

## **Is Reality or Illusion the Preferred State of Living in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

**Dorka Berecz**

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a modern play written during the heyday of the theatre of absurd, first staged in 1962. Interested in people who create their alternate reality as a general way of coping with the perplexing, tense atmosphere of the times, Albee decided to focus on such characters in his play. Martha and George, and Nick and Honey in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, have become accustomed to self-induced illusions; thus, when faced with reality, it almost destroys them and their relationships. The play deals with the parallel between reality and illusion, appearance and authenticity, masculinity and femininity, violence, religion, and many more themes. Both couples' relationships are based on illusions which slowly poison their lives and the only solutions for their problems is to exorcise them out of their lives in order to face the difficulties of reality. This paper seeks to address the play's thought-provoking central question: is reality or illusion the preferred state of living according to the characters? In this essay, I argue that although the characters seem to prefer living in illusions, their adherence to such illusions destroys their reality, and ultimately, their relationships. In order for the marriages to survive, it is necessary for them to embrace the reality they fear. The couples' plight can also be projected onto the whole of American society during the Cold War. I will examine the characters' relationship to each other, the significance of their illusions, how their behavior affects their marriages and relationships with others, and the underlying criticism of the American Dream.

Firstly, Martha and George's most intoxicating and most apparent illusion is their fictional, non-existent son. The couple struggles with fertility issues; as revealed throughout the play, they can never have children. However, they have fabricated a whole life around their fictional son; from his physical appearance to the hardships of his life, they have manufactured every little detail, making him even more alive. The couple's illusions provide them with a coping mechanism for their pain, fear, and inadequacy in life. Furthermore, they can return from their fantasy at their convenience and when reality fails them. Consequentially, the illusion eventually becomes indistinguishable from reality. The best explanation for preferring to live in illusions comes from Martha in the following scene:

NICK. You're all crazy: nuts.

MARTHA. Awww, 'tis the refuge we take when the unreality of the world weighs too heavy on our tiny heads. Relax; sink into it; you're no better than anybody else. (Albee 3.111.)

However, problems start to arise because Martha and George have conflicting realities. The issue with invented realities is that eventually, one is bound to find oneself living in a completely separate world from the others, unable to reach them. Furthermore, managing a deep and complex connection through different realities, such as marriage, is incredibly difficult, if not downright impossible. Nevertheless, they have no other choice but to try and exist in this confusing state. Even though they constantly blame one another for lying and deceiving each other; it is never clarified to the audience or the characters themselves, where the established line is between truth and illusion, and what could be considered a lie.

Moreover, how Martha and George see each other has also changed throughout their marriage. As Martha throws at George: "I swear... if you existed I'd divorced you. ... [...] I can't even see you... I haven't been able to see you for years..." (Albee 1.18). She cannot recognize George because of the separate realities and illusions they invented years ago and have lived in since then. Their personalities have become distorted. They cannot see each other or even themselves clearly; the lines between reality and illusion have been completely washed away. Martha says to their guests: "You just stay here and listen to George's side of things. Bore yourself to death" (Albee 2.65). This bitter comment from her highlights how Martha and George view certain things entirely differently. While George's side of things might be marked as boring, conversely, Martha's point of view might be only interesting because she tends to fabricate situations. She invents a reality, manufactures it in any way she wants to. Besides, fantasy and imagination are far more exciting and bearable than the painful reality; it allows Martha to take control over her life, even if only in her illusions. However, when Martha overplays and exaggerates their illusions and games, George realizes the extent of the consequences of their actions: "You're deluded... Martha, you're deluded. [...] I thought at least you were... on to yourself. I didn't know. I... didn't know. [...] You're...sick." (Albee 2.92.) By this point, it becomes apparent that something must be done to bring Martha back to "reality."

