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# ABSURDIST BLACK HUMOUR IN EDWARD ALBEE'S WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

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### Abstract

Nourished by the ideas of the Theatre of the Absurd that relied on the loss of logical language and on ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, which were considered to represent a barrier between us and what the world is really about, Edward Albee developed a view of the theatre that was unconventional, if not defiantly radical, by means of the language used, incoherent, frightening and strange but, at the same time, somehow humorous and hauntingly poetic and familiar. In Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Edward Albee is concerned with the failure of communication and the sexual substructure of modern society, by rejecting logic for a type of non-logic, which is stylistically transposed in a unique manner, giving birth to the play's black humour. Edward Albee's play observes the trends of drama related to this period that induces a kind of sick laughter, mocking and self-deprecating. His black humour shares the general traits of this trend, i.e. the debasement and dehumanization of man, a rising lack of moral values that results in a dark humour that laughs at the irrationality of the world, to which he also adds his personal tinge, i.e. the themes of lack of communication and lack of individuality, which are brilliantly rendered linguistically in his play, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?.

**Keywords:** black humour; linguistic stylistics; Theatre of the Absurd;

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The origins of the Theatre of the Absurd are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, it was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second World War, which showed the total impermanence of any values, shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness.

On the other hand, black humour involves a connection between seemingly incompatible ideas and emotions. The term black humour captures the image of death in connection with the origins of merriment (Simpson J.A., 1989). These terms represent implausible combinations: joy and tranquillity are conjoined with confusion, frustration and despair. In this sense, black humour embodies a paradox. It explores two philosophically extreme positions: that death is everything and death is nothing. This profound absurdity distinguishes black humour from other forms of humorous expression. The experience of black humour

emerges from the intricacies of human beliefs and behaviours surrounding death and through the diverse rituals that shape experiences of loss. Black humour is an attempt to articulate the tension between the haunting absence and disturbing presence of death. In black humour, topics and events that are usually regarded as taboo, specifically those related to death, are treated in an unusually humorous or satirical manner while retaining their seriousness; the intent of black humour, therefore, is often for the audience to experience both laughter and discomfort, sometimes simultaneously.

In the present paper, we are going to analyse a specific type of black humour, i.e. absurdist black humour, and demonstrate that it is the unifying thread of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama, which may also be considered central to the black humour present in 20th century drama, is its distrust of language as a means of communication. It seems that words fail to express the essence of human experience, not being able to go beyond its superficial meaning; it seems to have become nothing but a vehicle for conventionalised, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges.

Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which it distorts and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically.

Absurdist playwrights consider that this conventionalised type of speech acts represents a barrier between us and what the world is really about. They strongly believe that the loss of logical language brings people towards a unity with living things. (Esslin M., 2001)

Most absurdist dramas are lyrical statements, very much like music.

Nourished by such ideas and influences, Edward Albee developed a view of theatre that was unconventional if not defiantly radical. Even if the play under analysis in the present paper, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, would not be strictly classified as belonging to the movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd, there are, however, many elements of this play which are closely aligned with or which grew out of the dramas classified as being part of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Although the movement which became known under the name of the Theatre of the Absurd was not a consciously conceived movement, it has never had any clear-cut philosophical doctrines, and each of the main playwrights appeared to have developed independently of the other, it does have features that differentiate it from other experiments in drama.

The playwrights most often connected with the movement are Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Arthur Adamov. The early plays of Edward Albee and Harold Pinter fit into this classification, but they have also written plays that move far away from the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin M., 2001).

Edward Albee earned an international reputation as an innovative American dramatist, a great successor to such famous people as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. He is credited with creating a distinctly American kind of absurdism, influenced by such European playwrights as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Harold Pinter.

