

*Eliso Sukhitashvili*

THE SYMBOLIC MOTIF OF 'CHILDISH GAMES' IN ALBEE'S PLAYS *THE ZOO STORY*  
AND *WHO IS AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*

**Abstract**

This article focuses on Edward Albee's plays *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The article also discusses the 'first act' of *The Zoo Story* written after about a half of a century and presents these works written in different periods as a whole with the symbolic background of the 'harmful games' of the characters. The author ironically represents the members of academic society. The characters in the plays are reduced to an animal level, to the 'the state of nature' by 'childish games,' but they no longer want to be in the state and prefer to face the truth. The story that starts in the 'prequel' to *The Zoo Story*, ends in *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the ultimate game that is directed against the Creator, still continues and ends with chaos, ends with the most intense form of Hobbesian 'state of nature.'

Key Words: Edward Albee, Harmful Games, *The Zoo Story*, *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

**Introduction**

*The Zoo Story* is a play that, it can be said, represents the initial stage of Albee's 'childish games', and in general, the first steps of Albee's career as a playwright. It was written in 1958 and premiered in 1959 in Berlin, Germany. In 1960, it premiered in its own country. This play has been staged many times in Georgia in different regions and a couple of Georgian authors have expressed interest in it.

*The Zoo Story* is preceded in a separate act by the family life of Peter and his wife - Ann. This act was written by the author later, in 2004. According to the author, this part only served the purpose of telling more about Peter and giving him more space, because in *The Zoo Story* he occupies a small place compared to Jerry. However, this part, I think, has quite a deep meaning. The

life of Ann and Peter is the introduction not only to The Zoo Story but also to the lives of Martha and George in the 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* which was written shortly after *The Zoo Story*.

The main objectives of the article are its textual analysis, comparison and confrontation of the two plays mentioned above in terms of 'childish games.' The article also demonstrates what the ultimate aim of the games is, to whom they are against and how they are going to end. First and foremost, the article deals with *The Zoo Story* moving on to *Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and ends with conclusions drawn on the basis of critical analysis of the works.

### **Childish Behavior in The Zoo Story**

Children are nowhere to be seen in the episodes of Ann's and Peter's life. They are not acting characters. They are only mentioned by other characters, we only learn from others that Peter and Ann have children. There seems to be a reasonable suspicion that these girls exist only in the imagination of Ann and Peter. If we say that Ann and Peter are the predecessors of Martha and George, and I think that is so, then we can also think that these girls only exist in the imagination like Martha and George's imaginary child. The characters in *The Zoo Story* as well as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* seem to be reduced to an animal level: "*We are animals! Why don't we behave like that...*" (Albee, 2004:17) - says Ann in *The Zoo Story* and it is this 'animality' that is a refrain throughout the play. At the end of the act, Ann says she wants chaos and she and Peter imagine it is a tornado, the parrots come out of the cage and the cats eat them. Watching this, the girls eat cats. Ann and Peter - eat the girls, and finally - each other. In this episode, we may think that Peter and Ann's girls actually exist and not only in the imagination:

*'Ann: a tornado! And we would hear it coming – the roaring we'd never heard before but knew what it was! .....*

*Peter: knock over the cages and the birds would fly out...*

*Ann: .... and the cats would see that, and they would catch the parakeets and eat them...*

*Peter: ...and the girls would see this, and the girls would do – what?! – eat the cats?*

*Ann: Sure; Fearful symmetry.*

*Peter: And what... and what do we do then... eat the girls?*

*Ann: Sure! Even more fearful!*

*Peter: But who will eat us?*

*Ann: We do that ourselves. We eat ourselves – all up'* (Albee, 2004:21-22). I think this is what happens throughout the next two plays (I mean, *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*). After this dialogue, Peter goes to the park to read a book. It seems that this act ends in such a way that the expectation of some chaos or committing some animal action arises. This expectation becomes reality in *The Zoo Story* and then in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Peter, who is over forty years old, meets Jerry, a man in his thirties, in the park. Peter sits on a chair and reads a book. Jerry approaches him and starts talking as Ann approached him while he was at home and started talking to Peter. The course and the end of *The Zoo Story* are very similar to the theory of 'the state of nature' of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, according to which war is waged in nature against everyone. There is no power to which all will obey. '*men's natural state, before they came together into society, was war; and not simply war, but a war of every man against every man*' (Hobbes, 2003:29). Humans are down to the animal level, which is partly seen in the episode that I mentioned above about Ann and Peter's life. In *The Zoo Story*, it gets more intensified. In 'the state of nature' people are vulnerable and before someone kills them, they try to murder others. It seems that this 'state of nature' appears in a strange way in this play. Jerry is not even trying to kill Peter, but rather, he is trying to be killed by Peter. The portrayal of being in such a 'state of nature' is of profound importance. It is as if by this behavior the author wanted to show that Jerry no longer wants to be in an 'animal state' and also wants Peter to understand that Peter is in such a state. Peter and Jerry seem to start arguing over something childish - a chair and go to the murder. They are fighting over something that probably only children can argue about. Like animals, they seem to have no moral values. The words addressed to Peter in the scene of Jerry's murder underline his animalism: '*You are not really a vegetable; It's all right, you're an animal. You're an animal, too*' (Albee, 1958:49).

