Rethinking the Crisis of Humanities in Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

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Abstract. The increasing gap between Humanities and the so-called STEM fields is an intellectual concern that caused great controversy. While some scholars, critics and theorists believe that Humanities are indeed in crisis as humans become more interested in empirical sciences and modern technologies than human sciences, others criticize this perception and insist that they are in constant motion. Postmodern philosophers, for instance, reject the statement that Humanities are in peril and disapprove of the supposed supremacy and unquestionable correctness of the practical sciences that are fostered by modernist thought. In his study, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard criticizes modernists' tendency to devalue Humanities and calls into question the assumption that natural sciences are unified, progressive, and aim at the absolute truth that serves humanity. The French philosopher affirms that "scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge" (Lyotard 1984, 29). Lyotard's claim goes against modernists' view of science as a superior form of knowledge, as he believes that natural sciences themselves depend on Humanities to exist and explain their empirical findings.
In literature, many writers, including Edward Albee, have shown a similar interest in the exploration of the confusing dichotomy between human sciences on the one hand, and natural and empirical sciences on the other. Albee sheds light on this problematic situation of Humanities and comments on the increasing interest in natural sciences in his *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* This paper attempts to read Albee's work from the Lyotardian perspective, so as to study his dramatization of the complex connection between human sciences and empirical sciences, and to examine his critical attitude towards the assumed preeminence of scientific knowledge.

Keywords: humanities, empirical and natural sciences, scientific knowledge, narrative knowledge, postmodernism, Lyotard, Albee

INTRODUCTION

Edward Franklin Albee III (1928-2016) is a prominent American playwright known for his acute criticism of the American mainstream culture and values. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was his most influential and widely acclaimed play and it won the Tony Award for Best Play in 1963. This work was, in reality, his "first full-length play that would establish his reputation as a premier American dramatist" (Saddik 2007, 37). The play opened on Broadway at the Billy Rose Theatre, New York, on October 13, 1962.

It starts with George and Martha coming home from a party at her father's house. Martha informs her husband that the new teacher Nick and his wife Honey will visit them late at night. With the arrival of their guests, George and Martha engage in a verbal fight and try to humiliate each other in front of Nick and Honey through playing verbal games. This dramatic work revolves basically around the tense family connections between the husband and his wife on the one hand, and the two couples on the other. Through staging such unstable domestic situation, Albee does not only present a picture of an American family in crisis but also reflects on the power struggle between different academic orientations. The present paper, then, shall examine the characters' conflicting relationships, particularly George's and Nick's heated discussions, from the Lyotardian perspective in an attempt to uncover Albee's perception of the position of Humanities and sciences in the 20th century America.

1. STAGING HUMANITIES AND EMPIRICAL SCIENCES

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is set in "a house on the campus of a small New England college" and appears to address the existent clash between human sciences and natural sciences in the American academic world (Albee 2007, 154). The work opens with George, a history professor, and his wife coming home drunk from the party

and carrying on drinking until they are joined by their guests Nick, a new professor of biology, and his wife. From the very beginning, Albee seems to tackle the problematic relationship between Humanities, represented by the historian, and sciences, personified by the biologist, through dramatizing an encounter between two university teachers who are interested in different fields of specialization.

The humanist George is described from the outset as an ageing man: he is "forty-six, thin; hair going gray" (Albee 2007, 153). The physical collapse of the history teacher may be perceived as a first hint on the actual crisis of human sciences in general, and history in particular, which is uncovered gradually with the progress of the action. Actually, George is depicted as an unsuccessful academic who experienced many personal failures. The play reveals that he has accidentally killed his mother and father when he was young. George reveals his family tragedy to Nick when he tells him about a boy who "had killed his mother with a shotgun some years before" and who, "with learner's permit in his pocket and his father on the front seat to his right, swerved the car, to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a large tree" (Albee 2007, 217). It seems that it is George who "killed both his parents before he was sixteen: his mother with a shotgun; his father in an auto accident" (Hickey 1984, 51).