George's story further strengthens my argument for the characters' desire to exist in an illusion. The story of George killing his family, similarly to the story of their fictional son, is another ambiguous side-narrative that invites the audience to speculate and separate illusion from reality. In his article, Orley Holtan attempts to rationalize the inconsistencies of the narrative:

Martha later indicates that the story came from George's unpublished novel and that George himself may have been the boy in question. The facts of the case are never clear. They are specifically contradicted in the third act; furthermore, George has obviously not spent the last thirty years in a literal asylum. (Holtan 48)

In my reading of George's story, this could be interpreted in two ways. It either suggests that George is telling the truth and by repeating out loud what happened, he tries to reassure himself that it is indeed a part of reality; or he made up the story about his family as a metaphor and it helps him cope with the emotional pain that losing the prospect of a parallel, happy life has caused him. Martha is attracted to George's approach to their issues; when explaining why she loves George, she says that George is someone "... who tolerates, which is intolerable; [...] who understands, which is beyond comprehension..." (Albee 3.113.), implying that both of them had been through the intolerable and incomprehensible, and yet they still managed to find a solution that works for both of them. They are both familiar with and understand what it is like to be in constant pain. Presumably, Martha cannot be married to someone perfectly contented and healthy since she cannot live her life in that state either. She needs a man who can match her level of suffering so that her own problems would not seem so obviously problematic but somewhat tolerable.

Although Martha and George try to escape from reality, it eventually penetrates their illusions. Interestingly, through their son's invented obstacles, the husband and wife can communicate to each other what is objectionable about the other. Martha is too intoxicated and sexually inappropriate with their imaginary son. Presumably, this is similar to how George sees Martha: dissolute, promiscuous, and indomitable. Martha's disgust towards George is symbolized by their son's throwing up when he presumably sees his father. In other words, they are trying to address their problems in reality through their imagined parallel realities, although this further aggravates the anger and resentment between them. What has happened is that George and Martha have made the fatal choice of evading the ugliness of their marriage by taking refuge in illusions.

MARTHA. Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference.

GEORGE. No; but we must carry on as though we did.

MARTHA. Amen. (Albee 3.119.)

They have a mutual agreement to live life in illusions, which Martha, of course, breaks by mentioning their child to Honey. As a result, George understands that it is time to do what has to be done to save their relationship: exorcise their imaginary son and, with it, kill the illusions.

MARTHA. You have no right... you have no right at all...

GEORGE. I have the right, Martha. We never spoke of it; that's all. I could kill him any time I wanted to.

MARTHA. But why? Why?

GEORGE. You broke our rule, baby. You mentioned him... you mentioned him to someone else. (Albee 3.138.)

In a way, by breaking their unspoken rule, Martha could be regarded as unfaithful by committing infidelity to their shared illusion of their son. According to his understanding, George views this

action as more fatal to their marriage than her actual attempts at adultery with Nick, since betraying such a profound, secretive part of their marriage is much crueler. Consequently, he must end their shared illusion by killing the child.

George exorcises the child not only to kill the illusion and live in reality but to destroy one reality – that in which he has failed to exercise the strength necessary to make the marriage creative even without children – and create a new reality to take its place. Illusion must be destroyed in order to make room for reality. (Albee and Adler 67)

George not only exorcises his marriage but Nick and Honey's as well. He believes he must hurt them to help them survive: they have to realize their errors in time to correct them until it is too late. George attempts to make Honey realize the "selfishness and destructiveness of her fears" (Albee and Adler 67) of living in reality and by helping her to become a mother. He also helps Nick recognize "the sterility of his life on all levels – biological, intellectual, and ethical" (Albee and Adler 67). Moreover, George prefers tradition over innovation, the latter represented by Nick in the play. George is afraid of Nick and how his science fiction is becoming a reality: he fears that when humanity begins to artificially manufacture humans, they would become godlike and too powerful. Moreover, it would prove that anything is possible, and thus our illusions can quickly become reality. These reservations about technological advancement are considered reasonable in the era of the Cold War after the first use of the atomic bomb.

Nick and Honey have their illusions, too, regardless of the perfect, young American couple image they present. Not only do they have illusions about their fertility as Martha and George, but they also create a façade of their identities. When the characters are discussing how it was for Nick and Honey to arrive at an unknown, new town, Honey says: "You won't believe it, but we had to make our way all by ourselves... isn't that right, dear?" (Albee 1.23.). "Making their way" could be interpreted as inventing themselves and creating a suitable appearance for them in the given situation to survive in a foreign environment. However, it becomes a problem when they start believing in it during the process. Honey's approach to their marital issues is to forget: "I've decided I don't remember anything" (Albee 3.124.). However, her conscious denial only allows her to postpone the inevitable acknowledgment of the problems, not abolish them. Similar to the other couple, Nick and Honey's illusion has been compromised by telling others about Honey's hysterical pregnancy, so henceforward, they cannot continue as before.