I think the end of the play is an attempt for Peter to realize that he is in 'the state of nature', and Jerry is trying to make Peter realize that. Whether Jerry achieves this goal or not remains in question. However, if we say, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a sequel to *The Zoo Story*, then we find that Jerry's attempt was in vain. Jerry is aware of his being in 'the state of nature' and that is why he does not precede and kill Peter, but he can't make Peter realize this, Peter, who continues to play cruel games in the form of George. The rest of the world is in 'the state of nature' and the characters of *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* continue this theme. Peter, who returned home with

his wife - Ann (now in the form of Martha), received the university professor Honey and Nick, and continued to 'play' with them.

To go back to *The Zoo Story*, Jerry tells a story he never finishes, and what happened at the zoo remains unclear to the readers. Probably the end of the play is the continuation of the story of the zoo and the author wanted to say that Jerry managed to kill himself at the zoo. The whole world is a zoo. Exactly the same things happen at the zoo and the relationships are the same. Jerry goes to the zoo to see how humans co-exist with animals: *'I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals'* (Albee, 1958:39-40). If we go deeper, this quote about the separation of animals is exactly the kind of isolation of humans from each other. Jerry is alone, so alone that he doesn't even have a photograph of someone to put in the blank picture frames in his house. Even the people who live in his apartment are locked up and have no relations with the neighbors. Jerry is alienated and the only way to interact with humans and animals, it turns out to be a 'lack of love' for them, both for Peter and the dog of the owner of his house. At first glance, the play gives the impression that Jerry is lonely, isolated from society, but if we delve deeper into the play, we find that, in reality, Peter is more alone and isolated than Jerry. Jerry is still aware of his loneliness, his 'state of nature', but Peter does not realize this. *'Jerry understands this plight and seeks to remedy it on a personal level. Yet it has only been since his experience with the dog that he has really understood the problem and, more importantly, known how to cope with it'* (Sykes, 1973:448) - mentions Carol Sykes. Jerry realizes this and tries to break free from loneliness by establishing a relationship with Peter on Sunday. Jerry tries to throw Peter out of his chair, which is symbolically an invasion in Peter's isolation. The relationship is only established at the end of the play when Jerry is stabbed. Carol Sykes has the same opinion.

In the play, relationships are expressed by harming each other. A relationship with a dog results in the dog's harm by Jerry. At first, he tries to establish a peaceful relationship with the dog, but eventually, there is no other way but to poison it. He also forces Peter to commit the most heinous act - murder by stabbing himself on the knife and subsequently Jerry thanks Peter for not being indifferent to him and killing him. The same can be said about the relationship between the characters of *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They, too, only manage relationships by damaging each other. It can be said that this harm is also an expression of love for each other. In particular,

dog's harm has been replaced by indifference, and harm is better than indifference, as Carol Sykes points out, because this is still some kind of relationship. *'Jerry has undergone a crucial learning experience. He has learned that, paradoxically, cruelty is part of love-one cannot reach others without sometimes hurting them, and one cannot be reached himself without experiencing some pain'* (Sykes, 1973:449-450) – states Carol Sykes.

After Jerry and Peter's final 'relationship', Peter returns home with Martha, not with Ann, now with Martha (as I mentioned above, the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* can be considered a sequel to *The Zoo Story*) and begins the course of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

