns off his emotions and shuts down himself. He imprisons himself in his solitude. He cannot and will not become the one Martha expects him to be. He tries not to hear or feel anything. George is alienating himself from Martha and he blocks communication with Martha, who calls him a flop and humiliates him in all kinds of ways. "George acknowledges his detachment [which] is a deliberate maneuver" (Paul 50). It is the only way for him to deal with his loss and anguish. What makes it important is that George himself chooses this mode of life. In his article "*The Theater of Edward Albee*," Lee Baxandall offers a good explanation for George's detachment:

George's practical failures are his own choice. He was not born incompetent. [...] [In the boxing match he] has refused to assume the organization-man etiquette that would qualify him as her father's heir-apparent. [...] What really was objectionable was George's insistence on his right to individuality; given the situation, he had little choice but freely to choose futility. (91)

George chooses to be a member of the History Department, instead of the chairperson of it. In that boxing match story, George shows refusal to fight although this might grant him the position of the heir-apparent. George demonstrates his determination to preserve his individuality and his personality. C. W. E. Bigsby comments, "*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a protest against what Albee saw as a growing conformity, a retreat from individuality and moral responsibility. [...] It stands as an assertion of the absolute need to accept responsibility for one's actions and to close the gap between individuals, to end private and public alienation" (271). George himself

understands that he has been indifferent for too long. He is aware of his absolute need to take responsibility to and for Martha. He *speaks to the empty hallway*: “No, Martha, I did not clean up the mess I made. I’ve been trying for years to clean up the mess I made” (102). Since Martha’s exclamation that “It’s not what I’ve wanted” has awakened him, he begins to consider taking action.

GEORGE. Actually, I’m rather worried about you. About your mind.

MARTHA. Don’t you worry about my mind, sweetheart!

GEORGE. I think I’ll have you committed.

MARTHA. You WHAT?

GEORGE. (*Quietly ... distinctly*) I think I’ll have you committed.

MARTHA. (*Breaks into long laughter*) Oh baby, aren’t you something!

GEORGE. I’ve got to find some way to really get at you. (156)

George notices that Martha has “moved bag and baggage into [her] own fantasy world now” (155). Peter L. Hays illuminates that “Albee is pleading for relationships stripped of ignorance and self-deception for hard truths in our recognition of our need for others, and for responsibility for our actions toward others” (441). Martha’s retreat to fantasy world and her eccentric act to bring the privately shared fantasy to public awaken George to a sense of duty. George recognizes he should not avoid his responsibility anymore.

In addition to Martha’s “sick” way to blur the boundary between private and public and illusion and reality, one very important thing that makes George take action to help Martha cure her self destructive totalizing inclination is her attempted infidelity. When Martha seduces Nick, George enters and sees what is happening.

Martha and Nick embrace each other and they start to make out. The stage directions by the playwright show George's true feeling: "*George enters... stops... watches a moment... smiles... laughs silently, nods his head, turns, exits, without being noticed*" (165). George pretends he does not see all this and reenters the room. Martha offers him chances to stop her but he turns himself to read a book. According to Levinas, it is through gazing and speaking, the face of the Other demands the Same to respond: "This gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give" (*Totality* 75). The gaze and expression of the face urges the Same to confront it. But in George's case, he avoids this gaze of the Other, and consequently he avoids his responsibility for it. Driven by her self-deception "It's not what I've wanted," Martha intentionally seduces Nick—an act to provoke George as well as to amuse herself. When Martha takes Nick upstairs, she speaks to George, "I'll make you sorry you ever let yourself down" (174). Blaming all faults to George, Martha crosses the forbidden line. When Martha and Nick are upstairs, the stage directions tell about George's true feelings:

(He laughs, briefly, ruefully ... rises, with the book in his hand. He stands still ... then, quickly he gathers all the fury he has been containing within himself ... he shakes ... he looks at the book in his hand and with a cry that is part growl, part howl, he hurls it at the chimes. They crash against one another, ringing wildly.) (174)

George is angry but he pretends he does not care in front of Martha. They have been hiding their true feeling for too long. Analyzing Alan Schneider's production of this

play, Lewis E. Shelton makes such comment:

Conceiving of George as being terribly wounded, Schneider assumed that Martha has never before so openly participated in an infidelity as when she takes Nick off upstairs. [...] In Schneider's intention, the ending of the second act begins the plot reversal, for George gains an awareness of the destructive nature of his and Martha's marriage and seeks to bring about a change. (45)

Martha's sexual transgression in marriage is definitely unethical and her infidelity is a destructive move to their marriage. Martha has destroyed the trust between husband and wife. To George, this leads to the only conclusion; that is, he needs to save his wife by forcing her to face reality. In other words, he needs to demythologize the illusion in his and Martha's marriage.

Martha, who indulges in her power, is addicted to her imagination game.

MARTHA. (*Crying*) I FORGET! Sometimes ... sometimes when it's night, when it's late, and ... and everybody else is ... talking ... I forget and I ... want to mention him [our son] ... but I ... HOLD ON ... I hold on ... but I've wanted to ... so often ... (237)

Martha has always wanted a child that she could not have. Imagining having a son as a consolation is one thing. Mentioning of the son's existence and acting as if he is real is another thing. Martha seems to be unable to differentiate from fantasy and reality. Therefore, George decides to kill the invented son for Martha's good.