The plays that comprise this movement, including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* forsake the theatre of coherently developed situations, they most often than not forget settings that bear an intrinsic, realistic or obvious relationship in the drama as a whole, they disregard language as a means of logical communication and the cause and effect relationships found in traditional drama. In these plays, black humour is achieved by means of the settings and situations that often make the audience vaguely uncomfortable – the world itself seems, by means of the language used, incoherent and frightening and strange – but, at the same time, somehow humorous and hauntingly poetic and familiar. Black humour in this type of drama differs from black humour evoked in 20th century novels in that it is more allusive, more subtle and concealed, as absurdist dramatists write from a "sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition." (Esslin M., 2001, 32)

The Theatre of the Absurd seeks to wed form and content into an indissoluble whole, so as to gain a further unity of meaning and impact. This theatre has, as Esslin pointed out, "renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence."(Esslin M., 2001, 38)

Apart from such similarities as violation of traditional beginning, middle and end or the total refusal to tell a straightforward connected story with a usual plot, the disappearance of traditional dramatic forms and techniques, Edward Albee, in his *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is also concerned with the failure of communication and the sexual substructure of modern society, which is stylistically transposed in a unique manner.

Edward Albee obviously rejects traditional logic for a type of non-logic, which gives birth to the play's black humour.

Edward Albee's play observes the trends of drama related to this period that induces a kind of sick laughter, mocking and self-deprecating. His black humour shares the general traits of this trend, i.e. the debasement and dehumanization of man, a rising lack of moral values that results in a dark absurdist humour that laughs at the irrationality of the world, to which he also adds his personal tinge, i.e. the themes of lack of communication and lack of individuality, which are brilliantly rendered linguistically in his play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

## 3. FINDINGS

In Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, each character exists in his own private ego. Each makes a vain attempt to determine another character to understand him, but as the attempt is contrived, there is even more alienation. The technique used is the presentation of a series of seemingly disjointed speeches. The accumulative effect of these speeches means expressing the failure of communication in modern society.

The Theatre of the Absurd, and implicitly, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, does not offer solutions. Nothing is ever settled, no conclusions or resolutions are either reached or offered because the play is essentially circular and repetitive in nature, both in point of action and in point of the language used. From the very title of the play, it is obvious that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has been construed as an absurdist black joke with a deliberate twofold meaning. Therefore, if perceived as a semantic incongruity, due to the pun upon the words wolf and the name of the famous writer, Virginia Woolf, the title provokes laughter and if only the name of Virginia Woolf is taken into account, it stimulates meditation, and the underlying tone becomes serious. As a result, the seriocomic title of the play becomes extremely suggestive and represents an anticipatory technique for its black humour (Gussow M., 1999, 30-33). The mere reference to the name of Virginia Woolf could function as a portent because George and Martha are playing a dangerous game, which could drive either or both of them into madness, madness being a well-known motif for black humourists. The fact that the name is changed to Virginia Woolf is also significant from other points of view, too. On the one hand, Virginia Woolf wrote in the style of stream-of-consciousness, which tried to mimic the thought patterns of her characters, and one might be afraid of her because she tries to understand the intricacies of the human mind and heart and, at the same time, her writing is very complex and intellectual, therefore, one might be afraid of not understanding her. On the other hand, Virginia Woolf tried to reveal the truth of human experience, emotion and thought: all of the things that the couples in the play try to cover up.

The title is also a parody of *Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?* from Disney's The Three Little Pigs. Some unknown person sang the parody at the party that the characters attended earlier, and it was apparently hilarious. Nevertheless, Albee never explains in what context the tune was sung. It is like the audience/readers are given the punch line to a joke but not the set-up. However, the title is a joke whose meaning the audience does not know. The characters are up there on the stage laughing it up, while the audience is left wondering just what is so funny. This fact transforms the seemingly harmless joke into black humour. Albee seems to say, by means of his play, that life is a big black joke, which is reflected at the level of language and style in his play, whose meaning is ultimately unknowable (Gussow M., 1999, 34).

In Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, black humour becomes part of an extremely elaborated language game, which obviously violates the Gricean cooperative principle, and the maxim of quality, in particular.

Grice's cooperative principle may be broadly defined as "a rough general principle which participants will be expected to observe, namely: make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." (Grice H.P., 1975, 45)

In other words, the cooperative principle sustains that all talk exchanges are not a mere string of incoherent remarks, they are most often than not based on cooperative efforts and, last but not least, each participant recognizes in the respective talk exchanges a common goal or at least a reciprocally accepted direction.

Nevertheless, in Edward Albee's play, the cooperative principle and the rules that lie behind it are not self-evident because most so-called conversations in the play are, on the one hand, totally uncooperative, and, on the other hand, they clearly lack a reciprocally accepted direction.

