DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES IN ALBEE'S *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*

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Abstract: This paper tries to provide a critical reading of Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?(1962),which is one of the most popular and at the same time, the most controversial of Edward Albee's plays , especially with regard to its main female characters, Martha and Honey in the American patriarchal society of the time. Several themes including women's lives, marriage, children, love, hatred, sex and sterility, games and illusion are mainly represented in this play. The paper attempts to delve into the characteristics of these two women with a view to the situation they were living in including the state of their marriage. Employing this information, the paper hopes to draw an analogy between Martha and Honey.

Key words: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?; American Family, Happy Marriage, Feminine Mystique

The Historical Background and the Definition of Housewife

Considering Martha and Honey's age, fifty two and twenty six respectively, it would give us a better understanding if we briefly viewed the situation of women during the first half of the 20th century. The United States experienced the Great Depression in the thirties, during which the American dream had become the American nightmare. With a 40% reduction in the average American family income, many women had no choice but to work (Sutton 2013: N.pag). According to Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1974), the heroine represented in the magazines by the end of the 1930s were usually marching toward some goal or vision of their own, struggling with some problem of work or the world when they found their man. "In 1940, less than a fourth of American women worked outside the home; those who did were for the most part unmarried. A minuscule 2.5 per cent of mothers were career women" (Friedan 1974: 181).

As Catalano states the 1950s proved to be an important era for American women. With the end of World War II, men returned to the United States and to their jobs, which had temporarily been assumed by women. Women now out of work turned toward the home and domestic activity. Advanced industrialization and the beginnings of suburbs further separated the environments of women and men. At the same time, the Cold War placed an added emphasis on family unity as a defense against communism, making the role of women as wives and mothers crucial to the preservation of the United States and its democratic ideals (Catalano 2002: 64). A popular slogan of the time which was first used in 1949 was: "The family that prays together stays together" (Apperson 1993: 191). Not only praying but also children were crucial to glue the family bond. It was only possible through woman's domesticity. Advertisements during this time period portrayed women as stupid, submissive, purely domestic creatures who were mostly consumers. In her book, Susan Douglas makes arguments about the damaging effect that such advertisements had on women, especially young girls, of the time. She believes the negative impact of advertising on women's self-esteem affected far more than one generation. She notes, "It wasn't just our mothers who took in these messages. We daughters absorbed them as well,

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and they encouraged us to respect Dad and ridicule Mom" (Douglas 1994: 54-55). So women had to leave the labor force and many turned their full attention to raising families, Harrison asserts, but not for long. In her article on the changing role of women in the United States she concludes that both the business and public sectors quickly began to expand in just those areas that traditionally offered employment to women before and during World War II: office work, teaching, and nursing. With so many jobs available, employers gave up their preference for single women and hired married women and mothers. According to her, by 1960, almost a third of American wives worked for wages at least part time, twice the proportion in 1940, and the number grew higher every year and the money they earned paid for houses, cars, and college educations for their children (Harrison 1997: 11).

Baby Boom and Childless Women

In the early 1960s the idea of the American family, the baby boom and an obsession with the picture of a happy, domestic woman was the center of attention. Experts disagree about the exact years of the postwar Baby Boom, although the most commonly accepted opinion was from 1946 to 1964. The rise and fall of American Baby Boom is thoroughly studied in Monhollon's *Baby Boom: People and Perspective* (2010). In the second chapter of this book, Kimberly Voss asserts that in the United States, about 76 million babies were born between those years .In 1946, births grew from 222,721 in January to 339,499 in October. By the end of the 1940s, about 32 million American babies had been born, compared with 24 million in the 1930s.In 1954, yearly births exceeded 4 million for the first time and did not drop below that figure until 1965, which is considered the end of the boom. All those births affected women's lives (Voss 2010: 20). Women, who participated in paid labors during World War II, were now expected to return home and accept the conservative role of the housewife and the mother of several children. Magazine articles and books urged women to leave workforce and enjoy their domestic roles. The common gender stereotype of the time reinforced the idea that the important role for women was to rear and bear children and keep the household environment a proper one for their husbands to thrive. This image, to which American women had to conform, is what Betty Friedan refers to as the "feminine mystique". In her book, she argued that "[t]he feminine mystique has succeeded in burying millions of American women alive" (1974: 325). This sense of dissatisfaction, contributed to the rebirth of the feminist movement in the 1960s.

