

Compare and
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' Death of a Salesman', 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf' and ' The Glass Menagerie' are three American domestic dramas in the style of Ibsen and Strindberg that attempt to explore the idea of masculinity in America in the mid twentieth century. Masculinity in the time of the plays' creation was defined by monetary and vocational success, physical strength and dominance, but clearly, the perception of masculinity has evolved over time. Modern society now promotes gender equality and the feminist movement of the 1960s and general improvements in women rights have served to change social perceptions of gender.

This explains the differing reaction of a contemporary audience and a modern audience to the protagonists and their actions in these three plays. The major male characters in all three plays are presented as victims of society's expectations and the ideals forced upon them as men and these expectations were hugely fashioned by the American Dream. What is very clear from all three plays is that many men in post war America were living very pressured and unhappy lives in their efforts to achieve a life that was influenced by the ideal of the American Dream in a time of the Wall Street Crash where prosperity and success seemed impossible.

Firstly, the theme of success and failure is used by all three playwrights to explore the importance of a career in society's perception of masculinity. Through George, Albee shows success to be critical in proving masculinity to one's self and to society. George is undermined by Martha who is disgusted by George's failure to succeed in his career and his status as an ' old bog' in the history department. George's failure to grow in his career and his entrapment as a low level professor is reflected through expressionism.

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The play never leaving the living room reflects George's feelings of a constrained and claustrophobic life. Moreover, by referring to George as a 'floozy', traditionally an insult used against women, Martha undermines and questions his masculinity. Martha insults and emasculates George as she is comparing him to her ultra-successful 'daddy'. George's inability to fulfil his role as 'daddy's heir' destroys others' perceptions of his masculinity, particularly Martha's perception.

George's lack of success and submissive position in his marriage mean he fails to demonstrate society's (which in this case is personified by Martha) traditional male qualities. However, despite George failing to fit the traditional archetype of masculinity in both aggression and success, the idea of him being a flop is rather simplistic. George is not the complete failure that Martha views him to be. As George chooses not to fulfil Martha's ideals regarding his masculinity and in this way he aggressively asserts his willpower over his wife and as such presents his own form of masculinity.

Moreover, the ideal of success in presenting masculinity is used in 'D of S'. Willy's obsession with success warps his mind-set and as Bert Cardullo states 'he confuses materialistic success with a worthiness for love.' [1] This perfectly summarizes how an unhealthy importance placed on being 'well liked' and successful leads Willy to kill himself for money in an attempt to ensure his sons' success. Willy's other son, Happy, is himself wedded to American capitalistic values and says over his father's coffin that he's going to stick to these values for his father's sake.

Similarly, Biff was so inflated with a false sense of grandeur by his father that he became kleptomaniacal; he cannot resist stealing a successful businessman's fountain pen ' And I looked at the pen and I thought, what the hell am I grabbing this for? Why am I trying to become what I don't want to be' he does this as a niggling revenge against that man's success and his own lack of it. Moreover success and failure is linked into physical masculinity in the characters of Jim who during high school was a popular youngster, a successful debater and basketball star and Biff the popular football captain.

Both had massive popularity due to their athletic success and in the case of Biff his success made him above the law being excused by his father of his theft of the ball as the ' coach liked him. ' Both Biff and Jim falsely justify Willy's belief that being well liked was the key to success as both were popular ' I'm not popular like you were' not understanding that they were well liked because they are successful. The plays show how masculine physicality was overvalued and both contemporary and modern audiences would see physical ability to be a positive.

The damaging effect of the masculine gender roles is also explored through the women characters. The most shocking thing Martha does is pack away the booze: " My God, you can swill it down, can't you. " She drinks straight, tough-guy booze, like whiskey and bourbon. She no longer favours the tastes of her youth: " brandy Alexanders, creme de cacao frappes...seven-layer liqueur things...real lady-like little drinkies. " Martha once behaved as a woman should, but no longer does and this is off-putting and unsettling to George.

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Bonnie Finkelstein writes that the 1962 play portrays and analyses ' the damaging effects of traditional, stereotypical gender roles, particularly for women; the play serves to point out how unrealistic, useless and extraordinarily damning they ultimately are. '[2] The failure of Martha to fulfil the male ideal and how uncomfortable it makes the men shows the sexist and misguided masculine ideals of America. Even more so Linda is used to present masculinity. The representation of female characters in ' Death Of A Salesman' is often stereotypical and inferior.

Linda is shown as a typical house wife who always tries to encourage, sooth and cover up for her husband, Willy, no matter how rude or unreasonable his actions are. "(Linda) more than loves (Willy), she admires him", to the point that Willy suppresses her status within the family and never felt guilty to "(go) right through (her) speech". She says to Willy that "(he) makes mountains out of molehills" while she confesses to her sons that " Willy Loman never made a lot of money".

