

The Alcohol in the Space of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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Received: 3 February 2026; Accepted: 27 February 2026; Published: 25 March 2026

Abstract:

Edward Albee's seminal work, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is renowned for its profound depiction of marital disillusionment, interpersonal strife, and spiritual desolation. The core tension of the play arises from the sustained mutual torment, fierce quarrels, and meticulously crafted deceptions between the central couple (Martha and George) and their guests (Nick and Honey). Alcohol, as an indispensable narrative element, permeates every dramatic scene. Different types of alcohol not only serve as materialized representations of character traits but also function as non-human actants, subtly yet persistently catalyzing the escalation of conflict and the dynamic shifts in power among the characters. Through the juxtaposed presentation of alcohol within different spaces simultaneously, the characters' deep-seated desires are amplified, power structures undergo dramatic reversals, and the inherent vulnerability of ostensibly dominant figures like Martha is laid bare. This study, integrating thing theory and spatial narrative theory, focuses on the function of alcohol within specific spaces, examining how it participates in character development, propels plot progression, and reconstructs the power structure.

Keywords:

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Thing Narrative, Spatial Narrative, Power Relations

1. Introduction

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stands as a landmark of 20th-century American drama, celebrated worldwide for its sharp critical edge, absurdist tone, and unflinching dissection of the spiritual malaise of the middle class. Confining its action to a university apartment in the early hours of the morning, the play, through the drunken quarrels and psychological sparring of two couples – history professor George and his wife Martha (the college president's daughter), and young biology lecturer Nick and his wife Honey – over one long night, profoundly exposes the collapse of marital illusions, the hypocrisy of the intellectual elite, and the inherently violent nature of human relationships. The 20th century witnessed numerous turns, including the linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the narrative turn, the cognitive turn, etc.... [7]. Within narratology, spatial narrative and thing narrative have garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years. Spatial narrative is a theory emerging from the spatial turn in western narrative theory in the early twentieth century,

forming a crucial part of postclassical narratology [11]. It represents a “Spatiotemporal Complex” methodology [9]. Originating abroad, spatial narrative “traces its roots to Frank, finds its lineage through figures like Mitchell, and extends to Zoran” [8]. Joseph Frank’s concept of “spatial form” proposed in 1945 is considered its inception. In his work *The Idea of Spatial Form*, Frank articulated the nonlinear relationship between space and time in novelistic narrative, emphasizing the significance of space within storytelling [4]. Spatial narrative posits that space is not merely the setting for narrative but an integral component of it. It influences narrative structure, character portrayal, and plot advancement. For instance, in fiction, space can express time, arrange narrative sequence, or even become a crucial element driving the narrative forward.

Amidst the broader intellectual trend of “de-anthropocentrism,” the focus of research has gradually shifted from humans to things, leading to a distinct “turn to things” in both domestic and abroad academia. Correspondingly, thing narrative has emerged as a significant area of study within narratology. In essence, thing narrative explores how things tell stories and how they participate in constructing the meaning of the narrative world.

Scholarly research on this play has predominantly concentrated on its linguistic violence, absurdist themes, gender power, etc. Zuo Jin and Yu Dongming, in their paper, enumerate the play’s multiple absurdist themes through binary oppositions, including “presence and absence, reality and illusion, game and war, love and hate” [12]. Regarding the various games running through the drama, Yuan Jiali argues they are “both as a textual strategy to demonstrate his dramatic themes and as a theatrical metaphor to refer to the power relations on and off stage” [10]. Concerning various contradictions within the play—such as why the male protagonists are a historian and a biologist, the relationship between the rhyme and Virginia Woolf, and the invention of the “son”—Kang Yali and Liang Chaoqun provide answers in their article. They contend these elements aim “to critique America’s Nazi biopolitics” [5]. Blum, from a psychoanalytic perspective, studied the omnipresent figure of the “imaginary son,” states that “the fantasy of adoption is the fundamental underlying theme... This theme determines not only the content, but the structure of the play” [3]. Meyer analyzed how characters use language to blur reality and fiction, noting “the distinction between truth and illusion is not readily perceived” [6], thus reflecting the characteristics of absurdist theater. Bigsby pointed out that Albee uses the play to express his personal moral view of society, namely that “In this atmosphere personal relationships are corrupted to serving material ends and...marriage itself is degraded” [2]. However, the agency of “things” – particularly the omnipresent alcohol – as non-human actants, and their catalytic role in facilitating the flow of power through spatial juxtaposition, has not yet received systematic and in-depth exploration. Alcohol in this play is far from a mere background prop; it is a crucial narrative force that permeates the characters’ beings, drives their actions, shapes their relationships, and ultimately deconstructs their illusions. From the characters’ evident intoxication at the outset, through the continuous acts of pouring and drinking, to the subtle connections between different liquors and the characters’ personalities and fates, alcohol constitutes a dense network of “things,” interwoven with the play’s spaces – the living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom – collectively weaving this nocturnal ritual of power.