In such a social climate, Albee writes the Tony Award-winning play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), in which he critically analyzes and undermines many of the American ideals of the time and presents characters which are disrespectful of the traditional values (Adams 1985: 5-15). The play depicts Martha and George, a middle-aged dysfunctional married couple. George is an assistant professor at a New England college and his wife is the college president's daughter. Through their scathing and bitter alcohol-fueled feuding, they lash out at each other. When a young couple, new professor Nick and his wife, Honey visit their house after a late-night party, Martha and George continue their battle of wits and games, interchangeably attacking their guests and using them as ammunition, to put each other down.

Gilchrist observes that Edward Albee modeled this play after a short story by Virginia Woolf called "Lappin and Lapinova" which was first published in 1938 (2011: 853). What these two stories share is the depiction of a loveless marriage in which the female characters choose to create fantastical creatures. Martha creates an imaginary son and Rosalind in "Lappin and Lapinova" comes up with unreal identity for her husband and herself, two rabbits named King

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Lappin and Queen Lapinova. Both of these childless women use these fictional characters as a defense mechanism in order to survive and in both of these families, the husbands finally decide to disillusion their wives.

One might wonder why Martha and George had to give birth to their imaginary child. As stated earlier, twentieth-century reproductive morality promoted marriage and motherhood as a central goal of womanhood. According to Kline, the role of eugenicists cannot be overlooked in reinforcing such a pattern. Beginning in the 1930s, eugenicists started promoting marital and maternal happiness as a significant and fulfilling goal for modern womanhood (2001:129). Even Dr. Paul Popenoe, a specialist in heredity and eugenics, went so far as to say that not enough was being done at the college level. He argued in 1930 that "The importance of successful marriage and parenthood, personally, socially and radically would seem to require that all educational institutions place these second to no other objectives, in outlining the preparation of every student"(2003: 169). In "Now Is the Time to Have Children" he even appealed on several grounds to inspire motherhood. Based on the analysis of thousands of case records from his institute, he found a direct correlation between marital happiness and family size. According to him, more children results in the happier middle-class parents. He also referred to a physiological approach which claimed that a woman needs children for her health and mental hygiene, stating that woman's body is made for childbearing and is not functioning normally unless it bears children (Kline 2001:149). Addressing a white, middle-class audience, his general claim for the emotional and physical benefits of reproduction was echoed in the reports of marriage and sex counselors in the 1950s and 1960s. (150)

The childbearing ability for a woman was considered so vital that Dr.Robert Dickenson, an American obstetrician, gynecologist and maternal health educator, proposed that every couple should undergo a series of examinations by a doctor focusing on the women's genital anatomy with reference to marriage and child bearing (Kline 2001: 133). Clearly this cultural climate with its emphasis on marriage and parenthood put a strain on many women. As Modell puts it, "To be a mother was very much more vivid, important, thought-about, and valued at the height of the baby boom than to be a wife" (1989: 261) . Every married woman felt isolated if they did not adjust properly to their roles. Being childless, whether by choice or due to infertility, would make a woman the object of criticism and contempt. As Kline discusses, it was even believed that infertility in many cases was not because of physiological reasons but due to psychological and emotional disturbance. Marriage counselors were mostly of the idea that successful marital adjustment would result in fertility. The feminine mystique would even blame infertile women for their sexual maladjustment, their lack of femininity and unconscious rejection of motherhood (2001: 154-55).