Therefore, the further analysis of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* will be mainly performed from a pragmatic point of view, focusing on instances of non-observance of the above-mentioned principle but it will also rely on other co-factors that contribute to the play's absurdist black humour.

As Enikö Bollobás rightly asserts in her article *Who's Afraid of Irony? An Analysis of Uncooperative Behaviour in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Edward Albee's play relies on some "uncooperative principle" and has a reputation for almost lacking any action, because nothing really happens besides endless talking.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee presents an all-night drinking bout in which a middle-aged professor and his wife verbally lacerate each other in brilliant colloquial language. After a long stretch of time where families were pictured as perfect and happy, George and Martha share the name of America's founding and most famous couple, George and Martha Washington; thus, Albee also implicitly extends his portrayal of this faulty marriage to all America. The illusions and tensions under which they hide and snipe at each other are paradigmatic of a larger phenomenon in the nation itself.

Game-playing evolves as the central metaphor of the play and the variety of the games suggests the many ways one can shield oneself from reality. They are spread over all three acts (Act One: Fun and Games, Act Two: Walpurgisnacht, Act Three: The Exorcism), yet as the play progresses, the games become more serious and less fun.

Indeed, the audience witnesses "a modernist game" (Bollobás [E., 1981, 324]), as Bollobás calls it, whose rules are principles of uncooperative behaviour.

There are a variety of games used such as Humiliate the Host, Get the Guests, Hump the Hostess, Bringing Up Baby, Killing the Kid, each introducing new rules to define the new game, yet none of these rules discloses any possible way of cooperation.

Notice how all the names of the games from the play contain an alliteration, giving a lyrical but, at the same time, ironic tone to the whole play. From this point of view, of the poetical devices that are used throughout the play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* observes the trend of The Theatre of the Absurd.

For all of the play's savagery and bleak outlook, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is often very funny, George and Martha are so verbally skilful that their exchanges often make the audience laugh at the same time they feel the pain the two characters inflict, giving rise to a genuine form of black humour.

Albee's ability to evoke laughs out of the darkest situations is one of his hallmarks. Black humour is manifest by means of many forms in Edward Albee's play, perhaps the most obvious and also the most important being irony.

Irony belongs, together with hints, insinuations, metaphors, to the class of indirect speech acts as defined by Searle (Searle J.R., 1969). In an ironic exchange, the speaker's utterance meaning and sentence meaning come apart. Or, as Allwood puts it "intended communicative content and apprehended content differ," i.e. the speaker communicates something more than the opposite of what is literally expressed.

Also, common background assumptions are of great importance when dealing with irony. Allwood asserts that

"A can communicate something about his relation to a certain situation by concurrently communicating the conventional content of a certain linguistic expression and intending that B, through his familiarity with the situation, and the conventional content of the expression should draw the conclusion that A does not mean what he is literally saying." (Allwood, J., 1976, 135)

On the other hand, as a form of uncooperative behaviour, irony violates the Gricean maxims of quality: it says something, but in fact means something else.

Ironic speech acts may be compared to lies as far as the truth value is concerned. Both irony and lies are examples of uncooperative behaviour and they both violate Grice's cooperative principle. However, the difference between them is that lies do not have implicatures while irony may imply a number of things such as the opposite of the literal meaning, the intention of the speaker to leave the listener in doubt or the speaker's distance from the situation.

Albee's play abounds in both instances of irony and in lies, sometimes being almost impossible for the audience to distinguish between them:

Martha: 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: Green.

George: Blue, Martha.

M: Green! He has the loveliest green eyes… they aren't all flaked with brown and grey, you know… hazel… they're real green… deep, pure green eyes… like mine.

Nick: Your eyes are… brown, aren't they?

Martha: Green! Well, in some lights they look brown, but they're green. Not green like his… more hazel. George has watery blue eyes… milky blue.

George: Make up your mind, Martha. (Albee E., 1962, 50-51)

The above conversation has absolutely no connection with reality. Apparently reality changes according to the wish of Martha. The first thing that strikes the reader both in this fragment and in the entire play are the suspension points. The suspension points represent a graphic mark that may paradoxically symbolize, on the one hand, the characters' interrupted thoughts as the characters themselves are interrupted, incoherent, discontinuous beings, and, on the other hand, the continuous babble of the characters, who keep uttering word after word in a nonsensical and absurd dialogue; from this point of view, by using the suspension points, the author seems to suggest that this babble never ceases, even when the characters pause and do not speak.

