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# The Way the Games Are Played

From early in my childhood, there has rarely been a time in my life where I have not been playing a game of some sort. I have played board games, video games, role-playing games, and card games, just to name a few. I mention this because I began to notice distinct parallels between the games I played for fun and the Game of Life, and I am not referring to the one from Milton-Bradley. I mean life in general, the one we all experience in some capacity, and the one we struggle to understand. What many people do not realize is that the rules of the Game of Life are unwritten but also memorized by everyone. We know that research papers are supposed to be our own original work supplemented by the research of those before us, and that guests are supposed to be entertained and not attacked, and that humans and animals should not be mating with one another. Yet, Edward Albee has tackled the latter two statements head-on with his plays *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *The Goat*. Both of these plays explicitly remark on the Games of Life and Society by showing the audience two households that are torn asunder once the rules of Life and Society are brought into question.

The more obvious of the two plays in which this dissolution occurs is *The Goat*, which features Martin and the revelation that he has been cheating on his wife with a goat. The

perplexing thing about this discovery is the way it is built up by the characters of Martin, Ross, and Stevie. As Martin is preparing for an interview by Ross, Stevie begins questioning him about some odd business cards that Martin found in his pockets:

> **Stevie**: …Who is she?
> **Martin**: Who?
> **Stevie**: Clarissa Atherton, basic services. Does she smell funny? (*The Goat* 1651)

She then goes on to humorously describe Clarissa as a "dominatrix," and, though Martin denies any sort of infidelity, she goes on to state, "If not the dominatrix, then some blonde half your age, some… chippie, as they used to call them…" (*The Goat* 1651). What follows is an over-the-top and flamboyant (Albee describes it as "exaggerated Noel Coward") round of banter between Stevie and Martin:

> **Stevie**: Tell me! Tell me!
> **Martin**: Her name is Sylvia!
> **Stevie**: Sylvia? Who is Sylvia?
> **Martin**: She's a goat; Sylvia is a goat! [*Acting manner dropped; normal tone now; serious flat*] She's a goat.
> **Stevie**: [*long pause; she stares, finally smiles. Giggles, chortles, moves toward the hall; normal tone*] You're too much! (*The Goat* 1651-1652)

The irony, of course, is that Martin is actually telling the truth here. His "mistress" is, in fact, a goat he has named Sylvia, but Stevie is too caught up in the conventions of the Game of Life to notice or accept it. It also does not help that this theatrical exchange is "pitched in the exuberant style of romantic comedy," a trope that never seems to leave the theater for long (Robinson 64). The problem that Stevie encounters here is that Martin's statement—"She's a goat."—hints at something so taboo that she does not know how to interpret it as she walks off saying, "You're too much" (Robinson 65).

Stevie's confusion here relates to the concept of "common knowledge" in game theory, which can be described as "the specification of the game being played and the player's

rationality"; in other words, "all the players know these facts, know that they all know them, know that they all know that they know them, and so on" (Colman and Pulford 678-679). The rule that Stevie assumes that Martin knows is that human men sleep with human women and nothing else. There have been some exceptions to the rule added over time such as homosexuality, a topic of interest considering that their son Billy is gay, but those discussions only questioned the *sex* of the human and not the *species* of the woman. By bringing in the taboo of bestiality into the conversation, Martin disrupts the flow of the game he and Stevie were playing, which caused her to take a long pause.

Another notable instance of Martin breaking the rules is during the interview with Ross. Here, Ross is ecstatic that Martin has become "the youngest person ever to win the Pritzker Prize, architecture's version of the Nobel," has been "chosen to design The World City, the two hundred billion dollar dream city of the future," and only just turned fifty the week before (*The Goat* 1654). Martin, however, seems to be hung up on the last item, as he counters all of Ross's exuberant prodding:

> **Ross**: What an honor! What a duo of honors! You're at the…pinnacle of your success, Martin…
> **Martin**: [*considers that*] You mean it's all downhill from here? (*The Goat* 1655)

This question is quickly followed by a concerned Ross, perplexed that Martin is not basking in his own glory, who then asks multiple questions to Martin about his personal life and if there is "something the matter" with him (*The Goat* 1655). Eventually, Ross figures it out as he exclaims, "You're having an affair!" To him, Martin having an affair fits perfectly into the Game of Life, as it explains Martin's irrational behavior during the interview. Ross believes it is common knowledge that, as Martin's "best friend," he is entitled to know the intimate details of Martin's affair as he so politely asks him, "[H]ow did you fuck it up?" (*The Goat* 1658).