Albee brings Martha and Honey on stage as married women with no children. Obviously, they both have to suffer the consequences. In case of Martha and George, there is no reference in the play whether they had chosen not to have any children or not, but since they opted for an imaginary son, the issue of infertility seems to be the only explanation. Honey on the other hand, apparently became pregnant before marriage which rushed her and Nick into the matrimony. There is no clear indication whether Nick is right when he thinks "[i]t was a hysterical pregnancy. She blew up, and then she went down," (Albee 1965: II.i.60) or Honey had a real pregnancy which she had aborted. Only when she is drunk she reveals that she is afraid of having children because she does not want to go through the pain of childbirth. At this point George suspects that Honey has had abortions or takes some kind of birth control pills:

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GEORGE. I should have known ... the whole business… the headaches.... the whining . . . the...
HONEY. About what? Stay away from me!
GEORGE. Don't worry, baby ... I wouldn't.... Oh, my God, that would be a joke, wouldn't it! But don't worry, baby. HEY! How you do it? Hunh? How do you make your secret little murders stud-boy doesn't know about, hunh? Pills? PILLS? You got a secret supply of pills? Or what? Apple jelly? WILL POWER? (Albee I. i. 105-6)

What matters is that, whether done voluntarily or not, having no children has taken its toll on both of these women on different levels. As a defense mechanism, to fight the pressure imposed upon her by the society and the domineering feminine mystique, Martha needs the illusion of being a mother. Knowing that she is treated as a social outcast, she resorts to creating a child so as to feel normal and accepted. The child she creates is not a girl, a further replica of Martha who would have to be confined to the same principles dominating her life and suffer the same inequalities. Due to her insecurity, she creates a boy as a substitute who would compensate for George's inadequacies. Honey, despite being afraid of delivery, is doomed to comply with the mystique. Since she is drunk through most parts of the night we cannot tell if she is aware of what goes on with Martha, George and their imaginary child. Through her conversations with Nick, we recognize that she has not quite been taken seriously by him. She seems to be under the impression that in order to be defined and appreciated as an individual, she needs to fit the mould that society has decided for her, the mould of being a mother. We find the feminine mystique completely taking over her when towards the ending of the play she says almost tearfully that she wants a child:

HONEY [suddenly; almost tearfully]. I want a child.
NICK. Honey… .
HONEY [more forcefully]. I want a child!
GEORGE: On principle?
HONEY [in tears]. I want a child. I want a baby. (Albee III. i. 130)

The decision to make George kill off their son can be of significant concern. The story takes place in a living room in New Carthage, somewhere in New England. More than reminder of the Ancient Carthage as a scene for a passionate and tragic love story, it was the site of a Tophet- a child sacrifice precinct. Herr explains that Carthage provides the best evidence for the nature and practice of child sacrifice (1995: 64-65). Martha and George's imaginary son is killed on the eve of his twenty-first birthday. George, frustrated and enraged by Martha's infidelity, retaliates by depriving her of the only source of delight and affection in her life. The existence of their imaginary child is an escape from the drudgery life. It makes Martha feel normal and gives her hope and strength to face the world as a childless woman. As to reinforce the deeply entrenched belief in male superiority, Albee gives George the power and eligibility to choose to disillusion Martha and kill their son.

Male Domineering Social and Educational System

Albee pictures two couples representing two different forms of marital life. One is Martha and George, with Martha being abusive, profane and condescending and George as a man who has failed to play the archetypal masculine role of being financially and professionally

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a successful supporter of the family. This can be figured out through Martha's frequent direct and tactless references to George's failures in different respects: "I hope that was an empty bottle, George. You don't want to waste good liquor ... not on your salary. Not on an Associate Professor's salary" (Albee 1965: I. i. 56).

She also freely sneers at George's attempt to publish a book, which met with failure:

> MARTHA. Well, Georgie-boy had lots of big ambitions In spite of something funny in his past […]Which Georgie-boy here turned into a novel[. . .]. But Daddy took a look at Georgie's novel.
>
> GEORGE.STOP IT, MARTHA!
>
> MARTHA. And Daddy said … Look here; I will not let you publish such a thing…. (II. i. 81-82)

On several other occasions, Martha expresses her contempt towards George and the disappointment he has caused Martha's father. An important authority figure whose infiltration and leverage has always overshadowed Martha's life and her relationship with George is her father. In Abottson's book, *Masterpieces of 20th-Century American Drama*, we see him as an omnipotent, controlling figure who in "the wider social picture" epitomizes the "overcontrolling; intolerant social leaders Albee sees at work in the nation, whose callous control helps distort further the lives of those under them"(2005: 142). Martha's father embodies the spirit of patriarchy. He is a puppeteer who directs the scene of his players the way he wants to. He manipulates Martha, a representative of women society, into abiding by his decisions and demands absolute conformity. George's remarks on his father-in-law can confirm this point. Like the deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs and prejudices he is omnipresent throughout Martha's life:

