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"Who can keep learning [the linguistic] games we play?" Linguistic Games and the Parody of Contemporary American Culture in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to decode the linguistic games in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1962) using corpus linguistics. Stylistic devices will be analyzed through a reference to the dominant metaphors and the ironic tone of the playwright. The playwright invents many linguistic games which have thematic functions; they are meant to parody the American middle-class values and institutions. Fun, verbal battles, guessing games, baby talk, and word-play are used by George and Martha to ensnare their guests in their dysfunctional marriage. I will also refer to the role of deixis in translating the playwright's lamentation over the transformation of the American motherland into the locus of "ashes." The bitter reality, the failure of success, and sterility have encouraged the protagonists to move from reality to illusion and to invent a fantasy child who exists linguistically (and not biologically). The aim is to mislead the guests and to validate their unhappy marriage. What is specific about George and Martha is that they insult each other, they blur the boundaries between the private and the public, and they have failed to carry out the functions of a happily united family. Characters will go back to reality at the end of the play; "reality exists at the moment when language stops" (Bigsby 282). In other words, characters will face reality and acquire a realistic vision about their situation when they solve the linguistic enigma. The final goal of the paper is to create an interdisciplinary zone between linguistics and the literary text.

Keywords: corpus stylistics, games, pragmatics, deixis, irony, neologism, illusion vs. reality, metaphors, metonymy, American Dream

Literature Review

The Tragicomic Dimension of the Play

The play under scrutiny has been interpreted by many critics who tackled different issues. Some critics have paid attention to the process of writing the play and to the complexity of performing the linguistic games. For example, in Albee: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Stephen Bottoms focuses on the difficulty of writing and producing fun and linguistic games. He argues: "Conscious of pressures, Albee allowed Virginia Woolf to evolve over time, rather than rushing into writing it … He mentioned that it may carry comic [instances], but it's not a funny play" (Bottoms 15). In other words, the main difficulty lies in giving the impression of being a comic play, but dealing with tragic situations. I will link this tragicomic dimension to the idea of criticizing contemporary culture. In fact, Albee uses comedy to discuss serious issues about social decay and cultural impoverishment. In the same context of commenting on the tragicomic aspect of the play, in Performing Gender and Comedy Hengen Shannon and Eileen Shannon compare the postmodern play to the British absurdist play. They agree that "If George and Martha in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf or Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot present exceptions, [they] do so because of the comedy of their interactions, because, in addition to living tragically, their 'marriages' work often like the display of a performance by comedy terms" (9). The common point between the two couples lies in the tragicomic situation and in having unhappy marriages. However, the difference is that Waiting for Godot is an example of absurd drama and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf is a realistic play. I will further explore the tragicomic dimension by analyzing the significance of the different types of irony and the way in which Albee uses comedy to expose the tragic dilemma of the protagonists. This tragedy is caused by the fact of being disillusioned with contemporary American middle-class values and social institutions.

The Main Thematic Concerns

The theme of oscillation between dream and reality is analyzed by Jannis Rudzki-Weise in Truth, Illusion and the American Dream in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, where the author expands on the thematic examination and studies the illusory dimension of the American Dream. The author focuses on the characterization of Martha and writes: "for her, living the American Dream means being in an intact family with a loving husband and a child. This has not become reality and she is therefore living in the American nightmare" (Rudzki-Weise 4). The tragedy of Martha is heightened because she fails to construct a family and be a fertile woman. I will analyze Martha's disillusionment with the American Dream of family union by using the linguistic game of the son and by showing the way the sterile couple stands for the sterile life in contemporary America where nothing grows. My contribution will be presented through using corpus stylistics as a tool for analyzing cultural decay.

