
Illusion and Reality in A Doll's House

Truth or illusion? When the fantasy world people create in order to cope with the absurdity of life is brought too far into reality, it becomes hard to distinguish between authenticity and fiction. This ambiguity is apparent in both Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, in which marital relationships are solely based on illusion. Both couples in the dramas use illusions to avoid feeling the truth and the pain of failures. Yet, in the end, they are forced to wake up from the fake world in which they have lived and by openly expressing their feelings create hope for progress. It is essential to strip away illusion in order to experience life truthfully and fully.

The relationship between Martha and George in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is troubling from the very beginning, for it was founded upon illusion. Martha married George not because of who he really was, but, because of who she imagined he could become. As she tells Nick in the first act, "I got the idea about then of marrying into the college...which didn't seem to be as stupid as it turned out" (Albee 79). Her father was the president of the College in New Carthage, and Martha, being his only child, hoped to gain control of it herself through marriage. Thus, she married the illusion of George, who also bought into it himself. Yet, when they realized that this illusion is not real, because George didn't have "the guts to" (Albee 85) succeed her father, their marriage was hurt significantly.

Yet, the dominant illusion in George and Martha's lives lies in the seed of their relationship. Because they couldn't have any children of their own and lived a miserable life, they decided to create an imaginary child. Thus, the binding force in their relationship is also an illusion. Although Albee does not tell the audience directly of the child's unreality until the very end, he provides clues that imply this throughout the play. The first hint is provided when George warns Martha not to "start in on the bit about the kid" (Albee 18) as their two a.m. guests arrive at the door. The boy's physical perfection 'blond haired, blue eyed' also foreshadows the fact that he is an illusion. Then, as George and Martha use the kid to attack each other, their bizarre insults adds to the unreality of the boy. Martha first says that George used to make him sick all the time and George counterattacks by claiming that "the real reason our son...used to throw up all the time was... [because] he couldn't stand... you fiddling at him" (Albee 120). Finally, in the last act when George informs Martha that their son has been "killed" and Martha tells him that he "cannot decide these things" (Albee 232) it becomes apparent, even to Nick, that their son is merely a creation of the mind. Through Martha's reaction, however, it can be seen that the blurring of illusion and reality can cause something that is solely delusional to have a very real emotional impact.

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Similarly, in *A Doll's House* Nora and Torvald's whole marriage is built on illusions. The characters' untruthfulness and dishonesty towards each other marks their whole relationship. This is first revealed when Torvald asks Nora whether or not she broke any rules today and had "taken a bite at a macaroon or two" (Ibsen 6). Despite the fact that the audience had just seen Nora pop macaroons into her mouth as she came in, Nora completely denies it and tells Torvald falsely that "I should not think of going against your wishes" (Ibsen 6). Ibsen uses situational irony here to show that their whole marriage is based on fake appearances.

The greatest deception in their relationship, however, is in the form of Nora's secret debt. When Torvald was ill, she secretly borrowed money from Krogstad in order to travel to a southern climate to improve his condition. Until this day, Nora has not mentioned the matter to her husband and had been secretly repaying the debt, for she claims that Torvald and their marriage cannot sustain the knowledge of this secret. "How painful and humiliating it would be for Torvald, with his manly independence, to know that he owed me anything. It would upset our mutual relations altogether;" (Ibsen 13). Thus, Torvald's 'manly independence' is only an illusion making the basis by which they treat each other also fake.

Illusions are so common in both dramas that they mix in with reality until even the characters find it hard to differentiate between what appears to be true and what is false. In fact, in most of Albee's play, George and Martha are engaging in emotional and psychological 'games.' This becomes evident when Martha says to the bewildered Nick that "there is only one man in my life who has ever...made me happy...George" (Albee 189-190). Despite continuously insulting and humiliating George, Martha still truly loves him. With this paradox Albee hints that their arguments are merely part of a game and that not everything is as it appears to be. Martha supports this idea when she advises Nick that he should not "always deal in appearance" (Albee 190). Furthermore, the only reason Martha seduces Nick is to get George's attention and make him jealous. Yet, George acts as though he is indifferent and starts reading a book while Martha sexually entertains Nick. Later, it becomes apparent when George releases his fury alone on stage that he was only pretending not to care. Thus, their actions may all be false appearances. Nick even comments at the end that he doesn't know when George and Martha are lying. By blurring the lines between truth and illusion, Albee shows that it is not important whether something is a lie or not, yet the importance lies in how people choose to exist in a situation that they've found themselves trapped.

