

Sure thing: main themes of the novel

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Deception is a Sure Thing

Love is composed of a balance between two individuals, where both should find themselves equally giving and taking from the relationship. However, when this equilibrium turns lopsided, the repercussions gradually become unbearable. “ Sure Thing,” written by David Ives, uses repetition and characterization to emphasize the deception of Bill and Betty’s relationship, convincing readers that finding love is forever dependant on genuinity and balance. As the two individuals evolve from strangers into romantic partners, they become more and more entangled in their fantasy, finally finding a sense of eerie contentment in their final dialogue.

Serving as the first representation of repetition, a bell is promptly sounded after the first meeting of Bill and Betty, when all goes awry. Signifying a clean slate, the ringing gives the strangers a new opportunity to make a better impression on the other. Throughout the constant ringing, Bill is initially conveyed as a stubborn, desperate man, continuously restarting the conversation with “ Excuse me. Is this chair taken?” (Ives 13). Although he is a man of many mistakes, his manner of speaking shows dominance and assurance, as his words remain unchanged even through numerous rejections. On the other hand, Betty is reluctant and unwilling, claiming to “[expect] somebody in a minute” (13) when questioned. Where Bill is portrayed as a dominant male, Betty easily fits into the stereotypical role of a submissive female. With each ring of the bell, she begins to mold into an image of Bill’s ideal woman. Although she is distant in the beginning, Betty evolves into a lone, vulnerable figure, giving him the “[g]o ahead” (13) when

he asks to take a seat. Left in a state of exposure, she is prone to being manipulated by Bill, who remains the dominant figure of the initial power struggle. The relationship is covered in a shroud of deceit, as the ringing of the bell appears to favor Bill at the start of the play. Instead of respecting boundaries, he oversteps them, as he attempts to repeat the scene until he is satisfied with Betty's response. Ives conveys the message to his readers that this single-sided relationship simply results in negative consequences. Whereas the bell signifies Betty's submission, it also symbolizes the downturn of a possible romance, as "the characters shift and fine tune themselves, accommodating different possibilities, even different selves" ("Sure Thing"). As the struggle of being in control continues, the bell refuses to stop ringing, in the hope that the next situation will bring an unbiased balance to the relationship.

Although a male-dominant relationship is originally introduced by Ives, the audience is also exposed to a female-dominant dialogue as the play progresses. After Bill asks to sit down, Betty tells him she is reading *The Sound and the Fury*, to which he replies, "Oh. Hemingway. (Bell.) What's the book? Oh. Faulkner" (Ives 14). This signifies a lack of education on Bill's part, as he stumbles upon his words while recalling the author of a well-known piece. Whereas Betty appears to be well educated, Bill seems to be the opposite; however, as the play progresses, he gradually molds into her ideal man, raising his level of intelligence as his "two-point at — (Bell.) — three-point at — (Bell.)" eventually rises to a "four point at college" (20). Due to this, Bill instead lingers on his sense of humor rather than depending on intelligence. When he retorts with "I'm a Mets fan, myself" (14) and "I went

to Oral Roberts University" (14), the tone in his voice is joking, but is also filled with a sense of humility. Bill is vulnerable and exposed here, by looking to humor as a means of defending himself. Just as Betsy acts submissively under his constant questioning, Bill behaves in a similar manner, folding under pressure with the presence of her dominance in knowledge. The constant repetition of his question, "What's the book?" (14), as well as Betty's inquiry, "Where was college?" (14), merely adds on to his inadequacy, forcing him to make up larger fantasies each time the bell is rung. As Bill "frantically revises his college grade-point average upward several notches, then changes his hometown from Pittsburgh to Cleveland to somewhere in Westchester County" (Grimes), Betty's impression of him gradually improves, so much so that he folds under pressure from her standards. Seeing her look of disdain, he rewrites the scene every time, so that by the end of it, she is impressed with his college education, his knowledge of literary works, and even the area he grew up in. By creating an alternate reality for himself, Bill deems it possible to have a romantic relationship with Betty, although it is important to note that it is under false pretenses. Instead of having a genuine linking of two minds, Ives creates a situation where the bell is once again constantly ringing to make up for a lack of Bill's scholarly intelligence. Conveying a similar message to the readers as before, Ives uses the ringing bell to signify the falsity of the relationship, telling his audience that doing so will not create true love. Instead of pining for a lover with a hidden veil of deception, it is important to be filled with both genuinity and honesty. By sparking up a romantic situation with the use of lies, it is impossible to create a dual-benefitting

exchange that love is widely known for. Bill and Betty stray away from the ideal relationship, conforming to the negative aspects of the so-called human condition. Although they are free to enjoy life separately, as fate urges them to do, the rules of the world are broken by the falsity of the bell.