The language in the fragment is extremely simple, the only so-called adornment brought to it being the modifiers *the loveliest*, *real*, *deep*, *pure*, *watery*, and *milky*, which although are meant to make the nuances of colour more clear, they ironically succeed in bringing more confusion to the fragment as a whole.

After the initial argument between George and Martha, in which George states that their son has blue eyes and Martha contradicts him and asserts that their son has green eyes, the climax of the fragment is brought by Nick, who uses a tag question Your eyes are… brown, aren't they? in which all the expectations of the readers fall apart. The tag question is skilfully used by Albee in order to emphasize the brown colour of Martha's eyes as opposed to blue or green.

In the next retort, Martha manages to ruin all expectations and rules of logic by mixing colours completely. The final question is: are the characters ironic or simply lying or both? The answer would probably be that irony and lying beautifully combine in Albee's play to give rise to black humour.

Irony is achieved by means of a number of ways in Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, all meant to enhance the overall black humour. According to Bollobás (Bollobás E., 1981, 329), there are three ways used by Albee to obtain irony.

The first and most common way to obtain an ironic proposition is by using the negation of literal meaning as in the example: "Martha: I never joke… I don't have a sense of humour. I have a fine sense of the ridiculous, but no sense of humour." (Albee E., 1962, 51)

In this retort, the intended meaning that should be understood by the audience is that Martha always jokes and has the finest sense of humour, because all her actions in the play lead to this idea. This clash between literal and intended meaning, as expressed by the words Martha utters and her real actions, leads to irony. Here, the negation of literal meaning is achieved by the use of the negative adverb *never*, the negative word *no* and the negative auxiliary *don't*.

Another instance of this type of irony is the use of a verb in the affirmative, *to bring out*, and of a superlative, *the best*, when, in fact, the intended meaning of the verb is in the negative and the real superlative George wants to use is the worst:

Martha: It's the most… life you've shown a long time.
George: you bring out the best in me, baby. (Albee E., 1962, 124)

The second way to obtain irony, which evidently violates the maxim of quality, is by using "an intentional expression of insincerity." This statement is supported by Brown, who says that "only illocutionary acts with sincerity condition can be ironically performed." (Brown Jr., Robert, L., 1978, 10) Ironic operatives such as marrying, appointing, nominating cannot be performed exactly because they lack the sincerity condition. On the other hand, illocutionary acts that express intention, desire, belief, pleasure, also have sincerity conditions. Otherwise, they should be perceived as ironic as in the next retorts:

George: What made you decide to be a teacher?
Martha: Oh… well, the same things that… uh… motivated you, I imagine.
George: What were they?
Nick: Pardon?
George: I said, what were they? What were the things that motivated me? (Albee E., 1962, 31)

George's question, *What were they?*, is ironic because the sincerity condition is blatantly infringed. The violation of the sincerity condition is supported by the repetition of the question three times, the third time the cataphoric pronoun they being explicitated by a paraphrase in order to stress the above-mentioned condition. In fact, George wants it known that he lacks this condition.

In another ironic metaphor, "I'm not trying to tear him down. He's a God, we all know that" (Albee E., 1962, 26), George assaults his father-in-law, even if, at a superficial level, he praises him.

Another instance of ironic judgement, which is even more complex and multifaceted, is the following, which violates the sincerity condition of the speech act:

George: Martha's tastes in liquor have come down… simplified over the years… crystallized. Back when I was courting Martha – well, I don't know if that's exactly the right word for it – but back when I was courting Martha…
Martha: Screw, sweetie!
George: At any rate (back when I was courting Martha, she'd order the damnest things! I wouldn't believe it! We'd go into a bar… you know, a bar… a whiskey, beer and bourbon bar… and what she'd do would be, she'd screw up her face, think real hard, and come up with… brandy Alexanders, crème de cacao frappés, gimlets, flaming punch bowls… seven-layer liquor things. Real lady-like little drinkies. But the years have brought to Martha a sense of essentials… the knowledge that cream is for coffee, lime juice for pies… and alcohol pure and simple)…here you are, angel… for the pure and simple. (Albee E., 1962, 21-2)

In the above sample, the sincerity condition does not refer to the belief in the validity of the judgement: the crystallization in taste is by no means a virtue and all the arguments that should be in

favour of this crystallization are, in fact, against it. These counter-arguments that would in no way honour a woman make up the irony in this fragment.