George's past problems are coupled with his present conflicts with his wife, who persistently undermines his achievements and attacks his manhood. The couple's conflicting relationship is uncovered through their play of hostile language games. In the opening scene of the play, Martha indirectly addresses George saying: "what a cluck you are!" and adds: "what a dump!" (Albee 2007, 155). Her speech points to her sadistic character and embodies an attack on George's character. Martha further assumes that her husband is so passive to the extent that she finds herself obliged to take his role as the head of the family. In truth, Martha "demonstrates many masculine qualities, and her masculinity feeds off of George's

emasculation" (Eby 2007, 604). Throughout the play, George is represented as a passive husband who is incapable of defending himself from his wife's recurrent assaults.

Even his academic achievements are put into question by his wife. She is seen to challenge his position and to repeatedly blame him insisting: "you didn't do anything; you never do anything; you never mix. You just sit around and talk" (Albee 2007, 158). Her words reveal that George is an unsociable man whose inactivity resulted in his failure to progress in the academic life. George himself admits this failure and informs Nick: "I did run the History Department, for four years, during the war, but that was because everybody was away" (Albee 2007, 179). He acknowledges that he has led the department for some time not because he deserved it but rather for the simple reason that the other teachers went to war. George confesses further that Martha's father deterred him from publishing his memory book about the boy, who is, in reality, himself (Albee 2007, 249). His position in the faculty, then, is destabilized by his personal problems, family conflicts and especially his academic failures.

Unlike George, the scientist Nick is described as a handsome young teacher and is introduced as a man in his "late twenties", "blond, well put-together", and "good-looking" (Albee 2007, 153). Nick is physically described as an attractive teacher and his bodily strength lures Martha. Nick's positive traits are not restricted to his outward attractiveness as he is represented as a successful Biology teacher. In fact, he reveals that he got his Master Degree when he was nineteen (Albee 2007, 186). The older couple is impressed by his academic achievements despite his young age. Nick's external beauty and academic success sharply contrast George's physical ageing and his failure to secure a place in the college.

Nick's and George's conflicting relationship is basically explored through their perception of each other's teaching subjects. In fact, George, the Associate Professor of history, disregards Nick's field of specialization, biology. The disagreement regarding their specialities becomes the topic of a lengthy conversation between them:

> George. You're the one! You're the one's going to make all that trouble … making everyone the same, rearranging chromozones, or whatever it is. Isn't that right?
> Nick. (*With that small smile*) Not exactly: chromo*somes*.
> George. I'm very mistrustful. Do you believe … (*shifting in his chair*) … do you believe that people learn nothing from history? Not that there is nothing to learn, mind you, but that people learn nothing? I am in the History Department.
> Nick. Well …
> George. […] I'm very mistrustful. Biology, hunh? […] I read somewhere that science fiction is not fiction at all … that you people are rearranging my genes, so that everyone will be like everyone else. (Albee 2007, 177-8)

George is blaming Nick for what he sees as unethical experiences of his field of knowledge that represent a potential threat to the future of humanity. He expresses a critical attitude towards his guest's area of expertise and disapproves of his ignorance of the role of history in teaching people about life. Albee appears to dramatize George and Nick as representatives of their specialities, respectively Humanities and empirical sciences. The conflict between the two teachers alludes to the actual problematic relationship between the two fields and the valorisation of sciences over human disciplines.

George persists in criticizing the scientific advancement that aims to interfere with the laws of nature and change the human body. He believes that with biological intervention "everyone will tend to be rather the same… alike", and the result will be "a civilization of men, smooth, blond, and right at the middleweight limit" (Albee 2007, 198). For George, the potential destructive aftermaths of this interference include the "loss of liberty", "diversity will no longer be the goal", and "cultures and races will eventually vanish" (Albee 2007, 199). Biological progress, in George's view, will lead to the spread of conformity and the degeneration of all forms of distinctiveness and individualism. In George's thinking, Lincoln Konkle argues, "technological and scientific progress runs counter to social and moral progress" (Konkle 2005, 53). The historian believes that the identicalness of the human races that is fostered by

the scientific project will result in the dissolution of individual idiosyncrasies and consequently the very attributes that define the human being. With scientific experimentations, therefore, the notions of freedom and diversity will no longer exist and the interest in the human sciences will ultimately collapse.

