

Truth and illusion themes



As an Absurdist, Albee believed that a life of illusion was wrong as in consideration it created a false content for life, it is therefore not surprising that the theme of ‘ truth and illusion’ throughout *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* plays a significant role. Using critical language through stage directions and direct speech, Albee creates the lives of two couples whom over the course of one evening change dramatically. It is evident to the audience, even in the first scene that tension will play a large part of the eventual confessions and climax of the play, and through the break-down of characters truth and illusion will be determined.

Albee presents the hosts of the evening George and Martha as an unconventional, abusive married couple who seem to detest one another, which immediately raises an atmosphere of uncertainty and ambiguity to the play. Martha and George constantly bicker and intentionally frustrate one-another; however there is a steep contrast that Albee creates between their two personalities; George is passive towards Martha, intelligent and witty, but also very sad, on the other hand Martha is vicious, assaulting both mentally and physically, and is also an alcoholic which adds to her abusive nature. The couple’s relationship is difficult to comprehend as one minute George is calling Martha a ‘ sub-human monster’ who ‘ yowls’, but the other Martha is defending her husband’s great qualities, as he ‘ keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules;’, which greatly increases the illusion which surrounds the pair, as the audience never quite grasp who is telling the truth. Albee suggests through the couples interactions that they both agree that there is no such thing as an objective reality; ‘ Martha; Truth and illusion, George; you don’t know the difference. George: No, but we must

carry on as though we did. Martha: Amen.’ It is difficult for the audience to infer whether Martha and George understand each other’s emotions, and if at any one moment they are merely pretending to love or hate one another; which instantly adds delusion and illusion to the scenes.

Similarly Albee creates an illusion of gameplay between the two couples; and through their interactions over the course of the play, many unwanted truths are revealed. The over-consumption of alcohol throughout the ‘ evening’ increases both the tension between the characters, but also makes the divulgence of truth much more effortless; ‘ I’m numbed enough... and I don’t mean by the liquor, though maybe that’s been part of the process’. George’s ‘ numbness’ is portrayed through his often apathetic and calm persona, it is difficult to decipher whether this is what George is truly like in reality, or if the illusions of the evening give the audience a false pretence. Throughout the play George and Martha insist that Honey and Nick play several games which are very exposing; ‘ Hump the Hostess’, ‘ Get the Guests’ and to finish the ‘ Final Game’. The title of the first Act ‘ Fun and Games’ is in itself an illusion as the games the guests are forced into playing are certainly not ‘ fun’ on many occasions most people’s idea of ‘ fun’. Albee proposes that Martha and George often play games, however it seems strange to the audience that the couple’s idea of ‘ fun’ is to mock both their guests and one-another, though at any one time it appears that only one person from their marriage wishes to play; George for example at one moment in the play wishes to ‘ sit down over there and read a book’, whereas Martha taunts him with the suggestion that she and Nick really will play ‘ Hump the Hostess’, or upon George mentioning the ‘ Final Game’ Martha pleads for no more

gameplay in a 'tenderly' movement, which expresses both her sultry yet vulnerable personality. The overall dubiousness and uncertainty of the play induces a fear of the characters withholding information, which potentially could alter the entire meaning of the play, and leaves necessary questions unanswered, which adds tension and reveals truth about the characters personalities, although eludes from explanation of the illusions.

Albee creates an illusion of George and Martha's 'son' which essentially becomes a metaphor that sustains the couple's turbulent marriage; and ultimately George believes he has the authority to 'kill' off their son in an imaginary car accident, through the game of 'bringing up baby', which also relates to the theme, as Martha brings the entire fantasy too far into reality which the audience infer as madness. George and Martha add to the illusion of their 'son' by exposing minute details about the child, for example about his birth, and the color of his eyes and hair, 'blond-eyed and blue-haired' as George says, which emphasizes the influence of alcohol in both the illusion and how the illusions are presented. Nick and Honey, the two other main characters, are introduced to the hosts imaginary son early into the play, and doubt immediately arises as to whether George and Martha are telling the truth, although the deliberate intention to try to confuse and intimidate their guests with insidious gameplay, shows how George and Martha have traded a sane reality for an illusory one.

Nick and Honey, the guests Albee creates to attend the after-party at George and Martha's home, have a marriage concentrated around false pretenses and illusions. The couple appear to be an 'all-American', conventional family, virtually perfect on the surface, however throughout the evening

their truths are revealed much to the same extent as George and Martha's secrets are. The recurring theme of fertility, or the absence of, continues within their relationship; the reasoning for the couple to marry was portrayed as natural love between childhood friends, and a hysterical pregnancy, though in the latter scenes Nick reveals he wished really only to marry plain Honey in an attempt to inherit her wealth. Throughout the play as each of the characters become more intoxicated, Martha and Nick's flirtatious behavior particularly develops; at the close of Act Two the pair kiss whilst Honey is obliviously passed out in the bathroom, portraying the fact that their marriage certainly lacks truth and communication. In addition, Honey is portrayed as being the 'perfect housewife', however from her actions the audience deduce she has in fact an abnormally juvenile personality; for example sucking her thumb, and sleeping in a fetal position alongside other tendencies point to her unwillingness to accept herself as an adult. There are continuous references to Honey being 'slim-hipped' however the truth is revealed that in fact she is terrified of becoming a parent, and as a result takes preventative medication, or 'apple jelly', in order to ensure she does not fall pregnant. At the close though there is a significant change in her character, she is moved by George and Martha's account of their son and announces her decision to have a baby. The misconception of Honey and Nick's marriage is an evident example of how Albee explores the theme of truth and illusion, which links to both the false identities of the relationships in the play, but also how the exposure of their secrets allows the characters to feel liberated.

The presence of the name Virginia Woolf in the title of the play brings to mind the famous novelist, and raises the overwhelmingly recurring theme of learning to live without illusion. Albee creates these illusions within his play from one perspective so as only to shatter them; the characters battle one another and themselves to protect their own versions of reality. Albee raises the idea of private and public images within marriage, and within this theme the suggestion of artificiality and deception. The projection of false images questions Woolf's theory of humanity being afraid to challenge reality, which is strongly portrayed through the title of the play; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The title could be interpreted as 'Who's afraid of questioning existence?' and Albee suggests Martha is terrified of this convention of reality in the final moments of the play, as she expresses that she is afraid of Virginia Woolf; 'I...am...George...I...am', the overuse of ellipses slows the pace of the speech dramatically, giving the audience a sense of closure.

Edward Albee presents the theme of truth and illusion through the dissection of the four main characters; George, Martha, Nick and Honey in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The audience infers the increase of tension between the roles which little by little exposes their deepest truths, which is strongly influenced by the consumption of alcohol throughout the play. The false content for life in George and Martha's devoid marriage revolves around an imaginary son, which depicts the view that reality lacks any deeper meaning, and George and Martha must come to face that by abandoning their illusions and exposing themselves to one-another.