

Appearance versus reality in three contemporary american novels



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Appearance versus reality is a major theme of contemporary American fiction. The characters of *American Pastoral*, *We Were the Mulvaney*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* may appear to be living one way, or portray a strong public face, but the reality of their lives contradicts the appearance that they adopt. Philip Roth creates an almost perfect and idealistic character, Swede, in his novel *American Pastoral*. The novel opens with Nathan Zuckerman and his high school reunion. As Zuckerman recalls his high school years he remembers Seymour Levov, or Swede, who was the picture of perfection. Swede was one of Zuckerman's older brothers and someone to look up to and idealize. Swede was a star athlete, loved by all, successful in all that he attempted. As far as anyone could see Swede's life was sure to be a success. After graduating from college Seymour, a Jew, married a Catholic woman and former Miss New Jersey. Swede had it all. In 1985 Zuckerman's childhood model connected with him and asked to meet up. Zuckerman and Levov grabbed dinner in New York where Zuckerman had expected Levov to divulge his grief over the death of his father. Instead, most of the dinner was spent discussing Zuckerman's home life. Swede wall a wall of bland exterior. He was polite, smooth, and cool, but it was clear that there was something he was not saying. Swede's life was not as simple and glorious as Zuckerman had portrayed it to be early on. The initial appearance claims that the life of Seymour Levov will be one of a success. Then, his cool faced appearance at lunch present calm and control. In reality neither of these appearances holds to be true. Swede explains in the novel that " everything he shouts is wrong... causes, clear answers, who there is to blame. Reasons. But there are no reasons. She is obliged to be as she is. We all are.... Jerry tries to rationalize it but you can't. This is all something else, <https://assignbuster.com/appearance-versus-reality-in-three-contemporary-american-novels/>

something he knows absolutely nothing about. No one does. It is not rational. It is chaos. It is chaos from start to finish.” This quotation comes from Swede’s reflection on a conversation that he has with his brother, Jerry. Swede has been discussing his daughter Merry with Jerry. For the past five years Merry has been living a life away from her family in a world that the rest of the Levovs, particularly the older generations, cannot understand. Her father laments that his daughter has been raped, that she lives in a state of filth, and that she partakes in radical and dangerous bombings. Levov’s life, despite the original appearance, has been one of struggle, suffering, and difficulty as his familial life continually initiates stress into his situation. Jerry Levov blames Merry for the downfall of his brother. He claims that his brother’s life was destroyed by explaining her rebellion against her father and the subsequent stresses of her life choices. No matter how much evidence Jerry brings to the table, his claim cannot be as simple as it appears. Merry engages herself in political battles, partakes in bombings, runs away from her family, and much more. Jerry claims that these are the reasons his brother’s life fell apart. However, though it may seem that way to Jerry, the fact remains that Merry’s life can only be explained through chaos. In the aforementioned passage Swede seems to realize that there was no way to predict how Merry would react to any given upbringing. The result and her reaction of the way her father treated her and punished her are subject to many other things. It, like most in life, seems like pure chaos. The ability to predict an outcome, to know how a person will respond is nonexistent. The journey in which a single life take, that of Swede or Merry, cannot be fully understood and explained by the story of their life unless one accepts that chaos and a lack of concrete reasoning plays into how that

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person may end up. This reality is one that Jerry Levov cannot grasp, unlike his brother, due to the overwhelming appearance of the situation. So for many people, what appears to be masks the pure irrational nature of life. Another novel that addresses the theme of appearance versus reality is *We Were the Mulvaney* by Joyce Carol Oates. For the Mulvaney family public image is the key to life. This family, according to those around them, knows success and happiness. Michael Mulvaney, the father of the group, runs a successful roofing company whilst his wife, Caroline, runs the idyllic home and farm in addition to a small business. This power couple has everything one could ever dream for. Along with their multiple talents and financial stability the couple parent four children. Their children are well liked and great students. The picture of the perfect family is painted through what appears to be the Mulvaney way. However, despite the shiny exterior of the family, after Marianne, the daughter, experiences a trauma all they know and love falls apart. Suddenly, the Mulvaney, a strong-willed and successful family was hiding behind anger, shame, and pain. Marianne is raped at a school dance and attempts to hide it from her parents. After the truth comes out her father moves to press charges against the boy, but Marianne will not testify against her rapist in court. Everything Michael ever was proves to be a lie. Michael could do nothing to regain his status as father, leader, and success. His world view collapsed upon him when he could not accurately protect his family and ensure success for every member. He could not help Marianne and that was a failure to large to face. Instead, he forgot about her presence; at least he tried to forget about her presence. In the novel, and to Marianne, it seemed that Michael no longer recognized his daughter at all. In appearance, he had erased her completely from his life. Eventually,

