

A Failure to Face Reality in a Comparative Study of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract – Following the second half of the 20th century, people looked for success either in their business or in their life. Both Miller and Albee attempted to test the American society, the people's materialistic outlook and their unknown destiny. Neither Willy in *Death of a Salesman* nor George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* can have a clear picture of reality in their lives. Man's failure to face reality and to deal with it without being overwhelmed and destroyed is depicted here. Willy's superficiality, immorality, talkativeness, deteriorating health and George's phoniness, pettiness, unwillingness to face the truth all and all lead to their downfalls in the end. This essay portrays how man is not able to identify in order to attain his objectives in this world. It will be shown that the aforementioned flaws in man will lead to either one's death or at the expense of one's complete failure in life.

Key Words – destiny; reality; superficiality; flaws; Miller; Albee; failure

I. Introduction

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a play written in three acts first performed in 1962 about a couple, George and Martha, who invite a colleague Nick and Honey to their home. Martha taunts George and tells their guests how she is able to humiliate him. George then appears with a gun and fires an umbrella. Nick and Honey get uneasy with George's violent actions. During the second act as the women join George and Nick's conversation, Martha tells the guests about George's only novel which was already buried by her controlling father and he gets infuriated in a way that he grabs Martha by the throat. On the other hand, Nick's wife, Honey, is realized to have a hysterical pregnancy. Martha starts to seduce Nick in George's presence while George seems to be quietly reading a book. As they move upstairs, he throws his book violently. Then George invents the story that their child is dead. During the last act, George appears with some snapdragons and they talk weather the moon is up or down and they insult Nick at the same time. George and Martha's conversation turns to their imaginary son once more with Martha accusing George that he has been responsible for ruining his life. After their guests leave their home, George begins singing, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and Martha replies, I am, George... I am." Another play performed and published in 1949 is *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller. This play could run 742 performances and won both a Pulitzer Prize and New York Drama Critics Circle Award. This play is about a travelling salesperson who has worked for 35 years for a company and he is no longer able to bring in much business than he already made when he was young. His wife, Linda and his two sons, Biff and Happy, are worried about him. He tells his sons to lie if this helps them succeed in their business. He recalls a scene that he was caught by his son talking to a prostitute in his hotel room. He has some imaginary conversations with his brother Ben and finally, he thinks he is worth more dead than alive by using the insurance policy, so he commits suicide at the end of the play.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are in many ways

similar to each other. The first one is the tragic story of a salesman whose name is Willy Loman who is not as successful as he claims to be. After 35 years that he has tried to earn money and recognition, he fails and he cannot drive well running off the side of the road in his own car. Willy hallucinates about some events from his past: He remembers the scene he was seen by his oldest son with a prostitute and in addition he tells his sons not to be very truthful if they want fame and success. Finally, he decides to kill himself in his own car to guarantee the welfare of his sons. Therefore his life is tragic and he cannot face the reality of his being. Similarly, the latter case study is about an unlucky history professor, George, and his wife, Martha. They are not as happy as they should be. Their life is built upon an illusion, an imaginary child, which they always talk about it in front of others, esp. their new guests, a young couple, Nick and Honey, who have come to their home after a night party. Martha seduces Nick to have sex with, cuckolding her own husband in front his own eyes. The sexuality of the four characters is being portrayed in the play. Finally, George and Martha's imaginary son is declared dead at the end and they understand their illusions.

Reality, as Woolf defines in his Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary is the quality or state of being real, and realism is the concern for fact or reality and rejection of the impractical and visionary or the conception that objects of sense perception or cognition exist independently of mind or fidelity in art and literature to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization ([18], p. 962). In Ousby's words, realism is to represent the world as it is rather than as it ought to be by means of the descriptions rather than invention. Realism observes and describes contemporary life and the scenes as objectively as possible in a piece of prose which is not rhetorical drawing the characters from all social levels with even their colloquial speech in their dialogue. Realist writers frequently look to the ordinary people and the lowest class to study the reality of their lives ([12], P. 780). Habib states that realism in both literature and philosophy is an expression of scientific tendency to analyze and divide up the various constituents of the world ([6], p. 476). According to Pizer, Realism is the work of the middle class writers who share the same troubles the middle class are

suffering. Literature is believed to have a job and it is to make us familiar with one another in the common political and social progress ([16], p. 7).

