

**Illusion as Survival: Psychological Defense Mechanisms in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?***

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**ABSTRACT**

The illusion and reality theme in the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* appears more important than others. One may assert that the psychological tension in the relationship between George and Martha can be explained only by their illusions and psychological shields protecting them from breaking up. In the current research, the authors attempt to demonstrate how the use of illusions helps people deal with their dissatisfaction and failures in life. Psychoanalytical theories dealing with defense mechanisms will be applied to the analysis of characters' actions and the use of illusions and

fictions in the play. It can be stated that the fictional child born by George and Martha represents the main illusion supporting their union but also illustrating the extent of their psychological vulnerability at the same time. Through textual analysis, one will prove that illusions represent a means of protection and destruction. Although George and Martha find some consolation in illusions, they cannot live without facing reality. The study proves that illusion should be destroyed for psychological truthfulness and understanding.

**KEYWORDS:** Illusion, Defense Mechanisms, Reality, Marriage, Psychological Conflict

## INTRODUCTION

In modern plays, existential problems of a person feeling uncomfortable emotionally due to certain reasons are often discussed. One of such examples is the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee. The play premiered in 1962 and depicts an unhappy married couple named George and Martha.

The plot of the play starts at night when George and Martha invite another young couple called Nick and Honey to their place. Thus, what could be expected to become a simple and nice meeting turns out to be a battle of psychological games and emotions.

Illusions play a rather important part in the relationships between George and Martha since they pretend that they have a son. In other words, this illusion serves as the only motivation for living and developing a romantic relationship. When discussing about their imaginary son, George exclaims, "Our son is dead" (Albee 237). It means that illusion was the last thing that supported their marriage.

This essay analyzes the role of illusions as mechanisms of self-protection in the discussed play.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic research has shown that illusions and realities play an important role in the plot development of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Many critics analyze the play from the perspective of how it comments on the nature of human relationships and how people use psychological techniques to cope with dissatisfaction.

For example, critic Matthew Roudané says that illusion and reality can describe the relationships between George and Martha. They have an imaginary son who is an important factor for maintaining emotional well-being (Roudané 48).

Critic C. W. E. Bigsby explains that Albee's characters develop illusions in order to avoid the hardships of life (Bigsby 102). Illusions become a protection from suffering but lead to endless manipulations and confrontations with each other.

Some critics analyze the play in the context of Theatre of the Absurd and argue that illusionism in the characters' interactions reflects existential problems. For example, according to critic Martin Esslin, the characters' illusions show the fears of modern society (Esslin 85).

All the above-mentioned studies reveal important aspects of the play's theme but there are only few works dedicated to the aspect of psychology. This study adds to the body of literature on illusions among the characters in this context by applying psychoanalysis to the study.

### Theoretical Framework: Psychological Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms have been developed based on ideas found in psychoanalysis, specifically the writings of Sigmund Freud. The defense mechanisms can be defined as psychological mechanisms that work unconsciously within an individual's mind to prevent anxiety, guilt, and other negative emotions (Freud 45).

The following defense mechanisms may provide a useful analysis for the characters studied:

Denial: the refusal to face up to the harsh facts of reality.

Projection: blaming other people for your own mistakes.

Displacement: taking out your anger on easier targets.

Fantasy: imagining things you wish were true rather than dealing with the truth.

These defense mechanisms enable George and Martha to create an illusion regarding their life.

### THE IMAGINARY CHILD AS A SHARED ILLUSION

The strongest illusion is the one created by George and Martha of an imaginary child who does not exist except in their imagination, even though they talk about him like he's real.

There are several functions of this particular illusion. One is that it makes up for the fact that they cannot have children. Their marriage is one of disappointment, but their son can serve as compensation for it.

Secondly, the boy becomes the element of the game they play all the time. Martha often uses it to make George angry while George tries to set rules for how the illusion works. This is what Albee means with the actions of George, and the boundaries need to be strictly observed here.

George's destruction of the illusion by declaring that the child is dead makes Martha realize the harshness of her and George's condition.

### VERBAL GAMES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT

Another key element of the play can be found in the various forms of verbal games used by the characters. They involve embarrassing admissions, dramatic exaggerations, and insults.

Such behavior represents a psychological method of coping. Rather than confronting the emotional issues at hand, the characters convert them into games which help them vent their frustrations in a safe way.

George tends to use verbal mockery and stories in his defense, while Martha resorts to aggression as an emotional coping mechanism. This ongoing battle of the words shows the unstable nature of their relationship while preserving its emotional energy.

#### PROJECTION AND DISPLACEMENT

Examples of projection and displacement are found in numerous exchanges among the characters. For instance, Martha often projects her feelings of frustration onto George when she criticizes him for not being successful in his career. In actuality, the criticism is often more about herself than about George.

In the same vein, George utilizes displacement by resorting to psychological games as a form of coping with his anger, which he displaces upon Martha.

The use of such techniques by the characters demonstrates how they deal with painful emotions without having to face their true problems.

#### ILLUSION AND REALITY IN THE FINAL ACT

The climax of the play arises when George reveals the demise of their imagined offspring. In the process, they destroy an illusion that had been keeping their marriage alive.

While this development is tragic, it also marks a point where the characters have to face reality. When confronted with reality, they are compelled to recognize the hollowness underlying their fantasies.

In the final scene of the play, Martha confesses her terror of life devoid of illusion when she answers George's inquiry with "I am... George... I am" (Albee 239).

#### CONCLUSION

The climax of the play occurs when George informs them about the death of their fictional child. At this point, they shatter the illusion that had kept their marriage going.

Although this is indeed tragic, it is also an instance where they have to confront the reality of their situation. By confronting reality, they will have to accept the futility of their illusions.

At the end of the play, Martha expresses her fear of living without illusion as she responds to George's question with "I am...George...I am" (Albee 239).

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