

Now you see me



David Kotkin, more commonly known as David Copperfield, was the world's highest-paid magician in 2017; his net worth is over \$850 million (Cuccinello). It is impossible to become as successful as him without providing a good or service that is in high demand. In his case, he provides illusions. People enjoy and will pay in order to be deceived, and that is why magicians are in business. However, it does not require a magician to become enthralled by illusions. Illusions are a common coping device used by the masses in order to divert attention from the toils of reality and ease the pain of imperfection. All four characters of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* use illusions in differing ways in an attempt to suppress the agony they experience in their lives whether it be regretfulness, powerlessness, or lovelessness; however, they all come to realize that a life full of illusions is not necessarily a life worth living.

This aspect of the coordination between games and living with illusions is a major characteristic of *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?* and is introduced by the game that George calls Humiliate The Host. Although taking the role of game designer throughout a majority of the novel, Martha leads the charge in the first game. However, George is the one that turns it into a game. Following the vicious attack, George announces " we're done with Humiliate the Host" (Albee, 140). George had just endured a slew of degrading comments from his wife which obviously struck him to the core. Rather than addressing what had just occurred, George downgrades it as simply a game. This is a major sign that he is not viewing the events of that night as anything more than a dream-like illusion. He sees his very real failures as nothing more than just a part of a game, for he suppresses, ignores, and

pretends they are just part of a story that Martha tells. By softening his humiliations so severely, he is refusing to face reality and in turn refusing to do something about it. George goes on to tell Martha that “ I’m numbed enough . . . and I don’t mean by liquor” (155). In the future, based off how the game is viewed throughout the novel, George will continue to live his illusioned version of life in which he completely content with being an unpublished, associate professor at a small college and has no regrets about his previous choices in life.

Feeling picked on and humiliated, George rises to the role of game master with what he introduces as Get the Guests. In an attempt to focus on others’ rather than facing his own demons, George exposes the illusions in Nick and Honey’s relationship (142-147). George acts completely oblivious to the feelings of others, especially Honey who appears to be non-threatening and innocent in the horrific acts of the night thus far. The reality, however, that George was oblivious to was that real-world actions have real world consequences. In a game, almost anything can be said or done without any repercussions, for everything is simply an act within an illusioned state. George demonstrates this clearly by casually mentioning their secret without consideration of who it will hurt and how it will possibly come back to him in the future. Although Nick and Honey’s pain is clearly expressed, George is completely apathetic and ignorant towards real people’s pain almost as if it was just a game. “ She’ll get over it” is what George says when Honey becomes so emotionally distraught she becomes ill. He acts astoundingly nonchalant as if she had simply lost a round in a game and it would have no

real effect. George's illusioned view on how he treats others causes him to disregard the effects of his actions on himself and others.

In the next game, Nick and Martha are ones captivated by the thrill of a game that they are unable to discern their illusions from reality. In the lewdly named game Hump the Hostess, George also further displays his illusion though by once again downplaying an incredibly traumatic event. Nick and Martha have been helplessly flirting all night, and in this game, it escalates to a whole new level. It is revealed that Martha and Nick, oblivious to the true feeling of their spouses, they do commit adultery. To many, cheating is a very serious offense in a marriage and is treated as such. Nick is completely oblivious to the feelings of his ill wife and even somehow believes that he " will go back to his little wife all refreshed" (164). In Nick's world of illusion, he believes his actions, like George in the previous game, will have no consequences. On the other hand, Martha is thinking only about how George feels. Martha, throughout her and Nick's endeavor, is constantly concerned about what George is doing, for example reading a book. In her illusioned way of looking at her marriage, this is her way of getting his attention. In an attempt to get George to notice her and pay attention to her, she angrily tells him " Now, you pay attention to me . . . or I swear to God I'll do it" (173). Martha, like every married woman, wants her husband to notice and cherish her. However in Martha's mind, rather than talking to him straightforward, she will accomplish this by cheating on him. This clearly presents Martha's very illusioned perspective of her marriage and how to solve its problems.

No game more directly addresses the illusion of George and Martha's marriage quite like the final installment: Bringing up Baby. Martha and George's 'son' is later revealed to be part of a larger, more intricate game of which Martha broke the rule. In an attempt to fulfill the illusion in Martha's mind of what their marriage should have looked like, they created a fantasy life which included a child. In an attempt to appear normal or to fit in, Martha was desperate to tell Nick and Honey of their child although she knew the one rule to her game. Likely feeling overwhelmed by the 'perfect families' around her, the illusion became so strong it actually overtook her, and she believed it to be a reality. When George revealed that her son was dead, she asked to see the telegram (234) despite the fact that there could be no telegram, for there was no child. It was the final round, and ultimately a return to their life of disillusionment. Concludingly, Martha ultimately relates that her life of illusions has brought so much pain, sorrow, and confusion that she is unsure if her return to reality will be better or worse (240). The illusion had been so deeply ingrained in their lives that when George said "Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference?" (201) he was commenting on the blurred lines in his marriage between an illusion and reality.

Nick and Honey, although not harboring a pretend child, are not innocent of living their lives full of illusions. Similar to George and Martha, they are burdened by being unlike the society around them. Honey and Nick do not have kids (39), and in order to fit in and be a part of the world around them, children were a large part. Honey lives an illusion similar to Martha in a way by secretly taking contraceptives (177) while publicly exclaiming "I want kids" (222). Desperate to not appear different from the wives of the

professors if she did not have a child, she at least wanted to put up the front that she wanted one. Nick reveals a secret to George that in turn reveals a deeper illusion about his marriage. Although his marriage was based off a pregnancy scare (94), the darker intentions of Nick's do not stop there. He explicitly states that there was not any " particular passion between us, even at the beginning... of our marriage" (105). The lack of love in a marriage is to be expected when it was a marriage based on money and financial benefits (102). The illusion in Nick and Honey's marriage stems from both the deception from Honey about their future and the make-believe happy couple that both pretend to be although their marriage is severely lacking love.

There is no doubt that life and reality are difficult to face. George, Martha, Honey, and Nick are all living their lives soaked in illusions and falsities. As demonstrated multiple times in this drama, the abrupt crashing of the illusions and lies make for a much more agonizing reality. Therefore as idealistic and carefree as living a life of illusions may seem, no amount of temporary bliss is worth the severe withdrawal when those illusions are ultimately stripped from one's life, and they are left to pick up the broken pieces of their version of obscured reality.

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