There are also some other viewpoints stated by different critics on Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: Aberg asserts that Miller is criticizing the universal human condition, not just the American situation. He adds this idea that man is on the road of perdition because he can't separate himself from the dominant social forces around him. Therefore, he means that people cannot reach a true happiness in this world dominated by the capitalists and run by their ideology ([1], p. 8). Asset Management Group has mentioned that Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was written during a time period in the American history where the current situation of the people was much worse than it seemed to be. It was the time of great changes in America: from television and fast food restaurants to the first high-way systems. The Korean War tensions, violence related to the civil wars and the cold war tensions all foreshadowed the turbulence in the 1960s. The United States and the Soviet Union clashed over the Berlin war. The Vietnam War and the assassination of John F. Kennedy were the other outcomes of this turbulence. Albee was among the writers who fueled the Americans to see their faults. He himself asserted that the Americans had substituted the artificial for the real in their life ([3], P. 8)

This essay attempts to show two family groups on the brink of breakdown since they were governed by fantasies rather than wisdom and realism. The hollowness of the characters influenced by the American Dream affects them all in a way that it is shown they are seemingly blind to the realities of their lives. The fantastical world of the two plays surrounds all the characters from the young to the old. The cocoon they have woven round themselves cannot be seen and realized by their superficial judgments of life. It is shown that nothing can guarantee the people's life. Death and failure seem to be the only resolutions to the man's unhappy and miserable condition in a world dominated by chaos, inequality and injustice.

2. Discussion

The characters in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* fail to face reality in their lives. There exist several reasons in this play proving the inability of the characters to experience the lifelikeness of their situation in life. First, Martha accuses George who teaches history at the university that he is a do-nothing and a failure to the family. In Act one of the play, we can see their conversation:

"Martha: Well, That's too bad about you, George....

George (Grumbling): Well, that's how it is, anyway.

Martha: You didn't do anything; you never do anything;

You never mix. You just sit around and talk." ([2], P. 13).

Second, George does some childish actions proving the hollowness and superficiality of his character, as someone who is far from the reality of life: He fires at Martha with a pop-gun during the first Act of the play taking distance from the real world around him. Stugrin argues that what George does in front of his guests has some Freudian implications coming out of his unconscious fantasies. Although the toy gun with the loud noise it creates and its ejection of the parasol instead of a real bullet can be considered a comic relief, Martha takes it for George's weak manhood ([17], p. 71). In addition, George smashes a bottle against the bar and this repeats his first action very similar to his earlier impotent act of the pop-gun murder pantomime. The final and the most important illusion in the life of this couple is that they have an imaginary child in order to fill the empty place of Martha's desire to own a

baby. Stugrin once more refers to the superficiality of their life that they have never been able to face the reality of their life although they kill their illusory child during the ritual of purgation ([17], p. 77). Hoovash also states that Martha is victimized by the society and the social pressures of her time. The son-illusion is the only thing Martha can cling to and her balance is violated accordingly ([9]). Furthermore, in Bressler's view, Lacan relates fantasy or the imagination to the imaginary order where we can find our wishes, fantasies and our images ([4], p. 153). Martha seems to be in this situation surrounded by unreal fantasies and illusions she has no way out and as Machalicka proves illusion is one of the biggest American weaknesses. Martha does not know how to build the quality of her life. She expects all the things around her great and beautiful. Self-pity and disillusionment are what she suffers from. There is nothing in this world to please her. Her nights are spent by a glass of gin in her hand and her days in drunkenness. She daydreams and thinks about the future rather than her present time ([10]).