The Absurdist Dimension

Apart from thematic concerns, some other critics discussed the absurdist nature of the play and argued that Albee is not an absurdist playwright, but rather that exposes the nightmarish reality and offers an optimistic view regarding contemporary American culture. In this respect, in his "Reviewing Edward Albee's Electric Sixties," David Marcia refutes the claim that Albee is an absurdist playwright and insists that "a realistic portrayal of family life dominated any abstract or absurdist elements in the play" (qtd. in Bennett 84). I will develop this idea by showing that the play is not absurdist, but it represents Albee's dark depiction of contemporary culture, which is based on moral decay.

Gender Issues

Some critics have focused on the reversal of traditional roles and on Martha's desire to have a child as a compensation for being long repressed, and as a way to reconstruct her social identity and be identified as the ideal mother. In this context, in his "Patriarchy vs. Matriarchy'" Hans Osterwalder claims: "a fantasy of a son should compensate for her additional failure to produce a real heir apparent for daddy's empire … [She] is assuming a male identity herself by a pervasive

display of masculine character traits" (111). Put differently, Osterwalder emphasizes Martha's childhood complex and believes that her emasculation emanates from her strong desire to be her father's heir. I will discuss this claim by showing that she is rather obsessed with having a child and with reconstructing a stable family she was prevented from having during her childhood. This idea will be conveyed through using stylistic means and through analyzing Martha's language. In the same vein of dealing with gender issues, some other critics compare Martha to other classical heroines and claim that she shares with them the same situation of female plight and social repression. For instance, in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf: Necessary Fiction, Terrifying Realities, Matthew Charles Roudané observes: "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, despite its contemporaneity, harkens back to other classics in modern tradition imbued with gender conflicts: there are intimations of George Bernard Shaw's Heartbreak House and Henrick Ibsen's Hedda Gabler" (74). I will discuss this argument by showing the uniqueness of the play and its contemporary implications. Martha cannot really share the same experience of tragic heroines because she belongs to the contemporary period; she has different preoccupations, and she tries to go beyond gender constraints, especially at the beginning of the play when she subverts gender roles. The present paper is not meant to reconsider gender themes, but I will analyze the language of a female character who yearns for creating a harmonious family by inventing a private language and linguistic games with her husband. Yearning for harmony is caused by living in the contemporary era, where each family member lives apart. This family separation is one of the effects of the popular culture of consumerism, which aims at cutting family ties and creating passive creatures.

Methodology

The majority of critics I came across have dealt with psychoanalytic, gender, feminist, and thematic studies of the play. I will try to bring an innovative reading by creating a link between literature and linguistics. Accordingly, the corpus linguistic approach will be applied to Albee's text to elucidate the playwright's re-examination of different versions of the American dream (collecting lucre, family union, happy marriage, socio-economic stability, intellectual and academic progress, etc.). Irony, metonymy, metaphors, linguistic games, and different types of deixis will be deployed to find out Albee's attitude regarding contemporary culture and moral decay.

Research Questions

The present paper is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

In what ways does the playwright criticize the values of contemporary America? What is the relationship between form and content, and how does corpus stylistics help us study the main thematic concerns of the play?

In what ways are the couples of the play disillusioned with the myth of happy marriage, and how do they escape the socio-economic and political realities? How are they disappointed with the dream of family unity? What is the significance of the linguistic games, and how do they reflect Albee's parody of the American Dream? How can we compare the young to the older couples?

How do George and Martha face reality? How do they change their perceptions about happiness at the end of the play? In what ways do they embrace a new understanding about the American Dream, about achievement, and about the relationship between illusion and reality?

Corpus Stylistics

Before using corpus stylistics as a device for examining Albee's criticism of contemporary cultural values in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, it is pertinent to start with a theoretical framework and to define the term. In fact, corpus stylistics is perceived by Michaela Mahlberg, a professor of applied linguistics, as "a way of bringing the study of language and literature closer together: making use of innovative descriptive tools that not only fit into linguistic frameworks but also leave room to account for individual qualities of texts" (Ho 8). Put differently, corpus stylistics aims at creating a smooth link between literary style and content as it starts from the use of language to reach the intended meaning. The affinities between style and language use, form and content, structure and implied meaning, will be grasped with a major reliance on Leech and Short's model which delves into "linguistic and stylistic categories: lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and cohesion and context" (Leech and Short 75). In this respect, the analysis will focus on the dominant figures of speech, the lexical patterns, spatial, temporal, and person deixis, to map

out the way Edward Albee provides the audience with a parody of American middle-class institutions and values.