More evidence of Linda's love for Willy is when he starts scolding her for " taking Biff's side all the time. Linda not only accepts it but blames Biff for protecting her, asking him why did he " have to start that for". This shows Linda's low status within her family and not having equal rights with her husband, showing Willy's masculinity, and how men asserting their masculinity had a negative way of affecting their families especially their wives. Similarly, masculinity is observed through competition.

Nick is the ideal man and is thus everything George cannot be. Martha tells George he is " a blank, you're a cipher... a zero" because of his lack of manly

attribute, such as a commanding nature, athletic ability, good looks and ability to control his emotions. She berates him for sulking early on: " are you sulking? Is that what you're doing? " Men should not sulk; they must be stoic. Years prior, George refused to box his taunting father in law and was made to feel like less of a man because of it. Enter Nick, the macho man everything George is not.

Instantly, he is commanding: " I told you we shouldn't have come. " He is also stoic- he dryly responds " I am aware of that" when Honey tells him he's being ' josh. ' Most of all, Nick is far more attractive and athletic then the old and pudgy George, described often as ' about thirty, blond, and... good-looking' and once as ' quarterback. ' He was even a middleweight boxing champion. Thus, George is ugly, unmanly and no longer virile. He feels threatened: ' I said I was impressed Martha. I'm beside myself with jealousy. ,

Competition presenting masculinity is further explored in Death of a Salesman; Willy Loman belittles his industrious and intelligent neighbours, Charley and his son Bernard. Willy mocks both individuals when Biff is a high school football star, but after Biff becomes a jaded drifter, he turns to his neighbours for help. Charley lends Willy fifty dollars a week, sometimes more, in order to help Willy pay the bills. However whenever Charley offers Willy a decent job, Willy becomes insulted. He is too proud to accept a job from his rival and friend.

It would be an admission of defeat. Masculinity is as such shown to be counter intuitive to its own pursuit of success as masculine pride prevents

progression in career much like how Tom refuses to progress in the factory as he believes he's above it, this is a perfect example of as McDonough puts it ' the instability and dilemma of traditional American masculinity. '[3] This summarises how men are unable to reach the ultimately masculine goal of success by their inability to accept help due to their masculine pride of triumphing in competition.

Masculinity in traditional America is impossible to achieve without sacrificing aspects of Masculinity. Furthermore the inability of the male characters to effectively communicate in all three plays is significant in present masculinity. Albee makes use of language in ' Virginia Woolf' to illustrate how masculine ideals prevent constructive rhetoric. Both George and Martha constantly insult each other rather than communicate, as a means of asserting power in their relationship. Certainly, Martha continuously undermines George's masculinity by calling him a ' simp' and a ' floozy'.

The verbal sparring between the two therefore becomes as A. Stanz suggests ' The struggle between the man who would not violate his personal integrity'[4] On the other hand, the inability to communicate is seen in the parent and child interactions in both ' D of S' and ' Glass Menagerie. ' Throughout the play, Willy is unable to understand why ' Biff... has become lost.

In the greatest country in the world. ' It is only at the end of the play like ' Virginia Woolf' where honest communication breaks through, for Willy exclaims ' Biff he likes me! This revelation undermines Willy's masculinity as he was incompetent when attempting to communicate with his son.

Moreover masculinity is also presented to be defined by power and authority in contemporary America. Albee presents George as having masculine power and authority in his relationship through the structure of the play. As a naturalistic play, 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf' consists of an extremely complex structure consisting of the games that George and Martha engage in.

Despite the fact that the childish nature of the games is illustrated through the use of alliteration such as 'Get the Guests', they are in fact much more sadistic than their title suggest. This becomes clear in the way the structure of the play moves from the unassuming 'Fun and Games' towards the apocalyptic ending of 'Exorcism' and is vital in ascertaining George's masculinity. In spite of his being constantly undermined in sexual games such as 'Hump the Hostess' played by Nick and Martha, George asserts his masculine power through the competitive games played throughout the play.

In the final act named after a violent religious ritual 'The Exorcism', George proves himself to be masculine by ultimately winning the game by 'killing' his and Martha's son. George states his is 'not a god', I don't have power over life and death do I?' this is contradicted by the fact that his greatest masculine act is achieved through his acting as an omnipotent figure ending his sons life. This allows him to assert his authority over the illusion of his child facing facts and forcing his wife to do so also.

This clear demonstration of power both in his own mental strength and over his own relationship asserts his masculinity. Albee shows a clear support for the idea that a man should dominate his relationship and be the most

powerful member of a marriage which most contemporary audiences would agree with whereas a modern one would see to be wrong and believe marriage should be made of two equal parties. Correspondingly assertion of power over others through competition is universally accepted as a representation of masculinity. Standing triumphant over your foes is the ultimate image of masculinity.

Certainly it was evident in contemporary America where McCarthy created widespread hysteria and viciously climbed the political ladder by exploiting the fear of communism and aggressively attacking and accusing his opponents, Miller himself was even brought in to be questioned in McCarthy's witch hunts. This cutthroat competition is a cornerstone of both modern and contemporary America which is evident in Willy buying his boys a punching bag signed by the heavyweight champion ' Gene Tunney' a triumphant physical competitor who is seen as a hero by the young men.