Nick and Honey, another couple invited by George to their house suffer from their illusory world. Nick is the embodiment of the American Dream. Nick has some qualifications which are known as the ingredients of success in Stugrin's view: He is handsome, intelligent and athletic. He has a naïve enthusiasm and belief about his future. He has risen from an undergraduate to a biology instructor at the university. Nick is ambitious and opportunistic. He considers it beneficial to win the favor of the daughter of the college president, so he helps Martha humiliate George. Nick married Honey because she thought she was pregnant and Honey inherited some money from her father. Nick is thinking about furthering his career by the money. Their marriage is based on an illusion and potentially destructive. They will be as miserable as George and Martha are today ([17], pp. 86-7). Nick is not a success as it seems. Roberts asserts that once Martha wanted George to answer the doorbell acting as a houseboy and later she forces Nick to do the same thing after he has been a failure in bed with her. In Act 1 scene iii, when Nick asks George if he has any children, George answers with a childish reply: "That's for me to know and for you to find out." When George, in turn, asks about Nick's plans for the family, we understand Honey's hysterical and alleged pregnancy. Nick wants to settle in that university, George calls the place "Illyria, Penguin Island, Gomorrah and New Carthage" These allusions are all significant about Nick's false perceptions of the reality. Illyria was the wonderful seacoast in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; Penguin Island is both an illusory place and refers to a satire on man's civilization; Gomorrah was the most sinful city in the Old Testament and was thoroughly ruined by God since the people were lustful; and Carthage was a place the greatest unholy love affairs happened. These concepts all reflect the various aspects of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* ([13], pp. 22-6).

Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* represents the myth of the American Dream and the shallow promise of happiness through material wealth. There are several shortcomings in his life making him a real antihero forcing his downfall toward the gloom by his inability to face the reality. First, in one of preliminary parts of the play we can see Willy is talking to his boss, Howard, about changing his position in the company since he is too tired driving on the road, but he refuses with Willy shouting and losing his control. He also exaggerates his abilities in the past. As their conversation ends, Willy is completely fired by Howard. Second, Willy overestimates his abilities, but ultimately he proves to be nothing but a mere failure. Willy, Karim states, is after success in the business world. In Act-I he says that someday he'll have his own business. In fact, he is bragging to Biff. He believes that he will be greater than Charlie and more successful than Dave Singleman, but he has neither the competence of Charlie, nor as charismatic as Dave ([8]). Third; Biff, Willy's son,

who has failed math, he goes to Boston to tell his father intervene with his teacher, but he sees his father talking to a woman and this makes Biff feel hopeless and the impossibilities of his own life. This discovery, Galens believes, is very effective in Biffs' life in a way that he loses his summer school and his athletic fellowship. He is left by his two sons in the restaurant with the prostitute Happy has already met there ([5], p. 63). Fourth, Willy fails to be a moral teacher for his two sons. Stealing, Shannon declares, is an ethical issue presented in the character of Willy Loman. Willy Loman himself did not steal anything from the company, but he encouraged his sons to steal. In fact, he was proud of his sons' courage to steal something. It is seen upon the theft of some lumber when he said, "I gave them hell, understand. But I got a couple of fearless characters there." Therefore he rationalizes the guilt of stealing the building materials and the athletic equipments by his sons ([14]). Finally, Willy Loman dies desperately which deserves pity rather than fear. Metzger asserts that he dies at the end of the play delusional and unable to face the failures of his life. All his attempts, things he has and his accomplishments add up to nothing. This is the antithesis of life against death but a real depiction of the modern man ([11]).