In their examination of corpus stylistics, Leech and Short differentiate between stylistics and corpus stylistics by stating: “One major concern of stylistics is to check or validate the intuitions by detailed analysis, but [corpus] stylistics is also a dialogue between literary reader and linguistic observer, in which insight, not mere objectivity, is the goal.” (5) Unlike stylistics, which deals with deep analysis and focuses on the importance of style, corpus stylistics bridges the gap between the literary and the linguistic elements. We notice that Leech and Short’s model is based on an interdisciplinarity between literature and linguistics as it insists on establishing a sort of communication between the “literary reader” and the “linguistic observer.” The present paper will thus rely on our linguistic observation to grasp the literary and dramatic text. In reality, in the play, language is the intermediate between the character and the audience as the latter can have a deeper insight into Martha and George’s tragic dilemma and oscillation between illusion and reality through deciphering their linguistic codes.

Person, Space, and Time Deixis

Before dealing with a close analysis of the different types of deixis in the play, it is pertinent to define the term. British linguist John Lyons defines deixis using the following terms:

> *by deixis is meant the location and identification of persons, object, events, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it, typically, of a single speaker and at least one addressee (Lyons 637).*

It is important to note that deixis plays a fundamental role in grasping pragmatics because it is based on a complementarity between the structure of the utterance and its social context. In the play, the opening stage directions and the opening scene are marked by the frequent use of space and temporal deixis: “Set in darkness. Crash against front door … Front door opens, lights are switched on … it’s two clock in the … They’ll be here soon” (Albee 11) … But why now? It’s two o’ clock in the morning” (14) … well, now, perhaps we shouldn’t have come” (20). We infer through

the repetitive use of the adverb “now” and the present tense that the current events of the first scene take place at night. The nocturnal atmosphere confers certain gloominess and gives hints at the pessimistic outlook of the first scene. Martha and George are life-weary characters who have a tendency to spend sleepless nights and to roam bars in order to deny the bitter reality of failure. The failure of the couple is noticed through the disillusionment with the institution of marriage. In this respect, George and Martha use space deixis metaphorically and not physically, especially when they refer to “house” and “home” several times. They often refer to the house when they talk about their private space; Martha screams: “I’m loud and vulgar … in this house” (Albee 70). On the other hand, they use the term “home” when they mention the younger couple of the play: “[w]hy did they do… go home and get some sleep first, or something?” (15). The use of “house” instead of “home” suggests the failure of George and Martha to create close family bonds. In this context, Martha blames George for his failure to carry out the familial role of a husband: “I just told you: I just did it … I don’t know what you are so tired about … you haven’t done anything all day; you didn’t have any classes, or anything” (13). The use of person deixis and the recurrent use of the first-person pronoun indicate the reversal of gender roles and Martha’s feelings of superiority over the dominated husband. The frequent use of the verb of action “to do” is meant to highlight her dynamism, which is set in opposition to the passivity of George. George is thus the emasculated husband, and Martha is not the docile and obedient lady but a virile wife. We deduce through person deixis and the failure of the couple to create a functional family that the playwright points out to the dysfunctional marriage.

Apart from the failure inside the couple, George fails in the rat race of attaining upward mobility and in meeting the standards of academic success. Indeed, he is engrossed in history and human sciences in the era of scientific prosperity. He criticizes Nick: “This genetic business you’re talking about… Oh, that (dismissed it with a wave of his hand). That’s very upsetting.” (Albee 29) The shift from using “this” to “that” shows that George is opposed to eugenics as it represents a threat to the faculty of thinking, and it limits human creativity. He addresses the young couple: “Illyria, penguin Island Gomorah. You think you are going to be happy here in New Carthage, eh?” (31). George mocks Nick for his belief in the role of eugenics in endowing the postmodern man with a sense of euphoria. The use of authentic place and the place deixis “here” shows that George laments the

deterioration of values and augurs the nasty effects of scientific progress. He alludes to the Punic war, which had devastating effects on Carthage. New Carthage is a reminder of the monotonous way of life in New England, where dullness reigns supreme because of the sameness produced by eugenics and the absence of cultural diversity.

