

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

A comparative study of texts often presents us with an understanding of two perspectives which when put side by side, may display resonating values. It is these resonating values that lead composers of different contexts to share a main purpose in creating their texts. This notion is explored in the two texts, Virginia Woolf's 1928 fictional essay, "A Room of One's Own" and Edward Albee's 1962 absurdist drama, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Both composers deal with illusions that the societies of their time were engaged in and both seek to challenge their accepted orthodoxies.

Virginia Woolf's purpose is to challenge the illusion that women are inferior and men are superior. Her essay, originally intended for a university lecture to women, is now perceived as one of the greatest contributors to feminism. Woolf's use of the 'looking glass' is a visual metaphor that encapsulates the concept of magnifying one sex. She believes that by creating the illusion that women are inferior beings, men in turn, perceive themselves twice as capable as what they really are. Early on in her essay, Woolf presents men to be an obstacle, "He was a Beadle, I was a woman. This was the turf there was the path." This situation is representative of men placing women back into their 'rightful positions'. The fact that the Beadle had interrupted a flow of thought is symbolic of displaying men as a barrier towards women's attempts to think creatively and independently, hence to extend beyond that of what is stereotypically expected of them. The situation perpetuates itself as women are not given the chance to engage in male dominated areas. Furthermore, Woolf emphasises that the patriarchal values of her society deprive women of favourable conditions required to participate beyond the boundaries of their expected gender roles, "why must men drink wine and women water?" This concept is personified by the literary allusion, 'Judith Shakespeare'. A woman of equal talent to her brother, William Shakespeare, Judith eventually commits suicide due to the gender confinements that have disallowed her of exercising her talents. Woolf displays the dangers of a patriarchal mindset and encourages society to develop past such an illusion.

Edward Albee similarly deals with a superficial society that is blinded by a false sense of reality. Albee believes that the notion of achieving the great "American Dream" is an unattainable goal that constrains both men and women in the illusions that they seek comfort in. This is exemplified in the character Martha who aims to fit into the stylised American ideal by defining herself in light of the men in her life. Martha's marriage to George served the purpose of obtaining an heir for her "daddy's" university. Although as capable and financially able to run the university herself, Martha depends on her husband for kudos due to the conventional approach of women's dependence on men. Yet her violent outbursts and dysfunctional relationship with George display the dissatisfaction she has of the expectations in life, which are shaped by the 'American Dream' concept. Martha's invention of the imaginary son further demonstrates her refuge from reality by displaying her aim to complete an image of an ideal family unit. The "American dream" had created the illusion that happiness can only be derived from a specific and perfect ideal and Albee points out that such an illusion will not truly satisfy one's purpose in life.

Both composers offer a solution to the problem. Virginia Woolf proposes the idea that men and women should work as equals and not be influenced by the idea of patriarchy. Hence she highlights the image of the androgynous mind, inspired by an observation of a woman and man approaching a taxi to travel as one. This portrays Woolf's belief that one must have both a male and female voice in their mind and not prioritise one over the other. "It's when this fusion of the man and woman takes place that the mind uses all its faculties" Woolf's idea of the incandescent mind is also a corresponding concept she explores which encourages both women and men to rise above the anger that constraints them from creating great literature. This bright light is a motif that symbolises one's state of mind free of society's false constraints of what they must value. She encourages

women to take responsibility for themselves and act beyond the invisible boundary created by patriarchy. Her references to Jane Austen and William Shakespeare emphasize the importance of achieving such a state of mind in order to achieve success “If ever one fully expressed their work it was Shakespeare”. Woolf’s stream of consciousness writing style further supports her argument as she stays true to herself and fully expresses her inner thoughts, as a woman participating in the male dominated area, that is, literature.

Edward Albee similarly offers us a solution, the exposure of truth. Albee incorporates the metaphorical action of ‘peeling the bottle’ by Honey to get to what George refers to as the ‘marrow of the bone’, that is, the essence of truth rid of any lies. To this end, George also performs an exorcism where he kills the illusionary image of the son. By doing this he forces Martha to face her fears and denial of facts. She can no longer use him as her ‘bean bag’. The title, as well as George’s taunts, “who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” metaphorically implies ‘who’s afraid of the truth?’ It also alludes to the well-known children’s tale in which Woolf is suggested to be the wolf, hence demonstrating how society had created a fearful attitude towards facing what’s real. As George asks Martha if she is afraid, Martha replies in admission, “I am”. Albee uses this first step of Martha’s recovery to suggest to the wider audience that they too must recover from the illusion they are engulfed in by firstly accepting their own problem.

In reflection, it is made evident that Virginia Woolf’s ‘A Room of One’s Own’ and Edward Albee’s ‘Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf’ share common purposes in creating their text even though their contexts may differ. It is by close analysis of their purposes that allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the two texts and furthermore acknowledge the resonating values.