As a result of the lies between Nora and Torvald, the roles they each assume in their marriage are merely appearance. Nora, for example, takes the role of a child-wife and mother who is completely dependent on Torvald and who is a spendthrift when it comes to money. Torvald also supports this illusion through the names he uses to refer to her. For example, he calls Nora "my little squirrel" and "my little skylark" (Ibsen 4). Ibsen uses animal imagery to show that Torvald regards Nora as a small helpless creature. Nora in turn strengthens her fabricated role

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by acting as she knows Torvald wants her to be. The full falseness of her actions only becomes clear in the last scene of Act One when Nora tells Torvald that she absolutely needs his help, even with such a trifling issue as picking a costume for the upcoming ball. "Torvald, couldn't you take me in hand and decide what I shall go as...I can't get along a bit without your help" (Ibsen 27). The audience knows, however, that Nora is not as helpless as she acts, for she had decided all by herself the important issue of borrowing money in order to save Torvald's life. Thus, the Nora Torvald thinks he is married to is merely an illusion, and Torvald cannot tell the difference between the fake, helpless Nora and the real one.

Furthermore, Torvald takes the role of Nora's protector, who would risk his life in order to save her. This is "the wonderful thing" (Ibsen 48) that Nora thinks is going to happen when Torvald finds out about her debt and forgery. Since women at that time could not sign a loan, even if it was for the sake of their family, Nora forged her father's signature when she borrowed money from Krogstad, who now threatens to expose and humiliate her. Torvald, however, has also led her to believe that he will rescue her from this problem. He even tells Nora after he finds out that his best friend, Dr. Rank, is dying: "Do you know, Nora, I have often wished that you might be threatened by some great danger, so that I might risk my life's blood and everything for your sake" (Ibsen 58). Yet, this was only an illusion of Torvald that Nora actually believed. When the time comes for him to find out about the debt, Torvald proves that he was a hypocrite and vulgarly abuses Nora for bringing this shame upon him and even renounces her as his wife.

At the end of each drama all these illusions are destroyed forcing the characters to come face to face with reality. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George resolves the play by declaring the death of their imaginary son, who "drove into a large tree" as "he swerved to avoid a porcupine" (Albee 231). This is a form of paradox where Albee uses illusion to destroy another illusion. Though the boy, when he was a secret, provided a means of binding George and Martha together, after he was introduced to the real world, he became a source by which they attacked each other. Thus, George realizes that their kid has been brought too far into reality resulting in a negative effect on their marital relationship. As a result, he sacrifices the boy, who can be seen as a Christ figure, in order to save their marriage. In fact, Albee entitles the last Act "The Exorcism" referring to George's exorcism of the destructive power of their illusory son on their marriage. When George tells Martha at the end that "It will be...better" she answers with "I don't...know" (Albee 240). Although there is uncertainty as to whether or not their marriage will make it, at least now there is hope for progress because they can finally live honestly and truthfully without illusions. Yet, they must now experience reality no matter how painful it is, which scares Martha. Thus, the title of the play can, in fact, be translated into "who's afraid to live without illusions?"

In *A Doll's House*, the illusion of Nora and Torvald's marriage is also destroyed giving them a chance to progress as individuals. At the end, when Torvald's reaction to the news of Nora's

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forgery is far from what she expected, she realizes that she has been living with a complete stranger. Nora admits to him that "when the wonderful thing did not happen, then I saw you were not the man I had thought you" (Ibsen 66). Discovering that her husband confuses appearance with value and that he is more concerned with his position in society than with the emotional needs of his wife, Nora is forced to confront her personal worthlessness. She realizes that she has been living in a "doll's house" and that her husband has been "playing with her just as... [she] used to play with her dolls" (Ibsen 63). In fact, their first honest expression of feeling happens at the end when Nora confronts Torvald about her conclusions. Thus, she destroys their "doll house" by deciding to leave her husband and search for her identity. This creates hope for truthful human relationships in the future. Perhaps in years to come, Nora and Torvald will also be able to restore their marriage.

Both *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *A Doll's House* question the entire fabric of marital relationships. The marriage between each couple in the dramas was solely based on illusion. This in turn blurs the line between reality and fantasy and creates unreal, meaningless lives. A life of illusion is wrong because it produces a false content in life. Only by expressing true feelings and emotions can relationships actually progress.

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