George renders biology responsible for the dehumanizing situation of the postmodern Adam. In this context, he addresses Nick:

> *[at Nick, not to him]: You take the trouble to construct a civilization to… to build a society, based on the principles of… of principle you endeavor to make communicable sense out of natural order, morality out of the unnatural disorder of man's mind… you make government and art, and realize that they are, must be, both the same… you bring things to the saddest of all points to the point where there is something to lose then all at once, through all the music, through all the sensible sounds of men building, attempting, comes the Dies Irae (73).*

The stylistic analysis of the passage divulges the playwright's critical stance against eugenics and its major role in disseminating the roots of cultural homogeneity. The reiterated use of the deictic expression "you" shows that George is implicitly rebuking biologist Nick for thwarting individuality and heightening identity crisis. On the syntactic level, the use of dynamic verbs "to make," "to bring," and "to come," as well as the use of the modal auxiliary "must," evokes the speaker's firm rejection of the scientific orientation of the young generation. On the pragmatic level, the use of foreign words like "Dieas Irae" makes the passage appear like a dirge. George laments over the loss of human values and foretells the figurative death which will bring about mental stagnation and the degeneration of humanities.

Martha is impressed by the scientific spirit of Nick, and she argues that humanities are useless and abstract. The historian responds by inviting the scientist and the audience to ponder over the role of biology in endangering the artistic and creative side of men: "we will have a race of men, test tube bred… But! Everyone will tend to be rather the same. Alike. Everyone and I'm sure I'm not wrong here" (45). Temporal deixis and the shift in terms of tenses from present to future is another indication of the playwright's denouncement of eugenics. The use of the lexical register of resemblance – "same," "alike" – shows that George accuses science of multiplying the dilemma of

men and of leading to an absence of purpose. Accordingly, he invites Nick to read about history: "Read history. I know something about history. I know when I'm being threatened" (47). The marked use of the verb of cognition "to know" highlights the insistence of George on the role of history in endowing men with a better knowledge about the progress of the individual throughout history. The flaw of the young and the older couple is the inability to create an interdisciplinarity between history and science. The common thread between the couples is their constant escape from the nightmarish reality. However, what distinguishes Martha and George is their playful use of language, which is noticed through the use of deixis and will be further examined through their creative invention of some linguistic games.

The Game of the Son

Before analyzing the significance of language games in the play, it is pertinent to define the term, which has been tackled from different perspectives. From a philosophical angle, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that games consist of "language and the actions it is woven" (7). In other words, a meaningful linguistic game is based on actions since intended meaning is acquired because of the active involvement and the proximate relationship between speakers. Spanish specialist in Modern American Theater Catherine Larson further expounds on Wittgenstein's theory by suggesting a pragmatic touch. She writes, "the fundamental point of Wittgenstein's approach to language is that it is studied from the pragmatic perception of language in use. Language, then, is not an abstract system, but rather a working functional method of communication: when we speak, we act" (Larson 79). The aim behind embracing the pragmatic approach is to show the role of context and the specific use of language in constructing the linguistic games and in creating certain harmony between the speakers who know and understand the rules of the game. On the other hand, in his Shakespeare's Universe of Discourse, Kein Elam declares that the world of theater is characterized by the profuse use of language games because "dramatic discourse is always destined, if not on the page then at least potentially on the stage, to interact with its physical and behavioral surroundings, and especially with the body and its movements, in the production of meaning" (qtd. in Larson 79). Linguistic games in some plays are clearly characterized by the harmony between verbal and non-verbal languages, the movement on the stage, and the

behavioral aspect of the character. Though different, various approaches to language games converge in highlighting the role of these games as functional means of communication.