Albee's criticism of the biological advances and dehumanization of individuals goes along with Lyotard's incredulity towards the metanarrative of science. Indeed, the French postmodernist believes that "knowledge (*savoir*) in general cannot be reduced to science" (Lyotard 1984, 118) and that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge" (Lyotard 1984, 7). Lyotard insists that human knowledge includes not only scientific disciplines but also Humanities, what he calls *narrative knowledge*. *Humanities* has been defined as "a term generally used in Europe and America for literature, languages, philosophy, art, history, theology, music, as opposed to the natural sciences and the social sciences" (Cuddon 1998, 403). This concept is used then to refer to the branches of knowledge that are concerned with arts in general and contrast with science and technology. Like Albee, Lyotard denounces the assumed superiority of STEM fields over Humanities and intends to encourage people to rethink the position of *narrative knowledge* in the twentieth century.

Nick's advocacy of the scientific project to harmonize the world is in a way parallel to the modernist perception about the supremacy of *scientific knowledge* and its noble role in serving human civilization. However, George's support of individualism against all forms of conformity and his refusal of the idea of creating a perfect human race and similar humans embody an attack against scientific experiments. While George "is a historian sensitive to world forces and the decline of civilization", Nick "is the scientist in the present-day position of preference, already part of the Establishment, the new conformity in charge of reordering the world on a mechanized dehumanization of the future" (Lewis 1964, 35). The characters' antagonistic attitudes towards the future of humanity represent two

opposing worldviews: a scientific one that seeks to subjugate individuals to create ideal humans disregarding the importance of the past, and a humanistic one that aims to liberate them from such experimentations and to protect their distinctiveness and history.

Nick may stand for the figure of the ambitious scientist who, according to Lyotard, "questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or proof. He classifies them as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology" (Lyotard 1984, 27). The biologist' beliefs in the scientific project and the role of scientists in the advancement of human civilization run parallel to the classical perception of the indisputable contribution of the scientist in building human culture. His professional and academic successes are meant to highlight George's failures and question the importance given to his field of specialization, history. The contrast that Albee stages between the successful biologist and the ineffective historian could be a reflection on the actual declining of interest in Humanities and the growing inclinations towards the STEM fields.

2. Reconsidering the Position of Humanities

As the action progresses, the impression of the subjugated humanist and successful scientist that is given at the beginning of the play is put into question. As a matter of fact, the play reveals that the biology teacher's success is based on immoral practices and fake values. Nick himself informs George about his malicious plan "to take over a few courses from the older men, start some special groups for myself … plow a few pertinent wives" (Albee 2007, 229). He maintains that he will even resort to dishonest acts, building illegal relationships with professors' wives, in order to dominate the institution. George realizes that Nick is planning to secure a place in the faculty and then control it. He says that Nick represents "a direct

and pertinent threat to [his] lifehood" and admits that Nick is a potential threat to his existence in the faculty (Albee 2007, 228). In this play, the campus may designate knowledge in general with all its branches and the two teachers' struggle to assert a high position could mirror the real clash between humanistic disciplines and scientific areas. University, then, becomes a battlefield where different academic fields, notably Humanities and empirical sciences, vie and struggle for domination. Apparently, Albee focuses on the university circles in this play in an attempt to re-examine the problematic situation of the world of academia and to reveal the fallacies about the collapse of Humanities and the pre-eminence of scientific knowledge.

The biology teacher's immorality is apparent even in his relationship with his wife Honey. In fact, he tells George that he married her because his father-in-law "was a man of the Lord, and he was very rich", and adds that "when he died he had a lot of money" (Albee 2007, 226). It is obvious that their marital relationship is not built on the cherished values of respect and love but rather on materialistic considerations. Nick's greedy nature is reflected not only in his dishonesty with his wife but also in his wicked attempts to replace George and Martha's father as a chair of the faculty. The scientist's corrupt character is not restricted to the vacuity of his academic achievements as it is manifested even in his sexual impotence. Indeed, Martha, who admired his physical beauty and intelligence in the beginning, rejects intimacy with him when she realizes that he is a powerless man. She admits that he is unable to satisfy her desire and calls him "flop" (Albee 2007, 275) and "impotent" (Albee 2007, 276). Nick's external attractiveness and superficial intellectual superiority, therefore, are meant to mask his true personality and mislead the other characters.