> GEORGE. […]Martha's father expects loyalty and devotion out of his . . . staff.
>
> […] the old man is not going to die. Martha's father has the staying power of one of those Micronesian tortoises. There are rumors…which you must not breathe in front of Martha, for she foams at the mouth …that the old man, her father, is over two hundred years old. […] (Albee: 1965: I. i. 31-32)

From the very beginning of the play, we realize the hostility between George and his father-in-law: (I.i. 13). He also humorously complaints to his guests on their arrival about being married to the "President's daughter": "Let me tell you a secret, baby. There are easier things in the world, if you happen to be teaching at a university, . . than being married to the daughter of the president of that university" (I.i.24). Martha on the other hand, pays her tribute to the father on any possible occasion and uses every opportunity to make it clear to her guests how George has embarrassed her in front of her "Daddy" such as the time when he refused to get into a boxing fight with his father-in-law which made him look less of a man. Honey's father is also mentioned in the play as "a man of God" who "became pretty famous… and when he died he had a lot of money" (II .i. 68).This would lead the readers to wonder why Albee insisted on the portrayal of these two characters' fathers.

Both fathers are prominent respected figures of high social status and immense fortune. Edward Albee does not provide his readers with much account of the marital life of these two men or their relationship with their wives. We only realize through George's words that Martha's father had married twice. The emphasis on these two fathers may reinforce Albee's attempt to outline the significant role of men in the 20th-century America.

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Before the first act of the play ends, we learn of Martha's first marriage during her "[…] sophomore year at Miss Muff's Academy for Young Ladies…college," to a guy who "mowed the lawn" (I. i. 52) and therefore was of no distinctive education or social status. This marriage had been annulled after only one week with direct and early intervention from Martha's father and Miss Muff. In patriarchal societies, the young girls' freedom of choice in marriage had always been much restricted. It is around the same time that Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* claims that arranged marriage in France was not a thing of the past but there was a whole bourgeois class keeping it alive. According to her, this kind of marriage was quite frequent before 1945. In higher social circles, young girls were allowed to meet their future husbands under their mothers' watchful eyes (1953: 421). As a young girl, Martha's decision to marry a gardener's boy without her father's approval was considered a rebellious act against the principles of the phallocentric society of the time. Such insubordinate behavior could not be tolerated and had to be suppressed immediately.

Martha, feeling as if she had disappointed her father, seemed willing to do anything to win his favor again. As she discloses, by the time she graduated, her father "always had it in the back of his mind to… groom someone to" take charge of the college when he retired (Albee 1965: 1.1.P 53). When George came along "[…] who was young ... intelligent…and … bushy-tailed, and . . . sort of cute," (ibid.) Martha "[…] fell for him. And the match seemed…practical, too" (I.i. 55). She fell in love with George and married him, though according to her it wasn't her Daddy's idea that she had to necessarily marry the guy. This seemingly impetuous decision could have been originated by her subconscious fear of failing her father and her intense and unsatisfied desire to make him proud. Such emotions could also account for the mortification felt by Martha when Daddy's expectations are constantly dashed by George.

Honey's father on the other hand, a wealthy man of God, seems to have had a similarly controlling and manipulative relationship with Honey. Honey's hysterical pregnancy is mentioned by Nick. False pregnancy or pseudocyesis according to Rabuzzi may "not only reflect prevailing patriarchal attitudes toward childbearing, but also suggest ways of reconceiving it" (1994: 37) .In her book titled *Mother with Child: Transformation Through Childbirth,* Kathryn Rabuzzi explains that the word, from the Greek *pseudes*, false and *kyesis*, pregnancy, refers to a condition wherein a woman experiences symptoms of pregnancy as menstrual disturbances, womb and abdominal enlargement and breast changes. Visually she appears pregnant, although no conception has actually occurred (1994: 38-39). Among the psychological reasons for this phenomenon, she refers to one which could be ascribed to Honey's situation. She believes that "[f]or a woman who fears pregnancy or feels ambivalent about it, fictive pregnancy may punish her, fulfilling her worst nightmares" (1994: 39). She follows with an account of a thirty-six-year-old Catholic mother of four who felt she was pregnant following a tubal ligation. For her, freedom from further childbearing had an unhappy outcome. "An internalized image of religiously mandated reproduction so dominates her thinking that her body punishes her with false symptoms" (1994: 40).

