

STUDY PACK

***Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* – Edward Albee**

Before we start, we need to discuss the “Theatre of the Absurd”. Starting in the late 1950's, it explores what happens when human existence lacks meaning or purpose and communication breaks down. The plays are usually described as ‘circular’ – they don't really go anywhere, because communication is broken. So, pointlessness is... the point.

There were many famous plays from this genre, including Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencranz and Guildenstern are Dead*, but can also be seen in modern entertainment, Marvel's *WandaVision*, some of the *Rick and Morty* series, and some films directed by Guy Ritchie, the Coen brothers, or Quentin Tarantino.

So... who was Virginia Woolf?

The title of the play is an intellectual joke, it tells us a lot about the environment in which the play takes place. Virginia Woolf was an influential English author and feminist, often credited with inspiring the Bechdel Test.

So, with that in mind, let's get started with the play.

Group Discussion:

Love Languages

A “love language” is how someone expresses their love for someone else: by preparing them delicious food, by buying gifts, being protective, trying to motivate the other person, or arguing.

What love languages could be shown in the cases below?

A teenager is depressed, because they are having trouble with the other students at school.

A parent/friend then:

1. Buys them a new computer game next time they are out
2. Asks why it is so important, who cares anyway?
3. Signs them up for a new sport class
4. Invites their friends over for a ‘spontaneous sleepover’ without asking
5. Says they will go and talk to the other students’ parents and cause trouble for them.
6. Makes them a plate of their favourite cookies

Do you know anyone who does these things?

What happens when two people have different love languages?

At what point does “a love language” become toxic and/or harmful? When it is straight out abuse?

Summary of the play

On the campus of a small New England college, history professor George and his wife, Martha, return from a faculty party at Martha's father's home. (He is the college president.) Though it's late, Martha has invited a new-to-campus young professor, Nick, and his wife, Honey, to their home. When the couple arrives, the demons from George and Martha's long and troubled marriage begin to appear. Martha shares the secrets of George's past and sets out to seduce Nick. In revenge, George brings to light Martha's own failures and kills off the imaginary life that has sustained her. Throughout an alcohol-fuelled evening, George and Martha try to destroy each other, their guests, and the illusions they've kept up for so long.

Choose one of the underlined words that means:

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|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. keep someone or something alive | 4. ideas that aren't true |
| 2. powered by something | 5. newly arrived at the university |
| 3. not real/fake | 6. try to make someone want to have sex |

Playing with language – High and Low Register

The play is set in a university, and all the characters use a mix of high and low level language.

Low Register: match the term with its meaning:

1) bust a gut	a) weak person
2) simp	b) a good dancer
3) flop	c) on drugs
4) twinkle-toes	d) plain, quiet, not noticeable person
5) mousey	e) laugh very hard
6) hopped-up	f) failure

High Register: match the term with its meaning:

7) Carthage	g) rural, but nice/peaceful
8) humiliate	h) too much to take
9) bucolic	i) complicated/ hard to understand
10) intolerable	j) a doomed city
11) convoluted	k) having duties that make life hard
12) encumbered by crippling alliances	l) to make someone look stupid

Why do you think all the characters speak with a mix of registers? Which one is more emotional, which more intellectual? Could that help make the audience feel something?

Humour

The play uses a lot clever word play and very dark humour.

Can you find anything funny or weird in the following? Is someone being made fun of in each one?

- HONEY: I wonder if you could show me where the ... (Her voice trails off)*
GEORGE: (to MARTHA, indicating HONEY) Martha ...
NICK: (to HONEY) Are you all right?
HONEY: Of course, dear. I want to ... put some powder on my nose.
GEORGE: (as MARTHA is not getting up) Martha, won't you show her where we keep the ... euphemism?
 - GEORGE: Martha and I are having ... nothing. Martha and I are merely ... exercising ... that's all ... we're merely walking what's left of our wits.*
 - GEORGE: All I said was, our son ... the apple of our three eyes, Martha being a Cyclops ...*
 - Martha: Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference.*
George: No, but we must carry on as though we did.
Martha: Amen.
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AFTER SEEING/READING THE PLAY:

Why would a play about an unhappy married couple be named after a writer of feminist literature?

Does the way you see Martha's text below change if you think that she was stuck as being 'only' a wife in that particular era in the USA? Does it excuse her treatment of George?

MARTHA: George who is out somewhere there in the dark ... George who is good to me, and whom I revile; who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. George and Martha: sad, sad, sad [...] whom I will not forgive for having come to rest; for having seen me and having said: yes; this will do; who has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it. George and Martha: sad, sad, sad...

OR:

AFTER SEEING/READING THE PLAY:

Alcohol is a constant theme throughout this play? Do you think it adds to society's discussion on the line between the use, misuse, and abuse of alcohol or drugs in general? Are the issues just caused by alcohol, or is there something more going on? If so, what?

OR:

AFTER SEEING/READING THE PLAY:

Do Martha and George have a 'love language'? What do you think it is?

Martha claims that George "Can handle it. You married me for it!". This would suggest she sees it as her 'job' to push George, and she seems to say she does not enjoy it. He says he does not like either, but they keep pushing each other.

Can their behaviour be explained as just being their own way of being together, or is it a destructive/toxic relationship? Do you think they can or should stay together, and if so, under what conditions?