

The struggle for power in abigail's party

Literature



Edward Albee's "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and Mike Leigh's "Abigail's Party" can both be defined as disturbing and powerful works. Ironically, they are equally compelling for many of the same reasons. Both plays similarly reflect the constant struggle for power in relationships, describing the commonality of a dysfunctional marriage which was not uncommon during this time period as women became less committed to "staying together for the sake of the kids" 1, doubling the divorce rate.

The two characters, Beverly and Martha similarly represent one another and can be considered to be two individual overbearing personalities helping to portray the immense deception of suburban life. Both Albee and Leigh present the audience with female protagonists who exert forceful power over their partners. Albee reveals that Martha is the dynamic agent in "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" emphasizing her brash, assertive nature which is used to tear savagely with the "knives of hurled words, sharpened on pain and aimed to draw blood" 2, the way in which Martha relentlessly attacks George is awful to see, yet strangely familiar in modern day society.

Albee uses power dynamics to create tension in the play. Albee portrays Martha as a forceful character, emphasizing on her power, physical and mental strength in the quotation "I don't bray!" 3 Martha is shown to be a loud, vulgar and brash woman in this quotation, typically opposing the commonality of the housewife at that time.

Albee helps to express the familiarity of these characters in modern day society by describing that "most of my plays are not tied to time" 4, similarly obtaining an influence on modern day society. As compared to

Martha, Beverly also appears to be the most dominant, forceful character in "Abigail's party", depicted by an artificial, imitated, inauthentic or derivative dialogue. Leigh expresses the physical strength of this character by showing her intimidating nature towards her partner in "Oh, Christ, Laurence" 5. Comparably, the lead males in both works also present the image of their intellectual and cultural superiority through knowledge.

George is a sarcastic, biting character of which Albee focuses to have a strong sense of witty humour. He is portrayed as a character to immediately follow the orders of Martha, however ridiculous and absurd they may be. This therefore changes the power dynamics of the stereotypical, 1920's couple. George is introduced with a strong, intellectual knowledge, being able to outwit and correct, perhaps with "somebody" 6 and uses this same advantage to humiliate Martha and his guests with her own little game by being responsive to her behaviour.

George uses this as a destructive attack against Martha. "Martha's a devil with language" 7 shows George's dark, sarcastic humour used to embarrass Martha in front of her guests as she is expectant of an outburst in conflict of opinion, whereas George responds in a laid-back manner type approach. Reflectively, Nick and George also try to have the last word to gain an advantage over each other by using their intelligence.

George begins to manipulate Nick's sentences to intimidate his intellectuality. "You just finished saying that the things that motivated you are the same things that motivated me" 8 shows that Nick's inability to answer makes him too also feel like a "cluck" 9. However, Nick appears biting and

corrects George by saying " I imagine they were". George also intimidates Nick's work by showing his knowledge in biology, making him feel responsible as he's the one who's going to " make all of that trouble. Making everyone the same, rearranging the chromosomes or whatever it is. Isn't that right? " 10

Likewise, Laurence, Beverly's husband with whom he frequently argues seems powerless to compete with Beverly's flamboyant persona, and is constantly undermined by Beverly's oppressive charm. Leigh highlights this theme on several occasions, making both Laurence and his guests feel uncomfortable. " I told you nobody'd like olives, Laurence" 11portrays Beverly's constant undermining nature towards her husband, intimidating him in front of his guests. As compared with " Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? " Laurence also uses his cultural superiority and intellectuality towards his guests.

As he aspires to the finer things in life, Laurence enforces his knowledge on his guests at unfortunate moments. Nick and George have already been portrayed to be in direct competition towards each other, whereas Laurence and Angela may also have a similar rivalry when he corrects her about Tudor houses in attempt to appear more cultured and refined. " No Angela - Mock Tudor" 12 is a direct representation of Laurence's attempt to show his intellectual knowledge, yet again exerting power over his guests through mockery.