Juan Pablo Carreira

Essay on Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?

Title

Theater has always represented different social concerns through history by fictionalizing the reality of the characters. Their life on stage is a piece of fiction for the audience but a reality within the play for the play itself. This parallel contradiction, seeming paradox, is called metafiction: a literary device employed to pose a relationship between fiction and reality, in other words, to present fiction within fiction. The characters of Who’s Afraid Of Virginia Woolf, by Albee, live a stronger illusion than reality. However, this reality is a fiction, therefore, the play deals with a strong sense/atmosphere of metafiction. This hypothesis will be deeply explored by paying attention to the metafictional behavior of some of the characters, which at first seems real to the audience, but then turns out being mere illusion. The analysis will be tackled by two different viewpoints; the actions of the characters that make the reader sense the presence of metafiction in the play and the characters own backstory, which is as much fictional as they play is. Also, the characters have many stories that turn to be mere illusions, which empowers/reinforces even more the presence of metafiction in the play.

To begin with, the main and most important fictional story within the play’s fiction is George and Martha’s made-up son, whose reality isn’t confirmed and is almost left as a cliffhanger, but it is revealed as fictional at the last pages of the book. This story is used as a backbone for the whole play and many conversations are based upon it. The veracity of the story goes through many stages through the play: Albee’s text; sometimes it tells extremely true and other times the reader really questions if all the characters are just completely insane:

“NICK didn’t know until just a minute ago that you had a son.” [...] 

GEORGE “She told you about him?”

At this point the reader doesn’t even question the truthfulness of the story, however, at the end of the play we realize once and for all that it was has all been made up. “HE IS OUR CHILD!” [...] “AND I HAVE KILLED HIM!” [...] “JESUS CHRIST, I THINK I UNDERSTAND THIS!” Nick finally realizes the odd thing about Martha and George’s discussion; he realizes that their son is fictional, which allows him to put all the pieces together and understand the whole illusion. When he realizes it, the game, the night, finally comes to an end and Nick and Honey leave with no further ado. In this regard, Alan Schneider expanded expands on the concept of a gimmick child in his review entitled “Why So Afraid?”, where he states that even though this story is used to structure the whole play, the main story is not about it at all, but is indeed about the misery in the characters’ lives and how they try their best to patch the emotional hole that they have, even recurring to fictional stories and illusions: “Albee’s play is not about the child—just as Godot is not about Godot but about the waiting for him—but about the people who have had to create him as a “beanbag” or crutch for their own insufficiencies and failures, and now are left to find their own way, if there is to be a way, free of him.” Making a direct reference to Beckett’s play, Waiting For Godot, the critic...
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shows how a play can make multiple references and basically base the entire play on a character that doesn’t even exist inside the play. The non-existing characters within the play create a metafictional effect; the very absence of a character opens up a hole in the story that is purely fictional, as is every reference to it. These are mere illusions within the major illusion, which is the play itself.

The metafictional dimension in the play is so wide that it takes different forms and shapes, depending on which character says or does something that denotes its presence. At one point of the play, Nick tells his life story, this which is the only true and non-metafictional narration of a character’s life. However, George quickly uses this story to elaborate an “allegory” and metafictionalizes it. Nick has opened up to George in a supposed closeness and privacy; he has told him his true intentions with Honey and expressed his sorrow and misery in such a vivid way that the reader realizes that this small fraction of the play is not an illusion, Nevertheless, George, after some intricate repartees with Martha, ends up very frustrated and makes reference to a book he has written that nobody knows about, and the story of that book whose plot is all about what Nick has just told him. George derides Nick’s story, and firmly claims having written that book, which both himself and Nick know that it isn’t true. “It’s an allegory, really -probably- but it can be read as straight, cozy prose... and it’s all about a nice and young couple...” [...] “I’ve heard this story before”. The violence in the story rises up as George continues with his metafictional story, “I said JUST A MINUTE!” [...] “This is my Game”. George is very determined to make everyone play his game; he is cruel and insensible with Nick’s personal problems. This is shown metaphorically by the violent metafictionalization of Nick’s story and in a more literal way by the wild and savage discussion they end up having, making Honey and Nick fight. In 1962, Robert Brustein made a very accurate remark about this event on the play, “Albee seems less interested in the real history of his characters than in the way they conceal and protect their reality: the conflict is also a kind of game, with strict rules, and what they reveal about each other may not be true.” This is quite true, as the only hundred percent authentic story in the play is minimized in some way when George indiscriminately rips it off and turns it into an illusion. Also, these kinds of conflicts are shaped by the characters, especially George and Martha in a wicked form of game, with ominous rules, and impossible to avoid, George is a very active character regarding the use of metafiction, he tells many stories that seem real, but then he shows his true colors, he is just always playing with everyone, and the stories are mere tools and illusions to trick the participants of his sinister games.