As a play filled with ideals from a fantasy world, " Sure Thing" ends on a happy note, giving in to the fairytale aspect. Bill and Betty simultaneously speak up, interrupting each other's words yet having the capability to finish each other's thoughts. They find themselves repeatedly bickering over their most and least favorite things, agreeing on "[liking] Entenmann's crumb cake" (Ives 21), as well as finding brussel sprouts " disgusting" (Ives 21). The dialogue between the two certainly appears superficial, in that it skips around from discussing trivial concepts, such as their most loved foods, to forming opinions on their future marriage and children. When Bill asks Betty, " And children?" (21), she replies by saying, " Three of them," (21), to which Bill responds, " Two girls and a boy" (21). Their future is seemingly planned out, even going so far as to predetermine the colleges of the couple's children. Although somewhat humorous, the entire situation appears eerie, as the rapid evolution of Bill and Betty has formed from a meeting of two disagreeing strangers into two completely like-minded beings. The bizarre agreement is formed between the twisting and turning of ideas in both of their minds, seemingly causing a disruption in the natural order of things. Whereas the two individuals initially appeared to be opposites in their mannerisms and opinions, the couple have now bizarrely joined together to form a single being, sharing the exact same thoughts about everything. However, the relationship has reached a point where one person does not

dominate the other, and there appears to be a symmetrical balance. Instead of Betty condescendingly looking down on Bill for his education, or Bill controlling Betty to become more open-minded, the two appear as equals, accepting the other for any like-minded beliefs. It is impossible to forget, though, that this perfect balance has been controlled by an outside force, actually having nothing to do with the chemistry between Bill and Betty. Instead of forming honest opinions on one another, and deciding from there whether they are compatible or not, the two go down a spiral of never ending fantasy. Ives uses Bill and Betty as an example for a relationship that is inspired by false hope, completely differing from the true concept of romance. Although their love is eventually successful, one cannot forget the backstory behind the two strangers, as their romance does not bloom from genuinity. Where this alternate reality creates a materialistic image of love, propelled by fake ideas and ingenuine opinions, a real relationship should be built on the willingness of two people to conform to each other's ideals. Instead of changing their mindsets and fine-tuning their beliefs in the real world, the fictitious repetition of the scene provides a fraudulent conformity between them; they do indeed agree on like terms, but the forged aspect of the relationship fails to provide a realness that true love contains. As Bill and Betty fail to connect with their differing opinions, they look to the ringing bell to somehow intertwine their futures together, when in actuality, it is not meant to be so; they twist the universe, living in a fabricated reality with a sense of false contentment.

Although Ives tells his readers that love is based on genuinity, there is always the possibility that he hopes to convey the opposite meaning. As we

see the development of Bill and Betty's relationship, we see them entangling themselves deeper into a fantasy, ultimately finding contentment in their alternate world. In another sense, Ives wants to convey the concept that love can be based on ludicrous fantasies, instead of reality. Referred to as a "profoundly original artist who refracts the visible world through a personal prism to show us things that we could have never envisioned on our own" (Teachout), he takes his audience through science-fiction based ideas, using the couple to emphasize the absurdity of love. Even though romance can be delivered through genuinity and honesty, it is also illogical and nonsensical. Through the use of Bill and Betty's humor in the play, readers get a look into the humorous aspects of romance, where not all is absolute. When Betty asks Bill if he has a girlfriend, he firstly states, "Two, actually. One of them's pregnant, and Stephanie — (Bell.)" (Ives 19), then replies, "No, I don't have a girlfriend. Not if you mean the castrating bitch I dumped last night (Bell.)" (19). The method of humor is snappy and satirical, adding on tones of absurdity to the budding romance between the two strangers. A new tone is brought into the play with this silly humor, as well as the science-fiction aspect of the bell, bringing forth the idea that perhaps love is not balanced, but instead filled with a chaos that the two manage to perfectly balance within each other.

In conclusion, "Sure Thing" showcases the morphing romance between Bill and Betty, two strangers who continuously find themselves under unfortunate circumstances. Through the constant ringing of a bell, they ultimately join together to find happiness underneath a veiled falsehood. With this blooming love, Ives finds a deceitful romance, branching out in lies

rather than coming together with honesty and balance. By simply reading this play, one is left questioning one's actions with real-world romantics, asking whether or not love can be inspired by a series of infinite lies. The eerie question eternally remains whether relationships are propelled more by a balance of harmony and truth, or instead, energized by a combination of veiled sins and falsehoods.