### **Childish Games in Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?**

There are four characters in the play: university professor of the Department of History - George (Peter), university president's daughter and George's wife Martha (Ann), a new professor of biology - Nick and his wife Honey, who visit George and Martha's house at 2:00 a.m. after a university party. The play is in three acts. The title of the play - *Who is afraid of Virginia Woolf?* seems to be a refrain of the play in the form of a song. The author has taken the lyrics from Frank Churchill's song *Who is Afraid of Big Bad Wolf*, which originally sounded in the Walt Disney cartoon *Three Little Pigs*. On the one hand, this refrain is interesting because the characters of the play – representing the academic society - seem to remain children and cannot avoid the influence of this song by Churchill. I would also like to add that this may have prevented George from leading the Department of History. Charlene Taylor, in her article *Coming of Age in New Carthage: Albee's Grown-up Children*, notes that Albee uses children's poems: *'Georgie Porgie, Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? Pop Goes the Weasel, and Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush'* (Taylor, 1973:55). The use of children's poems may indicate the immaturity of the characters. That's probably why Honey does not want to have a child and she also takes pills for it. She does not want to be a mother. *'How do you make your secret little murders stud-boy doesn't know about, hunh? Pills?'* (Albee, 1962:177). And George himself kills even an imaginary child at the end of the play in his mind. After all, a child is a kind of responsibility for a parent and one of the indicators that a person is no longer a child. It is as if the 'imagination' of two daughters, which existed in the life of Ann and Peter in the first act of *The Zoo Story*, has now been replaced by a son's imagination. That

the child is imaginative is evidenced by several places in the play, for example Martha says: *'I said never mind! I'm sorry I brought it up.*

*George: Him up... Not it. You brought him up.'* (Albee, 1962:70). In this episode, instead of 'him', Martha uses 'it' and hints that the child is fictional. And then George mixes up 'it' and 'him' again: *'Martha doesn't want to talk about it...him. Martha is sorry she brought it up...him'* (Albee, 1962:70). After that, they quarrel over the color of the child's eye. This also suggests that such details in the invention of the son aren't decided yet, and this is revealed in the presence of the guests. Before the visitors come Martha calls George *'Georgie-Porgie, put-upon-pie'* (Albee, 1962: 12), which is one of the children's poems that Martha uses in a distorted form: *'Georgie Porgie pudding and pie,*

*Kissed the girls and made them cry.*

*When the boys came out to play*

*Georgie Porgie ran away'*(Internet resource).

According to Charlene Taylor, George is exactly such a person, avoids the society of men, fails to establish a relationship with them and he is weak (Taylor, 1973). On the one hand, Taylor's opinion is noteworthy, but on the other hand, we may think that it is a kind of introduction to Martha's behavior. I mean, her sexual intercourse with their guest – Nick, in the presence of George. If George was the person who kissed and cried the girls, neither Martha would fall behind George in pursuit of boys, and Georgie Porgie's story, it can be said, is just as appropriate for George as Martha, and once again suggests that the play's characters are not mature.

The immaturity of the characters is reinforced by the fact that George and Martha fulfil the wish of Martha's father, believing him as children believe their parents. It is Martha's father who will not publish George's book, which tells the story of a little boy who kills his parents. It can be said, an outside person controls the lives of Martha and George. Martha's father does not appear in the play, but he is the most influential character. It is his will that Nick and Honey are guests of George and Martha, as Pugh Tison points out. I will add here that the 'murder' of George's parents in the unpublished book seems to be a sign of George's fear of parenthood, and both, the murder of a parent and a child by George (the impression remains in the play that the story described in George's book is George's own story) should point to this. George hates a parent, neither he wishes to be a parent himself nor does he want to have a parent. However, this is based on a deeper symbolic motive. According to some scholars (e.g. Pugh Tison), Martha's father is a symbol of the

Creator of the universe. He is a character in the play against whom characters cannot play. However, in the end, it turns out that they are playing against him. ‘George states sardonically, “He’s a god, we all know that” (170). In Martha’s account of her father—“Jesus, I admired that guy! I worshipped him . . . I absolutely worshipped him. I still do” (206)—Albee deploys the ambiguity between “Jesus” as a mild exclamation and as a direct address’ (Pugh, 2018:10) – states Pugh Tison.

The theme of the immaturity of the characters is also reinforced by the fact that the action takes place in the New Carthage and the first act is called *Fun and Games*. Games and fun are not uncommon for adults either but are more common in children and young people. The characters initially play ‘Humiliate the Host.’ Martha insults George for his incompetence. George failed to take charge of the history department and then the college as a whole. George describes himself as: ‘I am a doctor. A.B. M.A. PH.D. ... ABMAPHID! Abmaphid has been variously described as a wasting disease of the frontal lobes, and as a wonder drug. It’s actually both. I am really very mistrusting’ (Albee, 1962: 37). In this context, it can be said that George calls his education ‘disease’. Precisely because he failed to become head of the history department and college. He did not manage to use his education and now it hurts him a lot. Martha discloses George’s inability in front of the guests, which further aggravates George’s pain. The humiliation in front of the attendees, especially in front of a new university professor, increases George’s pain. This game is also symbolically called ‘Humiliate the Host.’

