
Analysis of Underlying Themes in Twelve Angry Men

The play 'Twelve Angry Men' by Reginald Rose contains many elements that examine the implementation of the American justice system in 1957 and help shape the deliberations of the case. Perhaps the most important element is the relationship between Juror 3 and Juror 8, as the constant conflict between these two drives the narrative of the drama, allowing other significant elements to develop and be explored. The conflict between Juror 3 and Juror 8 does not exist in isolation – what they discuss resonates with the other Jurors who naturally gravitate to one 'side' or another. The jurors' interactions expose the play's other important element – prejudice. This integral theme would appear to be the driving force for the initial 'guilty' role. However, the conflict between Juror 3 and 8 also stimulates discussion on the reliability of the evidence presented. This leads to the next important element – reasonable doubt – being acknowledged as a possibility by the Jurors. Without the conflict between Jurors 3 and 8 none of the other elements would have developed, therefore resulting in the certain execution of a potentially innocent youth.

From the beginning of the play the audience can see the jury room is split into warring blocks between those who vouch for a guilty verdict and those who vouch a non-guilty verdict. This is mainly due to the fact that the jury room is verdict driven; the discussion is shaped by the battles between the jurors defending their early verdict choices. Juror 8 is the most significant character as he is the only juror to vote 'not guilty' within the first moments of the play, thereby initiating the central conflict. Just as the 8th Juror is a figurehead for the boys' innocence, the 3rd Juror is a figurehead for the boys' guilt. The 3rd Juror's lack of compassion stands in contrast to the compassion of the 8th. Although he claims to 'have no personal feelings about this' case, it is clear that he has a very personal motivation for wanting to convict the young defendant: 'That goddamn rotten kid, I know him, what they're like. What they do to you, how they kill you every day.' It is obvious the relationship between these two characters is a turbulent and conflicted one. Through the 8th Juror Rose highlights the power of the lone voice amongst most overwhelming majority. When asked to justify his not-guilty vote, the 8th Juror does not come up with arguments for the boy's innocence but rather highlights that 'it is not easy for [him] to raise [his] hand and send a boy off to die without talking about it first'. The 3rd Juror is unwilling to take time with the discussions and is convinced that the case is 'one of those open and shut things'. The 8th Juror thinks that maybe 'we owe the boy a few words' and this line opens the door to robust debate, in particularly between the 3rd and 8th Jurors. While the 8th Juror is concerned with ensuring the defendant has a fair trial and that the jury consider the details carefully, the 3rd Juror who is impatient and would rather they 'stop wasting time'.

Several key moments illustrate the nature of the relationship between the 3rd and 8th Jurors. In one, the tension comes to a close in a dramatic sequence in which the 3rd and 8th Jurors re-enact the stabbing and the 3rd Juror stabs down as the blade stops about an inch from the 8th Juror's chest. This moment characterizes the personalities as well as their interactions, as the 3rd Juror is generally more aggressive both physically and mentally, while 8th stands firm in his beliefs and opinions, displaying tolerance and compassion towards others. Without these two characters there would be no exploration of the prejudices held by the Jurors, as their conflicted relationship allows personalities of the other Jurors to be revealed and shows the audience potentially why they are voting the way they do.

However, although the relationship between the two is an integral part in the part, prejudice is just as significant in driving the narrative of the drama within the play. Prejudice is observed on many levels throughout the play; the most obvious is racial. While the race of the accused is never revealed, the audience understands that the boy is a minority of some sort, as he is often referred to as 'one of them'. When looking at prejudice in a larger sense it is quite clear that many of the jurors enter the jury room with preconceived notions and irrational ideas. From the first and second vote in the play the audience is exposed to Juror 3's and Juror 10's prejudice quite openly; 'The kid's a dangerous killer, you can see it... it's the kids, the way they are nowadays.' The 7th Juror is another who pre-judges the boy based on his background and previous experiences: 'Look at his record, he was in the children's court'. The 10th Juror also openly states his prejudice towards the boy: 'These people are born to lie, that's the way they are and no intelligent man is gonna tell me otherwise'. The 4th Juror has similar beliefs: 'This boy, let's say he's a product of a filthy neighborhood and a broken home... children from slum backgrounds are potential menaces to society.' Juror 10 believes 'those' people are 'wild animals' and this case represents an opportunity to get one before 'his kind gets us'. 'I've lived among them all my life, you can't believe a word they say ... they're born liars.' The prejudices and emotional baggage of Juror 3 become quite prominent as he accuses other jurors of having 'hearts bleedin' all over the floor about slum kids and injustice' and warns 'he's got to burn. You're letting him slip through our fingers'. He says he'd willingly 'pull the switch' on the young defendant.