Ross, like Stevie, is woefully unprepared for the news that Martin delivers, and he also meets the revelation that Sylvia is a goat with as much laughter as (if not more than) Stevie did. Once Martin confirms that this is not a joke, Ross is horrified. "THIS IS A GOAT!" he screeches. "YOU'RE HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH A GOAT! YOU'RE FUCKING A GOAT!" (*The Goat* 1662). This provokes him to write a letter to Stevie because he "can't stay silent at a time of crisis for you both, for Martin's public image…" (*The Goat* 1663). Note the second item in that list where he states that Martin's image as a successful architect is threatened by Martin's affair with a goat. It was not the *affair* that threatens Martin but the *goat* he is having an affair with.

When we meet Martin and Stevie again in Scene 2, they are joined by an equally outraged Billy. It is here that Martin quips that "[Billy's] *own* sex life leaves a little to…" (*The Goat* 1662, original emphasis). Once again, the rule of heteronormativity is brought back into the spotlight, only this time it is concerning the gender of the participants. Martin attempts to back-track by telling Billy, "You're gay, and that's fine, and I don't give a shit what you put where" (*The Goat* 1662). Martin, although he is clearly breaking the rules of the Game of Life, is still perfectly aware that Billy is likewise foregoing convention by openly denying sex with women in favor of men. Billy's homosexuality, however, has been brought into cultural debates long enough to have explanations and workarounds built into the Game. In the earlier discussion with Ross, Martin states that he has chosen not to give the "'You'll get over it once you meet the right girl' lecture" because the boy is having fun, to which Ross replies, "Well, of course he loves it; he's getting laid, for God's sake!" (*The Goat* 1653). The rules of the Game have accepted that homosexuality exists, but it quickly explains that it is temporary and will inevitably be resolved with the right human female.

Speaking of human females, Stevie almost seems *too* calm in her confrontation with Martin over the letter. This is even accepting that she "must have read the letter alone many times before performing it in front of her husband" (Florescu 139). Aware that Martin has broken tradition, Stevie also attempts to break tradition by "working on her inflections, gestures, facial contortions, and so on to prove her stubborn refusal to offer the same *old* repertoire to her husband" (Florescu 139). She cannot keep up the masquerade for long, though, and she soon succumbs to the blind rage and confusion she truly feels:

> **Stevie**: We prepare for…things, for lessenings, even; inevitable…lessenings, and we think we can handle everything, whatever comes along, but we don't know, *do* we! [*Right at Martin*] *Do* we!
> **Martin**: [*Bereaved*] No; no, we don't.
> **Stevie**: Fucking *right* we don't! [*Didactic*] Something can happen that's outside the rules, that doesn't relate to The Way the Game Is Played. Death before you're ready to think about it—that's part of the game. A stroke that leaves you sitting looking at an eggplant the week before had been your husband—that's another. Emotional disengagement, gradual, so gradual that you don't know it's happening, or sudden—not very often, but occasionally—that's another. You've read about spouses—God! I hate that word!—"spouses" who all of a sudden start wearing dresses—yours, or their own collection—wives gone dyke…but if there's one thing you *don't* put on your plate, no matter how exotic your tastes may be is…bestiality. (*The Goat* 1666, original emphasis).