Why George chooses to kill their created son is crucial, because killing the fantasy son means to face the music, to live without the illusion. George's decision of

killing “Martha’s favorite son” is not an act of revenge but an act of care and profound love for Martha. George has to think a way to put an end to Martha’s game. When Honey asks who chimes, George starts to form an idea:

GEORGE. (*He is home, now*) ... somebody rang ... it was somebody ...
 with ... I’VE GOT IT! I’VE GOT IT, MARTHA ... ! [...] and the
 message was ... our ... son ... is ... DEAD! (180)

In George’s imagination, a messenger arrives at the front gate and rings the doorbells. George eventually finds a perfect way to beat Martha at her own game. George “*begins to laugh, very softly ... [and this laughter] is mixed with crying*” (181). As McCarthy suggests, “The announcement of the death gives the tone of the writing. It is crucial that George’s role is conscious invention at this point, as this allows the coexistence of wit and emotion seen in the ‘strange half smile’ Albee requires from the actor” (71). It is painful for George to put an end to their imagined son; however, George recognizes its necessity to do so. His decision will make all four characters confront lives with more honest attitudes (McCarthy 68). He knows the difference between illusion and truth. It is time for him to help other characters to embrace the reality, especially Martha.

The boundaries between fiction and fact blur once again in the way George deliberates the news of the son’s death. The process of George starting the story line and Martha following reveals a sense of writing:

GEORGE. ... and ... what it was ... it was good old Western Union, some
 little boy about seventy.

MARTHA. (*Involved*) Crazy Billy?

GEORGE. Yes, Martha, that's right ... crazy Billy ... and he had a telegram,
and it was for us, and I have to tell you about it. (230)

When George speaks of a man in the company Western Union, Martha immediately gives him a name "Crazy Billy". Martha is quickly involved with George's narrative. It is like they together are creating a story. Indeed, from the beginning to the end, their son myth is a collaborative work. Eventually, the moment has come. "Martha... (*Long pause*)... our son is... dead," George announces (231). Martha is furious at hearing this news. *Quivering with rage and loss*, Martha shouts: "No! No! YOU CAN'T DECIDE THAT FOR YOURSELF! I'LL NOT LET YOU DO THAT!" (232). At first, Martha seems to be unable to accept this news. Gradually the truth that their son is only an imagination comes out to everyone.

NICK. (*Violently*) JESUS CHRIST I THINK I UNDERSTAND THIS!

MARTHA. (*Great sadness and loss*) You have no right ... you have no right
at all

GEORGE. (*Tenderly*) I have the right, Martha. We never spoke of it; that's
all. I could kill him any time I wanted to.

MARTHA. But why? Why?

GEORGE. You broke our rule, baby. You mentioned him ... you mentioned
him to someone else. (236)

In this dialogue, George explains to Martha the reason why he kills their son is that she breaks the rule by telling others. It shows the direct impact of the truth to all the other three characters. Martha is agitated and then sad. Nick understands the son as a mere imagination and is delighted with pure facts he finds out. Honey does not really

know what is going on and she dissolves into her dream world again.

Out of love, but not revenge, George kills the illusory son to gain a marriage based on truth. The imagined son is the bond that unites George and Martha but at the same time it is the weapon they use to attack one another. In order to reconstruct a more faithful relationship, George's act of killing the invented son is inevitable.

Rodney Simard concludes: "[Albee suggests] that people must be social creatures and must establish realistic means for dealing with others. Love and commitment are his chief weapons against meaninglessness" (38). George is used to avoiding connection with others. Only when George realizes that Martha is over addicted to the son myth they create does he decide to take his responsibility for their life. Softly George says, "It will be dawn soon. I think the party's over" (238). Dawn signals hope and "George now acts out of compassion and from his own needs for a more stable life" (Shelton 47). After George has dispelled Martha's illusion, they can restart their marriage now. The ending displays a sense of mutual understanding:

NICK. (*To GEORGE; quietly*) You couldn't have ... any?

GEORGE. We couldn't.

MARTHA. (*A hint of communication in this*) We couldn't. (238)

When Nick asks George if they could not have children, both of George and Martha answer "We couldn't" (238). The plural form "we" indicates a sense of real communication between George and Martha.

Recognizing his own alienation from society and deciding to kill the imagined son for Martha's sake, George fully represents Levinas's concept of responsibility to and for the Other. At first, George indulges himself in the past and the son-myth he

and Martha together create. Besides the imagined son, George's fiction seems to be his own fantasy world to avoid real communication with Martha. However, the presence of Nick and Honey, like the face of the Other, disturbs the private fantasy world of George and Martha. Being over-addicted to their son-myth, Martha seems to be lost in her own fantasy world and unable to differentiate illusion from reality. Martha's intentional adultery reveals that she has been under the control of the ontological monster occupied inside her. Detecting the seriousness of Martha's condition, George decides to abandon his own illusion and to take the responsibility to help Martha cure her totalizing inclination. He finally destroys their son-myth, thus has begun a more truthful marriage relationship.