

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

Key Scenes

Act 1

1. First time Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf is sung playfully (p5)
2. George's complaint about being married to the daughter of the president of the university (p13)
3. Martha's seduction of Nick relating to his physique (p27)
4. George seizes back attention with the gun (p30)
5. George talks about Nick creating a perfect race of men (p34)
6. Martha speaks in admiration about her father (p41)
7. Martha explains how she married George out of the practicality of a successor and infatuation, and her disillusionment with him over the years due to his unassertiveness (p45)
8. George sings "Who's Afraid" for the second time to drown Martha out (p46)

Act 2

1. Revelation of Honey's Hysterical Pregnancy (p49)
2. George tells the story of the boy who killed his mother and father (p51)
3. George and Martha argue over why the son is sick (p64)
4. Martha makes a rhyme about George's failed novel (p70)
5. George makes up a story that exposes the secrets of Nick and Honey's marriage, goading them to participate in the game (p75)
6. Martha seduces Nick (p87)
7. George sings "Who's afraid for the third time to intentionally break up the moment of intimacy (p88)
8. George purposefully reads a book to feign ignorance while Martha taunts him by saying she would amuse herself with Nick (p90)
9. The Killing of the Son (p97)

Act 3

1. Martha begins to unravel and process the difficulties of her life (p99)
2. Martha reflects on her paradoxical love for George (p102)
3. Martha orders Nick to open the door and accuses him of careerist intentions (p103)
4. George and Martha degrade each other with the son (p120)
5. Killing of the Son (p123)

Points/Incidents/Quotes	Techniques/Effects	Significance
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Themes

- Discuss the Presentation of X in the Play
- “Quote” Discuss

Key Themes

1. Truth and Illusion
2. Power and Powerlessness
3. Gender

Considerations

- Relation to elements of Style
 - a. Absurdism
 - b. Setting
 - c. Rising Tension and De-escalation
 - d. Parallels and Foils
 - e. Character Archetypes: Madonna-Whore
- PORN: Process, Outcome, Role, Nature
- In what ways → How so → So What
- Physical → Psychological → Emotional → Spiritual
- System/Society/Individual
- Appearance → Reality → Reconciliation

Truth and Illusion

Relation to Existentialism

How to respond when existence is found to be meaningless

- Technique: Absurdism
- Human Desire for inherent value & meaning ≠ Inability to find meaning
 - Attachment to meaning → Suffering
- Individuals should embrace absurdity and futility in rebellion
 - Creation of own meaning in meaninglessness

The American Dream

Ethos of Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

- Meritocracy and Equality
- Manifestation: Happy and stable family, house and job

The Nuclear Family

Ideal American Family in the 1960s with four roles: Father, Mother, Daughter and Son

- Enforcement of Capitalist Ideals: Family Unit of Trust against the more communal way of living of the Soviets
- Prominent in American Media

Self-Reflexivity

A technique whereby the play refers to its own fictionality

- Self-aware characters and Writing
- Effects: Humor and forces the audience to consider the nature of Truth
- Significance: Truth is relative and Chosen

Considerations

- Illusion of Relationship: Games that George and Martha play to find meaning in dysfunctional relationship
- Illusion of Power
- Illusion of Success in Social Expectations
- Illusion of Parenthood
- Illusory Arguments
- Control of 'Truth' by Stories
- Struggle towards obtaining Truth
- Construction/Deconstruction from Illusion to Truth
- Shared and mutually enforced construction of illusion → Relationship
- The performative Nature of Illusions
- Private Sphere → Public Sphere in the Story of the Son

Societal Expectations/Flippancy → Meaning

Illusions that fulfil **social expectations/reduce relationships to flippancy** are a means through which the self is defined, to construct meaning from hopeless suffering

- Sense of Catharsis
- So What/Reconciliation
- Illusory Relationships
 - George and Martha: Happy Family
 - Nick and Honey: Up and Coming Young Couple
- Illusions adopted as reality to cope with the actuality of deep-seated issues

Creation of Imaginary Son to fulfil Ideal of the American Dream

- "My chromosomological partnership in the...creation of our...blond-eyed, blue-haired son"
- Validation of Social Function
- Shared Responsibility

- Irony in things that George is sure of and colour → Flippant self-aware illusion
- "Partnership": Formal detached diction indicating superficiality
- "Chromosomological": Complex detached diction referencing biology (Nick) to indicate that the son lacks a self