It is this monologue that particularly intrigues me, as it is one of the few references to life as the Game of Life in *The Goat*. Stevie's rant can be summarized as "a question, finally or foremost, of the social contract," but I would extend even further as an explanation of the different exceptions that have been added to the rules of the Game over the years (Robinson 69). Death, illness, falling out of love, and evolving sexuality have all been added to the list of things that can be excused, but forgoing the human race for the caresses of an animal is not one of them.

Now that the truth has been exposed and that the game has been disrupted, "what is one to do with an apparently functioning system whose deterioration has only been indefinitely held at bay by one's own psychic investment?" (Robinson 71). And so, the house and household

begin to collapse. Stevie begins throwing various items such as vases and bowls, Martin is too paralyzed with fear to do anything, and Billy witnesses their meltdowns as he struggles to understand. “Ya see,” he imagines telling his schoolmates, “while great old Mom and great old Dad have been doing the great old parent thing, one of them has been underneath the house, down in the cellar, digging a pit so deep!, so wide!, so…HUGE!...we’ll all fall in” (*The Goat* 1681-1682). After this, he kisses Martin in a “deep, sobbing, sexual” way (*The Goat* 1682). And why not? The rules of the Game have already been shattered completely. Ross encounters them in this position and threatens Martin, saying, “Down it all comes—your career; your life…everything” (*The Goat* 1684). To this, Martin responds, “Oh, thank God! It’s so simple! I thought it was… I thought it had to do with love and loss, and it’s only about…*getting by*” (*The Goat* 1685, my emphasis). All that matters to Ross is that the Game of Life and its rules are maintained, personal satisfaction notwithstanding, which is something that Martin cannot stand to do.

The end of *The Goat* does leave many questions unresolved, however, as the curtain drops while the characters stare in horror and sorrow at one another. The same could also be said for Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, as it also ends with tears and some unanswered questions. Because of this, critics tend to debate with each other over what exactly the play is about. When asked about the film version of the play, Albee himself explained in an interview with *The Paris Review* that “a number of the movie critics of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* have repeated the speculation that the play was written about four homosexuals disguised as heterosexual men and women” (Flanagan). Albee continued by relating a story about how he attempted to correct a critic from *Newsweek*, who replied with two main points: “first, that we all know that a critic is a far better judge of an author’s intention than the author; second, that seeing

the play as being about four homosexuals was the only way he could live with the play, meaning he could not accept it as a valid examination of heterosexual life" (Flanagan).

If *Virginia Woolf* is meant to be a "valid examination of heterosexual life," what, pray tell, is the test? This is a trick question because there are actually *four* tests within this play, only they are all referred to as games. The four games of *Virginia Woolf*—Humiliate the Host, Hump the Hostess, Get the Guests, and Bringing Up Baby—play a similar role to *The Goat*'s "Who is Sylvia?," since they all focus on exposing the conventions and contradictions of society in the Game of Life.

Before the games begin, the play starts with George and Martha, who seem to be in the midst of a marital spat. On the surface, they are simply the warring couple in the midst of a battle of the sexes. The prevailing theme throughout, however, is "truth and illusion" (*Woolf* 83). The theatrics of George and Martha are just that: theatrics. They are playing games with themselves and their audience. For example, as they are in the middle of their opening feud, Martha loses track of what she should say and spouts, "You make me puke!" When George replies, "That wasn't a very nice thing to say, Martha," she praises him! "I like your anger," she coos, "I think that's what I like about you the most … your anger," before immediately calling him a "phrasemaker" and laughing along with George (*Woolf* 11). They know that she is playing the dominant, masculine woman and that he is pretending to be the emasculated male, and so they play-act their respective roles in an attempt to "mimic those roles to render them as questionable in the eyes of their audience" (Hoorvash and Pourgiv 12).

But, as Claire Eby states, "[g]ender not only has to be acted but also must have an audience" (605). In the case of *Virginia Woolf*, George and Martha's audience includes the young couple that comes to visit and the viewing audience of the theatre. In contrast to the

“characters” of George and Martha, Nick and Honey represent the stereotypical American husband and wife. Nick is a bold, confident young man as well as an up-and-coming biologist in the university George works in. Honey, in contrast, is “rather plain” as Albee puts it in his description of her character (*Woolf* 5). She is quite mousey, and she does not seem to have any force of her own, choosing instead to rely on the domineering Nick as her social crutch.