After ‘Humiliate the Host’ the idea of playing ‘Hump the Hostess’ comes to George’s mind, as if he wants to take revenge on Martha, but in the end, they play ‘get the guests.’ The characters of the play aren’t completely innocent children. When we say that these adult people remain children, the idea of a child’s innocence comes to mind, but it is not so. The characters are not like innocent children, but rather like children who insult and offend each other by playing the ‘games’ mentioned above. In this act, George tells the story of the marriage of Honey and Nick, which was not based on love. In this narrative, George seems to seek revenge for his insult in the first act.

The course of the play in Carthage exacerbates the theme of immaturity. Saint Augustine was in his youth in Carthage to study oratory. During his stay there, he was not yet a fully mature man and, at the same time, the inhabitants of Carthage did not live entirely morally and probably did not shy away from insulting each other. In the first act of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George tells Nick: ‘You think you are going to be happy here in New Carthage, eh?’ On which Nick replies: ‘I

*hope we will stay here*' (Albee, 1962:40). Before mentioning the New Carthage, George mentions Gomorrah, a sinful biblical city destroyed by its sins, and this episode is a sign that New Carthage is also a city full of sin. Its inhabitants are reduced to an animal level and the city will also be destroyed if the city residents do not repent their transgressions. After all, Albee's entire play is not just about four characters, it is the symbol of the whole society. The whole society is immature like the characters and has no moral values. They insult and abuse each other. *'I was more calm than others and did not take part in the orgiastic events of the 'troublemakers.' ... 'I lived among them and, to my disgrace, I was ashamed that I was not like them'* (Augustine, 1996: 46) - says Saint Augustine. Carthage is a place that hinders the movement of man towards the truth, God. People insult each other and their moral values, destroy them and then live in such a world. It can be said that they live in an animal environment. Kant's categorical imperative has nothing to do with the characters, their moral condition is far removed from it. Nor does it have anything in common with Christian doctrine, as evidenced by the title of the second act Walpurgisnacht, which is associated with a pagan holiday.

According to Pugh Tison, a reader can see Martha's sadistic attitude toward her husband and George's masochistic attitude, as George realizes Martha's behavior in her relationship with Nick. Martha warns George: *"We're going to amuse ourselves, George," he agrees, "Unh-hunh. That's nice." She further cautions, "You might not like it," but he genially accedes, "No, no, now . . . you go right ahead . . . you entertain our guests"* (Pugh, 2018:7). I think sadomasochistic attitudes are less visible among the characters. The characters are less aware of their condition and that is why they could not realize their sadomasochistic attitude towards each other. They just instinctively behave like animals. Ann, who still wants to satisfy her sexual desire in the first act, and to whom Peter responds only by recalling having sex with one of his girlfriends, manages to satisfy this in the form of Martha when she has a kind of sexual intercourse with Nick. Spengler episode is, so to speak, the point of intensification of the relationship between the characters, the moment of ascending their relationship to a more brutal level. *'And the west, encumbered by crippling alliances, and burdened with the morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events, must...eventually...fall'* (Albee, 1962:174). He thinks the West is burdened with rigid morality, whose steadfastness and immutability in the face of current events will lead to its eventual destruction. After this quote, George dashes the book against the wall and bells start ringing. Before that, in a conversation between Nick and George, George says: *'Then, all at once, through all the*



*music, through all the sensible sounds of men building, attempting, comes the Dies Irae. And what is it? What does the trumpet sound? Up yours. I suppose there is justice to it, after all the years...Up your'* (Albee, 1962:117). The episode of ringing the bells is, it can be said, the hardest episode during which the last revenge takes place. Honey asks who made the bell ringing and George replies that someone was at the door who brought a message about their son's death. George seems to be trying to face reality himself, he no longer wants to live in illusions. The sound of these bells seems to be connected with the day of wrath mentioned above, the second coming. The 'second coming' in the play is not followed by the resurrection of the dead, but by the death of the imaginative son. This episode is also symbolic in that 'the second coming' and the resurrection of the dead is symbolically related to the release of the characters from 'drowsiness.' The dead rise from the graves, while the characters of the play wake up from the sleep of illusions and move on to another, more brutal stage of action.