From the very beginning of the fragment, Edward Albee offers the readers a hint as far as the direction of the argumentation is going, for he uses three verbs that are supposed to be synonyms: *to come down*, *to simplify*, and *to crystallize*, but in reality they are not, because the phrasal verb *to come down* and the verb *to simplify* have negative connotations, while the verb *to crystallize* obviously has a positive connotation, meaning "to make something such as an idea more definite or precise." Therefore, although by using the verb *to crystallize*, George tries to soften his assertion, the other verbs obviously point to the negative direction Martha's life has taken.

Moreover, by the artful use of the phrasal verb *to come down*, which is usually most known in the syntagm *to come down in the world* (i.e. to lose wealth or position), George also implies that Martha has not only come down as far as her taste in liquor is concerned, but also as far as wealth and position, and why not, humanity, are concerned.

Furthermore, the repetition of the noun *bar*, the assertion *Real lady-like little drinkies*, which is made up of an ironically used diminutive – *drinkies* – and three modifiers – *real, lady-like* and *little*, as well as the enumeration of different types of alcoholic drinks, subversively stress the degradation Martha suffered over the years.

The use of the hendiadys *pure and simple*, first as an adjective and then as a noun, linguistically epitomizes the same idea of Martha's transformation. Also, the nouns *sweetie* and *angel* give the whole fragment cohesion as they support its fine irony.

The third means of obtaining irony is by questioning the truth of a presupposition and by bringing about some kind of incompatibility between the presupposition and the suggested meaning of the sentence.

An example of this type of irony is:

Martha: What the hell do you mean screaming up the stairs at me like that?
George: We got lonely, darling… we got lonely for the soft purr of your little voice. (Albee E., 1962, 35)

In this sample, irony has two purposes. On the one hand, the illocutionary force is reversed: flattery turns into assault because there is clearly irony in George's assertion that Martha has a little voice, which is characterised by a soft purr. On the other hand, another mechanism is also employed here: the presupposition logically implies its own negation. Normally, when George says *We got lonely for the soft purr of your little voice*, the audience takes for granted that Martha's voice has a soft purr. Nevertheless, exactly because it is ironically used, and because of the context in which it is used, the remark implies the negation of the presupposition, i.e. Martha has no little voice with a soft purr, it is, in fact, exactly the opposite as proven by the language and tone of voice she uses throughout the play.

In the next example, irony again relies on presupposition:

Martha: Get over there and open the door!
George: All right, love... whatever love wants. Isn't it nice the way some people have manners, though, even in this day and age? Isn't it nice that some people won't just come breaking into other people's houses even if they do hear some sub-human monster yowling at'em inside? (Albee E., 1962, 19)

In the above statement, if George had limited himself to saying *Some people have manners*, the logical negative presupposition would have been ironic enough. But Edward Albee goes further, he pushes the limit towards black humour, by using a contradiction between two presuppositions: Some people have manners and *Some people won't come breaking into other people's houses* and their logical negative implications some people do not have manners and some people do come breaking into people's houses.

Geoffrey Leech, in his book, *Principles of Pragmatics*, makes the distinction between information which is asserted and the information that is used as descriptive or identificational features of a participant of an assertion, i.e between including predications, rank-shifted predication, which are

asserted in discourse, and downgraded predication, which takes on the status of features (Leech G., 1991, 25-28)

Downgraded predication is the equivalent to a feature in function but has the structure of a predication.

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, ironic presuppositions are also built by negating some downgraded predication and incorporating it into presuppositions.

Leech's rule of predication states that: "If a predication X contains within it (either directly or indirectly) a downgraded predication Y, then X presupposes Y' (where Y' is an independent assertion equivalent to Y." (Leech G., 1991, 296)

The following fragment is an illustrative example "The one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the… creation of our… blond-eyed, blue-haired… son." (Albee E., 1962, 49)

By means of this mechanism, the opposite of the downgraded predication of chromosomological partnership and of the blond-eyed blue-haired son is implied, which gives rise to irony.