The games start almost immediately after Martha sings the title song during the get-together. Now, it is important to know the significance of the song “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf” as the play does very little to explain it. Albee stated that the inspiration for the song when he saw the words “scrawled in soap…on [a] mirror” (Flanagan). It struck him “as being a rather typical university, intellectual joke” because “who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf means who’s afraid of the big *bad* wolf … who’s afraid of living life without false illusions” (Flanagan). Considering Woolf herself wondered “which was truth and which was illusion,” it is no wonder that Albee chose this moment to introduce the first of the four games that attempt to shatter the preconceptions Nick and Honey hold dear (qt. in Gilchrist 862).

The first game, Humiliate the Host, finds Martha overplaying her role as the dominatrix while George does the opposite by transforming himself into a feeble, washed-up man. In the meantime, they both work together to stoke the egos of Nick and Honey, luring them into their games subtly and intelligently. Eventually, the topic of Nick’s muscular, young body is brought up, as Honey energetically states that “[h]e was intercollegiate state light heavyweight champion” and that “he has a very … firm body” (*Woolf* 27). As Martha launches into the story of how she knocked George out in a boxing warm up, George leaves the room, grabs a shotgun, and aims it at Martha’s head. When he pulls the trigger, a Chinese parasol pops out instead of bullets, causing only a minor jump-scare for all audiences present. One would assume that

Martha would be outraged at such a thing, but she once again praises George, saying, "Yeah … that was pretty good. (*Softer*.) C'mon … give me a kiss" (*Woolf 29*.)

George's prop begin the transition from the first game to the second as "Martha understands George's fake gun play as he intends her to: as paying tribute to Nick for having the real article" (Eby 605) Martha then begins to play along by asking Nick, "*You* don't need any props, do you, baby?" (*Woolf* 30, emphasis mine). George retaliates, as a stereotypical male should, by questioning the new alpha male on his turf. Specifically, he goes into details about Nick's project, which seems to stem at least somewhat from the eugenics movement. "[T]his young man," George declares, "is working on a system whereby chromosomes can be altered […] We will have a race of men … test-tube-bred … incubator-born … superb and sublime" (*Woolf* 32). He even insinuates that all of the new "men" that Nick will create will be perfect copies of himself, in which case "the ants will take over the world" (*Woolf* 33). Nick actually revels in this, exclaiming, "Oh, sure. I'm going to be a personal fucking-machine!" (*Woolf* 34). This discussion sparks another round of Humiliate the Host, as Martha swings into another story about George, but the latter ends the game by singing "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf."

Both the song and the beginning of Act II mark the full beginning of "Hump the Hostess." The goal of the game is to get Nick, a "real" man who is supposed to be the paragon of virtue and progress, to have sex with Martha, but the game also functions "as a step toward Get[ting] the Guests," as it tricks Nick into becoming a player in the game (Eby 610). George correctly assumes that Nick did not marry Honey for love, and Nick confirms this by stating that, in addition to her considerable wealth, "[he] married her because she was pregnant" (*Woolf* 44). These statements expose something that George, Martha, and Albee himself seem to want to reveal, which is that "society has become so much materialistic that there exists no emotional

bond between the husband and wife, rather everything is a sort of transaction" (Parray). Storing this information for later, George then continues stroking Nick's narcissism by telling him, "[W]e'd decided that you'd take over the History Department first, before you took over the whole works. You know… a step at a time" (*Woolf* 52). Bolstered by this, Nick begins to play along, declaring that all he has to do to get the university in his grip is to "[t]ake over a few courses from the older men, start some special groups for myself … plow a few pertinent wives …" (*Woolf* 52). And so the trap snaps shut. Nick, growing bolder by the second, that he will "get [Martha] off in a corner and mount her like a goddamn dog," just as George hoped he would (*Woolf* 53). As a finishing touch, George begins hitting on Honey, calling her names like "angel-tits" and "monkey-nipples" (*Woolf* 62). This inevitably provokes Nick to actually run off with Martha, conceding, "I'll play the charades like you've got 'em set up … I'll play in your language … I'll be what you say I am" (*Woolf* 66).