The same could be said of Honey. The influence of her Catholic priest father, must have given her the impression that her religious and moral duty as a woman is to have children. As stated earlier, entrenched patriarchy dictates that ideal women are married ones with children. Being imprinted with religious and patriarchal images of what a woman should do, she requires to be pregnant against her own fear of childbirth. So instead of providing an antidote to negative patriarchal attitudes, Honey's fictive pregnancy promulgates them.

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The possibility of this hysterical pregnancy being in fact a genuine one which was aborted was also previously examined in the paper. For the American society of the 20th century marriage preceded childbearing and violating this normative sequence could be a source of enormous individual or family shame. Marilyn Coleman in *Family Life in 20th-Century America* remarks that "[b]irths to single mothers were referred to as illegitimate until around mid-century, and children born out of wedlock were often labeled bastards. Because of low tolerance and stigma among the white population, until the 1960s, single white women who became pregnant generally had the following choices: they married, had abortions (illegally until 1973, when abortions became a legal medical procedure), hid their pregnancy status, or stayed in institutions for unwed mothers until the baby was born and could be given up for adoption" (Coleman 2007: 25).

Such a social view towards pregnant girls and the catastrophic consequences for them may have made Honey resort to abortion. Although largely illegal in the first half of the century in most states, abortion was fairly easily obtainable. According to Radosh, illegal abortions were often performed in 'abortion parlors' and were rarely prosecuted. (2009: 24) Women's access to knowledge about birth control was also very restricted at the time. Coleman refers to the case of Margaret Sanger, an American nurse and sex educator, who caused great controversy in 1915, by distributing pamphlets which contained information about birth control. She was arrested for violating postal obscenity law by mailing contraceptive information. In 1916, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the United States in New York and was arrested nine days later charged with maintaining a public nuisance (2007: 134) . Of course, Coleman observes that the situation gradually improved and by the 1950s 81 percent of white wives were using some form of birth control, though the major breakthrough came with the second wave of feminism and the invention of birth control pills in 1960 which enabled women to control their fertility (2007: 135). Given the mentioned situation, there is no wonder why George accuses Honey so harshly of her "secret little murders" (Albee 1965: I. i. 106) .

When focusing on the character of Honey and Martha, the education they received cannot be overlooked. During the first half of the twentieth century women would mainly join segregated colleges. It was not until the 1960s that some colleges made transitions and adopted coeducational system of studying. As McClelland argues this segregation in the 20th century would go beyond mere physical separation of boys and girls. In *The Education of Women in the United States*, she remarks that the actual educational experiences of the girls at schools were quite different from those of the boys. While in educational system boys and girls were routinely treated to the same school conditions with the same curriculum, the same teachers and the same educational activities, qualitative difference existed in educational outcomes for women. The cultural dominance would discourage girls from taking advanced courses in mathematics and science and encourage them to traditional roles as wives, mothers and homemakers. Although women gained invaluable educations in the latter half of the nineteenth century and managed to put their education to use in a variety of ways other than homemaking, by the end of the 1920s they found their influence shrinking once more from national level to the level of home and community (McClelland 2013: 41-43). The view towards educated women was not quite favorable either. James McKeen Cattell , the renowned American psychologist, persisted for decades in calling his dictionary *American Men of Science* (1921) even though it included women as well. (Kohlstedt 2004: 8).