There exist striking parallels between Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Undoubtedly, both of the major characters in these plays are superficial characters. In the same way that George is not a real kind of man shooting at Martha with a pop-gun, and Machalicka proves that this gun is the first visual image used on the stage which George throws at Martha and Nick which is an expressionistic device used to show his inner concerns following their sexual intercourse. George brings death into the play after pointing his gun at Martha ([10]). Willy Loman in the latter work is overwhelmed by the superficial realities of the American life. An example is his repetitive reference to the power of the Chevrolet as the strongest American car ever built and he is accordingly killed by jumping in front of it to guarantee the insurance money to be delivered to his family members. Martha imagines having a child and George tries to convince her not to talk about it while their guests are there. In Jenkins view, George animalizes Martha including silencing her and pointing to her inability to produce a child ([7], p. 63). By the same token, Willy Loman imagines that one day he will be even greater than Uncle Ben and Charlie. Needless to say that both George and Willy Loman's behavior is not within the society's acceptable standards. Willy encourages his sons to steal objects from their neighborhood and approving their courage who will succeed in the future if they take his advice. In addition, he has an immoral relationship with a woman and caught by his son at the hotel talking to that prostitute. Similarly, George realizes the immorality of his wife, Martha, having an affair with Nick and he proves he is a cuckold rather than a real kind of man he ought to be.

There is also a striking contrast between Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Unlike Willy who becomes weak at the end of the play and unable to travel from city to city in order to make enough profit in his business; Nick, George's colleague, is handsome and athletic and thinks about his future. He has progressed in his life from an undergraduate to a biology instructor at the university, so there is a trace of success in one of the live characters of the play though he is condemned to failure in the end. Martha is victimized by the social pressures of her time and that's why she clings to the son-illusion all her life; On the other hand, Linda, Willy's wife, is crushed by the financial problems of her family, but she does not surrender to the obstacles in front. She is even seen mending her stockings to prevent from further financial straits of the family. Perrine asserts that during Act II, Willy and Linda talk to each other and she is caught by Willy mending her stocking at which he is irritated and annoyed:

"Willy. Will you stop mending stockings? At least while I am in the house. It gets me nervous. I can't tell you. Please.
(Linda hides the stocking in her hand as she follows Willy across the forestage in front of the house.)" ([15], p. 1431).

Besides what mentioned earlier, symbols play a paramount role in the developments of these two plays. Cars, Karim argues, can symbolize togetherness and family which have a symbolic power over Willy throughout the play. The silk stockings Linda is mending represents guilt and shame between Linda and Willy and also his inadequacy to provide his family with what they wish. Ben, Willy's brother, is the emblem of cruel success he attempts all his life to reach at ([8]). Roberts also mentions that the gun symbolizes an evident sexual symbol Martha enjoys in the play. There is also a symbolic parody when Nick suggests dancing at the party. When Martha and Nick are dancing in a partner swapping, she tried to make her husband notice his own inadequacy with all her body suggestive movements. She also completes her husband's humiliation to show his failure in life ([13], pp. 27-33).

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Conclusion

Distinguishing the dream from reality is a difficult task for many people which need to be clarified by the literary works. Mixing up the impractical and the visionary for the real is a false conception that might occur for the people unable to see the harsh realities of their lives. Taking a look at the lives of the ordinary people draws any reader's attention to this fact that man is a slave to his own folly. In the binary opposition of reality versus illusion, the latter weighs more on the scale. As stated by Pizer, one can witness such an alien world via literature ([16], p. 7). Ousby also asserts that literature represents life through descriptions and selecting characters from all social levels ([12], p.780). Therefore the realistic portrayal of the incidents in these two plays furnishes us with an opportunity to scrutinize the world around us more profoundly than we ever did.

In sum, the two antiheros in both of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are doomed to forget the reality of their lives by living in mere fantasy, but the latter case study seems to be a greater tragedy than the first since the dramatist has cleared his purpose by inviting us to witness two couples' lives rather than one at two different ages. In fact, Nick and Honey are George and Martha at a younger age. George and Martha's terrible situation is a foreshadowing for the young couple's future life. They realize their illusory life and hold a funeral ceremony for the dead child they had imagined to forget their illusion of a son and the evils they had throughout their lives. That seems to be heroic and a step toward reality and freedom of thought in the end. However, Willy Loman is a businessman who descends in his manners and business and hurries to his predictable life as foreshadowed in the play by the power of the Chevrolet. There can't be any rescue for such a man who is trapped by his illusion and he is crushed by the world around him. He is a real American antihero who has built his life on a dream.

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