This is still evident with Media's modern obsession with the Klitschko brothers. This ideal of competition is presented by Miller through Willy's inability to aggressively assert himself to Howard and in his job as a salesman as he depends on being well liked which leads him to be seen as a failure as a man by both audiences of a modern and contemporary nature. Consequently the structure of ' Death of a Salesman' plots the demolition of Willy's perception of his masculinity. This failure and decline is represented by Miller in the structure of the two acts and requiem.

Whereas the first act of ' Death of a Salesman' has a hopeful theme and builds up the idea of success. By Act Two Willy's failure is unmistakable to

the audience. Moreover, in the final section of 'Requiem', only his family and Charley are present. This clear lack of caring friends shows how Willy's entire philosophy of being well liked is a lie and his entire perception of life is disproved and his masculinity is undermined. Moreover 'Loman is haunted by the hollowness of the objects in which he has invested his selfhood. [5]

His desperate pursuit of the materialistic capitalist values of the American Dream leads to him becoming a material object himself. He eventually comes to see himself as simply a source of money. Willy is shown by a contemporary audience standard as not being masculine completely failing to assert his dominance over his job or life and instead becomes a victim of consumer America and in his failure to achieve the American Dream takes the cowardly and masculine option of suicide however a modern audience would see his suicide as a masculine sacrifice to help save his sons from his own failure to succeed.

Additionally paternal relationships and an exploration of the role of fathers are a huge part of the playwright's presentation of masculinity. The mid-20th century was a very patriarchal era. The father was the head of the house and the ultimate example of masculinity to his sons. A strong relationship between a man and his sons was crucial to maintaining a healthy household 'Either he's your father and you pay him that respect, or else you're not to come here.' Once the relationship began to deteriorate, the entire family unravelled.

Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman' displays how the relationship between Willy and his two sons creates the downfall of the Loman family and the

failure of Willy as a man. Their relationship is constantly changing throughout the play. Biff and Happy idolize and have nothing but adoration for their father when they are children ' Where'd you go this time, Dad? Gee we were lonesome for you', but when they grow up they realise how their father failed to prepare them for the real world ' And I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air.

Willy is portrayed as an un-fit father and as a direct correlation Willy is portrayed as an un-fit man. Willy never really had a father figure when he was growing up. This lack of a male role model and the fact that Willy was deprived of affection as a child leads him to feel ' rather temporary' about himself which makes him smother his sons with love and ' oppresses them with the nakedness of his hopes for their success. [6]

As a result of not having a true father figure in his childhood, Willy struggled with fatherhood because he had no example to base his parenting on nor how to act as a man this lack of knowledge will perpetuate itself in his sons. Likewise the inability of George and Nick to actually father children and how this affects masculinity is explored in ' Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf. ' Neither couple in this play has a child, a fact that seems to come between both couples. For George, their lack of a child is another failure in his masculinity.

Similarly Tom's desire for autonomy becomes a masculine endeavour to escape from his mother's stifling control and suppression of his masculinity through her iron grip on the domestic sphere and to, much like Willy, emulate his absentee father ' I am like my father. The bastard son of a

bastard. ' This is a further example of how the playwrights present the idea that male role models are key to creating a masculine individual as Willy and Tom's failure to fulfil their roles as males is caused by their lack of male example or in the case of Biff and Happy how a poor male example can also lead to failure.

Likewise both couples in are deeply influenced by the wife's father; the play forwards the thought that neither Nick nor George is a successful masculine example in part because they are yet to become adults living in the shadows of their fathers in law and in part because they are not able to step up to a masculine role of fatherhood. The pattern is echoed in Martha and Honey, whose fathers' wealth and prestige led, in great part to their marriages.

Nick and George seem to regret the amount of power and influence the men have (or had) over them. This shows the submissive nature and back seat role of both men in their marriages and as such a failure in masculinity. Both Albee and Miller use the form of the plays to present masculinity through the theme of truth and illusions. Albee demonstrates George's masculinity by the end of the play as he was powerful enough to no longer need the lie of a child stating that ' It was...time.

As Baxandall states ' the tension between truth and illusion is at the heart of Albee's plays. '[7] Clearly George, like Biff, faces reality and this honesty and bravery demonstrates his masculinity by ending the illusion. To conclude, it is evident that all three playwrights present the fact that masculinity is unbelievably complex in American society.

Despite the fact that many ideals of American masculinity such as strength and success retain their importance in modern society's definition of masculinity, modern audiences will understand that masculinity no longer remains a rigid formula but is in fact a complex ideal. For example many metrosexual activities are now accepted as typical masculine behaviour such as piercing ears or wearing hair product. Certainly all the plays suggest the complexity of masculinity with the pressures of their society cause damaging effects on the family and the mental health of men.

Reference

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cjas/june_miller.html