In the same framework of dealing with corpus stylistics and in order to better understand the significance of the linguistic games, I will focus on the extended metaphor of the son. In their "Metaphor and Mind Style," Elena Semino and Kate Swindlehurst argue:

Whereas cognitive theorists have highlighted the relationship between conventional metaphors and the world view of a particular culture, we explore the way in which consistent and nonconventional metaphorical patterns within a particular text reflect the conceptual system of its creator. We suggest that, in an individual level the systematic use of a particular metaphor or metaphors reflects an idiosyncratic cognitive habit, a personal way of making sense of and talking about the world: in other words, a particular mind style (Semino and Swindelhurst 147).

Put differently, individual metaphors are different from the conventional metaphors and are more personal as they mirror the cognitive side of a specific character. On the other hand, conceptual metaphors are fixed and are understood by common people as they are based on conventions. From the perspective of some cognitive linguistics, it is believed that

the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another. The general theory of metaphor is given by characterizing such cross-domain mappings. And in the process, everyday abstract concepts like time, states, change, causation and purpose turn out to be metaphorical (Lakoff 43).

The mental field plays a fundamental role in constructing metaphors, and what is specific about conventional metaphors is that their abstract connotations can be automatically recognized. This view about the cognitive aspect of conventional metaphors is further developed by Hungarian Professor of linguistics, Zoltan Kovecses. He argues that conventional metaphors are "highly conventionalized, in that speakers of English use them naturally and effortlessly for their normal, everyday purposes" (Kovecses 34). It is noticeable that even ordinary people can decipher the significance of conventional metaphors which can also be considered as conceptual because the implied meaning of some concepts is clear to the mind of the speaker and the hearer. Kovecses adds:

Conventional conceptual metaphors, such as Argument is War, Love is a Journey, Ideas are Food, and Theories are Buildings, are deeply entrenched ways of thinking about or understanding an abstract domain, while conventional metaphorical linguistic expressions are well worn, clichéd ways of talking about abstract domains. Thus, both conceptual and linguistic metaphors can be more or less conventional. (34)

We infer through this argument that the area of convergence between conceptual and conventional metaphors lies in grasping the abstract dimension and in being able to associate different items and find similarities between incomparable elements. Unlike conventional metaphors, individual metaphors are special in the sense that they reflect the unique experience of a character, and they cannot be understood without having access to the mental roadmap of the Character and learning about his/her subjective experience. That is why, grasping the individual metaphor, or the game of the son, helps the audience get access to the cognitive insight of George and Martha. The metaphor of the son translates their obsession with achieving the American Dream of family union. The fantasy child exists only in language and is physically absent: “Martha does not want to talk about it him. Martha is sorry she brought it up him” (Albee 48). The person deixis is made clear through using “it” and “him” interchangeably to highlight (in an implicit way) the illusory nature of the child. The presence of the child as an object of fantasy betokens the contradiction between the soaring expectations and the disillusionment with the reality of failure. Only Martha and George can decode the meaning of the son game, which reflects their oscillation between dream and reality. In fact, Nick is not able to grasp the meaning of the individual metaphor and he complains: “I didn’t say I was deaf. I said I didn’t understand. I meant I was implying I didn’t understand” (64). This statement creates a sort of dramatic irony because the audience tend to know that the imaginary son stands for the dramatic dilemma of the old couple and of their embarrassment because of sterility. This sterility is metaphorical as it can connote the barren life in modern America, which is characterized by the loss of values. The next part will study the loss of values by referring to the corruption of some social institutions and by using metonymy as a tool for analysis.