- Malleability of Language → Instability
- Illusions have a pragmatic purpose in finding meaning in suffering
- The self has autonomy whether to accept/reject truth
 - If Truth → Meaningless and Hopeless, perhaps Illusion is a better alternative
- Social expectations of extrinsic values → Success

		becomes binary and the self is prone to inefficacy & disillusionment
George relishing in illusion of gun rather than real violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual and Auditory Spectacle • Rapid escalation and de-escalation 	Relationships based on flippant illusions would be reduced to a theatrical grapple to outwit and outshine the other for power which leaves the self in a state of instability desperate for attention
George prizing taking a jab at Martha > Physical Intimacy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “<i>stage-side breast. He breaks away...That’s what you’re after, is it? What are we going to have...blue games for the guests?...Pyrrhic Victory</i>” (p31) 		
Honey’s use of language: Superficial responses appreciating whatever occurs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep faults in forced unpassionate marriage • Illusion as supportive wife in up and coming couple • Supports Martha’s flirtations praising Nick rather than standing up for herself (p27) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maxims • Uncreative Hyperboles • “Intercollegiate” Complex Diction → Pride • Parallelism in blindly supporting Martha’s words: “firm body” 	
Hiddenness → Knowledge and Power The self utilises illusions to keep the other in the dark about its true intentions, to derive power from the impression that it has more knowledge over the other		
Frivolity to protect Innermost Self The self defines itself with the illusion of frivolity to protect its true innermost self from hurt by others, through redirecting pain to its facade (and finding satisfaction in insults that graze rather than address real issues)		
Frivolity for Efficacy in Dominance The self defines itself with illusory frivolity seen in the wordplay that George and Martha engage in, to find a sense of efficacy in dominance over the other		

<p>George and Martha using the narrative of the son to insult each other (p37, 120)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “He’s not completely sure it’s his own kid” 		
<p>George relishing in illusion of gun rather than real violence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visual and Auditory Spectacle Rapid escalation and de-escalation 	<p>Relationships based on flippant illusions would be reduced to a grapple to outwit and outshine the other for power which leaves the self in a state of instability desperate for attention</p>
<p>George prizing taking a jab at Martha > Physical Intimacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>“stage-side breast. He breaks away...That’s what you’re after, is it? What are we going to have...blue games for the guests?...Pyrrhic Victory”</i> (p31) 		
<p>George singing “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf” to drown out Martha’s complaints (p46)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Auditory Spectacle → Sing-song quality and rising intensity → Flippant yet Deliberate Anger Parallelism → Frivolity Reference to Virginia Woolf → Fear of seeking the truth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stream of consciousness writer who aimed to reveal horrifying emotional rush in internal struggles of Characters 	<p>Create Sympathy for self-definition by illusion given the pain of reality</p>
<p>Martha describing George supposedly killing his parents and disappointing her Father (p70)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excitement that she rhymed Ultimately results in Violence 	<p>Child-like</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diction Parallelism of Taunts Simple rhyme Scheme: Single Rhyme of Monosyllabic Words <p>Irony</p>	<p>Unites binaries of Frivolity and Gravity to show that real Issues will ultimately surface in spite of all attempts to escape and honest and direct resolution is necessary</p>

<p>Martha's Illusion of sex and successful seduction → Youth, Desirability and Power (over George)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbiotic Affirmation with Nick 		
<p>Inconsequential Wordplay between G&M</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "(MARTHA) You don't even have the...the what?... (GEORGE)...guts?" • "We're merely walking what's left of our wits" 	<p>Helping each other in insults</p>	<p>Frivolity can be damaging in leaving wounds in relationship to simmer</p>
<p><u>Process of Joint Language and Narratives</u></p> <p>The self employs language and narratives that are jointly constructed in the process of self-definition, however it is a foolish struggle as they are ultimately feeble and fall apart when manipulated by different agents to their own self-interest</p>		
<p>Creation of Imaginary Son to fulfil Ideal of the American Dream</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "My chromosomological partnership in the...creation of our...blond-eyed, blue-haired son" • Validation of Social Function • Shared Responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irony in things that George is sure of and colour → Flippant self-aware illusion • "Partnership": Formal detached diction indicating superficiality • "Chromosomological": Complex detached diction referencing biology (Nick) to indicate that the son lacks a self 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malleability of Language → Instability • Illusions have a pragmatic purpose in finding meaning in suffering • The self has autonomy whether to accept/reject truth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ If Truth → Meaningless and Hopeless, perhaps Illusion is a better alternative • Social expectations of extrinsic values → Success becomes binary and the self is prone to inefficacy
<p><u>Process of Re-defining Past Narratives</u></p> <p>The self is defined by a narrative of its past, which it manipulates through illusion to regain a sense of efficacy despite tragic events in an attempt to fight for its autonomy that is worthy of sympathy</p>		