On the other hand, the syntagm blond-eyed, blue-haired son is not a simple mistake made by George or the author of the play. It is, in fact, a deliberate absurdity that sets the evidently ironic tone.

Albee also relies on entailment in order to obtain an ironic effect in his *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*. In pragmatics, entailment is the relationship between two sentences where the truth of one (A) requires the truth of the other (B).

Irony in the following excerpt results from the attack of the marriage contract entailed:

George: Yes, Martha? Can I get you something?
Martha: Well… uh… sure, you can light my cigarette, if you're of a mind to.
George: No… there are limits. I mean, man can put up with only so much. I'll hold your hand when it's dark and you're afraid of the bogey man, and I'll tote your gin bottles out after midnight, so no one'll see… but I will not light your cigarette. And that, as they say, is that. (Albee E., 1962, 50-51)

George's assertion reverses a generally agreed-upon scale of values: lighting a cigarette involves much less effort from the part of the one who performs the action than comforting someone when having a nightmare. Ans, yet, George ardently refuses to perform the easier act, i.e. lighting his wife's cigarette, by using words with a great force of assertion such as the noun limits, the phrasal verb to put up with, the two modifiers only and so and the set phrase that is that. By violating regularly accepted pragmatic rules, and by refusing to perform the easier action, George also negates the pragmatic expectation of the sentence.

n fact, he does not comfort Martha after having nightmares and he does not help hiding her alcoholism and, on top of that, he would even refuse to perform such an easy action as lighting her cigarette. This reversal of values clearly leads to the ironic mocking tone of the fragment.

Irony in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* becomes a perfect language game and "through this cruel but effective game, the ironists (i.e. George and Martha) achieve a tremendous perlocutionary effect: by the end, they will have dumped their hidden problem on the new couple through forcing them to take part in their game of exorcism." (Bollobás E., 1981, 333)

Besides the omnipresent and all-pervasive irony, which represents the foundation upon which black humour is built, black humour also comes into many other forms in Edward Albee's play.

One of them is the use of witticisms. Witticisms, by their double-intended meaning, represent such a means of creating black humour. Witticisms are witty, often biting remarks, characterised by cleverness in perception and choice of words, whose ingenuity or verbal skill has the power to evoke laughter.

Albee's verbal dexterity in point of witticisms is made up of one-liners, generally pitched by George with perfect comic timing. An example of such a witticism in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* may be considered the following retort: "Why, Martha… your Sunday chapel dress!" (Albee E., 1962, 35)

This retort comes as a reaction to Martha after she changed in a revealing outfit. Therefore, there is an obvious contradiction between Martha's appearance, who looks more voluptuous after changing her dress, and George's words that turn the remark into a skilful witticism.

The exclamation mark is artfully used by Edward Albee in this reply. The exclamation mark is usually used in order to express a very strong feeling, be it an emphatic declaration, an interjection or a command. In this context, it is used to express surprise; but being surprised could be either a positive or a negative state. In the above retort, the exclamation mark is the only indicator of George's real state, probably that of being surprised in a negative way.

Albee also makes use of two modifiers before the noun dress, i.e. *Sunday* and *chapel*. He is not satisfied with only using the noun *Sunday*, he also inserts the noun *chapel* in order to make his remark even more mordant and Martha's dress even more outrageous. Also notice that the sentence is elliptical, it does not have a predicate, fact which emphasizes once again Martha's immoral and inappropriate outfit. The basic opposition is between a positive attitude represented by the literal utterance and a negative attitude being communicated.

Another instance of witticism is the following: "Martha, won't you show her where we keep the… euphemism?" (Albee E., 1962, 59)

Here, George ironically uses the noun *euphemism* instead of *bathroom*, since the whole play abounds in taboo and offensive words. The sentence may be thought of as a witticism due to the use of the noun *euphemism*, since only an educated person such as George could introduce it in discourse and, at the same time, use it in an ironic manner.

Vulgar humour and insult humour also play a very important part in building up the absurdist black humour of the play. There are numerous instances that account for both vulgar and insult humour.