The biologist's academic success is further undermined by the history teacher who recognizes his fake values and shallow achievements. Throughout the play, George is perceived attempting to dominate his conversations with Nick and to challenge his linguistic

abilities. He shows also his cleverness and intellectual superiority through his continuous rectification of Nick's language mistakes. When the biology teacher makes use of a nonexistent English word, George rapidly draws his intention to his mistake and tells him that the word used to describe a grouping of geese is "gaggle … not gangle, *gaggle*" (Albee 2007, 230). George's objective is to destroy the fake image of the successful scientist presented by Nick in the opening of the play and confirmed by Martha and his wife Honey. In addition to his linguistic dexterity, George's offensive words succeeded in uncovering Nick's vacuous character. In fact, the humanist abuses Nick verbally and compels him to reveal his hidden intentions. As a result, Nick divulges his deceitful plans to take over the faculty and tells George that he is ready to build illegitimate connections with other teachers' wives in order to progress in his academic career. George challenges Nick's assumed intellectual superiority and seems to succeed in exposing his fake personal as well as academic achievements. Albee appears to dramatize this very clash between the historian and the scientist in an attempt to encourage readers/spectators rethink the actual situation of Humanities.

Early in the play, the biologist is presented as a successful teacher who has a positive impact on the future of humanity, whereas the historian is introduced as a passive professor. "The conflict between George and Nick", clarifies Gerry McCarthy, "is at one moment represented as a conflict between two attitudes to the present: George, in history, looks back; Nick, in biology, looks forward" (McCarthy 1987, 66). But as the play goes on, the initial depiction of the two characters and their areas of expertise is subverted and each of them reveals his true qualities. In reality, George's acute manipulation of language and his play of confusing verbal games have reversed the characters' positions. The second language game, "Get the Guests", is an attempt on the part of George to protect his position and assert his domination over the institution. George defeats also Martha by the end and reestablishes his position as the head of

the family. He is the winner in this game and the ultimate victor in the verbal fights. "Despite his ineffectual appearance, he is the one who elicits people's confessions and largely directs the increasingly unpleasant 'games'" (Abbotson 2003, 192). His ability to manipulate the language games alludes to his powerful character and the last scene of the play presents him as a driving force and a source of power.

The humanist regains his position as an influential man and the scientist retreats to an inferior status. With such subversion, Albee seems to reexamine the crisis of human disciplines and the faith in the absolute correctness, truthfulness and reliability of experimental sciences. Albee's criticism of the increasing interest in sciences and the disregard of Humanities reflects the Lyotardian conception of *narrative knowledge* and *scientific knowledge*. Lyotard believes that scientists have no more access to truth than historians or humanists (Lyotard 1984, 29). Indeed, he argues that even scientists resort to Humanities, especially history, to explain the results of their experiments. In the play, what started as a valorisation of biology over history becomes an examination of the confusing situation of human knowledge in general and an attempt to reinstate the interest in Humanities. Like Lyotard, Albee believes that all branches of knowledge should be taken with the same bundle of interest. His play, thus, emphasizes the complementarity between the two fields of knowledge and urges its readers and audience to readdress the preconceived ideas about the inaccuracy of Humanities and the indubitable truthfulness of scientific knowledge.

Conclusion

Briefly, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* explores the dialectical relationship between human sciences and scientific sciences through staging two antagonistic characters who epitomize the conflict between the two branches of knowledge. In the beginning of the play, Albee pictures the critical situation of Humanities using the figure

of the disempowered historian who struggles to affirm his existence and assert his identity amid uncertainty and against competing forces. He captures also the assumed prosperity and superiority of scientific fields through the dramatization of a successful biologist who plans to change the future of humanity. Nevertheless, the position of both disciplines is destabilized and confused with the unfolding of further details and facts about the real characters of both George and Nick. The reversal of their initial personalities serves to confuse the reader/spectator and to alienate him/her from an emotional identification with one of the characters. Albee seems to be interested more, in reality, in raising awareness about the increasing disinterest in Humanities and the growing inclination towards sciences for their supposed accuracy and truthfulness. This work, then, aims to rethink the crisis of what Lyotard calls *narrative knowledge* and to incite the public to treat the different areas of expertise on an equal basis.

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