Need to Shatter Illusions The self must ultimately acknowledge and shatter its illusions and define itself by reality with honesty to the other to find a stable sense of meaning and efficacy beyond illusion		
Artificiality of the Son in his Death by George's decision and words		
<div> <div>Power</div> <div> <p>Contextual Significance: WWII</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic Expansion: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rising Materialism Conformity Political Conservatism: American Dream Reinforced Gender Roles <p>Sources of Power</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Connections/Social Status <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Gender Roles Status: p13 on marrying Martha Recognition/Validation <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Martha as a Daddy's Girl Denial of Validation to George to assert Power over him <p>Considerations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power allows one to fulfil certain roles → reinforces one's sense of self Power distinguishes one from others → Establishes sense of self Power allows one to fulfil desires and express oneself Begins with Fun and Games: Lovable Fun </div> </div>		
Powerlessness → Desperation → Societal Roles The self responds to powerlessness with desperation for power, through the fulfilment of societal roles		
Martha's Desperation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rejected by Father without Reciprocation and Attention Failure to fulfil Societal Functions/Expectations as Housewife, Parent and Daughter of College President Desperate to replicate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Groom": Tone of Finality Repetition with altered meaning from noun to verb <ul style="list-style-type: none"> George defined by function > self Disregard for George's Autonomy 	

<p>parent-child relationship</p> <p>Pressure and Dependence on George to live Vicariously</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations to regain power, fulfil roles and win Father's Favour • "He was the groom...he was going to be groomed...he'd take over the History Department...college" (p45) 		
<p>Creation of Imaginary Son to fulfil Ideal of the American Dream</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "My chromosomological partnership in the...creation of our...blond-eyed, blue-haired son" • Validation of Social Function • Shared Responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irony in things that George is sure of and colour → Flippant self-aware illusion • "Partnership": Formal detached diction indicating superficiality • "Chromosomological": Complex detached diction referencing biology (Nick) to indicate that the son lacks a self 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Malleability of Language → Instability • Illusions have a pragmatic purpose in finding meaning in suffering • The self has autonomy whether to accept/reject truth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ If Truth → Meaningless and Hopeless, perhaps Illusion is a better alternative • Social expectations of extrinsic values → Success becomes binary and the self is prone to inefficacy & disillusionment
<p><u>Embracing of Frivolity → Illusory Dominance → Instability</u></p> <p>The defeated self responds by embracing its powerlessness in frivolous illusory games to lower expectations and regain a sense of efficacy, which is ultimately theatrical and unstable</p>		
<p>George and Martha using the narrative of the son to insult each other (p37, 120)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "He's not completely sure it's his own kid" 		
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<u>Defeated Self → Insults Others</u> The defeated self is spiteful in disparaging the other in order to obtain power and establishment		
George and Martha using the narrative of the son to insult each other (p37, 120) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish parental role • Identity established in being distinct from the powerlessness of their dysfunctional marriage Martha’s Boxing Story (p29) Criticises Nick’s place in the History Department (p26)	Boxing Story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis that Hurt was Unintentional 	
The powerless and vulnerable self can find fulfillment in unity with others who are vulnerable		

Points/Incidents/Quotes	Techniques/Effects	Significance
<p style="text-align: center;">Techniques</p> <p>Key Techniques</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Absurdism 2. Setting 3. Rising Tension and De-escalation 4. Parallels and Foils 5. Character Archetypes: Madonna-Whore 		
<p><u>The Madonna-Whore Archetype</u></p> <p>Men view women according to two archetypes-- Madonna (the subservient virgin) and the whore (evil and overly sexual)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Binary that is constantly in a tension <p>Conformity to the Archetype</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honey tends towards the madonna archetype with her child-like behavior • Martha tends towards the whore archetype with her brazen behavior 		

- Affair with gardener
- Seduction of Nick: "Go back to your little wife all refreshed"

Deviation from the Archetype

- Honey: Rejection of motherhood
 - Empowerment in the rejection of norms of selflessness and service to the husband
- Martha: Ironic obsession with motherhood
 - Imagined son + Hysteria at death

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