Metonymy

In addition to attacking the American Dream, Albee attacks the church as a social institution. Metonymy is another stylistic device used to decry social and moral corruption. Metonymy is based on "cognitive perspective [which] increasingly demands a search for larger patterns of metaphoric thought in texts" (Burke 216). Metonymy is different from metaphor in the sense that it is based on the substitution of one term with another. On the other hand, the metaphor is characterized by the association of incomparable elements. In addition, "metonymic signifiers foreground the signified while metaphoric signifiers foreground the signifier" (Chandler 132). In the play, Nick and George use metonymy when they refer to Honey's father. They criticize the preacher when they use the term "God's money," which functions as the signified. Nick reveals to George: "He spent God's money… and he saved his own. He built three churches, or whatever they were, and two of them burned down and he ended up pretty rich" (Albee 69). God's money refers to the public money that has been exploited by the elite; religion seems to be used as a cover under which materialistic ends are achieved. What is ambivalent about Nick is that he criticizes the moral void and material richness of his father-in-law, and he gets married to Honey for financial reasons. The obsession with Mammon (the god of wealth) is a feature common to the main characters of the play. In this way, the playwright points at the negative effects of the individual rat race. He is clearly opposed to the Capitalist values of the American jungle. In addition to metonymy, the ironic style is another feature of corpus stylistics, and it is a tool for analyzing Albee's parody of middle-class values.

Irony and the Game of "Get the Guests"

Irony is another dominant stylistic device used to parody American middle-class life and values. To better understand the message of the playwright, this part sets out to analyze the pragmatic implications of some ironic instances. The first type of irony is verbal: it consists of a gap between words and meaning, and it entails the speaker's dissatisfaction with reality. This type of irony is noticed when George insults Martha and asks her: "what do you want me to do? Do you want me to go around all night braying at everybody" (Albee 13). Literally speaking, the husband seems to insult his wife and to ask her to stop uttering a bray. The intended meaning is different because the illocution is to ask Martha to stop reminding the speaker of their reality of sterility. Situational irony is another type of irony, and it is conveyed through the funny situation of arguing over the eye

color. Martha insists that their son “has the loveliest green eyes” (50), and George affirms: “He has blue eyes, Martha” (50). We infer through this situation that either George or Martha is lying about the eye color. However, a closer look at the situation helps us to deduce that both of them flout the maxim of quality as they provide their audience with false information about the son. This ironic situation is meant to highlight the idea of sterility inside the couple and to dramatize their dysfunctional marriage. A sense of dramatic irony is achieved when George and Martha trap the younger couple of the play to reveal the truth of their unhappy marriage, and the audience know better about the real intentions of George and Martha. A case in point in the game of “Get the Guests,” when George addresses Honey and recounts: “It’s all about a nice young couple and Mousie’s father was a holy man” (87). Literally, the story is meant to amuse the guests; the intended aim is to “reveal the hidden” marital conflicts. Honey gets nervous when she gets the implied meaning of the game and accuses her husband of blurring the boundaries between the private and the secret. All the secrets are revealed at the end of the play when the games are decoded and the couple kill the imaginary son. Characters will go back to reality at the end of the play; “reality exists at the moment when language stops” (Bigsby 282). In other words, characters face reality and acquire a realistic vision about their situation when they solve the linguistic enigma.

Non-Verbal Language: From Page to Stage

Albee’s criticism of popular culture is also conveyed through non-verbal language and the theatrical productions of the play. What is specific about this modern playwright is that he used to attend the theatrical performances of his plays and to insist on adding an authentic touch and on using body language as a form of expression. In reality,

> *by staging his own work, Albee seeks to realize in moment to moment performance his original blueprint for a play, his rehearsal illuminates his authorial strategies and aesthetic. His directing of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf demonstrates how central his insistence on psychologically and sociologically credible stage behaviors is to his theatre aesthetic (Solomon 32).*

His minute focus on the psychological and social behaviors is meant to dramatize the psychological effects of contemporary culture and of living in a society whose members are obsessed with the culture of consumerism. This dramatic situation can be examined through the performance of "Get the Guests" game:

> *When George screams 'silence!' to begin his 'get the guests," Albee reminded him to pause first because the scream must startle us. His dramaturgy has already established a pause, indicated by closing the preceding speech with ellipses, but he had to justify it during rehearsal because most actors tend to disregard textual punctuation and stage directions (Solomon 134).*

Albee insists on respecting the punctuation provided in the dramatic text because it is functional. For example, the pause at the beginning "Get the Guests" game is meant to be a moment for reflection. The audience is invited to ponder over the game and to think twice about sterility.

