

Illusion and Absurdity in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Albee

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Abstract: The paper explores the reality-illusion-absurdity matrix in Edward Albee's play *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The characters escape reality with various tricks. The absurdity of the play is that illusion, though destructive, is eagerly needed by the characters to fill the void in their message and existence. Albee thinks that even though life is nothing we must have the courage to confront our emptiness.

Keywords: Albee; Illusion; Absurdity

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The play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee is an American classic and yet a much debated play. When it was first produced in 1962, some critics claimed it as "a sick play about sick people ... they really belong in a sanitarium for the mentally ill rather than on a stage" [Coleman 1962: 20]. The Pulitzer Prize Committee was divided in opinion whether to grant the playwright an award and eventually rejected it as it was a "filthy play." The play has invited an incredible number of interpretations. It could be intended as the existential situation of marriage, the failure of American Dream or the degeneration of the West, or the futility and absurdity of human existence. Its critical debates go on and on and each sheds light on the messages of the play. My paper will explore the major themes of illusion and absurdity in the play with focus on the characters. Albee's remark "Who's afraid of living life without false illusions" [Kolin 1988: 52] has most often been taken as a revealing line for the play's 'message.' Illusion, though destructive, is fearfully needed by the characters to fill the void in their marriage and existence. Illusion seems indistinguishable from reality throughout the play. It is hard to tell whether George's story about his past is true or fictional. Similarly, Nick and Honey's life is illusion-based. Nick marries Honey for money not for love. Seemingly strong and virile, Nick is actually impotent. Absurdity of the play is that the characters live on illusion and take it as real. Different from O'Neill, whose *The Iceman Cometh* conveys the necessity to hide behind false illusions because reality is too painful to bear, Albee thinks that though life is nothing we must have the courage to face our emptiness without fear. "The banishment of the illusion is the first step toward spiritual regeneration" (Roudané 1990: 22).

1. Reality vs illusion

George and Martha's marriage is based on illusion. Martha married George not because of who he was but who she imagined he would be and who she could be by extension. She is married to the illusion that George would be the college president. George also accepts the illusion. Realizing that this is untrue and that George is actually a failure causes significant damage to their life. One of the play's biggest illusion is hinted at from the first scene, when George cautioned Martha not to talk about the kid. Although this is not clearly confirmed until the third act, their implicit argument about the child reveals that "the kid" is a fiction. He does not exist, but rather it is the couple's shared illusion. In act three "The Exorcism," both Martha and George admit that they cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. In this act, Martha tells George, "truth and illusion... you don't know the difference," to which George responds, "no, but we must carry on as though we did" (201). Albee has said *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* means "Who is afraid to live without illusions?" At the end, after George sings it, Martha simply says, "I am" (242). Those are the final words of the play. Albee's message is that we have to live without illusions, no matter how much comfort they give us. When Martha propose creating another imaginary child, George says no, not another round of make-believe life.

To some extent, another happy couple Nick and Honey also live in illusion. Nick married Honey for money not for love; in order to gain power in the college, he is flirting with Martha, trying to achieve success by conquering women with connections. Honey knows her husband's intention but is not willing to confront, disguising herself as a naive woman, unwilling to face the unpleasant fact about her marriage. Each of the characters hide in their illusion to cope with failures in their life and marriage.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is Albee's most affirmative work despite its depressive presentation of marriage. Near the end of the play George explains to Honey, "When you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There is something inside the bone... the marrow... and that's what you gotta get at" (212). The "marrow" here refers to "reality." At this "marrow" moment George finally realizes that to redeem their marriage and their very existence, the son-myth has to be put away and the illusion governing their

life has to be purged. When Martha brings their fictional son to the public, George realizes that their private life has degenerated into a terrifying make-believe world. Psychotic dependence on illusion as truth and comfort blurs the distinction between truth and illusion.

This awareness finally brings George to exorcize the son-myth and place themselves in the “marrow” or the essence of their relationship. Catharsis precedes spiritual regeneration. The play challenges the sorts of illusions paralyzing the figures in *The Iceman Cometh*. Albee tells us, “It’s about going against the ‘pipe-dreams.’ After all, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* just says have your pipe-dreams if you want to but realize you are kidding yourself” [Roudané 1982: 38].

2. Reality and absurdity

The set of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* seems to be based on everyday, verifiable reality. In this play, Albee rarely provides stage notes. He simply describes the scene as “the living room of a small house on the campus of a small New England college.” All subsequent brief references to the stage set is realistic. However, despite the apparent realism, Albee deliberately disrupts the objective presentation by integrating the natural, verifiable world with an absurdist world.

Albee writes in the school of the Theatre of the Absurd, whose famous writers include Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. One of the characteristics of absurdist drama is that the characters recognize the absurdity of existence, which alienate them from their surroundings, and they seek comfort in pipe dreams. Illusion is vital to the couple George and Martha as well as Nick and Honey. To expel illusion from their life is tantamount to an act of violence.

One of the characteristic concerns in the Theatre of the Absurd is the blurring of illusion and reality, which takes central stage in the play. Albee also explores the relationship between absurdity and reality. At first glance, George and Martha’s conversations seem to be realistic everyday dialogues between husband and wife. The meaningless topics and repetitious dialogues are ponderously boring. This repetition emphasizes the boredom and circularity of plight in their relation. Despite their extensive arguments and repetitions, George and Martha seem to have reached little understanding for each other. Dull and trivial talks occur throughout the play. In absurdist drama, profound truth of life is usually presented through the small and absurd details of life.

Albee’s description of modern marriage is definitely existentialist. The title of act one “Fun and Game” is ironic as the couple are engaged in a bloody war against each other. Characters’ talk about themselves are not reliable. For example, we don’t know for sure whether George is the boy who accidentally killed his parents in his story. Since we are offered with so many absurd and unreliable talks, readers have the feelings that what they argue about and whether their story is true or not are not important, and what is important is how they interact with each other, and how they choose to exist in this absurd and existentialist situation where they found themselves trapped.

3. Conclusion

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is both an absurdist and existential play, combining realistic world and imaginary world. The characters have empty pursuit of life and are stuck in boring marital relation in which they cannot communicate with each other. Life is meaningless like their tedious argument. Like the characters in the play, many people in life have the same plight: illusion is necessity since reality is too unpleasant to face. Through George’s revelation and catharsis, Albee cautions us against living on illusion or getting lost in make-believe world, which is paralyzing and futile. No matter how difficult it is, we need to confront the real world with courage.

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