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Marianne was physically exiled from the home, and the appearance that Michael had forgotten his daughter grew stronger. In reality, this was simply a front to mask the pain he was suffering from. Michael failed his daughter through his inability to protect her. His ideal and perfect world proved to be a complete sham and his only way of coping is to resort to another sham: the façade of forgetfulness instead to reality of shame and anguish. As a result, Michael turned to alcohol as the life he knew crumbled apart. Michael lost his business, his daughter, his pride, and even his wife. Each member of the Mulvaney family slowly departed in order to independently find a way to live with themselves and cope with the destruction they had witnessed. This family could never really be the picture that everyone took them to be. If the Mulvaney family were as truly perfect and strong as the original public view would account, then the rape of Marianne would not have so harshly affected the family unit. It tore them apart. This can only be rationalized through the concept that the family, despite appearances, was operating under false pretenses of perfection when in reality the unit was weak enough that just one blow would bring them tumbling down. The dynamics of this family was redefined by one event, and individual reactions to that event. Michael and his family allow the public to see only one version of them, which allows for their downfall to be even more tragic to the public eye. Yet another piece of literature that presents the theme of appearance versus reality is Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. This play is compounded by the idea of illusions, games, and hidden truths. Martha and George, a middle-aged couple, welcome Nick and Honey into their home one evening. Nick and Honey hope to learn from the more experienced couple about life at the college they are involved with. They have come to gain knowledge from the

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seemingly happy and wise couple before them. Martha and George are nothing what one would expect. Instead of living in a life of normalcy and truth, the couple partakes in what they indicate as games. These games, each framing a different section of the play, are ways in which illusion, or appearance, are introduced to the work. The most shocking game that the couple plays concerns the life of their child. According to Martha and George, they are parents to a child of their own. The reality is, there is no child. Martha and George, in reality, are not parents. However, in creating a game, they allow themselves to raise a child together. They often fight over the child, though no child truly exists. Finally, George kills off their fictional child by claiming that the child died. Martha is beside herself with grief. Their kid, though simply a game, was something the couple created together. Though not real, it allowed the two of them to be together in imagination and falsified memories. They created their own lives in illusion so that their appearance is starkly different than the truth. George and Martha are not a happily married couple raising a child together as they attempt to appear, but are simply two people struggling to cope with the truth set before them. This struggle can be related back to George and Martha's actual marriage. The couple lives their lives through illusory games, allowing appearance to become their realities. Throughout the play the couple tries to one-up each other while playing the games. This is how they find joy and happiness, through a false reality. The creation of this alternate reality gives George and Martha a chance to live out their appearance. In reality, in the real world, George and Martha would be challenged to confront emotions and situations that may be difficult for anyone. The façade is safety net, protecting them from the difficulty of the real world, real emotions. The games that they play

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in marriage allow them to feel a rush that they compare to reality, that they make seem like reality, but in fact, it is their escape from reality. The appearance they put up in their games drives the marriage to absolute insanity. Martha exerts her fear of reality when sharing that she in fact is “afraid of Virginia Woolf”. Martha and George are both terrified to face real life, real emotions, and the struggles of their real marriage. The illusory games give them an opportunity to live falsely in a perceived reality, a simple appearance of the truth. It appears, after the “death” of the false child that the couple may choose to leave behind their appearance and begin to live in reality after the play closes. There is a possibility that the walls and appearance created in their games will be tumbling down slowly to allow both Martha and George to embrace the truth in reality, no matter the drastic pain and suffering this may cause. In the literary works *American Pastoral*, *We Were the Mulvaney*s, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* the theme of appearance versus reality is a crucial issue. The appearance of life allows for a misrepresentation or false reality for the characters encountering it. They may hide behind their appearance in safety or simply fail to live up to their appearance. Either way, what seems to be hardly ever is the reality of the situation. Contemporary American fiction continually explores the relationship that appearance and reality have with each other, and the underlying problems that they pose to one another and the people who must face those problems.