Both George and Martha and Nick and Honey are running out of time to save their marriages, even though compared to the younger couple, George and Martha's transformation throughout the play is more dominant. Hence, this long-awaited metamorphosis becomes the main driving force of the play, which Adler draws attention to in his article:

Who is to blame, then, is clearly not as important in Albee's mind as the fact that both George and Martha urgently desire a changed relationship, a marriage rebuilt on a new

foundation, for they sense that the opportunity and ability to establish one diminish with the passing of time. (Albee and Adler 69)

It is important to note that the play presents the two marriages as foils to one another, and in that, the love and partnership George and Martha have is certainly more profound than Nick and Honey's. In connection to relationships, Albee demonstrates that love and hate are two parts of a single whole: "Ordinarily we love and hurt because we do try to reach each other. Such a belief implies, of course, that if love does fail, then one must be willing to hurt the other person in order to reach them" (Albee and Adler 67). George and Martha continuously try to reach out to each other. Thus, even though their relationship is violent, loud, harmful, and abusive in many aspects, their love for one another forces them to maintain a close relationship by continuously hurting each other. "Significantly, the only time when George and Martha do not thrust the blame at each other for their own failures is in their inability to have children" (Albee and Adler 68). They remain a unit and share the pain, even if they find different ways to cope with it. In my opinion, Albee presents a modern and realistic approach to relationships, specifically marriages. "He suggests that there is no greater love than not failing another in a moment of need" (Albee and Adler 70). Therefore, from Martha's standpoint, the only way to reach out to George and make him notice and appreciate her again is by trying to seduce Nick in front of him. According to Wild and Fisk:

Albee's solution lies therefore in confronting the illusion and thus confirming what is really the truth behind these illusions which in the end affirms the couple's individualism. [...] His drama therefore implements the elements of the Theatre of the Absurd and promotes moral obligation of living with an awareness of its illusive societal pressures. (9-10)

Furthermore, the play's setting of postwar America and the Cold War provides rich context and a strong motive for the characters to be affected by the absurdity of reality and frustration of the period. The snappy quarrels evoke the tension between the Cold War superpowers (Bennett 103), while the continuous pressure build-up recreates a presumably similar atmosphere to the Cold War era.

With *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee purposefully criticizes the American Dream and the deterioration of the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With many of his plays, Albee frequently "launched fierce attacks on middle-class complacency and hypocrisy, and the moral failure of American society" (Walsh), and this play is a prime example of such criticism. In the 50s, the American public's obsession with the perfect appearance indicated that Americans were afraid to show any sign of weakness in fear that the US would be regarded as the weaker superpower. Consequently, the appearance of strength, fertility, and happiness became the most important attributes for the people and the country. Being a patriot meant living the American Dream. Both couples of the play fall victim to this pretense.

Firstly, the couples, especially Nick and Honey, are presented as the poster-child for the American dream, the perfect American couple: beautiful, intelligent, educated, ambitious. Only as the play progresses into the long night do we discover that the couples are aggressive, abusive, secretive, infertile, and their life is anything but desirable. Therefore, the audience realizes that pretending and escaping into illusions can only continue until one has to face life's difficulties. Through these characters, unhappiness and suffering are finally revealed under the unconvincing façade of the American Dream.

The characters' names could be regarded as revealing references and alternatively ironic comments by Albee on the concept of the American Dream. Albee confirmed that George and Martha's names are direct references to George and Martha Washington, the first-ever couple of the United States, and their "imaginary child could represent the uncompleted revolutionary spirit of this country" (Holtan 46). The American Dream apparently failed these couples. Despite being college-educated, healthy, beautiful, and living the life of the middle class, neither couple has achieved *the* dream and fulfilled the pursuit of happiness that was promised. Their infertility indicates something profoundly unnatural in them considering the era's obsession with the significance of family life. Moreover, their moral failure speaks volumes since George and Martha should be the most morally virtuous couple in the US. Nevertheless, they fail to live up to that picture-perfect image, and they spiral into a maddening state.

