

ENGLISH ADVANCED: *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF? / A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

The exploration of the respective contexts and values in Virginia Woolf's 1929 transformation of a critical essay *A Room of One's Own* and Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* gives insight into the world and circumstance in which both composers existed and those changing values and perspectives. The two provocative texts challenge accepted social norms and, in this sense, establish an insubordinate voice in their respective contexts. Woolf raises confrontational questions about the status of women in literature, whilst Albee challenges the censorship and superficial domesticity that characterised American society in the 1960s as well as the fallacy of the American Dream. Woolf and Albee similarly use their voices of dissonance to explore the concept of truth in a world of illusion and are concerned with exposing entrenched social values relating to gender equality and the impact that social conventions have on an individual. Both composers address the concept of individualism in a restrictive and conservative society through the assertion of their thoughts and concerns regarding the socioeconomic condition at the time. Through their vastly diverse mediums of production, both composers encourage the audience to develop a deeper understanding of the accepted values of their time.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, published in the post WWI period of the late 1920s and at the cusp of 'first-wave feminism' in Britain, was greatly influenced by the changing values that arose due to the emergence of the suffragettes. Woolf initially presented her ideas which formed the foundation of the partly fictionalised narrative *A Room of One's Own* as two separate lectures based on the topic of 'Women and Fiction' to an audience of young women in Girton College, the first women's college in England, at Cambridge University. The fictitious setting of Oxbridge within her text is an obvious allusion to the renowned British universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and establishes a sense of irony for the reader as women were not allowed to study at either of these institutions. Woolf can be viewed as a Modernist writer that strived to expose a harsh reality underlying superficial social complacency thus contesting taken for granted assumptions that dictated traditional gender roles in society.

Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a political satire that was composed in the post WWII era of Cold War tension, fear and hostility and targeted a contemporary and sophisticated audience. Albee sought to expose the hypocrisy and conformist nature of American society whereby western culture advocated conformist lifestyles and gender roles while individuals pursued the 'American Dream'. Albee's dramatic text is a combination of realism and the absurd, and seeks to penetrate the surface so as to reveal the true nature of people and relationships. Albee himself stated that his play was: "an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society... a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy keen." *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was written during the time of the second-wave feminism which had a great effect on the views and attitudes of the women portrayed within the text. The avant-garde play shocked audiences through its use of confronting language and bitterness that challenged the conservative and traditional values of the time.

Truth and Illusion

Both *A Room of One's Own* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* employ characters who reside in a life of fiction as they are unable to comprehend their own reality. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf yearns to discover the true nature of fiction and desperately seeks the objective truth in a society that perpetuates the ideological dominance of patriarchy. To add to the complexity of her text beyond the critical essay, Woolf utilises a fictional narrator: "Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any other name you please – it is not a matter of any importance)..." (*A Room of One's Own* – Ch 1, Pg 5) The use of the personal pronoun 'I' offers

universality to the character and suggests that Woolf's attitudes and values are relevant to many women. Her stream-of-consciousness reinforces the perceived truth in her writing and exemplifies the characters inner conflict and disillusionment within a patriarchal reality.

The utilization of the metaphorical term "incandescence" throughout the text symbolises the pure 'white light of truth' that Woolf deeply craves. She defines the motif as the state in which everything personal burns away and what is left is the 'essential oil of truth', devoid of subjectivity and thus of greater artistic value. Through the use of a fictional narrator and by suggesting that "fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact" (Ch 1, Pg 4), Woolf uncovers the truth about a patriarchal society that has deemed women inferior in a dispassionate and unbiased manner. Her text thus represents an example of literature that is free of prejudices and closer to the 'nugget of pure truth' which Woolf was eager to discover. The motif of 'light' is extended when Woolf references Mary Carmichael, an imaginary novelist, and exclaims that her work is groundbreaking and will "light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been" (Ch 5 Pg 98).