Before he does, however, they must all play a round of Get the Guests, where George turns the tables on Nick and Honey and attempts to reveal the secrets they have kept buried from one another. He lures Honey in with the story of "How They Got Married" by changing the names around, but she becomes just as horrified with Nick as the tale goes on. Once George reveals that he knows that Honey faked a pregnancy to get Nick to marry her, she is filled "with outlandish horror," to which George comments, "And that's how you play Get the Guests" (*Woolf* 65). Through Get the Guests, George shatters the illusions the two had created by revealing that a third party knows their secret.

Speaking of secrets, George and Martha also let slip their own. While they made up games specifically for Nick and Honey, the two have also made up a more private game: Bringing Up Baby. Since George and Martha have so far been unable to have children, they

made up one, and through the night, they continue to use this "child" as a bargaining chip in their spats. The both of them are quite adamant about this particular game because it adds to their own illusion. They are supposed to be, like Nick and Honey, a happy couple who has a house, a job, and children, but they do not want to be that. They want to shock Nick, Honey, and the audience "through their fun and games, their word plays, their unrestrained humor and even their battles" (Hoorvash and Pourgiv 18). By doing so, they will break down the illusions and reveal the truth.

Even though the characters are played by actors, the characters *themselves* are imperfect actors, as they frequently break their own narratives. In one scene, Martha taunts George by starting to tell the guests about his failed novel, but George intervenes:

> **George**: *Please*, Martha!
> **Martha**: (Almost disappointed.) Well, I guess you didn't get the whole sad story. What's the matter with you, George? You given up?
> **George**: (*Calm ... serious*.) No … no. It's just I've got to figure out some new way to fight you, Martha. Guerrilla tactics, maybe … internal subversion … I don't know. Something.
> **Martha**: Well, you figure it out, and you let me know when you do.
> **George**: (*Cheery*.) All right, Love. (*Woolf* 57).

This is not the conversation of a bickering couple; instead, it more closely resembles that of co-conspirators. Everything they do is improvised and performed, and they both are acutely aware of the fact that an audience is watching, be it Nick and Honey or the theatre itself (Hoorvash and Pourgiv 20).

The final act's title, "Exorcism," was actually the play's working title while Albee was crafting it, and it makes sense when one factors in Aristotle's definition of tragedy, which is "accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of [negative] emotions" (Jaf and Zaihong 61, *Poetics* 93). Three things are exorcised in this act: the imagined child of George and Martha, the fragile illusions of Nick and Honey, and the games themselves. George, in the spirit

of the evening, decides to reveal the truth about their "son" to Nick and Honey, to Martha's dismay. She was not expecting to be a participant in the show that evening, so she puts up quite a fight. Hoorvash and Pourgiv explain this scene best, stating, "Although, from the beginning of the play, [George] participates actively and voluntarily in their games of phallic destruction and subversive mimicry, he seems unwilling to risk *everything*… He destroys their son, the most important feminine fiction their marriage nurtured, to stop the game before *it* destroys them both" (22, original emphasis). With that, the younger couple leaves as the sun rises on Sunday morning, providing a day of rest for George and Martha.

As stated earlier, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* ends with tears. George sings "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf" once more, but he does so as a lullaby. Martha cries, "I … am," as the curtain falls (*Woolf* 98). Martha's role as the lead role in the grand masquerade has ended, but she and George both wonder as to what happens next. What will one do in a world without the games of Life? Neither this play nor *The Goat* provides an adequate answer. Yet, I believe what Albee has done with these plays is to start the process of reconstruction by performing the most painful and terrifying part: the deconstruction of what once was.

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