

## Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Edward Franklin Albee III is an American playwright, acknowledged among the protagonists of the American Theatre of the Absurd.

His works, such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The Zoo Story*, *A Delicate Balance* and *Sea-scape* are an unsympathetic examination of modern society.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a word-play on the title of the once popular song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" from Walt Disney's *The Three Little Pigs*, but also refers to the famous British novelist.

The story takes place in the house of George and Martha; they invite a professor and his wife (Nick and Honey) to come to their place. Martha and George drink and exchange offensive words to one another in front of the embarrassed younger couple.

Here follows the verbal exchange between George and Martha just after a tragic piece of news has arrived. Missy is the other nickname for Nick's wife.



### *You Can't Do That!*

GEORGE: Sweetheart, I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you... for us, of course. Some rather sad news. [*Honey begins weeping,<sup>1</sup> head in hands*]

MARTHA: [*Afraid, suspicious*] What is this?

GEORGE: [*Oh, so patiently*] Well, Martha, while you were out of the room, while the... two of you were out of the room... I mean, I don't know where hell you both must have been somewhere [*little laugh*]... while you were out of the room for a while, well, Missy and I were sittin' here havin' a little talk, you know: a chaw<sup>2</sup> and a talk and doorbell rang [...] and... well, it's hard to tell you, Martha...

MARTHA: [*A strange throaty<sup>3</sup> voice*] Tell me.

HONEY: Please... don't.

MARTHA: Tell me.

GEORGE: ... and... what it was... it was good old Western Union,<sup>4</sup> some little boy about seventy.

MARTHA: [*Involved*] Crazy Billy?

GEORGE: Yes, Martha, that's right... crazy Billy... and he had a telegram, and it was for us, and I have to tell you about it.

MARTHA: [*As if from a distance*] Why didn't they phone it? Why did they bring it? Why didn't they telephone it?

GEORGE: Some telegrams you have to deliver Martha; some telegrams you can't phone.

MARTHA: [*Rising*] What do you mean?

GEORGE: Martha... I can hardly bring myself to say it.

HONEY: Don't.

GEORGE: [*To Honey*] Do you want to do it?

HONEY: [*Defending herself against an attack of bees*] No no no no no.

GEORGE: [*Sighing<sup>5</sup> heavily*] All right. Well, Martha... I'm afraid our boy isn't coming home for his birthday.

MARTHA: Of course he is.

GEORGE: No, Martha.

MARTHA: Of course, he is. I say he is!

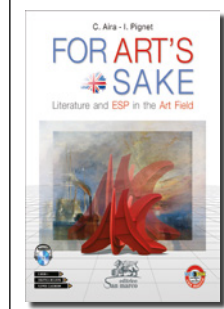
GEORGE: He... can't.

MARTHA: He is! I say so!

### GLOSSARY

1 crying – 2 cigarette – 3 from the throat – 4 company of telegraphic communications – 5 breathing





GEORGE: Martha... [*Long pause*]... our son is... dead. [*Silence*] He was... killed... late in the afternoon... [*Silence. A tiny chuckle*<sup>6</sup>] on a country road, with his learner's permit<sup>7</sup> in his pocket, he swerved<sup>8</sup> to avoid a porcupine,<sup>9</sup> and drove straight into a...

MARTHA: [*Rigid fury*<sup>10</sup>] You... can't... do... that!

GEORGE: ... large tree.

MARTHA: You cannot do that!

NICK: [*Softly*] Oh my God. [*Honey is weeping louder*]

GEORGE: [*Quietly, dispassionately*] I thought you knew.

NICK: Oh my God, no.

MARTHA: [*Quivering*<sup>11</sup> with rage<sup>12</sup> and loss] No! No! YOU CANNOT DO THAT! YOU CAN'T DECIDE THAT FOR YOURSELF! I WILL NOT LET YOU DO THAT!

GEORGE: We'll have to leave around noon, I suppose.

MARTHA: I WILL NOT LET YOU DECIDE THESE THINGS!

GEORGE: ... because there are matters of identifications, naturally, and arrangements to be made...

MARTHA: [*Leaping*<sup>13</sup> at George, but ineffectual] YOU CAN'T DO THIS! [*Nick rises, grabs hold of*<sup>14</sup> Martha, pins<sup>15</sup> her arms behind her back] I WON'T LET YOU DO THIS, GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!

GEORGE: [*As Nick holds on; right in Martha's face*] You don't seem to understand, Martha; I haven't done anything. Now, pull yourself together. Our son is dead! Can you get that into your head?

MARTHA: YOU CAN'T DECIDE THESE THINGS.

NICK: Lady, please.

MARTHA: LET ME GO!

GEORGE: Now listen, Martha; listen carefully. We got a telegram, there was a car accident and he's dead. POUF! Just like that! Now, how do you like it?

MARTHA: [*A howl*<sup>16</sup> which weakens into a moan.<sup>17</sup>] NOOOOOOOO.

#### GLOSSARY

6 little laugh – 7 paper given to drive before the driving licence – 8 turned sharply, changed direction –  
9 little animal with thorns – 10 anger – 11 trembling, shaking – 12 anger – 13 attacking – 14 holds strictly  
– 15 closes – 16 cry of pain – 17 soft complain

#### ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 What does George read to Martha?
- 2 What news does it contain?
- 3 What is Martha's reaction?
- 4 What is the atmosphere like?
- 5 How would you describe George and Martha's personalities?