Holtan argues that the play can be regarded as "an allegory of the American historical experience" (49) and that the dialogues disclose more about the American Dream:

America had begun by feeling that she could escape from history, control her own destiny and preserve her innocence, but that fond hope soon met with failure. The American dream – the child, which was to be given birth upon the new continent – never really materialized; the paradise on earth was not founded. Instead, America was increasingly caught up in the same corruptions, compromises and failures as the rest of the world. That failure may have been all the more painful because America was the victim of her own idealism. (49)

Albee emphasizes the disillusionment of the United States through the metaphorical struggle of his characters. George has failed to fulfill the societal expectations both in his personal and professional life: Martha and her father expected him to earn a prominent position at the university, however, he was only the head of the history department during wartime. Moreover, even his writing ambitions have been restricted by Martha's father; George's sense of powerlessness comes from the lack of decision-making about the trajectory of his life. Thus, the unfulfilled ambition and the necessary illusions for survival are commentaries on the American population and the future of the nation. Holtan further analyzes this approach in his article:

If, as Albee has suggested, the child is taken to represent the notion inherent in the American dream that the new nation could escape from history and the failings of human nature and

create a perfect society, that belief is shown to be an illusion which must be destroyed if the couple and the nation are to face the future realistically. (Holtan 51)

As the title suggests, fear is the main incentive of the play. While the name of Virginia Woolf in the title symbolizes the madness entailed in reality, it also refers to the fear of the big wolf, which is probably a direct reference to Russia and the Cold War. According to Bennett, Albee's play is a "carefully crafted psychological drama that engages the issues of existential existence while simultaneously suggesting the use of reason can be used to triumph over fallacious defense mechanisms" (104). The play points out that the uncertainty and anxiousness caused by the wars can only be survived if one follows reason, rather than illusion. Contrarily, disillusionment further amplifies the problem and results in chaos. Martha and George's strange games and pretense over their son's existence allow them to "[mask] the *real* situation: the fear of facing the real world, without a conceptual comfort blanket that imposes false purpose and meaning upon George and Martha's existence" (Bennett 105). The extensive drinking, abusive behavior, language games, and imaginary son are all coping mechanisms that allow Martha and George to delay the realization of their painful existence in a world full of uncertainty.

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* shows that life cannot be lived through illusions, no matter how soothing. However, he reasons that life cannot be lived through truth either, for it is often overwhelming and painful to bear. Albee criticizes the concept of the American Dream through his characters and encourages the "exorcism" of the illusions from the American nation. The play exhibits the consequences of living in illusions without realizing it and offers confrontation to escape them. He suggests that the moment one brings a secret to light, it is no longer a secret; thus, it is no longer an illusion that one can continue to believe and live in. Neither Martha and George nor Honey and Nick can continue living according to their previous illusions after the wild night, after the "total war" they had survived. However chaotic the night had been for the couples, the play ends somewhat optimistically, as the dawn brings a new beginning. Once they all have revealed their true struggling selves, they can begin the hard work to save their marriages and get used to living in the troublesome yet, at least sincere reality.

### Works Cited

- Al Sharadgeh, Samer Ziyad. “Different Forms of Violence in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 10.1 (2019): 140-146. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020.
- Albee, Edward, and Thomas P. Adler. “Albee’s ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?’: A Long Night’s Journey into Day.” *Educational Theatre Journal* 25.1 (1973): 66–70. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/3205836](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3205836).
- Albee, Edward. *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Penguin Books, 1965.
- Bennett, M. “Cold War Tactics: Fear in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*” *Words, Space, and the Audience: The Theatrical Tension between Empiricism and Rationalism*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2012. Accessed 15 Feb. 2021.
- Billington, Michael. “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is a misunderstood masterpiece” *The Guardian*, 18 Sept. 2016. [www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/sep/18/whos-afraid-of-virginia-woolf-edward-albee](http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/sep/18/whos-afraid-of-virginia-woolf-edward-albee).
- Holtan, Orley I. “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” and the Patterns of History.” *Educational Theatre Journal* 25.1 (1973): 46–52. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/3205834](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3205834).
- Kingsley, Lawrence. “Reality and Illusion: Continuity of a Theme in Albee.” *Educational Theatre Journal* 25.1 (1973):71–79. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/3205837](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3205837).
- Meyer, Ruth. “Language: Truth and Illusion in ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?’.” *Educational Theatre Journal* 20.1 (1968): 60–69. Accessed 18 Oct. 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/3204876](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3204876).
- Walsh, David. “American playwright Edward Albee: The character of his opposition to the status quo.” *World Socialist Web Site*, 22 Sept. 2016. [www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/09/22/albe-s22.html](http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/09/22/albe-s22.html).
- Wild, Angelika and James Fisk. “The narrow line between realism and absurdism in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf.*” 2013. Accessed 24 Nov. 2020.