Albee similarly explores the concept of truth and illusion by attempting to reveal the truth behind his characters illusory lives. In his dramatic text, Albee also emphasises the importance of living without illusions. It is the composer's goal to reveal the truth about his characters' relationships and marriage, and expose the harsh reality of the American Dream with its complacent materialism and lack of genuine communication and feeling through his use of sarcasm, cynicism and dialogue. The four characters employed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are symbolic of the reality disguised beneath the illusion of the American Dream. In Albee's own words the title of the play means 'who can live without false illusions?' The rhetorical question of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* becomes a leitmotif that expresses the contextually salient provocation of people's artificial identities. At the denouement of the play, Martha identifies herself as the one who is afraid "I...am...George...I...am..." (Act 3, Pg 128) as she fears Virginia Woolf and her attempts to expose the reality of truth and the sincerity of emotion. In what was widely regarded as a time of affluence and prosperity built on conservative family values, these themes compelled and shocked audiences as they challenged traditional values of the 1960s context.

As the play progresses it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between truth and illusion. George and Martha recount stories about their past and 'play games' with their guests Nick and Honey, such as 'peeling back the label' and 'hump the hostess' which act as metaphors that help to reveal the truth hidden behind each of his characters. George's character comments on the ambiguity of truth and illusion "...who can tell the difference, eh?" (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – Act 3, Pg 107) The disorientating blend of these two concepts forms the central thesis of the play. Through the exposure of George and Martha's most significant illusion, their fictitious son, Albee is commenting on the emotional cost of truth-telling. George puts an end to the fabrication when he states "Now listen, Martha... We got a telegram; there was a car accident, and he's dead... Now, how do you like that?" (Act 3, Pg, 124) This notion is reiterated through Albee's use of religious imagery and allusions in the naming of the three acts within the play. Act 3 is titled 'The Exorcism'. George and Martha's stories have the additional effect of encouraging Nick and Honey to tell the 'truth' about their own relationship. The play is therefore much like *A Room of One's Own* in that there is a gradual process of incandescence - stripping away layers of artificiality and illusion, allowing the audience to see the true nature of the characters and reflect on their own social and individual reality.

The Pursuit of Individualism

Defined as a psychological term that refers to the ways in which people identify themselves and focus their goals, the concept of individualism is explored throughout both *A Room of One's Own* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Woolf's involvement in the Bloomsbury Group, a progressive social group of artists, led her to confidently express, and eventually publish, her intelligent opinions regarding gender inequality and oppression as well as the pursuit of individualism in her patriarchal context. Virginia Woolf is considered one of the first 'proto-feminists' of the twentieth century and her

concerns regarding the central tenets of feminism are dominant in *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf employs metonymy to illustrate the need for writers to embrace the concept of an 'androgynous mind'. Woolf quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge in saying that great minds are androgynous and that it is only when "a woman has intercourse with the man in her" (Ch 6, Pg 113) that great writing can be accomplished.

The characters introduced in the text, such as the fictionalised narrator 'I', reflect on modernist and existentialist concerns, particularly that it is the individual's responsibility to give his or her life meaning in what is otherwise considered a demoralising and alienating world. The concept of existentialism is also prevalent through the recurring motif of incandescence as Woolf constantly probes the question of what happens to human beings when they have been stripped of all illusions that have previously given their lives meaning.

The American Dream is a clear manifestation of individualism in American society as the concept consisted of individual freedom of choice, boundless opportunity, personal fulfilment, and happiness within every individual's reach. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Albee emphasizes the idea that the pursuit of individualism has created a discontented society and he parodies the ideals and values which in western civilisation are supposed to give life meaning. Albee effectively paints a dystopian image of the stereotyped traditional family unit through the characterisation of George and Martha, who are ironically referenced to the patriotic couple, George and Martha Washington. Albee uses this symbolic first couple as a microcosm for what was to become known as the American Dream. The decline or fallacy of this dream resonates through *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* when George cynically states "We drink a lot in this country, and I suspect we'll be drinking a great deal more, too... if we survive." (Act 2, Pg 56)

Albee further explores the concept of individualism through his use of absurd ideas and themes. The overriding principle behind the Absurdist movement was the idea of existentialism, in that 'life is absurd' and people live in a world that is meaningless and alienating. The most significant expression of the absurdity of existence is found in George's cynical reference to 'Dies Irae' and the 'trumpet sound' while talking to Nick. This reference epitomises the existential view as George concludes that despite all "the trouble to construct a civilisation," and "through all the sensible sound of men building," the message to humanity will be, simply "Up yours." (Act 2, Pg 62)