This paper aims to employ the dual perspectives of thing narrative and spatial narrative theory, focusing on the material entity of alcohol, to analyze how it signifies

character traits, ignites desire, dismantles rational defenses, facilitates the disclosure of secrets, and ultimately enables dramatic reversals in power relations among the characters, thereby revealing the core narrative function of “things” in the construction of Albee’s dramatic world.

2. The Space and Alcohol in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

The play opens in the early hours in a university campus apartment. Martha and George have just returned from a party hosted by her father (the college president), both already significantly inebriated. Upon entering, they engage in a discussion sparked by Martha’s offhand remark “what a dump” (Albee 6), debating its origin. Using this topic as a springboard, they then attempt to recall the name of a specific picture. Although the script does not directly depict a drinking scene at this moment, the characters’ incoherent dialogue and uncontrolled behavior clearly indicate that alcohol, as an internalized substance, has already begun impairing their cognition and reason. Subsequently, young lecturer Nick and his wife Honey arrive for a visit at the president’s request. The four engage in superficial social pleasantries in the living room, beneath which undercurrents of tension flow.

To ease the awkwardness of the initial meeting and attempt to establish rapport, Martha and George’s first social strategy is to offer their guests drinks. Martha commands George that “Make the kids a drink, George. What do you want kids? What do you want to drink, hunh?” (18). Here, alcohol, as a thing resting on the table, is actively appropriated by the characters as a tool to mediate interpersonal distance. In this process, humans (the hosts) and the non-human entity (alcohol) co-construct a temporary “Actor-Network.” As the conversation deepens, the four rapidly descend from politeness into verbal sparring and even personal attacks. Beyond the internal drives of desire and conflict within the characters, alcohol, as a key actant within this network, undoubtedly bears significant “responsibility” for escalating the dramatic conflict through the physiological and psychological effects of its continuous consumption.

Notably, when serving drinks, George does not offer a single type of liquor but meticulously inquires about preferences before pouring different beverages. Martha prefers rubbing alcohol. Its potent, direct taste profile aptly symbolizes her flamboyant, aggressive, and domineering personality. In the play, she expresses opinions without restraint, openly provokes, and humiliates others, especially George. This trait often gives her superficial dominance in conflicts, allowing her to scorn social etiquette and candidly expose her emotions, desires, and resentments. Honey chooses brandy, a spirit with a relatively mellow taste and flexible style (neat or mixed). This reflects the complexity of Honey’s character: as Nick’s wife, she strives to project a refined image of elegance, corresponding to brandy’s smoothness, but her underlying naivety, fragility, and neuroticism gradually surface under the influence of alcohol. Nick drinks Bourbon, its distinct and robust grain flavor often associated with masculinity and confidence. As an ambitious and goal-oriented young biology lecturer, Nick’s determined and purposeful nature aligns with Bourbon’s bold character.

The text mentions George’s earlier preference for brandy, later switching to “bergin” (likely a misspelling of “bourbon”). From Martha and George’s fragmented recollections, it can be inferred that George, in his youth, also harbored ideals, loved literature and history, and shared sweet times with Martha. His then-naive temperament might have resembled Honey’s, hence his preference for brandy.

However, years of marital strife, professional setbacks, and accumulated psychological depression have rendered brandy's "mildness" insufficient to alleviate his bitterness, leading him to shift towards Bourbon, which better matches his internal anguish and increasingly hardened (or perhaps numbed) emotional state. Thus, the choice of alcohol type becomes a significant external signifier of the characters' inner personalities and psychological states. Here, the "thing" transcends its utilitarian function, becoming a symbol laden with cultural connotations and psychological codes; its selection and transformation silently reveal the characters' fundamental traits and life trajectories. The non-human entity (liquor), through being chosen and consumed, deeply intervenes in the characters' behavior and subtly foreshadows the narrative.

The entire plot is strictly confined within the spatial boundaries of Martha and George's home, with character movement primarily revolving around the living room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom. The living room, as the core dramatic space, hosts the main social interactions and drinking. The characters' spatial mobility—moving between the living room and other auxiliary spaces—creates crucial spatial juxtaposition. Functioning as the "front stage" of the home, the living room is designated for reception, social performance, and public display. Martha and George "receive" Nick and Honey here, ostensibly for a social gathering, but in reality, it becomes an arena for power struggles and emotional venting.