Other jurors are less prejudiced. Juror 5, who comes from a difficult background, takes offence as he feels that there is some prejudice aimed at him due to his upbringing. Juror 11 can also relate to being offended: 'This sort of sentiment I can understand', he says, suggesting that he too has suffered prejudice in the past. And although earlier in the play he 'had no personal feelings about the case', Juror 8 accuses Juror 3: 'You want to see this boy die because you personally want it, not because of the facts. You're a sadist.' The different types of and reactions to prejudice demonstrate that prejudice is integral as a theme and would appear to be the driving force for the initial 'guilty' role; however, the conflict between the Jurors stimulates discussion on the reliability of the evidence presented, so reasonable doubt then comes into play as another theme.

The audience never finds out for sure whether the accused is guilty or innocent. While much of the evidence is questioned and manipulated by the 8th Juror, by the end of the case there remains a tremendous amount of evidence built up against the accused. However it is still "beyond a reasonable doubt" that the jurors must find the accused guilty in order to convict him, and they all ultimately come to the conclusion that they have at least some doubt. From the first scene in the play the judge says, 'if there is a reasonable doubt then you must bring me a verdict of 'not guilty', however if there is no reasonable doubt you must find the accused guilty.' The 8th Juror is first character to establish there may be reasonable doubt present in this case: 'I'm not asking anyone to accept it; I'm just saying it's possible.' The 8th Juror proceeds to demonstrate throughout the case how facts 'may be colored by the personalities of the people who present them' and things may not be as they first seem. The frequency in which the term 'fact' is used throughout the play causes questioning of what constitutes 'fact'. Its statements like 'let's talk facts, these people are born to lie, now it's the way they are... they don't need any big excuse to kill someone... everybody knows it' – that are made which are evidently not 'facts' but are opinions expressed without any supporting evidence. This goes to prove that the word 'fact' does not necessarily describe an objective truth. The 8th Juror recognizes that 'reasonable doubt... is a safeguard that has enormous value in our system. No

jury can declare a man guilty unless it's sure', but not all Jurors agree with this opinion. 'What reasonable doubt? That's nothing but words.' As the 8th Juror challenges the facts and witness testimonies throughout the play, regularly introducing new information to the audience, the other Jurors come to realize that there are very few details of which they can be certain of. 'There are a lot of details that never came out... I now have reasonable doubt in my mind.' He reminds them that many things are uncertain and they should remain aware of this - 'I think there's enough to make us wonder... I'm just saying it's possible' - by keeping a healthy attitude of reasonable doubt rather than jumping to conclusion and making sudden decisions which ultimately can impact on someone's life. Therefore reasonable doubt is a vital element in the play as it explores the idea that we can rarely be absolutely certain of 'facts'.

It is true to say the relationship between the 3rd and 8th Jurors plays an integral part in the play 'Twelve Angry Men'; however, it is not necessarily the most important element present. Prejudice and reasonable doubt are themes that are just as significant, by driving the narrative of the drama throughout the play. Prejudice and the conflict that comes along with it brings out the personalities of each of the characters and allows the audience to see the ideas, beliefs and opinions of the Jurors, making this theme is significant. Without reasonable doubt none of the other elements would have developed and discussion on the reliability of the case wouldn't have been present, leading to no proper exploration of the case. This proves that although the relationship between Juror 3 and Juror 8 is a significant element in the play, prejudice and reasonable doubt are just as essential in the exploration of the play.