Men VS. Women

Virginia Woolf's depiction of the struggle for gender equality reflects the traditional values that characterised her society. Through the communication of the metaphorical thesis, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Ch 1, Pg 4), Woolf questions long-held traditional values regarding the relentless subjugation of women in an attempt to create a sense of equality and actualize their identity. Woolf is essentially attempting to convince young women of the time to strive for independent space and income in order to overcome the inferiority to domineering males. The composer employs the motif of interruptions and distractions throughout the discourse to symbolise the interruptions a women at the time would experience without her own room. This also allows the reader to experience the uncomfortable sentiment.

The postulation of the hypothetical existence of Shakespeare's equally talented sister, Judith, is symbolic of women being unable to achieve literary success due to the restriction of their sex. Judith's story ends in her suicide and is an example of unrealised creative potential. This notion is reiterated when the narrator states "Who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a women's body?" (Ch 9, Pg 56) A contrast between the two meals attended at Cambridge University allows Woolf to discuss the conflicting educational opportunities of men and women at the time. The juxtaposition of the 'sumptuous' luncheon at the men's college and the 'bland' dinner at the women's clearly underscores the inequality that exists between the two genders. Beadle, an Oxbridge security official reminds the narrator that only "fellows and scholars" (Ch 1, Pg 6) are permitted to walk on the grass, symbolising how society at the time offered women only one path to follow in life with many barriers and obstacles to success and contentment.

Although written many years after *A Room of One's Own* and conveying an alternate perspective, the concept of gender equality is still addressed in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In a 1960s American context, the suburban housewife was stereotyped as beautiful, adequately educated and only concerned with her husband, her children and her home. Albee echoes this concept in his text, noting by contrast, what the ideal men and women in 1962 should be. The actions of the female characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* would not have been acceptable at the time in which *A Room of One's Own* was composed with Honey's refusal of children and Martha's inability to have children as well as her open defiance of George. These occurrences stand in stark contrast to Woolf's careful reasoning and veiled criticisms. Albee employs metonyms and idioms to satirize Martha's attempts to gain superiority over George when she states "You don't want to waste good liquor George, not on your salary. Not on an associate professors salary." (Act 1, Pg 45) Martha utilizes a patronizing tone in order to provoke George and undermine his masculinity. This contests Woolf's exploration of the struggle between genders and the ongoing marginalisation of women.

In the text, both of Albee's female characters depend on men for power, status and money. Martha appears to be aggressive and assertive but in reality the only power that she possesses is through her father's position in society and through her sexuality. By changing outfits, flirting with Nick and revealing secrets from her sexual past, Martha is attempting to gain authority and in this case, demean George. Similarly, Honey uses her sexuality as a means to control her relationship with Nick. Nick married Honey as he believed her to be pregnant when in actual fact it was "...a hysterical pregnancy. She blew up and she went down." (Act 2, Pg 49) As in *A Room of One's Own*, interruptions and distractions are prevalent throughout the play when Honey exclaims "I am going to be sick". George is another source of interruption throughout the text, creating them as a means to confuse and disempower the other characters, especially Nick, in order to gain a sense of superiority. Albee's four characters have essentially failed to live up to their gender roles and expectations in society. Each character is damaged irrevocably and acts out of aggression, alcoholism and infidelity as substitutes for happiness and ways to re-establish gender identity. Albee examines through the context of the stifling 1960s how family and individual happiness can also be achieved through the restraints of gender expectations. Gender roles and equality is a feature of both texts, however the differing contexts mean that the concept is depicted in very different ways.

The significance of context is highlighted through both Virginia Woolf's and Edward Albee's demonstration of how discourse can shape common values and ideas, relevant to their era. Although each composer's works reflect their separate contexts, they both explore similar subject matter that is prevalent to their societies. By exploring the ways in which changes in context lead to changed values and perspectives being reflected within a text, it becomes obvious that time does affect a composer's representation of their opinions and concerns.