While the four socialize over drinks in the living room, the power dynamic between Martha and George fluctuates continuously. A moment of eased tension occurs when they find common ground—flattery directed at Martha's president father—with everyone agreeing he is "quite a guy," "a god" (20). Martha, leveraging her status as the "president's daughter," initially dominates the conversation and the marital power structure. She publicly recounts childhood anecdotes and freely humiliates George for his inadequacy, simultaneously reinforcing her superior position by commanding George to serve drinks (for herself and the guests) like "Hey, where is my rubbing alcohol?" (18), "you can light my cigarette..." (36). George endures dual oppression—physical (laborious servitude) and psychological (public humiliation)—reduced to passive pleading. Alcohol, as a thing, possesses limited intrinsic value; however, when incorporated into the social chain of "sharing-serving-consuming," it acquires the symbolic power to reconfigure interpersonal relations. Martha reinforces her dominance by ordering George to serve; George's act of serving constitutes an active form of bodily abasement. Yet, as the continuous intake of alcohol increasingly impairs neurological function, diminishing rational control and leading to unregulated behavior, the established power structure loosens and becomes destabilized. In the final act, sustained heavy drinking pushes all four towards psychological collapse. Seeking revenge for Martha's infidelity with Nick, George meticulously fabricates the fictional event of their "son's fatal car accident." This news shatters Martha's psychological defenses, reducing her to a helpless hen who collapses into George's arms, begging for the truth only to be manipulated by him. At this moment, the power relation undergoes a fundamental reversal: Martha's aura as the "president's daughter" and her domineering posture vanishes entirely, while George transforms from the "failed history professor" into the orchestrator of vengeance. This dramatic power inversion relies heavily on alcohol's persistent catalytic effect (weakening inhibitions, amplifying emotions and inducing irrationality). It forces characters' deepest secrets and fatal vulnerabilities into the open. George, as the relatively "sober" observer and

strategist, precisely exploits Martha's alcohol-exposed fragility, seizing ultimate power through the narrative act of "killing" the child.

In the scene where Honey and Martha leave for the bedroom to change clothes, the play presents a juxtaposed narrative between the living room (male space: George and Nick) and the bedroom (female space: Martha and Honey). In the living room, the men representing science (Nick) and humanities (George) inevitably engage in a contest. George, probing Nick's true intentions, continuously refills his glass. Under the influence of alcohol and George's prompting, Nick gradually reveals the truth about his marriage and his designs on currying favor with the president. Simultaneously, in the "girl talk" occurring upstairs in the bedroom, Martha, affected by alcohol, discloses the core secret of her and George's "son" to Honey, directly violating her pact with George and laying the groundwork for his devastating retaliation. Alcohol here functions crucially as a "truth serum," lowering psychological defenses and prompting characters to divulge their most intimate family fantasy to virtual strangers.

Honey, as a key figure in the play, frequently retreats to the bathroom due to her low tolerance for alcohol. Her temporary "absence" leaves only Martha, George, and Nick in the living room, objectively accelerating the eruption and escalation of conflict among the trio. Honey prefers brandy, but overconsumption leads to repeated vomiting. The play describes her multiple times passed out drunk on the bathroom floor. As the daughter of a wealthy minister, Honey possesses inherent economic advantage within her marriage. Yet, under the dual physiological and psychological effects of alcohol, her deep-seated fear of pregnancy is fully exposed. When Martha leaves for the bathroom to tend to Honey, George and Nick engage in fiercer verbal combat in the living room. George successfully induces Nick to confess his calculation of using an affair with the president's daughter to advance his career. Seeking revenge for George's perceived "inadequacy," Martha, emboldened by alcohol and vengeful intent, returns from the bathroom and openly flirts with Nick in the living room. Alcohol here significantly amplifies sexual, power-hungry and vengeful desires suppressed by social norms, stripping away the veneer of intellectual respectability.

When Martha and Nick move their flirtation to the kitchen, Honey, reviving in the bathroom, encounters George alone in the living room, creating a juxtaposition between the kitchen (space of infidelity) and the living room (space of conspiracy). Honey, in a drunken and disoriented state, confesses to George her fear of pregnancy, her deliberate act of abortion, and her recurring dream of a "knocking sound." It is Honey's alcohol-induced rambling that provides George with the crucial inspiration to conceive the fictional "death of the son" as his ultimate weapon against Martha. In George's subsequent execution of this vengeful "filicide" narrative, Honey, in a semi-lucid state, even becomes his "accomplice," confirming the fact of the son's death as a witness. At this juncture, alcohol not only dismantles reason but also distorts perception and stimulates unconventional, associative "creative" thinking, directly precipitating a major plot twist.

3. Conclusions

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf portrays the psychological torment and mutual exploitation endured by two couples under the persistent influence of alcohol. The four characters circulate continuously within the enclosed spatial network formed by

the living room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom, generating different character groupings and interaction patterns that constantly collide to produce new dramatic conflicts. The living room, as the central narrative field, maintains a dynamic juxtaposition with the other spaces. Alcohol, as the core narrative prop, functions like an invisible thread through its physical presence and physiological effects, connecting all spaces and plot developments. Alcohol not only externalizes character traits but also profoundly participates in the generation, consolidation, destabilization, and inversion of power relations. It amplifies subconscious desires (for sex, power and revenge) and deeply buried vulnerabilities, significantly lowering psychological defenses, leading to the exposure of core secrets, and ultimately exacerbating the characters' inherent and latent conflicts, propelling this late-night social gathering towards an abyss of psychological devastation. By focusing on the narrative function of alcohol as a "thing" within specific spatial juxtapositions, this study reveals how Albee masterfully employs material elements and spatial structures to co-construct his intensely dramatic and absurd theatrical world.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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