Martha is also a character that deploys metafictional behavior. Martha at the beginning of the third act gives a long monologue in which she admits many of her true thoughts and feelings, she shows vulnerable to the reader, and confesses to the reader that she is miserable in the inside. At this point, we realize that the only bond that Martha and George have is fictional, she uses this behavior to relate with George. Only illusion and violence are keeping their marriage alive, this a sad statement which vividly represents the most important themes of the play. “Whom I will bite so there’s blood”, a very strange and gore imagery of violence, and “Who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules” a direct reference to the
fictions they deal with. The death of this marriage has many causes, among the reasons the play clearly indicates that they both have odd personalities; ambitious, uncaring, and lust govern their minds. This is intricately tied with the American Dream of the 60’s, money was the main objective of everyone, that materialistic driven society was undergoing a great dispute between scientific and humanistic ways of thinking; communism versus capitalism, this is clearly shown in the play by the confrontation between George being a history professor and Nick a biology one. Albee himself talks about this matter, “I think it has something to do with what I thought The American Dream had to do with—the substitution of artificial for real values in this society of ours.” These “values” were divided during the 60’s very clearly into artificial (materialistic) and real, these are also present in a much more metaphorical way in the play, adopting the form of fiction for artificial things, referring to the games and illusions the characters elaborate to evade the ugliness of their lives, and real for the feelings of the characters, which are influenced and shaped by high consumptions of alcohol. They are never showed sober; they enter the very first scene as they return to from a party that was abundant in alcohol. This means that even the reality we see on stage or read from the book, the characters’ personality, is just an illusion, as the alcohol may be influencing them. This causes a lot of uncertainty due to the metafictional uncertainty the play has. The fiction that is constantly present in their lives is a good reference to the American Dream, which can also be linked to the fiction of the fake child story, as Martin Esslin wrote in The Theatre Of The Absurd, “Here the connection to The American Dream with its horrid dream-child of the ideal all-American boy becomes clear; thus there are elements of dream and allegory in the play (is the dream-child which cannot become real among people torn by ambition and lust something like the American ideal itself?).” Esslin claims that maybe the reason that the American Dream could never be realized is that it isn’t compatible with the ideals it itself introduces, and the same notion could be applied to this “dream-child” comparison he uses. The sad fiction that the characters live in is more influential to them than their own real reality, which also is a fiction. This confirms, demonstrating the reader once again the vivid presence of metafiction.

All in all, the whole play transmits that the characters are more devoted to their fictions than to their real lives and feelings. All those illusions are just means to evade their miserable and empty lives. This whole fiction in which they live is framed within another greater fiction, the play and the story itself. According to Patricia Waugh, “all fiction is [...] implicitly metafictional since all works of literature are concerned with language and literature itself”. From where this statement, we can conclude that the whole play continuously and repeatedly deals with metafiction both from the characters and from the play itself.

References (Here, Juan Pablo, you can list the texts you’ve made reference to)


Esslin, Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd...

Schneider, Allan. “Why so Afraid”, in...
Very good job, Juan Pablo! You have deeply thought of a hypothesis which you try to confirm throughout the essay. Though at some points this attempt may seem to get lost, it still shows your concern to provide solid arguments for the reader to understand your claims. Very good use of quotations, both from the play and from the theoretical part of the handout.

Congrats! It’s been a pleasure to read your piece.