Not only is sterility physical, but it is also spiritual as it is based on moral emptiness. This vacuum is the outcome of the values of a popular culture based on the rules of consumerism. Popular culture affects social identity in the sense that it makes citizens passive creatures. In this respect, Paulo Suess, a specialist in culture studies argues:

> *In contrast to popular cultures whose subjects are particular peoples, pop culture deprives a people of its subjectivity. Pop culture stimulates passive consumerism, and does not bestow identity on peoples or social groups. By means of its homogenizing force, pop culture makes the shape of all civilizations the same, without itself being because of its passive consumerism … Popular culture is not really a culture, but a commodity. (185)*

Suess believes that popular culture is "a commodity" because it strips the human being of humanity, and it aims at creating a homogeneous culture. Albee is deeply opposed to this homogeneity as it is an obstacle to intellectual development, creativity, and individualism. Under the effects of cultural conformity, the human being becomes a machine which works blindly without having any space for creative reflection. The playwright criticizes the ambivalence of popular culture which kills individuality, asks some citizens to be physically attractive, and creates different means to make them passive. This idea can be better understood through the characterization of

Martha and the choice of a special shape to perform her role. In fact, “when Martha is played by a fat actress, the casting taps into a well of cultural prejudices toward fat women as untamed and unsocialized. … Martha’s insatiable thirst for alcohol and sex harks back to an ancient trope of powerful woman as all consuming” (Mobley 52). This idea can be discussed because Albee does not accept cultural prejudices against women – he is rather attacking the social norms which expect a contemporary woman to be slender and passive at the same time. It is the case of Martha, who becomes addicted to alcohol, which is a major element of pop culture. The characterization of Martha has an allegorical dimension as she stands for mother America whose social body is contaminated because of the dominant culture of consumerism, which implants the values of anarchy.

The play mirrors Albee’s outcry over the negative effects of popular culture and the remarkable dominance of sterility, but it also translates his optimistic view and his belief in a better future. His positive view can be detected through his modification of some theatrical performances of the play. For example, “[he] refused the subtext added by John Ottavino and criticized the fact of adding an utterance about Honey’s sterility” (Solomon 132). He refused the scene related to sterility because he wanted to leave a glimmer of hope for the next generation. We deduce that Albee’s criticism of popular culture is constructive criticism because it carries out a call for change and cultural revival. This call is made explicit when Albee advises some stage producers using the following terms: “Don’t play the symbols…. Don’t play the death of all future children” (qtd. in Solomon 132). He believes that future children can bring positive winds of change by being creative and by reconstructing a new culture based on free thinking.

Conclusion

To conclude, the paper has attempted to create an interdisciplinary approach, between linguistics and the literary text. This interdisciplinarity is created through relying on language use as a tool for analyzing Albee’s re-examination of contemporary culture. The corpus stylistics approach to Albee’s Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf helps us perceive the way the playwright questions the values of contemporary American culture. The play has an allegorical dimension as the couple of the play deviate from the first ideal American couple, George and Martha Washington. The flaw of

the couple is their obsession with money and their belief that material success can bring about happiness. Happiness proves to be an illusion for the couple, who change their perception about happiness and reach the conclusion that peace can be achieved through accepting instead of avoiding reality. The couple succeed in creating harmonious moments at the end of the play, when they stick to reality instead of being immersed in illusions. Albee criticizes the nasty effects of popular culture, but he also stages his belief in the implementation of a new cultural American system based on encouraging creativity and on preserving the individuality of the human being.

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