After World War II more American women than ever before were going to college but fewer of them were going on from college to pursuit a career or profession. As Freidan observes,

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in 1950s two out of three girls who entered college were dropping out before they finished and those who stayed showed no signs of wanting to be anything more than the suburban housewives and mothers (1974: 142) . When comparing with her time, Betty Freidan noticed a difference. College girls were becoming less interested in commitment to any activity or career other than that of housewife. A subtle and almost unnoticed change had taken place in the academic culture for American women which Freidan called the new sex-direction of their educators (1974: 148) . The feminine mystique had brainwashed American educators and made them more concerned with their students' future capacity for sexual orgasm than with their future use of intelligence. Friedan remarks that "[t]he one lesson a girl could hardly avoid learning, if she went to college between 1945 and 1960, was not to get interested, seriously interested, in anything besides getting married and having children, if she wanted to be normal, happy, adjusted, feminine, have a successful husband, successful children, and a normal, feminine, adjusted, successful sex life" (ibid.). Education was constantly held responsible for the general and sexual frustration of American women. For women, college was predominantly considered "the place to find a man" (1974: 158). So by dissuading a girl from any but the "normal" commitment to marriage and the family, the sex-directed educator promotes a girl's adjustment to the feminine norms (1974: 162) . This new sex-direction of women became a part of education and "was perhaps even more insidious on the high-school level than it was in the colleges, for many girls who were subjected to it never got to college" (1974: 154).

Martha and Honey were both the victims of such an educational system. Of Honey's education, we know little. She may or may not have gone to college. Yet during her high school she was clearly influenced by sex-directed educators persuading her that higher education or any career plans would defeminize a woman. To her, the real core of feminine settlement was living in intimacy with a beloved man and raising his children. Like many other girls, she might have been motivated for marriage by the need to conform to the domineering mystique. This need also has undermined her confidence and made her weak and subordinate to Nick. While through conversations, Nick is introduced as a young, handsome man who tries to achieve his personal autonomy and identity by ambitiously planning his future, Honey is presented as a vulnerable and more or less feeble-minded girl who exchanges no more than pleasantries and stupid responses for the most part. Her personality is mainly shaped by the education she received and the social and religious impositions on her.

Martha, on the other hand, responded differently to such influence. The sex-directed education has indoctrinated her for her proper feminine role. In terms of the qualities of an ideal husband, like the majority of other girls, she might have looked for "the man who will assume the most important role, that is, handle his own career and make the majority of decisions affecting matters outside the home"(1974: 143). But George has clearly failed to handle his career. he was supposed to succeed Martha's father and take over the college which did not happen. His inadequacies, in Martha's mind, have made him a disappointment, a great, big "flop" (Albee 1965: I. i. 56). Martha does not hesitate to bring this issue up on any given occasion: "God knows, *somebody*'s going to take over the History Department, *some day*, and it ain't going to be Georgie-boy" (I. i. 44).

Out of hostility to George, Martha deliberately clings to values other than his, relying upon the authority of her father. This situation, according to de Beauvoir, can be attributed to couples in which the husband disappoints the wife. To take revenge, the wife relies on some masculine personality who seems to her to be superior, in order to get the better of him. Even without offering anything positive in the opposition, she strives to contradict him systematically,

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to attack and to wound him; she endeavors to give him an inferiority complex. If she has the necessary resources, she will take delight in imposing her judgment, her opinions, her commands; she will assume complete moral authority. (451) Martha does all this and even more. She repeatedly compliments Nick on his physical fitness in parallel with ridiculing George saying that he "isn't too happy when we get to muscle. You know… flat bellies, pectorals..." (Albee I. i. 38)

Conclusion

Freidan's definition of feminine mystique which evaluates women's capability and potentials and introduces the norms only by marriage and procreation is well represented in the Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Honey's submissiveness in one hand and Martha's brutal behaviors are two sides of the same coin. Martha's her bitterness, her vulgarity and her constant attempt to provoke George's jealousy are all a testimony of her frustration and her sense of grievance. In the male-dominant society, they are merely the property of a father handed down to George/ Nick. They were raised to believe that they have to rely on a man, first the father and later the husband. Both men failed in different respects. Nick is not as fertilely masculine as he claims both in academic and procreative sense. Martha's father broke her heart when he annulled her first marriage, which was obviously inspired by young love, and George disgraced her by his professional incompetence. Honey and Martha have been both victimized by the patriarchy of the time. Honey has put up no resistance and is defeated by the mystique but viewing Martha as a victim would be a lot harder due to her violent and aggressive words and deeds. Nevertheless, when one looks into different aspects of her life the reasons for such extreme and hostile reactions become evident.

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