I mentioned above that the story of the boy that George tells is the story of George himself. Interesting here is the fact that the boy who killed his parents maniacally bursts into laughter after the murder. Also noteworthy is the fact that George describes the scene of his son's murder in exactly the same words as the story of the boy he met in the cafe, or the story of his father's murder: *'He swerved to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a ... large tree'* (Albee, 1962:231). The episode of the murder of the son has a deeper symbolic significance in the play, as does the story of the father's murder by George. Bursting into laughter after the murder of George's father, according to Pugh Tison, exactly tells that George escaped the influence of his 'father'. With the murder of his son, he seemed to put an end to the continuation of 'father's' domination. Honey and Nick also renounce 'father's' domination. They also try to put an end to this with their infertility. They do not want to be parents, they do not want Nick to be called a father. According to Pugh Tison, such kind of behavior by the characters is directed against the Father - the Creator and the murder of the son ends the game, the next round of which will no longer be. The next round, which is directed against the Father himself. I can not agree with Pugh Tison, though. I think the most horrible round of games is starting right now. Begins the round of destruction and justification of the Hobbesian state of nature between countries expressed in the following proverb: 'homo homini lupus est.' As Hobbes mentioned in his *On the Citizen* 'Man is a God to man and Man is a wolf to Man. The former is true of the relations of the citizens with each other, the latter of relations between commonwealths' (Hobbes, 2003:3). Sigmund Freud agreed with the proverb. In his opinion, man

needs a neighbor ‘to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus.*’ (Freud, 1930:31). That is exactly the round that Ann and Peter imagined at the end of the first act, round of ‘eating’ each other after the ‘eating’ of their children.

### **Conclusions**

Finally, it can be said that the characters in the play are reduced to an animal level, to the ‘the state of nature’ by ‘childish games’, but they no longer want to be in the state and prefer to face the truth.

The characters in the play are lonely. Jerry, Peter, Martha and George are lonely. They manage relationships only by harming each other, which can be seen as an expression of love in the sense that harming is a kind of relationship, and in this respect, better than indifference. Characters are more or less aware of their loneliness.

The author, it can be said, ironically treats the characters representing the academic society. He presents them as children, at the age of immaturity. There are many hints about this. This, in turn, probably calls into question the development of the next generation. Immature and childish academics will fail to educate a sane society.

The plays *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are intertwined, both ending in murder. One might think that George is represented in the form of Peter, and George's father in the form of Jerry - who tries to wake up his son by trying to be killed by him. The next round of George and Martha's games is ‘eating’ of each other, destroying each other as Peter and Ann eat first their children and then each other in the first act. This is what happens in the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the chaos that Ann needs. It is the fear of participating in the round after this horrible game that can be seen in the response given by Martha at the end of the play *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Martha is afraid of playing in the next round, which aims to destroy each other.

The characters seem to be in illusions throughout the play, but eventually, they wake up from the drowsiness of the illusions and move on to another, more brutal stage of action in which ‘*homo homini lupus est.*’



**References:**

1. Saint Augustine. (1996). *Confessions*. Translated into Georgian by Bachana Bregadze
2. Albee, Edward. (1958). *The American Dream and The Zoo Story*. A Signet Book.
3. Albee, Edward. (1962). *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. A New American Library. USA
4. Albee, Edward. (2004). *At Home at the Zoo*.
5. Hobbes, Thomas. (2003). *On the Citizen*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought. Edited by Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne.
6. Pugh, Tison. (2018). "Edward Albee's Sadomasochistic Ludonarratology in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*. Volume 31. Number 1.
7. Sykes, Carol A. (1973). "Albee's Beast Fables: "The Zoo Story" and "A Delicate Balance.""  
*Educational Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Vol. 25. No. 4. pp. 448-455
8. Taylor, Charlene M. "Coming of Age in New Carthage: Albee's Grown-up Children."(1973). *Educational Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press. Vol. 25. No. 1. Pp. 53-65
9. Internet source: (10.06.21) "Georgie Porgie" Lyrics.  
<https://allnurseryrhymes.com/georgie-porgie/>
10. Internet source: (10.06.21) *Homo homini lupus (Man to man is an arrant wolf) / Homo homini deus (Man to man is a kind of God)* <http://www.antiquitatem.com/en/homo-homini-lupus/>
11. Internet source: (10.06.21) *De Cive* by Thomas Hobbes  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/en/decive1.htm#115>
12. Internet source: (10.06.21) Freud, Sigmund. (1930). *Civilization and its Discontents*.  
<https://www.stephenhicks.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FreudS-CIVILIZATION-AND-ITS-DISCONTENTS-text-final.pdf>

*Author's email: [sukhitashvili.eliso@gmail.com](mailto:sukhitashvili.eliso@gmail.com)*

*Author's biographical data:*

*Eliso Sukhitashvili studied English Philology at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University in 2011-2015 and earned a Bachelor's degree. In 2015-2017 she graduated with a master's degree in English Philology from the same university. Now she is a PhD student at the same university and is researching English-language avant-garde drama. Her interests include English and American playwrights.*