Foul language like: Damn! (pp. 26, 32, 36, 42, 57), Goddamn! (pp. 16, 17, 25, 34, 41, 44), Screw you! (p. 19), screw (pp. 21, 31, 47, 116), angel tits (p. 35), Up yours!(p.73), evidently stand in contrast to the educated diction and neologisms George and Martha occasionally use such as abstruse, recondite (p. 44), malignancy (p. 47), flagellator (p. 60), to endeavour (p. 73), to name but a few, and is illustrative for the opposition that exists in black humour.

Insult humour is mainly used by Martha and George when addressing each other. Their insults are accurate, deadly, yet, most often than not, hilarious. They call each other names all through the play. Martha calls George a cluck (pp.11, 12), simp (p. 16), pig (p. 17), bog (p. 36), fen (p.36), swamp (p. 36), prick (p. 42), floozie (p. 50), flop (p. 56), cipher (p. 18), sour-puss (p. 19), muckmouth (p. 20), cochon, canaille (p. 65), son of a bitch (p. 79), bastard (pp. 83, 91), monster (p. 94), etc.

If Martha is openly aggressive in her use of language, George, on the other hand, is more allusive. In the first part of the play, he only uses names of endearment when talking to Martha such as love (p. 23), pet (p.35), darling (p.35), sweetie (p.41), although the intended meaning is obviously opposite. In the second part of the play, however, when the joke of the title sounds a refrain and darkens significantly and also the games become darker and tension accumulates, full-scale abusiveness from the part of George, too, comes out: in this part, besides the endearment names (which again mean the opposite of what they literally express), such as angel (p. 51), wife and lover (p.75), love (p. 76), sweetheart (p. 91), George also uses pejorative terms proper such as wicked woman (p. 49), a deeply wicked person (p. 49), monster, bête, putain (p. 65), satanic bitch (p. 84), a spoiled, self-indulgent, wilful, dirty-minded, liquor-ridden… (p. 94).

Notice how, even in his insults, George is more elaborate than Martha. He never uses only an insulting word when addressing Martha, with the exception of the French words, which, however, are grouped together. He always adds a modifier such as wicked or deeply or satanic. The last structure is an enumeration of adjectives, all related to Martha, with no head noun. The quintuple syntactic structure is in itself extremely complex since it contains two simple adjectives (spoiled and wilful) and three compound adjectives (self-indulgent, dirty-minded, liquor-ridden), therefore Albee most probably felt that there was no need for yet another insulting head noun, since the readers already know to whom George refers.

It is common knowledge that men are usually more straightforward and economical in using words, while women are usually more allusive and elaborate in their use of language. Nevertheless, in Edward Albee's play things happen the other way round. Martha is the one who is more straightforward and who uses much more insulting language than George does, who is more subtle, allusive and elaborate in his use of language, although the result is the same in both cases: emotional brutality.

This change of roles from feminity that turns into masculine feminity and masculinity that turns into feminine masculinity leads to a loss of identity that is a very popular theme among black humourists.

The dialogue of the play has a great rhythmic feel. Besides the chants and short poem-like fragments that rhyme, and the alliterations (for example superb and sublime – p. 45, test-tube-bred… incubator-born – p. 45, or the names of the games, which were mentioned earlier), Edward Albee also repeats words or phrases within speeches or dialogue exchanges to create a variety of rhythms.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Edward Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* can be just as funny as it is emotionally brutal. These seemingly contradictory ingredients combine to bring to the surface the play's absurdist black humour.

Edward Albee's black humour is not as cruel as that of Golding, Vonnegut and Heller, it is more subtle and even elusive at times, getting closer to Swift's cynical style of writing, although Albee focuses on different themes than Swift, such as sexuality, reality versus illusion, The American Dream or love and hate. Nevertheless, Albee's black humour is not less shocking than that of the above-mentioned novelists, and mainly by means of scathing witticisms, violent obscenity of the dialogue, blatant sexuality and profane use of language, he eventually manages to bring to the foreground a fine type of black humour, more intellectual and crafted.

The desperate games, the play-acting, the barbed puns demean, toy with and, paradoxically, support each other fuse into an exposé of the uses and limits of language itself. In Edward Albee's play, the words sneer and spin into a kind of gigantic theatrical pun that most often than not triggers, at the same time, laughter and pain.

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